

Sermon on the Mount Lifestyle

Dear Friends,

The Christian lifestyle should be lived with a long-term focus. If we think "Lifestyle," we should think of more than what I think, say, or do in the next hour. It should nudge us to contemplate what we do--and why we do it--for months and years to come. Matthew 5:1-2 opens the door of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount for our understanding. He delivered this sermon to--and for--disciples. That means His sermon is to us no less than it was to those men who first heard Him preach it to them. It enlightens us how we should live our daily lives, including both our habits and our motives.

Jesus richly bathed His message in our study passage for this week in the healing balm of forgiveness. When we pray, how much do we focus on our failures to forgive others and seeking His help for us to forgive them? Or do we invest most of our prayers asking the Lord to change their minds so they agree with us?

When we do godly things, Jesus, "Sermon on the Mount" kind of godly things, why do we do them? To gain for self? Or to glorify Him for His loving kindness? Do we do them hoping for an approving audience of other believers who will notice our good deeds and praise us? Or do we do them hoping only for the Lord's approving grace?

Jesus compared these acts of goodness with something of high value that you might store in a safe place. Later in life, not in eternity, you shall face dark seasons when you need those treasures to shape how you deal with those seasons. Are you prepared in godly grace to deal with them? Or shall they take you by surprise and unprepared? How we live today builds how we shall react later during those trials.

When we cease trying to read how we earn heaven into every verse of Scripture and study it to learn how we should live our lives today for Him and for His glory, the Bible comes alive with its vibrant and clear instructions. How often do we face challenging situations and ask, "How should I deal with this?" When we study Scripture, especially those rich lessons such as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we find the answers in clear and communicative words. Demanding? Challenging? Yes indeed. But they do teach us the how and the why of living our present lives to the glory and praise of our Lord.

Lord, please teach us daily more about this fruitful way to live.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

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For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. Lay not up for yourselves

treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:14-21 KJV)

When people lose their way and become confused or uncertain about the right course, the wisest choice is always to pause and get back to the basics. This is especially true of Christian ethics. The religious elite in first century Judaism had complicated God's Ten Commandments into over six hundred rules. Most people couldn't remember six hundred rules, much less live by them all, a lively example of the defeated confusion of moral complexity. How did Jesus respond to this confusion? He reduced those "Big Ten" to two basic principles.

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40 KJV)

In this example, Jesus reminds us of the simplicity of godliness. Whenever anyone or any influence entices us to complexity, beware. They are not leading us to Jesus and His ways.

During the last three years, simple Biblical Christianity in this country has endured a crushing blow. Many pastors realized that their people simply were not prepared to deal with pressure in a godly and Biblical fashion. Paranoia, anger, and isolation have been far more the trend than basic Biblical habits. If we hope to refresh and to restore vibrant Biblical faith to our lives and our churches, we need this simple "Back to the Basics" lesson from Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount. We need to re-learn to practice this lifestyle and thereby erase those God-dishonoring habits that we've allowed to take over. My present intent is to write an extensive series on **Sermon on the Mount Lifestyle**. As I ponder the general situation of today, I am inclined to start in the middle to address what I perceive as one of the most pressing needs of our day. Lord willing, we shall study the whole message in time.

Take a moment to slowly, carefully read the verses above. Make a list of all the first words of each sentence. How many of those words are in some way "Connective"? They connect the thought of the current sentence with what went before. Jesus didn't deliver a fragmented random message. He taught a carefully framed sequential message for His disciples. (Matthew 5:1-2 KJV) The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' personal lesson to His disciples. Are we listening to Him?

Immediately prior to our study verses, Jesus taught the disciples the model prayer. However, He singled out the leading thought of our study passage for further emphasis and explanation. Of all the things covered in this model prayer, Jesus highlights the need to forgive for special emphasis. He knew—He knows—what we are most liable to ignore. Our broken carnal nature relishes holding grudges, not forgiving. Therefore, Jesus gives us a solemn warning. To the extent we carry a grudge and refuse to

forgive others, to that same extent Jesus warns us. Our Father will not forgive us. Can we afford to choose this option? Not if we honestly ponder our own sins and failures of faith.

Ponder the last three years in your life. You formed sincere and honest views of COVID. No doubt, some of your dearest friends came to an equally sincere and honest but different view. How have you interacted with them? Angry debate? Diminished care and interaction? Perhaps it is a good time to take your relationship with them to Jesus in your prayers. Forget about praying for them to change their minds and agree with you. Pray for your own forgiveness for unkind thoughts toward them, and perhaps unkind words. If we review these few years, most of us need that prayer today. I need the Lord's forgiveness—can't survive without it. Therefore, I can't afford to delay this prayer for forgiveness. How about you? ***I fear the spiritual impact this season had on believers far, far more than I fear an invisible virus.***

The next lesson Jesus taught used fasting as the example, but the principle applies to any good thing you might do. Do you long for an audience and words of praise for the good things you do? Or do you work to do them quietly and without attention or praise from your friends? When we consider the effort and often the sacrifice to do something truly good, we face a choice? Whose approval matters? God's? Or our friends? Jesus teaches that we may get one or the other, but not both. In this, as in so many of His Sermon on the Mount teachings, Jesus drives our thoughts to the heart of the matter. He shows us what to do for sure, but ***He also shines His bright light on our personal motives.*** So we do the right thing, right by Jesus' teaching. But do we do it with the right motive? Or do we do it hoping for praise and popularity with our brothers and sisters? Jesus gently, but firmly reminds us. We may get their approval or His, but we cannot get both. Choose His approval, even if no one ever sees or knows what you do.

Occasionally people ask me about fasting in the New Testament. I can't find a passage that commands fasting. However, several passages teach regarding how to fast—and how not to fast, this lesson as one example. I always refer them to Isaiah 58. What the Lord directed Isaiah to write about fasting harmonizes and supports what Jesus taught in this lesson. Biblical fasting is not about not eating and putting on a sad appearance. It is about quietly doing godly kindness toward those who need that help. You fast, but no one looking on would ever imagine that you were fasting.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Remember, Jesus addressed the Sermon on the Mount to disciples, to people who were already saved and were following Him. If we interpret "disciples" in Matthew 5:1 as referring to the twelve only, they had left their careers to follow Him, a life-changing choice. And, despite the "I'm adding stars to my crown" self-centered attitude that dominates so much of contemporary Christianity, Biblical teaching reminds us that heaven shall be all about praising God, not about our relishing our personal accomplishments on earth. (Revelation 5:9 KJV)

A simple analogy will help us with this thought. We routinely keep our money in a bank account. In today's electronic world, we can write a check or swipe a debit card and access that money to pay our bills. We can also use our bank app to deposit checks into our account and never leave our home. Apply this same idea to Jesus' words. How we choose to live, and, more importantly, ***why*** we choose to do what we do, either adds to our spiritual treasury or deletes from it right now. The Lord knows every thought, word, and deed we do. He knows why we do what we do. Our choices and motives either please Him or bring chastening. In this sense, every action we take either adds to our spiritual treasury or reduces it. Through life, we inevitably face seasons of need. If we have wisely and faithfully "Invested" our energy in

the walk of faith, a “Sermon on the Mount” lifestyle, we can draw sustaining faith from those treasures to sustain us through our dark seasons. If we failed to live faithfully in the “Faith-walk,” we will find those dark seasons painfully lonely. Simply put, daily, moment by moment, we either add to our spiritual treasure or take away from it. We use it now. In eternity, we shall have a full agenda praising Jesus for redeeming us from our sins. There is no time or desire in heaven to sing “I did it my way.” You didn’t! If you lived your life in the walk of faith, that “Sermon on the Mount” lifestyle, ***you lived your life “His way,” not yours.***

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. We do not build spiritual, “Heavenly,” treasure by occasionally doing something good. That “Bank account” only grows by steady habits of godly faithfulness. An example from pastoral experience. Fairly early in my pastoral experience, I received a phone call one afternoon that an older member of the church I served had passed out while shopping. Sandra and I immediately drove to see him and learn how he was doing. He was still shaken from the episode, but he didn’t want to talk about it at all. All he wanted to talk about was how good and gracious the Lord is and how much he loved God’s children. This dear man demonstrated his true “Treasure” in the midst of a personal health crisis. He had heart problems, the likely cause of his episode, and he only lived a few months after this episode, but his spiritual heart vividly revealed where his treasure was. To apply the analogy, when he faced his trial, he had a strong balance in his “Bank account.” He could draw from it and overcome the trial with joy in his Lord.

Would you like to find the faith and grace to face your personal dark seasons as this dear man faced his? You might respond, “Yes, that would be wonderful, but I don’t think I could do that.” You are so right. You can’t. Stop making self the centerpiece of your life and thinking. Your heart follows your treasure. Form the faithful habit of living your life and dealing with your problems the “Jesus way,” the “Sermon on the Mount” way. This lifestyle retrains your “Heart,” your deepest affections, to think less of self and more of God and of your brothers and sisters. The Lord has blessed me with far more kindness than I deserve. But, given my mortality, I’ve had a couple significant health episodes that could have taken my life. In each of those episodes, He reminded me of His goodness and His care for me. You see, a caring father doesn’t measure his love for his own child based on what the child deserves. He deals with his child based on his personal affection for his child. Our Father in glory deals with you and me in that same way, in love not in measured justice. Realize that wondrous truth, that living “Grace,” and work on “Treasure” that He will bless and safeguard for that day when you shall surely need to draw on it.

Elder Joe Holder