

Chapter Three: Part Two

What I couldn't see ten years ago

The decision to begin preaching through Matthew ten years ago was a fateful one. It changed my life. What had been up to that point a highly trained and well-intended adventure became a life-defining purpose. In the decade that has transpired my sense of definition (what I am here to do) has become all too clear. I am here to preach the teaching of Jesus.

I saw this quickly as I began preaching Matthew. It grew with Luke and reached fruition with Mark. Along the way, I made some decisions that helped in this pursuit. The first was to preach through 1Corinthians for a year. This cemented the loose intent I had after finishing Matthew. No offence to Paul; mention him often in sermons; and find his letters a source of pastoral guidance, but not the source of sermons.

The second helpful decision was to leap over the Sermon on the Mount. In Part One of this chapter I mentioned the theory of the hub and wheel. The sermon is the hub; the teachings surrounding it are spokes leading to the wheel. This is a helpful theory and it provides a tangible way of understanding the long pause of chapter 5-7 of Matthew's Gospel. Although I didn't preach through it, I did write two book-length studies on the sermon which convinced me of its power and what it could offer to one who seeks to follow Jesus.

Yet, what I couldn't see when I made this decision was how significant the sermon was and why. I could not yet appreciate how this was Matthew's "gift". I could not see this until I preached through Luke. When I preached through Luke's four different parts, the significance of the sermon on the mount came clear. For when I preached through Luke's longest section, the pilgrimage, I could see what was Luke's great offering. The pilgrimage of Jesus through Samaria, which comprises roughly 10 of Luke's 24 chapters, is a structure within a structure; it is a very purposeful "ordering". This is Luke's gift. Seeing Luke's made me appreciate what Matthew had done. He too had a structure within a structure, a very purposeful "ordering."

I could see this because a choice I made. I chose to preach Luke out of order. Luke has four parts: the gospel of Mary; the Galilean ministry of Jesus; the pilgrimage through Samaria; and, the Passover week in Jerusalem. I preached these four by starting with the pilgrimage. Then I went back to Mary's gospel which flowed into Galilee and ended with Jerusalem. This decision allowed me see the unique gift of Luke, the Samaritan pilgrimage, as similar to the sermon. This is what distinguished his gospel from Mark and Matthew.

I say this because most of what will follow in this chapter requires stepping away from the pericope theory we just put forth. We will need to break the sermon down into smaller pieces than pericopes to see the power of its structure. I believe the sermon can be preached as pericopes as Mark created and Matthew adopted. Yet, the sermon is also a unique structure that is more than a Sunday reading for preaching.

The More

The sermon on the mount has five parts:

Beatitudes: “blessed are”

Antitheticals: “before you heard it said”

Great Disciplines: “fast, pray, give . . . in secret”

Ladder of Knowledge: from the treasure of the heart to finding God’s heart

Imperatives: five things you should always do

In these five parts there are 24 pericopes. Yet, if we look inside the pericopes there are far more than 24 pieces. The beatitudes are comprised of eleven teachings. There are six antitheticals but an additional teachings that serves as a warning. The three great disciplines, which forms three pericopes, also has six petitions and a repetition- equaling 10 teachings in all. There are seven rungs on the ladder of knowledge and five imperatives. In total that equals 40 separate teachings. 41 if you count the directive of Jesus to “sit down.”

In this part we will explore the sermon as more than pericopes. It is an elegant, purposeful order of Jesus’ teaching. The order is both within the pericopes at times and in the parts as well. The first three parts are an inward journey; the second two are an outward journey.

That is a lot of images and information. As we move through each 40 teachings, my hope is that the flood of ideas will become more and more manageable. Each teaching builds on the one before it; each section relates to the last and to the next; the sermon as a whole is like a living creature: it is meant to be seen as a whole, yet, as Paul suggested, the foot and the hand are not the same.

I once heard a pastor preach the sermon on the mount. He memorized it and “delivered it.” This was nice, and in an age when no one memorizes anything, he made a big impression. Yet, this is not how the sermon is to be delivered. If you feel inclined, please memorize it. This is a great exercise. You will benefit greatly from it. Yet, reciting it to others will not have the same benefit.

The sermon contains 40 places to stop. 40 places where we should ponder; we must “sit down” as Jesus instructed the crowd with each one. Reading them through them like a list would be like walking quickly through the galleries of an art museum. You can say that you saw each

painting, but what you actually saw would be nothing to match the power and beauty of each work of art. You need to linger and look at a few.

In 2020 I will preach through these pieces. I will stop for a week with each one. I am very curious to see what this will do. In writing a Lenten devotion where each piece was given a day, I was quite excited by how this created a pace so to ponder. Preaching them should take a year. My guess is that this is what Matthew intended. He added a year's worth of teachings for preaching. Or, I could be wrong.

The Direction to Sit

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them.

One of the first practices a Buddhist monk is taught to do is sit. The monks are also taught to breathe, to eat. These very basic practices allow the monk to relearn life, to be born anew. You might believe you already know how to sit. But, take just five minutes; time yourself. See if you can sit and be quiet, without worry or racing thoughts. The chances are you will make it less than a minute before you realized, "I can't really sit still."

The teacher, Jesus, had them sit down. You are bid to do the same. You are bid to do this 40 times.

I - The Blessed Path

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

To be poor of spirit is to see your brokenness. This does not require that you understand your brokenness, or why you were broken, or who broke you and when. The first blessing is simply a recognition: I am broken. It is much like the declaration of the alcoholic, "I am Bill W. and I am an alcoholic." A great leap is taken here. There are many, many more steps and leaps to go before there is a sense of freedom from addiction, but the first step is taken.

Recognizing the broken spirit is a downward step. It takes us toward the grave. And so are the next two steps. They too take us deeper into the brokenness, the limits of life. Yet, with each step downward there is mercy; there is promise. "Yours is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

To mourn the life we lived, to repent, to see our path as ruined by greed, by falsity, by confusion, by anger: this is to die to self. We see our life as "not our own." We recognize that our end is the grave and our wages are death.

If we see the end to which we move as no longer our own, then we find the comfort of being bid to follow Jesus. The “old life is gone”, yet behold all things are new. This is the great comfort of the second step downward. We are moving toward the clay: from dust we came to dust we return. Yet, as we do we now find grace instead of wrath.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Humility is the key to abiding in the Kingdom of God. This the “bottom” of the descent, but it is also the bedrock of a new creation. What was ruined in pride is restored in humility.

Those who find the path of humility “inherit the earth.” The blessings of this life are not squandered. Vanity and selfishness squander all good gifts. Humility is the way we keep what is good. We keep it because we do not see ourselves as worthy of it, nor believing we can control what is good. The gift is given; the gift is received with gratitude: so are the meek.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

This is the first step upward. With this step we are rising from the grave. We have died to the old self and we are born anew. Now our desires are for the good. We hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The most important part of this Beatitude is to understand the gift. To be satisfied is the bold promise. For how often have any experienced true satisfaction? We are pleased for a moment and then disappointed. We finish one task only to be called to the next. We live without the peace of satisfaction. Jesus says, if you follow this path you will experience satisfaction.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

The next step upward is to live with the power of forgiveness. This is the great leap beyond anger and vengeance. This is not an easy step as we will see. To rise up here is to leave beyond the instinct to strike, to fear, to be sure you must hate. These instincts are wired into our DNA. They reach the level of survival.

To be born anew is to take on a new instinct, a new impulse. Where before we were quick to strike, sure of violence, now we are sure of compassion; we trust kindness instead of hatred. Jesus is describing a step that could take decades in someone’s life.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

The eyes that can see God are those who see God in all. This was the revelation of Augustine who was the first to treat the sermon as a structure within a structure. For him the theophany (seeing God) is finding God in the person next to you.

This sight comes from a heart made pure, cleansed of all wrong desire. Consider how much of our desires are unreal expectations, unspoken demands, secret longings that cloud our judgment. If we recognize that our dreams are often far from what is good, then we are close to the sight of the pure. For in seeing the destruction of expectations, we give way to hope. In speaking the demand, we find the better path of prayer. In the honest moment, we often find that we already have what is better.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

With the sixth beatitude we are now ready to live the life of Jesus. In living his life we will bring peace to earth and be seen as born of God, born of spirit.

Peacemakers represents those who would reconcile with all. We are those who trust in forgiveness; we seek no control of what is good; we desire what is right alone. In this we may peace with those around us.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

For those that have no peace, our words are a great threat. To say there is no need for me to hate you is a great challenge to the one who believes hatred is the only way to live. To those who are convinced that no one can be trusted, the honesty of the peacemaker is a great lie.

Hence, the one who bids peace is met with a sword. The one who lifts the fallen is crushed by hatred. This is the first warning of the sermon. If you follow Jesus, you are not immune to the evil manifest in the world.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The last blessing is again a warning, but it is also an affirmation. The path that Jesus walked is not easy, nor is it above the fray of the world. It is, in a sense, buried within the brokenness of life. To follow Jesus is not to avoid the storm, but to find peace in its midst.

The key to this is joy and gladness. This is the second warning of the sermon. Too often the way of endurance is severity; the path of survival is a hardening of the heart. Jesus says, the way to live through the calamities of life is joy and gladness. Too often we see people who believe you must put your head down and maintain a joyless, dour life in order to be good. How far this is from the sermon.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

To be the salt of the earth is to be the sustaining goodness. We preserve the gift of creation by living the life of Jesus. We are here to be good stewards of a great gift. This is the posture of the meek who know all good things come from God as a gift. We sustain the earth when we live here as stewards of a gift.

If we lose this purpose, then we are nothing more than soil. From dust we came, to dust we return. If we are not living as purposeful caretakers of a great gift, we are just a matter of erosion, slowly decomposing flesh.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

This is an important structure to see if you are going to read the remainder of the sermon. Earth and Heaven. Salt of the earth; light of the world (*cosmos* in Greek). When we reach the six petitions of the Lord’s prayer, this is the structure: Heaven and Earth. We see it most explicitly in the third petition: thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Again there is a warning embedded in the teaching. “No one . . . puts it under the bushel basket.” The warning is in the rhetoric. No one says “no one” does something without implying you are prone to do something just like this. We hide the truth; we cover what needs to be revealed. The implication is: we are a light in hiding. Just as we are people who cling too tightly to possessions and consider ownership a definition in life, so do we conceal and deflect what is true from those who need to see and hear the truth.

Thus ends the beatitudes. Eleven descriptions. Here Jesus is offering a portrait of life. A blessed life looks like this. What will follow, the antitheticals, is the opposite. Where the beatitudes describe, the antitheticals direct. This is a good thing; do this good thing. Again, this is part of the structure. Nearly all of the teachings in the sermon are found in Luke. Yet, they are cast about, like hidden treasures you stumble upon. In the sermon, the sequence and structure of the teachings is part of its meaning. Convinced of such a life, here, now, is the path that will lead you to it. Consider the beatitudes as fruit on a tree. With the antitheticals, Matthew will take us to the roots of the tree.

II - Antitheticals

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches

them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

This teaching only appears in Matthew. It is part of the “impossible ethic” of the sermon. That your righteousness would exceed the scribes and the Pharisees is impossible if we equate “religious devotion” with righteousness. Being the zealot of the zealots is a forsaken path. Yet, the key to the teaching is in the call to “fulfill.”

Jesus will be challenged by the scribes and Pharisees again and again because he didn’t adhere to their interpretation of the law and the prophets. He also differentiated between what goes into a person and what comes out. In other words, what is most important is what you do, not what you understand. In living the fulness of the law (living in a spirit of poverty, recognizing our end, and walking in humility), we find a greater righteousness than pride and fear and zeal can create.

The warning is the key to moving onto the six teachings to follow. You must maintain the posture of the blessed life as you move through each, otherwise your efforts are doomed to the limit of your enthusiasm or severity.

Anger

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

When I read this passage or teach this teaching, there is almost always someone who will say, “yes, but. . .” There must be “righteous anger” or “justified anger.” What about what Paul says, “be angry but do not sin.” All of which are true and have a place in life and experience. Yet, none of which get to the heart of this radical teaching of Jesus.

Consider that this is the first teaching that Jesus gives to the crowd where they must do something in particular. Heretofore the teachings have been descriptions, general calls to repent and believe. Only to the apostles has he given a direct command, “follow me.” This is the first time where he has said, do this. Do not be angry.

As we will see in the next five teachings, this one is the door, or the essential first step. In order to reach the end of this path (love your enemies) you must first put aside anger. This is terribly difficult because anger is our confidence; we trust anger. Anger gets things done; anger keeps harm at bay; anger is the energy we need when things get tough. And then, it isn't.

Patience can be our confidence, our trust. Patience gets far more done than anger; patience keeps much more danger at bay; patience is a renewable energy, it gives as it takes. And when things are terrible and way off course, patience born of humility is the saving resource.

Jesus says, you will be thrown into prison because of anger. In this we can begin to see the ultimate end of anger: we are incarcerated by it. Anger is our prison. Like Plato's cave, we are living in the shadows of false light as long as we look to anger as our confidence.

Lust

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

Before we look to the impossibility of this teaching (losing limbs and eyes), it will help if we see the correlation of what Jesus is teaching here with the teachings of the Buddha. Buddha teaches that there are three great sufferings in life: anger, desire, delusion. In the antitheticals Jesus will offer each of these sufferings twice. Anger and vengeance; lust and love of enemies; and divorce and swearing as delusion.

I offer this here because, like anger, we trust desire. Follow your heart. Whatever you want is right. Find your passion. As well intended as these directions may be, they are nowhere close to the teachings of Jesus. If we were to recast these directions in light of the teachings of Jesus (and Buddha), they would sound like this. Know the darkness of your heart, before you see its light; your desire for the right must be greater than yourself; lose all expectations so to find what is true. It is much faster to "follow your heart" than to be honest about the depth and brokenness of the heart.

The second antithetical, the discarding of wrong desire or lust, can be seen as very repressive. Don't lust sound like the advice of Nancy Reagan, "don't do drugs." Yet, unlike the misguided attempt of the first lady, Jesus' teaching is part of a path toward freedom. To see desire as suffering, what causes us to sin, is to see the root of our despair, our lack of peace. To cut off the hand, to cut off the foot, to pluck out the eyes is a spiritual discipline: see the root of suffering and clear it away.

Divorce

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

If this is not the most poorly interpreted teaching of Jesus, then I don’t know what is. No one takes the mandate to cut off hands over lust as a literal direction. But when it comes to divorce, now we do. Centuries of people have endured shame and suffering because we have poorly understood this teaching.

To read this correctly we need only replace the word divorce with discard. Do not discard people. The antitheticals are teachings that must be lived every day. Do not divorce if taken literally only applies to a minority of people and it is only a question for less. Every one discards people; each of us have cut some off, said, “enough.” This teaching of Jesus is not only a mandate to be slow to such a discarding, this teaching is also a deeper truth about delusion.

In this antithetical and the next, the suffering of the soul that is being identified is delusion. To reject a beloved as no longer a beloved, to turn to the friend and say, “I don’t know him,” and, most importantly, to say, “this one is not worthy of dignity,” this is the heart of delusion. We are looking to people in a way that is not only untrue, it is an untruth that demands a constructed world. The wife who leaves the husband for another must “divorce” herself from the vows, the relationship, the identity of one person for another. This is far different from the wife who leaves her husband because their marriage is false or dysfunctional or a matter of convenience.

False Confidence

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

The fourth antithetical has been interpreted as a mandate against oath taking. Hence, Mennonites are forbid to “solemnly swear” in court or pledge allegiance to the flag in the classroom. As with the mandate about divorce, the literal interpretation misses the point.

The teaching about swearing is best understood if we recast it as “false confidence.” False confidence is what we “swear by.” False confidence can be seen in the trivial (I like this brand of car; it is the only one people should buy) or the profound (this person will lead us to freedom

because she can do nothing wrong). Confidence gives way to falsity when it becomes delusional.

Nowhere has the church seen this more than in the literal and wooden interpretation of the bible itself. Often referred to as “biblical authority” this false confidence is used as a hammer to swear what is true and impose such certainty without merit or accountability. “The Bible says so.” This false confidence has fostered great suffering in the forms of biblical inerrancy or infallibility. The bible can never be wrong or lead to err. The fourth antithetical warns against this delusion.

Vengeance

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

In the last two antitheticals we can begin to see the process and progress of the teachings. What began as a rejection of anger is now a rejection of intended violence. Vengeance is the desire to use violence to restore justice, to exact punishment, or to deter future wrong doing. To these Jesus says, lay this impulse aside.

The process and the progress is also seen in the increased challenge. It is one thing to master the false confidence of anger (“I am going to give people a piece of my mind”); it is another thing to no longer believe violence offers any gain. The latter is whole other level of challenge and mastery. The complexity of justice and mercy, the need for restoration and reconciliation, are not found in anger, but they are in vengeance.

What is more, though, we can also see that if you have not mastered anger, lust, disdain, and the pride of false confidence, the chances of you living this teaching of Jesus is zero. This is not a place to begin; this is a place to end. There are many steps that lead to the moment where you can “not resist the evil doer.” This is not a matter of mere recognition; it is a great mystery. How can we live right and not resist the evil doer?

Love of Enemy

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The last antithetical, ironically, is the one people remember. Love your enemies. As was stated above, such a mandate is only possible if the first five have been mastered. To live without anger as something you trust, to know anger as poison, this is only the first step. To put down expectations and demands and control. To live accepting what is offered instead of imposing your demands, this is the second. To reject the impulse to discard people, to find the depth of patience and forbearance that keeps the broken and the unwanted is something few master, but it is only one more step.

To reject false confidence and violence is necessary for the love the enemy to be more than another delusion and suppression of violence. We can all bite our tongue and wait for the other shoe to drop. This is not the preparation that leads to “being perfect.” Being perfect is living slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The six antitheticals fulfill the law in that we live in the perfection of God who is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

III - The Great Disciplines

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

At the heart of the sermon are three practices. In order to see what this means, consider this. Jesus has just called upon his followers to take up an arduous and impossible set of tasks. To move from no anger to the love of the enemy is daunting. It will take great energy and effort and strength. Think of the six antitheticals as each being an “iron man” effort of the soul. Each is a marathon, an ocean swim, and a difficult bike ride so to speak. To finish this race, the follower will need enormous energy and stamina. Jesus offers three practices that will offer such energy.

The first is a spiritual exercise. If you learn to give alms, then you gain a spirit of generosity. With generosity comes freedom and compassion and humility. A generous spirit seeks no return, makes no demand, and looks only to offer kindness. To achieve this spirit a follower must learn do two things. Two things occur in this discipline. The first is to give in secret. This is to gain the freedom of no expectation or reward. The gift is the gift. The second is that the right hand must not know what the left is doing. This is the fruit of persistent practice where the action becomes instinct. The gift is not a calculated offering, vetted with great assurance. The gift is the gift.

Again, this is a spiritual exercise. The next is a soulful one; the third is a matter of the body. The first exercise leads to a new spirit, a spiritual birth. This is not the case with the next two. With alms giving we begin down a path of being born of the spirit.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

In the second discipline we are venturing into the soul. The soul is our memory, our understanding, and our will. Jesus teaches his followers that the freedom of the soul is found in prayer, prayer in secret, without contrivance, without vanity.

Yet, at the heart of the prayer is the energy of forgiveness. This is the only teaching Jesus repeats in the sermon. Forgive as you are forgiven is repeated. We do not see forgiveness as a source of energy, but with this teaching we are at the heart of the sermon and its greatest power. The way forward is forgiveness; this is the true source of strength.

If we go back to the antitheticals and apply mercy and forgiveness to them, the power of forgiveness comes clear. If we look to beatitudes it is what causes the soul to rise unto God, “blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

There are different types of prayer and different forms it can take. Jesus gives six petitions, each begging for a unique type and form. Yet, only one is restated. Forgiveness, mercy, is the key. Like humility is to the parables, so is mercy to the sermon: the key to abiding in the kingdom of God.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

The final discipline is a matter of gaining mastery of the body. Fasting is not a punishment, but a discipline where we find freedom from the body’s instincts and impulses. It is important here to reiterate the purpose. This is not a rejection of the body or a negative view. Fasting is the

path where the follower regains control of the body. Rather than soul being led by the body, fasting allows the body to follow the soul.

What is most important here is to remember the notion of stamina and energy. It is impossible to be mercy and forgiving and compassionate if your body is betraying you. Consider how often you have apologized for a misdeed by saying, "I didn't mean to snap, I am just hungry." Or consider the failures that arise from fatigue.

In order to follow Jesus through the teachings of the sermon, the disciple needs energy, strength and power. These comes from the great disciplines; they are a power source.

IV - The Ladder of Knowledge

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

After the disciplines, the sermon takes a different path. The first is a set of seven teaches that lead us upward. We begin with the heart; we move to the eye; and then wealth; from wealth we move to worry about time; and from time we are confronted with judgment, holiness, and then heaven. The ladder, like Jacob's ladder, is a movement from heaven to earth and back again.

The first step is find your heart. So often people fail in life because they do not know their heart. By heart, though, Jesus doesn't mean desires or wants. By heart what is meant is the image of God, the truth of being a beloved of God. There is no greater good. This is the treasure that lies within the heart of each.

Here we are not to validate our desires, but to find the one true desire: to live as God intended in creation. This intent is reborn in us as we follow Jesus.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

In order to take this step on the ladder, it is important to understand what Jesus means by the "eye" as well as "darkness." Again and again, Jesus will say, if you have ears to hear and eyes to see. By this he means the eye that looks for the truth born of humility. The eye of humility is one that is full of light.

The darkness is what Jesus refers to as "evil." In the last petition of the prayer we are taught to say, "deliver us from evil." We can take this deliverance as from evil at large or evil as

personified in the devil. Yet, we understand it best if we recognize the darkness that is in all of us. Here our prayer becomes deliver us from our evil. This is the great darkness that destroys the soul.

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

If we can find the image of God in our heart and then see the light of humility that leaves the darkness within, then we find the freedom of laying aside greed. To lay aside greed can be found in the other parts of the sermon (blessed are the poor in spirit; do not lust; give alms in secret; enter through the narrow gate), here though it is stated plainly. Freedom from greed as part of the ladder means we are rising above the spirit of possession and expectation. Also we are finding the mandate of love. For as much as we associate love with God or speak of love in relationship to our faith, Jesus doesn't mention love often in the synoptic gospels. In John it is almost omnipresent. Yet, in the sermon love comes in regard to enemies and greed.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

This is the longest teaching of the sermon. It is perhaps the most beautiful and the most difficult. To live without worry. This is impossible.

What we eat, what we drink, what we wear are not important. Many people live without great care being brought to each. Yet, we need not take them literally, or as the end of the matter. This is the teaching about finding more than food, more than drink, more than clothing. Most of life is spent trying to get more of these; rarely do we find people who are trying to find how life is more than these. Or, better put, so much time is spent moving from effort to effort trying to make enough for life and all the worries that come with our day to day that we have no strength to rise above them.

Mostly, though, we worry about tomorrow. Time is a relentless adversary. Time, or the sense of time projected unto tomorrow: to live without any worry is the challenge of this step in the ladder.

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

Like all the other sections, the ladder has a progression and process. Quite often this passage is thrown down before people as if it is a simple step. Yet, this is the fifth step on a ladder. No one would try to step on the fifth step of a ladder while standing on the ground. “Do not judge” can only be achieved by those who know their heart, know their darkness, and have put down greed and worry. Only here can you see the offender with a level of humility and patience that will offer mercy born of truth.

Not judging is often confused with indifference or disdain. We do not judge those we deem unworthy of our time or effort. We treat them with contempt or dismiss them as beyond the saving and thus without the demand of judgment. This is not what Jesus is teaching.

“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

This sixth step in the ladder is to understand what is holy. The pearls of heaven. If we consider this step as the opposite of the last, it may come clear.

The last step was to see others without contempt, to look upon all people with humility. In this step it is the opposite: do not expect such vision from others. The challenge of reaching such of a lofty vision of life takes great effort. Do not expect this sight to be shared.

The pearls of heaven is the beauty we can see in the whole cloth of creation, the commingling of heaven and earth, the elegance of the universe in its vastness and pressing proximity. The loving and trustworthy dog can be a dear friend, but he or she cannot grasp the mystery of holiness. These are mysteries not a logical conclusion or sight born of natural instinct.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

The last step on the ladder, like the antitheticals, is often quoted as if it were the first step or obvious direction. It is, of course, neither. We can all ask, seek, and knock. Yet, how often do we ask for what is our destruction? Who often do we seek our own downfall? Do we not knock at the wrong door again and again? Yet, if we consider this teaching as the fruit of the last six steps, the six antitheticals and the beatitudes, it becomes much more than “name it; claim” foolishness.

If we see this seventh step as the great leap born of generosity, mercy, and self-control, then we are close to understanding the Father in heaven who gives good things of those who ask him.

V - The Imperatives

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

In the final section of the sermon there is no longer a process or a progression. Like the great disciplines, these teachings are not weighted with increasing difficulty; they are a list of things we must do. Think of them as a kind of third table of commandments. Here Jesus is giving a new version of the “law and the prophets.”

The first is the golden rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The key here is to understand that this is rule for all times. There is no time to not do this. This is a rule for living each day. You don’t have to master the first four parts of the sermon to live this; you need to master the first four parts if you want to live this with energy, intelligence, and love.

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

The narrow gate, or what Jesus will refer to as the eye of the needle, is part of the architecture of the city walls in ancient times. During the day, the gate of commerce is open. At night it is closed. At night you can enter through the narrow gate. This is place where people enter without goods, where they come home, where they enter in the darkness.

To enter the narrow gate is to live as one who is known, who has a home and love. Mostly it is find the rootedness of being in a place. Here is where we are no longer a stranger. The narrow gate is for those who are known by name.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can

a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

This teaching demands we look to the fruit of life. This is the path of honesty and attention. Too often this teaching is a question of a person's character. Yet, it is better understood as a rejection of unfruitful tradition.

We often become slaves of "how things are done." Jesus says, look to the fruit. Does your custom, your habit, your law and moray lead to good life or suffering? If it is suffering, cut it down. Too often we choose tradition and perpetuate destruction and prejudice. There is no time when allowing bad fruit to persist is a good plan.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

This is the teaching about our character. Our value is in what we do, not what we say. This is the critical measure of all our doctrines and philosophies and certainties we too often offer without evidence of value. Jesus offers one measure of value: do you live the will of the Father in heaven?

This imperative can be a great stumbling block. Like the rungs that must be climbed before we "ask, seek, and knock," we must be clear that we are truly unclear about will of God beyond what is required of us: walk humbly, love mercy, do justice. If we see this as the will of God the imperative changes from a divinization of mystery to a very clear mandate for living.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!" Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

The last imperative and last teaching of the sermon directs us to do one thing: build your house on the rock. Yet, what is this rock?

Perhaps the most likely candidate is the only teaching that is repeated in the sermon. Forgive as you have been forgiven. If you not only do this, live this, but see this as the foundation of all things, then we are close to the kingdom of God.

The “shema” is another likely “rock.” Love God and love your neighbor. This could be the rock upon which we build.

A third possibility is humility. All can find the find the kingdom of God (even the violent can take it). Only the humble can find the kingdom of God and live there. Love, forgiveness, humility: perhaps they are the width and length and depth of the rock upon which we are to build. Perhaps.