

A Message to Remember

***“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”
—John 10:27,28***

THE SERMON ON THE

Mount given by our Lord and recorded in Matthew chapters 5 through 7 is widely held by believers to set forth needed guidelines and behaviors for Christians during this present Gospel Age. In the previous chapter we read, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at

hand.” (Matt. 4:17) Those who would heed this admonition of Jesus give evidence of a readiness to receive the further instructions contained in the lessons herein to be considered.

The first portion of the Master’s discourse addresses a series of “Beatitudes,” or blessings. They illustrate the transformation of character to be manifested by those who would be acceptable to God as participants with Christ in his kingdom, and the “blessed” condition of all who are thus developed.

HUMILITY

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:3) Poverty of spirit was exhibited by Jesus to the degree that he willingly submitted to his Father’s will in every particular, and was “obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Phil. 2:7,8) This quality was in direct opposition to the pride exhibited by Lucifer, whose desire was to be exalted “above the stars of God” and “be like the most High.” (Isa. 14:12-14) Those who would become associates with the Master during his glorious reign must first acknowledge their spiritual insufficiency and need of redemption. As they humbly acquiesce to the instructions found in God’s Word they will then have their hearts revived and begin to walk in righteousness.

SYMPATHETIC MOURNING

“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.” (Matt. 5:4) This trait might well be illustrated by having compassion toward others who are experiencing grief, as contrasted with having feelings of self-pity resulting from personal difficulties and adversity. When he saw the sorrow and despair of family and friends at the death of Lazarus, “Jesus wept.”—John 11:35

Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus “beheld the city” of Jerusalem, and “wept over it.” (Luke 19:41) He mourned because the people of Israel—his brethren—had little appreciation for the special divine blessings that would have been theirs as a nation of kings and priests. He knew that because of their hardness of heart, this grand offer was being withdrawn. (Matt. 23:37-39) For the footstep followers

of Jesus, there are many opportunities to enter into the sorrows of others and offer them comfort, as preparation for the future work of helping to wipe away mankind's tears in the kingdom.

MEEKNESS

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matt. 5:5) The Lord invited those who would be his disciples to emulate him along this line of character. Later he said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”—chap. 11:28-30

The Master showed his meekness by being gentle and approachable in his dealings with children, publicans, sinners, and all with whom he came in contact. Even when he was shamefully treated, he did not retaliate. Peter stated, concerning Jesus, “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.”—I Pet. 2:23

Christ's followers are also called upon to suffer for righteousness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they will be enabled to manifest a meek and gentle character. A worthy admonition for all consecrated believers is: “The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, . . . patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.”—II Tim. 2:24,25

DESIRE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” (Matt. 5:6) The Scriptures declare concerning Jesus, “For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.” (Heb. 7:26) The footstep followers of our Lord are being selected to be a part of this heavenly priesthood and, therefore, must “hunger and thirst after righteousness” in order to be made pure and acceptable for this role.

Although covered by the imputed robe of Christ’s righteousness, spirit-begotten believers are not actually perfect in the flesh. They repeatedly need to go to the throne of heavenly grace for forgiveness of their trespasses. Nevertheless, they are required to strive against their inherited weaknesses and sinful propensities. These followers of the Master must love “righteousness” and hate “iniquity” to such a degree that their heart intentions will always strive for holiness of thought, word, and deed.—Heb. 1:9

THE MERCIFUL WILL OBTAIN MERCY

“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.” (Matt. 5:7) Those who will share in the work of restoring mankind during the kingdom must be very merciful. As kings and priests, they will be dealing with fallen mankind, who will need great assistance to recover from the sinful condition in which they entered the tomb. The order of that time will be justice, tempered with mercy, so that the human family can be educated in righteousness under the mediatorial rule while being brought up to perfection.

The Gospel Age saints have been objects of divine mercy. Each has been invited to undergo a transformation process from their sinful condition to become “a new creature . . . in Christ.” (II Cor. 5:17) If rightly exercised by their experiences, they ultimately will become part of that sympathetic high priest that will be empowered to extend mercy to the entire human family during the reign of righteousness.

PURITY OF HEART

“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” (Matt. 5:8) The impact of the Holy Spirit upon the consecrated believer is such that it drives away worldliness, deception, or anything that reflects an unholy attitude. Complete purity of the flesh cannot be attained in this life because of human imperfections. Through the redemptive merit of Christ’s sacrifice, however, the followers of Jesus strive against their weaknesses and blemishes, thereby attesting to the true desire of their will and heart.

As the prospective body members of Christ see the holy standard of thought and conduct as exemplified in the Scriptures, they will wage a vigorous warfare against sin in their flesh. They will seek assistance repeatedly from the throne of heavenly grace to demonstrate that their intentions are in harmony with the will of God and all his arrangements. The awesome prospect of actually seeing the Heavenly Father in glory is almost unspeakable, and will only be attained by those whose heart loyalty towards righteousness is unwavering.

PEACEMAKING

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matt. 5:9) The Lord’s followers are to “seek peace, and pursue it” in their lives. (Ps. 34:14) They may especially rejoice in the opportunities provided whereby they can help to calm troublesome situations, as opposed to engendering strife. There are many ills and injustices in the world over which consecrated believers have very limited impact. However, there will be times when a word of reconciliation may appropriately be interjected, both among brethren and others outside the fellowship.

“A word spoken in due season” may prove to be invaluable in bringing calm to a situation that otherwise might get out of control. (Prov. 15:23) The lessons learned and applied on this side of the veil in such development of character will stand the more than overcomers in good stead as they fully engage in the ministry of reconciliation during the glorious Millennial reign of Christ.

JOYFUL ENDURANCE OF PERSECUTION

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, . . . Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.” (Matt. 5:10-12) The ability to manifest this attribute gives evidence of a high degree of spirituality. Revilings and false accusations are always unpleasant to the flesh. It is only the New Creature that can appreciate such treatment, because it realizes that to endure evil for Christ’s sake is an evidence of loyalty to

God and is credited as “bearing his reproach.”—Heb. 13:13

The concept of unmerited suffering by consecrated believers is further expanded upon in Scripture: “If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: . . . But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.”—I Pet. 4:14-16

OTHER THEMES

After Jesus provided the Beatitudes, he continued to speak, touching on various subjects. He said that the disciples of Christ are to be “the salt of the earth,” in that their lives should have a preserving influence upon the world, which otherwise would be even more depraved than at present. (Matt. 5:13) If footstep followers of Jesus fail to live out the high character standards exemplified in the Beatitudes, however, their testimony would have little positive impact upon mankind. Similarly, Christians are to be the “light of the world,” just as Jesus was that “great light” that came into the world. Individually and collectively, consecrated believers are called upon to let their “light so shine before men” and by their good works, emulate the character of the Master and glorify the Heavenly Father.—vss. 14-16; chap. 4:16

Another theme found in the Sermon on the Mount relates to Christ and the Mosaic Law. Concerning the Law, Jesus said, “I am not come to destroy, . . . but to fulfil.” (chap. 5:17,18) He was faithful in

keeping its every feature perfectly, and in laying down his humanity in sacrifice, thus “nailing” the Law “to his cross.” (Col. 2:14) As a result, all who accept the terms of discipleship, the Jews first and later the Gentiles, would have an opportunity to become a part of the spiritual seed of Abraham, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.—Matt. 16:24; Gal. 3:27-29; Gen. 28:14

A high standard of righteous living would be required to participate in this arrangement. Jesus said, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20) This is evidenced by the fact that Jesus’ teachings on such matters as anger, adultery, and divorce, were of a higher order than those proclaimed by the Pharisees.—vss. 21-32

The Pharisees held to the letter of the law, knowing that killing others was forbidden, and such an act would require the offender to be brought to judgment. (Exod. 20:13; 21:12) Jesus, however, equated anger and hatred with murder, even if they do not lead to actual killing. Additionally, the calling of one’s brother a “fool” was an extremely serious matter that could lead to dire consequences for the offender. Thus, improper feelings towards one’s brother should be promptly settled, because failure to do so and harboring ill will could not be acceptable to the Lord. In looking at all these issues, although Jesus’ ministry occurred prior to Pentecost, it is evident these lessons were meant for Christian believers, begotten of the Holy Spirit.

The Mosaic Law also prohibited adultery. (Exod. 20:14) Jesus stressed inward purity and the need to crucify any such desires even if the actual act was not committed. (Matt. 5:28) Continuing, he said, “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell”—that is, destruction. (vs. 29) A disciplined life of self-control is emphasized as needful for the followers of Christ and seems to be the point made regarding the Master’s instruction to “cut . . . off” offending members of one’s body.—vs. 30

As part of the Law, divorce was permitted because of incompatibility. (Deut. 24:1-4) Here again, the Master introduces a higher standard for his disciples, in which he forbade divorce except in the case of “fornication,” even though he did not command that divorce must occur in such an instance. His instructions also prohibit marriage or remarriage to anyone previously found guilty of adultery. (Matt. 5:31,32) Additional considerations regarding these topics are found in some writings by the Apostle Paul.—I Cor. 6:9-11; 7:8-17,39

Another issue addressed in the Sermon on the Mount was that of using oaths to emphasize the truthfulness of statements made. The Jews knew from the Law that one should not take God’s name in vain, but evidently attempted to circumvent the third commandment by swearing by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or even one’s head. (Matt. 5:33-36) For Christians, oaths should be unnecessary as there are no circumstances under which it would be proper to tell a falsehood. We read, “Above all things, my

brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.”—James 5:12; Matt. 5:37

The teaching of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was well established in the Old Testament, although authority for meting out retribution lay in the hands of established authorities rather than the individual. (Matt. 5:38; Exod. 21:24; Deut. 19:21) When injury is inflicted upon a follower of Christ, he may use any lawful means to obtain redress, but it would violate the spirit of the Lord to “render evil for evil.” (I Thess. 5:15) However, the example of removing one’s self from harm’s way is well illustrated by Paul’s appeal to have his case heard by Caesar rather than to return to Jerusalem and stand trial there, which undoubtedly would have resulted in immediate physical harm or death.—Acts 25:9-12

Jesus taught that a key evidence of a regenerated heart is the ability to love one’s enemies. Additionally, he called upon his disciples to “do good to them that hate you.” (Matt. 5:43-45) Both of these qualities are impossible to achieve without receiving divine aid through an increasing measure of the Holy Spirit, prayer, and by patiently endeavoring to imitate Christ. By studying the principles of truth outlined in the Scriptures and noting the selflessness of Jesus in laying down his life to benefit all mankind, disciples who obediently follow in the Master’s footsteps will take increasing pleasure from each evidence that they are overcoming the spirit of the world, the flesh, and the adversary. Such a growth will indeed motivate them to fulfill

these commands as evidence of their supreme love for God.—vs. 48

Matthew chapter 6 commences with a reminder that unselfishness is absolutely necessary to receive divine favor. (vss. 1-4) The act of giving to others in sincerity and without desiring public approval, in contrast to seeking commendation from fellow men, is an evidence of heart purity. Jesus saw that this quality was obviously lacking in the hypocritical religious leaders of the Jews, who he said “sound a trumpet” when doing their alms.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Verses 5-13 are devoted to Jesus’ instructions concerning the subject of prayer. Such petitions, he says, should not be in the form of “vain repetitions,” as practiced by some. Prayer is a privilege, and instruction concerning the basis for acceptable prayers is necessary. “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss.”—James 4:3

Jesus gave an example of a proper form of petition that is commonly called “The Lord’s Prayer.” It is characterized by simplicity, brevity, and reverence. It first acknowledges the sovereignty of God and ascribes honor and praise to the Creator. This is followed by an expression of confidence that divine authority will be manifested in the establishment of a kingdom on the earth, and the conditions that will obtain here will be in harmony with the righteousness existing in the heavenly realm.—Matt. 6:9,10

After giving priority to God’s interests, all personal needs are presented, acknowledging dependence upon our Heavenly Father for sustenance. (vss. 11,12)

Although “daily bread” is usually associated with temporal provisions, the need for spiritual food to sustain consecrated believers should be the main intent of this request. In requesting forgiveness, emphasis is again placed upon the quality of mercy that should be manifested by Christians towards others who may offend. The inability of the Lord’s people to perform perfectly in their actions and a continual need to seek divine forgiveness for transgressions should help to cultivate compassion and sympathy for others.

In view of personal weaknesses and failings under trial, believers may pray “lead us not,” or abandon us not, in such situations, acknowledging that only from God comes grace sufficient for the occasion, not from one’s own strength. Similarly, recognition that there is an evil one is a reminder not to trust to self but to call upon the Lord for safety and deliverance.—vs. 13

LAYING UP TREASURES

Beginning with verse 19, and for the balance of Matthew 6, we find some of the most powerful teachings of the Lord with respect to laying up earthly versus heavenly treasures. Anything that man values becomes a treasure to him. These may include wealth, fame, earthly friendships, power, family relationships, social distinction, and material belongings. Those who would be disciples of the Master are required to place their attention upon heavenly treasures to which the spirit of sanctification will lead.—vss. 19-25

There are some very worthwhile earthly treasures that might be pursued. However, inasmuch as

one cannot “serve two masters” simultaneously, such desires must be subservient to fulfilling the terms of discipleship, which involve self-denial and cross-bearing. (Matt. 16:24) The Apostle Paul could confidently claim at the end of his course that a crown of righteousness awaited him because he had set his affections upon the things above, and had “fought a good fight.”—II Tim. 4:7,8

As an impetus to prevent anxious care on the part of his followers, Jesus gave as an example the fact that the birds of the air did not worry that God would not provide for their needs. (Matt. 6:26) It should be noted, however, that was not a prohibition against putting forth effort to secure things needful for oneself and one’s family. Yet, the concept of going to extraordinary means to obtain future personal security apart from God is well illustrated in the parable of the rich man, who knew no limits to his care over earthly things, but ultimately lost all in death.—Luke 12:16-21

In a further illustration, Jesus pointed to the “lilies of the field,” which rely solely on God for their existence, yet exceed all of Solomon’s elegant apparel in beauty. Similarly, instead of striving for an accumulation of material goods, disciples of the Lord should “seek . . . first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness,” and all other necessary things would be provided according to the Father’s will. The Lord in his earthly sojourn followed that course unto death. His followers, if faithful, will do the same.—Matt. 6:28-34

JUDGING OTHERS

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus gives explicit instructions to the household of faith that they should not judge others. (vss. 1,2) The word “judge” as used in these verses includes among its definitions such meanings as punish, condemn, and avenge. Recognizing that it is impossible to read anyone’s heart, or to be certain of the motives behind someone’s deeds or words, it should be apparent that fault-finding or rendering harsh judgment of others gives evidence of lacking mercy. Knowing that “there is none righteous, no, not one,” how important it is to remove the “beam” from one’s own eye before attempting to remove a “mote,” or speck, from the eye of another. (vss. 3-5; Rom. 3:10) As with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, this admonition is especially for brethren in Christ, rather than the world of mankind who are not seeking to follow in the footsteps of the Master.

It is possible, however, and scripturally appropriate, to make certain judgments or to exercise the spirit of discernment without condemning or speaking evil of others. Two such examples would include examining the doctrinal teachings of leaders and determining who are qualified to be class servants. (I Tim. 3:1-13; I John 4:1) Additionally, the ecclesia has the responsibility of making determinations if major disputes between brethren have occurred, or if serious trespasses require corrective action.—Matt. 18:15-17; I Cor. 5:9-13

Following the Master’s reference to judging, he provides a lesson as to the importance of diligence in seeking God’s assistance through the guiding influence of his Holy Spirit. (Matt. 7:7,8) It is

quite humbling to seriously consider the many lessons found in the Sermon on the Mount. All honest-hearted followers of Jesus will find that they come short of attaining these high standards of righteous conduct in various areas. Nevertheless, his disciples are encouraged to seek God's ways through persistency in study and prayer. The Lord gives assurance that the loving Heavenly Father will reward such efforts far beyond what an earthly parent would do for his child.—vss. 9-11

“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.” (vs. 12) This verse, commonly known as the Golden Rule, expresses the means by which those in the school of Christ can examine their own actions, especially with regard to their fellow brethren. When the meaning of this passage is internalized, the Lord's people will be aided in their Christian walk. They will keenly realize the pain they would experience if the situation were reversed, and their brethren were condemning or speaking evil of themselves. How sobering it is to realize the stringent requirements of the narrow way.

“Ye shall know them by their fruits.” (vs. 16) Earlier it was noted that judging others in the sense of condemning them is unmerciful. Nevertheless, as the outward “fruitage” of fellow brethren is seen, those who have the spirit of discernment should be able to determine whether others display the spirit of sacrifice and whether their fruit reflects the qualities contained in the Beatitudes. If they bring forth “good fruit,” and their teachings and example are in accordance with Scriptural principles, they

may be supported and encouraged. If their fruitage manifests the works of the flesh, the Lord will reject them. A noteworthy standard for contrasting “works of the flesh” with the “fruit of the Spirit” is set forth with clarity by the Apostle Paul.—Gal. 5:19-23

“UPON A ROCK”

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with a description of those who build “upon a rock.” (Matt. 7:24,25) This rock is Christ Jesus, who has set forth the necessary doctrinal foundation, faith structure, and character likeness to be developed as revealed in God’s Word. This contrasts with those who build upon the “sand” of human traditions, theories, and false doctrines, which do not have a sanctifying effect, nor can stand up to the storms of testing and trial.—vss. 26,27

As the Gospel Age nears its close, there are increasing trials and tests upon all who profess to be the Lord’s followers. Only those who are in full heart-harmony with the Lord’s will shall stand these tests and be rewarded appropriately. Others who have not properly appreciated the high standards and privileges of discipleship will be exposed, in fulfillment of the prophet’s words, “Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.” (Isa. 28:17) As we apply the lessons Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount, and as expanded upon in other related scriptures, may our daily conduct reflect that we are “doers of the word and not hearers only.”—James 1:22 ■