

**THE COMING OF GOD'S KINGDOM
WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A DISCIPLE**

Matthew 4:17 - 7:29

PART A. Introduction (4:17-25)**Summary of Jesus' proclamation of the gospel**

John the Baptist has just spoken of one 'coming after' him (3:11). It is Jesus of Nazareth, and here he is, the more powerful one, standing before us and repeating the words already proclaimed by John: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (3:2).

This is the Messianic time: the time to which the prophets had looked forward with such longing; the time that had filled the dreams and sustained the lives of a whole people; the time when God would visit this world and establish peace and justice and the reign of his love. History is reaching its full flowering.

The kingdom that Jesus is to establish is the kingdom of God. It is from God and it is about God and it consists in communion with God. The good news is being offered. To receive it we must be ready to 'repent', to open our minds and hearts and be ready for a change in outlook and a change in attitude and behaviour (see the commentary on 3:8,11). What this means and how people are to change their minds and hearts so as to receive what God is offering is the subject of the rest of the gospel. We might recall the words of Isaiah:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'.

– Isaiah 52:7

The official Prayer of the Church begins each day with the following words: 'O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts' (Psalm 95:7-8). We might reflect on them as we begin our study of Matthew. If we have not taken the trouble to listen and to follow in the past, it is still possible now to do so. Even if we have in some way listened and followed, it is necessary to keep listening and to be ready now to follow, for God may be calling us now on a new journey.

God cannot be contained within the limits of our ideas concerning him or the ways in which we have so far come to know him. Yet this transcendent God is immanent in our lives and in our world, and has come near us in Jesus. A disciple of Jesus must always be ready to 'repent', to be open to the surprise of God's word calling us to an ever deeper intimacy, and to an ever closer sharing in the mission which God entrusted to Jesus.

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

compare
Mark 1:14-15
Luke 4:14a

Jesus invites others to join him in his mission

18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea -- for they were fishermen.

19 And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.'

20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

In the final scene of his prologue, Matthew underlined the fact that Jesus is bringing the light of God's revelation to those in the 'region and shadow of death' (4:16). In his summary of Jesus' proclamation, he spoke of repentance as a necessary condition for seeing this dawning light (4:17). In this present passage the way to repent is made clear: it is to follow Jesus, leaving behind anything, however important, that impedes our journeying with him.

From the beginning Matthew draws attention to the fact that Jesus' mission was never meant to be one that he was to carry out on his own. The goal was to reconcile all to God. This involves the building of community and so the necessity of extending an invitation to others to help make this possible. The sea is a symbol of the forces of chaos prior to the creative action of God's Spirit. In watching Jesus call the fishermen from the sea, we are watching his Spirit call them to be part of a new creation. Jesus' redeeming action is already at work.

The Greek word translated 'follow' in 4:20,22 (not in 4:19) is *akoluthēō*, from which derives our English 'acolyte'. It is commonly used in the gospels for that way of accompanying Jesus that is special to a disciple. These first disciples are being called to carry on Jesus' mission of rescuing others from the 'sea'. They will 'fish for people' (compare Jeremiah 16:16).

Note that the initiative comes from Jesus, both in word and in a look that penetrates to the heart. The urgency of responding to the call is underlined by the word 'immediately'. There seems to be a conscious contrast here with the way Elisha responded when Elijah called him (1Kings 19:19-21). Following Jesus must come before anything else, no matter how important (see also 8:18-22).

Christian detachment is not a matter of refraining from becoming really involved in this world. God loves the world, and Jesus longed to heal it so that we would live to the full. Disciples of Jesus are committed to undertake God's project for the world with all their hearts and minds and with all their energy.

compare
Mark 1:16-20
Luke 5:1-11

Teilhard de Chardin expresses this well:

God does not deflect our gaze prematurely from the work he himself has given us, since he presents himself to us as attainable only through that very work. Nor does God blot out, in his intense light, the detail of our earthly aims, since the closeness of our union with him is in fact determined by the exact fulfilment of the least of our tasks ... It is a matter of life and death that the earth should flourish to the utmost of its natural powers...

Far too many Christians are insufficiently conscious of the divine responsibility of their lives. They live just like other people, giving only half of themselves, never experiencing the spur or the intoxication of advancing the kingdom of God in every domain of humankind. If you must blame us, then blame our weakness, not our faith. Our faith imposes upon us the right and the duty to throw ourselves into the things of the earth.

– The Divine Milieu

Christian detachment calls us to be attached to people and to things in such a way that we are willing to let them go if ever and whenever we are called to do so. Furthermore, detachment is not possible for us on our own initiative. We can leave what we love only when called and graced to do so. Jesus' first disciples did, indeed, leave their father and their nets but only in response to Jesus' call to accompany him.

The call to follow Jesus is well expressed by Paul in the following passage in which he speaks of the ministry of reconciliation which Christ continues through him. It is a ministry of calling people to follow Jesus: a following which makes of a disciple a new creature:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;
that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,
not counting their trespasses against them,
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

– 2Corinthians 5:17-19

Crowds gather around Jesus the teacher and healer

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.

25 And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

compare
Mark 1:21,28
Luke 4:31,37

verse 24
compare Luke 6:18

verse 25
compare Mark 3:7-8
and Luke 6:17

In this passage Matthew recalls Jesus' teaching and healing ministry and speaks of his spreading reputation. Matthew is providing a general overview of the first major section of his gospel. The teaching will be presented in chapter 5-7; the proclamation of the gospel and the healing will be presented in chapters 8-9. Matthew's conclusion (9:35) repeats verse twenty-three almost word for word.

The following words of Isaiah provide a good commentary on Matthew's summary of Jesus' ministry:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

– Isaiah 61:1-2

Jesus' ministry is meant for all. It extends beyond the territories of Galilee and Transjordan to the heart of Judaism in Judea and Jerusalem, but also beyond the boundaries of Judaism into Syria and the Decapolis. It is surprising to find Syria mentioned here, and that it is given such a prominent position. This fits nicely with the hypothesis that suggests Antioch in Syria as the place of origin of the Greek version of Matthew. Matthew is assuring his community that the gospel which they have heard has its origins in the preaching of Jesus.

Matthew speaks of Jesus teaching in *their* synagogues. The author and the community for whom he is writing already see themselves as a separate community. (Note similar expressions: 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54; 23:34).

The sick and marginalised, Jew and non-Jew, gather around Jesus. Matthew's Christian community has a similar composition. Jesus is teaching them about God and about how they are to respond to the good news of God's saving grace. Matthew is inviting his community to listen attentively to Jesus' teaching.

This is the first time that Matthew has used the word 'gospel' ('good news'). As we listen to Jesus' teaching, therefore, we should keep remembering the good news: 'You are my sons/daughters. I love you. I delight in you' (see 3:17).

Only to the extent that we believe this are we able to listen as Jesus draws out the implications of the gospel for our understanding of God and for the kind of response which we are to give to grace.

Each generation has its John the Baptists who prepare the way for God's beloved Son. When they invite us to come to baptism and to confess our sins, they are acting for the risen Jesus who is drawing everyone to himself and so to the Father. It is Jesus who redeems and saves and who effects the conversion of mind and heart without which we cannot enjoy the divine communion for which we are created and for which we hunger.

Let us come to him with our sicknesses, our demons, our paralysis, and ask him to heal us. And let us listen attentively while he expounds to us the mysteries of the kingdom into which he is inviting us.

Part B Jesus' teaching on discipleship (5:1 - 7:29)

Introduction

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Matthew mentions the crowds again at the end of this 'sermon': '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' (7:28-29).

He is highlighting the universal dimension of Jesus' mission. The words on discipleship which we are about to hear are meant to reach everyone. Not all, however, listen to Jesus. Those who do are called 'disciples' — a word Matthew uses here for the first time. It is possible to listen fruitfully to Jesus only if we have the attitude of heart and mind of those who have left behind whatever comes between them and their answering the call to follow Jesus (4:20,22).

Matthew situates this 'sermon' on a mountain. He wants to present Jesus' teaching as the fulfilment of God's revelation to Moses, and so he alludes to that other mountain on which God revealed to Moses the way the people were to live in order to obey God and reach the goal of their journey:

The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.

– Exodus 24:12

It will be from a mountain that the risen Jesus will commission his disciples to go forth and teach as he has taught (28:16-20).

While the following sermon is composed by Matthew, the sayings are those of Jesus whose words would have been carefully treasured by those who heard him. However, as was explained in the opening chapter of this book, the disciples of Jesus did more than remember Jesus' words. They pondered their meaning in the light of all they knew of Jesus' life and death and in the light of their post-crucifixion experiences of Jesus' continued presence in the community.

compare Luke 6:17,20

Matthew is doing more than record Jesus' words. He is also sharing his inspired insights into the mind and heart of Jesus in an attempt to connect with the experience of his community and to draw out the implications of Jesus' teaching for their lives. We should expect, therefore, that in some instances, Matthew is recording not Jesus' remembered words but the meaning of Jesus' teaching expressed in Matthew's own inspired words and applied to the new situation of his community.

We are privileged to have here a record of a number of Jesus' sayings. We are privileged also to have the insights of an inspired disciple who has contemplated Jesus' words and, with profound pastoral love, is sharing his insights with his fellow Christians. Each generation is called to do the same, as the context within which we live our lives changes. Let us help each other to ponder the heart and mind of Jesus and, through these 'words of the kingdom' (13:19), presented to his community by Matthew, may we come to know what is God's will for us, and how we are to live today so as to be true disciples of Jesus.

The moral teaching of Jesus always includes a call. It is an invitation to personal communion with him, and carries with it the promise of the Spirit to make our response possible. As we read this 'sermon', let us call upon his Spirit to enlighten and encourage us.

³ **'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'**

The Beatitudes

This is the first of eight brief sentences, in which we have the essence of the 'good news of the kingdom'(4:23). John the Baptist summoned his contemporaries to 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'(3:2). Matthew uses exactly the same words to summarise the teaching of Jesus (4:17). Now we hear that God's kingdom is present.

We must first look at the significance of the word translated here as 'blessed'. The Greek is *makarios*, which itself translates the Hebrew *ashre*. Some English translations use 'happy'. However 'happy' comes from the same root as happen and haphazard. Happiness is a feeling which one happens to have, by chance or good fortune.

The translation 'blessed' correctly directs our attention to God whose blessing is the source of the joy which Jesus is describing. This teaching is fundamental to the Scriptures, as the following typical statements from the psalms indicate: 'Blessed are those who trust in God'(Psalm 2:11). 'The Lord takes delight in his people. He crowns the poor with salvation'(Psalm 149:4). While God's blessing is fundamental to what Jesus is saying here, his focus is on the special joy which we experience when situations that could so easily be destructive are rendered meaningful by our union with him.

To understand what Jesus means by being 'poor in spirit' we will have to watch him to see how he is poor in spirit. He is presenting this as the fundamental attitude of a disciple, only because it is his fundamental attitude also. The blessedness, the bliss, the profound delight of intimate communion with God, which the disciple experiences is a sharing in the religious experience of Jesus. Our understanding, therefore, of what Matthew means by 'poor in spirit' will deepen as we continue our contemplation of Jesus. Here, however, we should make an initial attempt to point our reflections in the right direction.

The word 'spirit', when applied to human beings, always refers to our relationship with God. The word 'poor' applies to those who do not have the resources to meet their own needs. We are 'poor in spirit', therefore, to the extent that we recognise that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God, on whom we totally depend.

compare Luke 6:20

Jesus is telling his disciples that they will share his communion with God to the extent that they recognise their own powerlessness and complete dependence on God, give up all self-reliance, and look to God as the only source of their hope and salvation, trusting that God wants only to love them. It should be obvious from Jesus' own commitment to the poor and oppressed that he is in no way justifying material, economic poverty, nor is he saying that there is anything good about any of the deprivations experienced by the oppressed poor. Certainly, when our lack of resources to meet our pressing needs is obvious, we are less likely to think of ourselves as self-sufficient, than when our material welfare is secured. The deceptive and superficial self-reliance that goes with wealth is a trap that caused Jesus to say: 'It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven'(19:23). However, it can be hard for the poor, too, because of the temptation to envy or to despair.

The 'poor in spirit' are those who recognise their need and cry out to God in their distress. The whole biblical tradition is that the God of Israel will always heed this cry:

Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians ... I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt'.

– Exodus 3:7-8,12

As we watch Jesus, we see that he, too, cannot resist the cry of the poor (4:23-24), and later he will call his disciples to share in his mission of liberation (9:36-38). When he meets a person who wants to be his disciple and who has resources to help the poor, he asks him to rid himself of his possessions — of the riches that burden and 'possess' him — and to give them to those who need them. Only then will he be free to follow Jesus (19:21). Whatever resources we have, we will be judged on how we shared them with those in need (25:25-26,42-43).

Jesus, therefore, is not praising poverty of any kind. He is calling his disciples, whatever their situation, to recognise that they are not independent, that they do not have the resources in themselves to be or to do anything, but that they are totally dependent upon God. In this first beatitude, Jesus is assuring them that if they do this and act accordingly they will experience now the communion with God that will satisfy their deepest need and their deepest longing.

A perfect image for the 'poor in spirit' is found in Psalm 131. Here, the psalmist places before us for our imitation a little child, utterly dependent, simply and totally looking to the mother, and doing so joyfully because of the security provided by the mother's love. Later in the gospel, we will hear Jesus saying: 'Unless you change, and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'(18:3). It is this attitude that accounts for the extraordinary intimacy of Jesus' religious experience, causing him to speak to God as 'my dear Father' (Abba). Shortly, he will speak of God as the Father, too, of his disciples (5:16), and teach them to pray as he prayed (6:9).

The beatitudes

⁴ *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ **Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

⁷ *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸ *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹ *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children [sons] of God.*

¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake [because of righteousness] for theirs is the kingdom of heaven .*

The second to the seventh beatitude (5:4-9) spell out important aspects of being 'poor in spirit'. We will examine them shortly. However, let us now go straight to the eighth and final beatitude in which we hear again the refrain: 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (5:10).

This time those are declared 'blessed' who are 'persecuted because of righteousness'. We have already noted that Jesus' first words in Matthew's gospel refer to 'righteousness' (3:15), that is to say, to a commitment to doing the will of God in every circumstance.

It is one thing for a child to trust. It is another for an adult in a world of sin, oppression and suffering to maintain this same loving trust in God while being committed to do God's will. The challenge presented by Jesus to his disciples is to remain 'poor in spirit' precisely under persecution.

We will see Jesus living with this childlike trust in his own public ministry and especially in his suffering and death. In his narration of Jesus' death, Matthew refers, as we shall see, to Psalm 22, the psalm, par excellence, of the person who is 'poor in spirit'. With the opening words of the psalm upon his lips (27:46), Jesus is portrayed as recalling the kind of trust he experienced as a child:

It was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

– Psalm 22:9-10

In his experience of isolation, pain and rejection, however, this memory seems of no avail. Nevertheless, Jesus continues to cry out to God, knowing that there is no other source of salvation, no other place of hope or of refuge. And then come the words:

God has not despised or disdained the poor man in his poverty. He has not hidden his face from him, but has answered him when he called.

– Psalm 22:24

Matthew will develop this theme of persecution later (10:16-39). His community suffered through the tensions they experienced because of being misunderstood and rejected by their fellow Jews.

compare Luke 6:21

They suffered also through the opposition they found when they attempted to put into practice the liberating love of Jesus in a society in which the powerful were determined to maintain the class divisions and unjust structures that supported their position. They suffered also through the tensions that occurred within their own Christian community (18:15-20). Matthew assures them that the person who is 'poor in spirit' knows the blessedness of God's love. However painful the circumstances, the poor in spirit experience, even now, the bliss of divine communion.

In between the opening and closing beatitudes, there are six short statements which look at six aspects of what it means to be 'poor in spirit'. The two beatitudes which we have just examined are in the present tense: the intimate communion with God is a reality experienced here and now by Jesus and by his disciples. The six intermediate beatitudes, however, speak of the future. God's blessing did not protect Jesus from the harm brought about by the ignorance or malice of human beings. Neither is there a guarantee of protection for Jesus' disciples. Jesus did not avoid suffering and he is not pretending to his disciples that they will avoid it by following him. He is however teaching them a way of responding to life that will lead them to the fullness of beatitude which God has promised those who open themselves to the gift of his love.

Those who mourn

The 'poor in spirit' are 'those who mourn'(5:4). Jesus assures them that they are blessed by God and that one day they will be comforted. This, too, is traditional teaching:

Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,' says the Lord; 'I will place them in the safety for which they long.

– Psalm 12:5

I shall turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow.

– Jeremiah 31:13

The prophet who celebrated the ending of the Babylonian exile was inspired to open his writing with the words: 'Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem'(Isaiah 40:1). Later in the Isaiah scroll we read:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

– Isaiah 61:1-3

Matthew has already prepared us for this theme in the story of the flight into Egypt (2:13-18), and we have already witnessed God sending his angels to minister to Jesus as he faces the trials that are part of our human condition (4:11). In the section immediately following the 'Sermon on the Mount', Matthew presents us with ten scenes in which we see Jesus healing and comforting the afflicted.

The beatitudes

Matthew stresses the point that Jesus did not comfort from the outside, as it were: rather, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (8:17). We will witness Jesus' own brokenness as he laments the failure of Jerusalem to heed the good news (23:37), and as he faces the isolation, pain and 'failure' of his trial and death. He confides to his disciples that he is 'deeply grieved, even unto death' (26:38).

Already, in introducing this discourse, Matthew has shown us Jesus working tirelessly to heal and to bring comfort (4:23-25; see also 9:35-37). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews summarises Jesus' experience when he writes:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

– Hebrews 5:7-9

Those who mourn are those who feel their own affliction, whatever its source, and the pain suffered by others. Those who do not mourn suffer from the hardness of heart that is characteristic of the egotistical. We are so self-reliant, so caught up in our own world, our own successes, our own projects, our own comfort, that we do not even notice the pain around us. Furthermore, we fail to experience the awful condition of our own dulled spirit, because we are so insensitive to grace and to sin.

Jesus is speaking to those who dare to allow God to give them a 'heart of flesh' (Ezekiel 36:26) that cannot avoid the pain, but that cries out to God in faith. He promises us the consolation and comfort of God's Spirit. The timing of this gift, however, is something to be left trustingly in God's hands, as Jesus' own experience of the passion demonstrates.

Jesus himself knew the experience of being comforted by his Father when his own heart was broken by the lack of justice and the lack of love and the lack of prayer that he witnessed all around him. He longed to set people free, he longed to bring the light of divine revelation to those living in the 'region and shadow of death' (4:16). His heart was broken by the sickness, the suffering and the sin that surrounded him. Here he asks his disciples to open their hearts, too, to the poor and oppressed, and to let themselves experience their own and other people's affliction.

Matthew is writing for communities that feel deeply the separation from their Jewish brothers and sisters who have not accepted Jesus. They know, too, the grief of seeing 'the increase of lawlessness' and the 'love of many growing cold' (24:12). They also mourn the absence of Jesus the bridegroom (9:15) who is so slow in coming (25:5). The prophet Zechariah spoke of God's promise to 'pour out a spirit of compassion' on those who mourned for the 'one whom they have pierced' (Zechariah 12:10). So will Jesus' disciples experience finally the fullness of God's consoling Spirit when they are invited: 'Enter into the joy of your master' (25:21,23). As Paul says:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

– Romans 8:18

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

– 2Corinthians 1:3-7

The meek

The ‘poor in spirit’ are also spoken of as being ‘meek’(5:5) They have the strength to maintain a love that, in the words of Paul, ‘bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’(1Corinthians 13:7). The expression ‘bears all things’ might be better translated ‘has space enough to hold and to bear everyone and everything’. Moses had this quality to an extraordinary degree: ‘Moses was very meek, more than anyone else on the face of the earth’(Numbers 12:3). The perfect example of meekness is Jesus himself. In the dramatic portrayal of the trials of his desert journey, Matthew has already presented Jesus as resisting temptations to power, possessions, and prestige (4:1-11). Later, we will hear Jesus inviting his disciples: ‘Learn from me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls’(11:29, compare 21:5). The meek do not abuse power. Faced with evil, they heed the words of Paul: ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’(Romans 12:21).

Being ‘poor in spirit’ they place their trust in God and know that all the power of God is there for them, if they but obey God’s will. Relying on God, the meek remain conscious of the presence of the sacred in this world, and so they experience respect for all that God has made, and especially for the unique mystery of the human person. A constant teaching of the Scriptures is that the Promised Land was won, not by the exercise of human power, but by the power of God (Psalm 44:3). For this reason the Psalmist says: ‘The meek shall inherit the land’(Psalm 37:11). Matthew repeats this teaching here, for Israel is still in exile. To carry out their mission to the whole earth they must heed Jesus’ words and welcome God’s action through him. They are blessed who refuse the use of violence in favour of gentleness, as they courageously carry out their commitment to doing the will of God. If, like Jesus, they respect the freedom and mystery of others, they will be given by God their place in the inheritance for which they long.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

The ‘poor in spirit’ are further described as those who ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’(5:6). Longing to do God’s will is one of the central themes of the Scriptures of Israel. Psalm 119 opens with the following beatitude:

Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the way of the Lord.
Blessed are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart.

– Psalm 119:1-2

The beatitudes

Already in his prologue, Matthew has presented Joseph to us as a ‘righteous man’ (1:19) who ‘did as the Angel of the Lord commanded him’ (1:24). Jesus first words in Matthew’s gospel show his concern ‘to fulfill all righteousness’ (3:15), a commitment that he sustains when put to the test. He lives ‘by every word that comes from the mouth of God’ (4:4).

This is a central theme of the whole of this first discourse which sets before us the kind of ‘righteousness’ (5:20) expected of us if we are to be Jesus’ disciples. Those who ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’ are those who are committed to ‘strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ (6:33), wanting nothing more than to do the will of God. This is the ‘good fruit’ (7:17) by which a good tree is known (compare 3:8). Jesus knows his disciples (7:23) by the fact that they do the will of his Father (7:21).

In the present, we are asked, like Jesus himself, to live in faith. We should expect to suffer setbacks and disappointments, and what may appear to be failure. Ultimately, however, we will not be disappointed, and we will receive from Jesus himself the welcoming words: ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom’ (25:34). We hunger and thirst now, but we ‘will be filled’ (5:6).

The merciful

A further quality of the ‘poor in spirit’ is that they are ‘merciful’ (5:7). When Paul tells us that God is ‘rich in mercy’ (Ephesians 2:4), he is expressing an understanding of God that is central to Israelite faith. The Greek word (*eleos*) translated here as ‘mercy’ is used in the Bible to translate three Hebrew words, each of which expresses a central idea concerning God. The first is *hesed* which speaks of God’s faithful commitment to his promises and to the covenant love he has for Israel. The second is *hanan* which speaks of the favour which God shows those whom he loves. The third is *raham*, which derives from the word for ‘womb’ and speaks of the tenderness of God’s love. God is spoken of as ‘merciful’ hundreds of times. Two examples will suffice. The words in italics are translated by *eleos* in the Greek Bible:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and *be gracious* [Hebrew *hesed*] to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

With everlasting *love* [Hebrew *hesed*] I will *have compassion* [*hanan*] on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer ... For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my *steadfast love* [Hebrew *hesed*] shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who *has compassion* [Hebrew *raham*] on you.

– Isaiah 54:8,10

It is this same mercy that God expects of Israel. Once again there are hundreds of examples. We will be content with two:

I desire *steadfast love* [Hebrew *hesed*] and not sacrifice.

– Hosea 6:6; a text quoted twice by Jesus, see Matthew 9:13; 12:7

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love *kindness* [Hebrew *hesed*], and to walk humbly with your God?

– Micah 6:8

We must contemplate Jesus to see him expressing the mercy of God. Again and again, people come to him, pleading for mercy, and again and again the heart of Jesus goes out to them to heal, forgive, and comfort. Matthew tells us how deeply Jesus was moved by the suffering of those whose lives he shared (9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34).

One of Jesus' main complaints against the scribes and Pharisees who stubbornly resisted his message was that they neglected mercy (23:23). It must not be so among his disciples: 'Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' (18:33) Paul is convinced that God wants to be 'merciful to all' (Romans 11:32), and praises God who:

saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

– Titus 3:5

In the 'Sermon on the Mount', Jesus is speaking especially to his disciples. They are indeed blessed who share in this beautiful love that is from God. Their own brokenness and their own trust has taught them to be sensitive to the brokenness of others. Those who give expression in their lives to the mercy of God do not sit in judgment on others and are always ready to forgive (6:12; 18:21-22). Their heart of flesh hurts with those who are hurting. Reaching out to others they will experience God reaching out to them (25:35-36).

The pure in heart

The 'poor in spirit' are also 'pure in heart' (5:8). This is the first occurrence of the word 'heart' (Greek *kardia*) in Matthew's gospel. Its importance will become obvious as we proceed. It refers to the centre of feeling, thought, intention and motivation, from which all human action springs (15:19). It matters what we do. It matters what we say and how we relate. Jesus, however, was not content with external obedience or conformity to regulations. He was concerned with a transformation of heart, with a cleansing 'of the inside' (23:26). His teaching is traditional:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

– Psalm 24:3-6

The 'poor in spirit' have a heart of flesh that is pierced by the sufferings of life and open to God's Spirit; a heart that experiences the affliction of the purifying fire of God's love till all that is not of God is burned up and consumed – till all that remains is love. Like the previous qualities, purity of heart is a gift from God, a gift for which we must pray:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

– Psalm 51:10

The beatitudes

Jesus is inviting his disciples to be open to receive this gift from God. It will require that they renounce everything that resists God's purifying grace, but in the purity of that love Jesus promises that they will see God, the one in whom they have placed their trust and to whom they have committed their lives: the one with whom they are already in communion. Paul expresses this same hope:

Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

– 1Corinthians 13:12

Those who make peace

Finally, the 'poor in spirit' are those who make peace (5:9). Open to the one who can create out of nothing, they do not measure their hope by their own resources, nor are they daunted by opposition or discouraged by apparent failure. This is not the false peace of a conscience where remorse has been stifled, or of a community that is so dulled as to be insensitive to salutary disturbance. Jesus is speaking of those who, hungering and thirsting to do God's will, believe that whatever God wants to do through them will be done if they are attentive to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God'(4:4), and are committed to doing God's will. God is the one who makes peace. As God's children they mediate God's grace in the world.

The translators responsible for the NRSV, in their desire to avoid language that is judged to be exclusive, have translated the Greek word for sons as 'children'. It is true that we are children of God. Matthew, however, is pointing to our identification with Jesus. We are able to make peace only because we share the life of the Son. God's will is that there be peace: that harmony of the whole of creation radiantly manifesting the glory of God and exulting with delight in a cosmic hymn of praise. It is the gift to be offered to the world by his disciples as they go on their mission (10:13); a peace made possible 'through the blood of Jesus' cross'(Colossians 1:20). One day it will be seen that those who, as disciples of Jesus, have given their lives to be instruments of God's peace to the world are enjoying the fullness of divine intimacy enjoyed by God's Son: 'they will be called children [sons] of God'(5:9).

All these central beatitudes are promises to be fulfilled in an indefinite future. They express, however, the conviction that sustained the heart of Jesus in his life, and here he reveals the secret of the mystery of the kingdom to his disciples. The focus throughout the beatitudes has been on God, for Jesus is revealing the good news about God. The present and future blessing is a gift from God. God cannot give it in a way that bypasses our human freedom and our dignity as persons. We cannot receive his gift while we seek to fulfil our needs in ways other than in listening to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God'(4:4). Matthew has spelt out some aspects of what it means to be 'poor in spirit'. With honest realism, he has made it clear that being a disciple is a way of living in the midst of persecution and suffering while sharing in the intimacy of Jesus' communion with God. Being Jesus' disciples holds out the promise of reaching the fullness of beatitude for which we are made and for which our heart longs.

The disciples' relationship to the world

Matthew has just presented the fundamental teaching of Jesus on discipleship. In the eight beatitudes he highlights dimensions of the inner dynamism of the Christian life inspired by God's Spirit of love. Here he moves dramatically from general principles expressed in the third person to Jesus' words addressed directly to his disciples ('Blessed are *you*').

Matthew picks up the point of the eighth beatitude, except that now, instead of speaking of persecution because of righteousness (5:10), he focuses on the bond with Jesus ('because of *me*'). Matthew's community experienced the suffering that went with belonging to the Christian community, both from the general society who considered them to be atheists since they did not show what was considered proper respect to the 'gods', and from the Jews who saw them as heretics. Paul prepared people for the experience of persecution and encouraged them to respond as Jesus responded:

All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

– 2Timothy 3:12

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

– Romans 12:14

If we suffer because of Jesus, we will share his reward:

We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

– Romans 8:17

We know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

– 2Corinthians 1:7

Jesus' disciples will experience the consolation of his Spirit:

God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

– Romans 5:5

Jesus is inviting his disciples to experience his own freedom. To the extent that our joy and gladness is dependent on the way other people treat us, we are not free. Paul writes:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

– Philippians 4:11-13

¹¹ **'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account** (because of me).

¹² **Rejoice and be glad** (keep on rejoicing and being glad), **for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

compare Luke 6:22-23

Persecution

Perhaps the hardest feature of suffering is when we suffer alone and can find no meaning in it. One of the special joys experienced by those who unite their sufferings with those of Jesus is the consolation of knowing that we are not alone.

Just as Jesus, through the prayerful, patient and loving way in which he bore his suffering, brought so much healing and consolation to others, so our suffering too, if borne in the same way, can be redemptive, bringing others to see and embrace God. Paul writes:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

– Colossians 1:24

We read of Peter's joy when suffering persecution (Acts 5:41) and he writes to a community undergoing persecution:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

– 1Peter 1:8-9

Like Jesus, Peter invites his fellow Christians to rejoice:

Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

– 1Peter 4:13-14

Finally, Matthew links the suffering of the disciple with that of the prophets (5:12). He is concerned to portray Jesus as the fulfilment of the spiritual hopes of Israel. Even Jesus' suffering is prefigured in the suffering of those who were ministers of God's word to Israel (see, for example, Nehemiah 9:26; 1Thessalonians 2:14-16). We find the same point being made in the letter of James:

As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance.

– James 5:10-11

The power of one who loves through suffering lies, not in the suffering itself which more often than not is unjustly imposed, but in the love, faith and patience that transcend the suffering and have their own special purity and carry their own special conviction. Watching Jesus die on the cross arouses our fear and a sense of outrage at the injustice being perpetrated. Watching Jesus pray, believe, love and forgive while dying arouses our wonder and awe. We experience much the same reaction when we witness the suffering of a disciple.

As Jesus' disciples we cannot avoid persecution, any more than Jesus could avoid it, by taking refuge from the world. To be with Jesus is to share his mission from God. Disciples are to be 'salt' to the earth, giving it taste, preserving it, consecrating it to God (see Leviticus 2:13).

The Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt.

– 2Chronicles 13:5; see Numbers 18:19

Jesus the Messiah is the fulfilment of that covenant, and the community of his disciples is to be a sign of the new covenant that God has made with the world in Jesus. Here, for the first time, we have a warning. The members of the Christian community (the 'you' is plural in Greek) must be vigilant to preserve close communion with Jesus. Otherwise they will be rendered useless.

Jesus' disciples are to be 'the light of the world'. Our lives are to be sacraments of God drawing all who witness our good deeds to give thanks and praise to God. Here, for the first time in Matthew's gospel, God is referred to as 'Father'. It will happen another sixteen times in this 'sermon', and forty-four times in the whole of the gospel. In this way, Matthew highlights the intimacy with God shared with the disciples by Jesus, 'God's Son, the Beloved' (3:17). His disciples are Jesus' brothers and sisters, truly 'blessed', sharing in his divine communion.

We are reminded of Paul's words to the Christian community at Philippi, in which he exhorts them to be

children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

– Philippians 2:15)

Likewise Peter:

Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

– 1Peter 2:12

Jesus is also warning his disciples not to seal themselves off from the pagan world. They are to embrace it. Zeal for the purity codes, the temple cult, the Sabbath and circumcision, is now an obstacle to their God-given mission.

¹³ ***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.***

¹⁴ ***You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.***

¹⁵ ***No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp-stand and it gives light to all in the house.***

¹⁶ ***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.***

compare Luke 14:34-35; 11:33

verse 13, compare Mark 9:50.

verse 15, compare Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16

¹⁷ *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*

¹⁸ *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.*

¹⁹ *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.

²⁰ *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The Old Testament has attained its goal

The law and the prophets comprise the most important works of the Hebrew Bible, the sacred writings which express God's self-revelation to the people of Israel (see the prologue to Sirach; also Matthew 11:13 and Romans 3:21). The key accusation made against Christianity by the leaders of Judaism was that following Jesus meant disregarding this revelation and abandoning faith in, and obedience to, the God of Israel.

This is not true, says Matthew. Jesus did not abolish the revelation held sacred by the Jews. However, neither did he simply confirm it, or reinforce it, or obey it. Jesus is the culmination of God's self-revelation. In him it reaches its goal. He brought it to its fulfilment, its perfection, its full flowering.

After this initial declaration, Matthew includes a statement beginning with the words 'truly I tell you'. This expression is found in all four gospels, and occurs thirty-one times in Matthew. It may be a transliteration into Greek of Jesus' own idiomatic way of speaking and a signal, therefore, that the gospel-writer is including an actual statement by Jesus remembered and handed on in the tradition.

Here Jesus solemnly declares the irrevocable nature of the revelation of God found in the Jewish Scriptures. However, revelation is a process. Now it has reached its goal in Jesus and in the obedience required of Jesus' disciples. God's will revealed in the 'law and the prophets' is now to be understood and obeyed as it was understood and obeyed by Jesus.

In this way Matthew is defending Christianity against the accusations made by the Jewish leaders of his day. He is also reaching out to his fellow Jews, asking them not to stay in the valid revelation found in their tradition, but to listen to this tradition at depth and to recognise in Jesus, and so in the community of Jesus disciples, the goal to which everything they hold dear has been leading. For Christ is the 'goal' of the law (Romans 10:4). Once the goal is reached, one should not go back to the imperfect revelation that was leading up to it.

Finally, Matthew addresses his fellow Christians: if you really want to ‘enter the kingdom of heaven’, the blessedness of which has just been expressed in the beatitudes, ‘your righteousness’ must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew has already introduced us to the scribes (see the commentary on 2:4), and to the Pharisees (see the commentary on 3:7). It is necessary that Jesus’ disciples not only appear obedient, but really be obedient from the heart.

Christian obedience does not exempt us from the obedience required by the law and the prophets. What Paul calls the ‘law of Christ’(Galatians 6:2; 1Corinthians 9:21) goes to the heart of the law of Moses and transcends it. To illustrate this, Matthew now gives six examples (5:21-48) of how following Jesus requires a more profound and internal obedience than was required by the Mosaic Law.

²¹ *'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment."*

²² *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.*

²³ *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,*
²⁴ *leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

²⁵ *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.*

²⁶ *Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

Disciples must work for reconciliation

Matthew's first example goes to the fundamental commandment that demands that we respect the life of another (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). The statement that 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment' is a summary of the legislation found, for example, in Exodus 21:12, Numbers 25:12 and Deuteronomy 17:8-13.

Jesus, speaking with authority ('I say to you'), demands an avoidance of all behaviour that expresses anger and disrespect, and that treats others as having no value and as having nothing to offer. As the gospel proceeds it will become obvious that Matthew's community was suffering from internal divisions and tensions. The repetition of 'brother or sister' in this passage seems to indicate that Matthew's focus is on the Christian community itself.

Three short statements (5:22) reinforce each other and leave no room for compromise, reaching a climax in the threat of the 'hell of fire'. The word 'hell' translates the Greek *gehenna* which itself is a transliteration of the Hebrew *ge-hinnom*, the valley of Ben-Hinnom (Joshua 18:16). This valley forms the southern boundary of Jerusalem, and it was here that certain inhabitants of the city sacrificed children to the god Molech in an effort to placate the god and save the city (2Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). This was in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (587BC). Jeremiah was horrified at their action and cursed the valley (Jeremiah 7:32-33; see also 19:1-15; 32:35). By the first century AD Gehenna had become a symbol for the punishment of those who died unreconciled to God.

There is no logical progression in the nature of the three crimes mentioned (5:22), nor is a logical progression intended in the punishment. The central point being made is that discipleship of Jesus demands purification of the heart and attitude as well as abstaining from violent acts. We might compare John's statement:

All who hate a brother or sister are murderers.

– 1John 3:15.

What we do that is evil is destructive of ourselves and of others, and its consequences cannot be avoided (see commentary on 3:7 concerning the ‘wrath of God’). Matthew does not say anything here about the nature or duration of the punishment, except to include the traditional symbol of ‘fire’.

Matthew adds two sayings on reconciliation. In the law of Moses the commandments that speak of our relationships to one another (Deuteronomy 5:12-21) are placed after the commandments that speak of our relationship to God (Deuteronomy 5:6-15; 5:12-15 blends the two). This is because it is our relationship to God which provides the context within which we are to relate to others and it is our relationship to others that is the test of the reality of our relationship to God. So here (5:23-24), Matthew links the demand for reconciliation with worship of God, and presents Jesus as having the same attitude to the cult as is frequently demonstrated by the prophets. We cannot give proper worship to God without it affecting the way we relate to others. We might instance the following oracle from Isaiah:

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile. ... When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

– Isaiah 1:12-17

The matter of reconciliation is, of course, made particularly difficult from the fact that we cannot achieve reconciliation on our own. What Jesus requires of us is that we be willing to seek it and that we have a heart that is not hardened against our brother or sister, so that there is no barrier to reconciliation coming from our side. Moreover, we are to be active in doing all we can to achieve it.

There follows (5:25-26) a piece of practical wisdom drawn from experience, in which Jesus encourages his disciples not to put off reconciliation, but to do it ‘quickly’. The longer division is allowed to go on in a community, the worse its effects, and the more difficult it is to purge away the evil.

Parallels to Jesus’ teaching in this whole passage can be found in the Old Testament. His teaching therefore is not new. The need to go beyond the strict requirements of the decalogue is something with which the prophets and the faithful religious teachers of Judaism would have agreed. By presenting Jesus’ teaching in this dramatic way, Matthew focuses attention on Jesus himself. To understand what Jesus is teaching we must watch how he was gentle, and how he brought about reconciliation. It is this that is new, and it is this that Jesus requires of his disciples: ‘Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart’(11:29). In the lives of Jesus’ disciples the focus is on the commandment to love, seen here in the commitment to seek reconciliation. We will notice the same focus on love in the following passages. It is for the same reason that Paul can write:

Clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

– Colossians 3:14

Disciples must not regard each other with lust

²⁷ ***You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery."***

²⁸ ***But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.***

²⁹ ***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.***

³⁰ ***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.***

In the law of Moses respect for life requires also respect for the intimate relationships that give value to human life, and in particular for the relationships within the family. Hence the command forbidding adultery (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). Once again Jesus reinforces the law but goes deeper, penetrating to the causes of adultery and calling for purity of heart (compare Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21).

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be committed to a way of looking at each other with a respect that frees us from seeing each other as possible objects for the indulgence of our sexual desires. We must not only avoid adultery; we must have a heart that is free of lust.

Matthew reinforces this teaching by including here (5:29-30), sayings that are found also in the context of scandal (18:8-9). Matthew speaks of the 'right' hand, as being traditionally the more important one. The point being that no matter how important we might want to do something, it is not worth doing if it leads to hell. The 'right' eye is mentioned for verbal balance.

As in the previous example, so here, hell (*gehenna*) is presented as a symbol of punishment. We cannot avoid suffering the effects of our sinful behaviour. We must take every measure, however drastic, to avoid behaviour that will end up destroying us. No bodily indulgence is worth the destruction of the whole 'body', or, as we would say, of the 'self'.

verses 29-30 compare
Mark 9:43,47
Matthew 18:8-9

Disciples must respect marriage commitment

Matthew repeats Jesus' teaching on divorce at more length later in the gospel (19:3-9). We refer the reader to our commentary on that passage, especially in relation to the expression translated here as 'except on the grounds of unchastity'.

The law under which the Jewish scribes permitted divorce is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which Matthew summarises (5:31). This time, Jesus is concerned to abolish certain permissions granted by the law.

His teaching follows on from the previous passage, in that the practice of divorce, widespread among the Jews and even more so in the Greco-Roman world, was another way in which women were treated without respect and forced into situations that involved infidelity to their marriage commitment. To remain a widow was to be in a truly desperate situation.

Jesus' disciples are to be concerned not with legal casuistry but with the nature of the marriage commitment and the fidelity to love which it requires.

³¹ *'It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce."*

³² ***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.***

compare Mark 10:11-12
Luke 16:18

³³ **'Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows [oaths] you have made to the Lord."**

³⁴ **But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,**

³⁵ **or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.**

³⁶ **And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.**

³⁷ **Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.**

Disciples must respect the truth

This fourth illustration of the kind of righteousness expected of a Christian consists, like the previous three, in a refinement of the teaching of the decalogue. There the commands forbidding murder and adultery are also followed by a command against taking oaths in court that 'bear false witness against your neighbour' (Exodus 20:16). To take an oath is to attempt to guarantee the truth of one's words by calling on the authority of God. The Jewish law condemned taking oaths to support what was untrue.

Jesus goes further. We should always speak the truth as we see it. We need courage to 'speak [do] the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15). We should not give in to those who would use pressure to get us to speak or act in ways other than our conscience dictates.

At the same time, we need the humility to recognise that our hold on the truth is quite fragile and partial. Sometimes what we call 'the truth' is only our opinion. With greater wisdom we may come to realise that we were mistaken. We have no right to claim God's support as though we had the whole truth. Let us speak the truth honestly, but with humility, open to the further discoveries to which God will guide us.

It is easy sometimes to avoid the difficult task of discovering the truth by using religious language, which then becomes a kind of camouflage. This, as Jesus, says, 'comes from the evil one'. Later in the gospel Matthew will have severe words to say about the use of oaths by the scribes and Pharisees (23:16-22). James has the same teaching:

Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

– James 5:12

The Greek word translated 'vow' in 5:33 is the normal Greek word for 'oath'. A vow is a promise made to God. An oath is calling on God to witness the truth of what one is saying. This passage has one focus only, and it is on oaths, not vows. In practice Christians have understood Jesus' words in a nuanced way. They have recognised the need at times for the community to require an oath of someone for its own protection, and to ensure that justice is done, as, for example, in the courts of law. A disciple may not take an oath for his or her own advantage, but may be required to take one for the advantage of others.

Disciples must be meek

In his fifth illustration, Matthew reminds his readers of the law which places a limit on retribution by legislating that punishment had to be proportionate to the crime (Exodus 21:24). The righteousness of Jesus' disciples must go further. They are to refuse to do anything which meets evildoers on their own terms: 'do not resist an evildoer' (5:39). Paul expresses this well: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:21). Jesus is not telling his disciples to let evil have its way. He is requiring of them that in resisting evil they must not only refuse to do evil themselves, but they must continue to do good. We find a similar teaching in Psalm 37:

The wicked borrow, and do not pay back, but the righteous are generous and keep giving ... Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones.

– Psalm 37:21,27-28

Paul tells us that our faithlessness cannot nullify the faithfulness of God (Romans 3:3). He says the same of Jesus: 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful' (2Timothy 2:13). Jesus' disciples are to learn this same fidelity. Evil has its own seduction, and we are tempted to respond badly when we are treated badly. Jesus teaches us to remain loving even when others treat us in an unloving way. As Paul says: 'See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all' (1Thessalonians 5:15).

We are to imagine a disciple offering the right cheek to someone as a greeting. When the offering is rejected, the disciple is to continue to reach out to the other person, offering the left cheek as well. When as disciples we are insulted or treated badly, we are to remember how Jesus was treated and respond in like manner (1Peter 2:23).

The second illustration warns us against presuming it is always good to defend our rights. We can choose to be generous. Likewise, what others do in forcing us to walk one mile is their affair. We do not have to meet them on that level and, while being true to ourselves, we may choose to act generously towards them.

³⁸ *'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."*

³⁹ *But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;*

⁴⁰ *and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;*

⁴¹ *and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*

⁴² *Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

compare Luke 6:29-30

⁴³ *'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy."*

⁴⁴ **But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,**
⁴⁵ **so that you may be children** [sons] **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.**

⁴⁶ **For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?** ⁴⁷ **And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?**

⁴⁸ **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

compare
Luke 6:27-28,32-36

Disciples must love as God loves

The command to love one's neighbour, that is one's fellow Israelite, is a fundamental demand of the law (Leviticus 19:18; see James 2:8). There is no simple, corresponding injunction to hate one's enemies, but the sentiments are found frequently in the psalms (see Psalm 139:19-22).

Jesus commands his disciples to love their enemies. Apart from the baptism scene where God speaks of Jesus as the 'Beloved' (3:17), this is the first time Matthew has spoken of love. The love of which Jesus is speaking (Greek *agapê*) is not the spontaneous feeling that we associate with a spouse or family (*stergein*); it is not passionate desire (*eros*); nor is it the affection experienced between friends (*philia*). It is rather a love of choice, a commitment to value a person.

As used in the New Testament it means to recognise the value of other people because of what we have come to know about them through God's self-revelation in Jesus. It refers to the decision, based on this recognition to pray for them (5:44), to do good to them (5:55) and to greet them in peace (5:47; compare 5:9), however badly they might treat us. Disciples are asked to be like Jesus in giving themselves for others (Galatians 5:13).

The kind of love of which Jesus is speaking here concerns not feeling but decisions: faithful commitment to the good of another. This love is from Christ; it is a participation in his loving: 'Christ lives in me ... and I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and who gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Knowing what God has done for us in Jesus (Philippians 1:9-11) we commit ourselves to carry on his mission of love. Love, like *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible, is primarily a quality of God: it is God's commitment to our liberation: a commitment to which God is faithful - a commitment which Jesus incarnates in his obedience to the mission of liberation (redemption) which he has from his Father.

To speak of our love for God is to speak of our commitment to God's cause and of our faithful carrying out of God's will. It is to make real in our lives the love of Christ, for it is Christ's mission which we share and it is his Spirit that enables us to do it. It is to do what he commands us (John 15:15), and his command is that we love one another as he loves us.

Jesus requires of his disciples that they do good to everyone. The reason for this universal command takes us to the heart of the good news. God is not the God of one people only. God is the God of the ‘tax collectors’(5:46); the God of the ‘Gentiles’(5:47). God is the ‘Father’ of all: ‘The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made’(Psalm 145:9; compare Wisdom 15:1). According to Jesus, God does not cease doing good, even if people are evil or unrighteous. Jesus’ disciples, because they share in Jesus’ own relationship with God, are ‘sons of God’ (5:45) — an expression that highlights the link with Jesus, the Son (compare 5:9). As such our attitude is to be that of our Father, an attitude of which Jesus is the perfect example. Compare John (1John 4:7-12); also Paul and Peter:

Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

– Ephesians 5:1-2

Be like obedient children ... as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct ... love one another deeply from the heart.

– 1Peter 1:14,15,25

Once again it is the example of Jesus that makes this injunction so special. Examples of the general principle can be found already in the Jewish scriptures (see Exodus 23:4-5). The final injunction – to be ‘perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ sums up the teaching of 5:17-47 and what the ‘righteousness’ of the disciples of Jesus requires. At their best the ‘scribes and Pharisees’ found their delight in doing God’s will as revealed in the law. In their devotion to God, they longed to obey God’s will meticulously in every detail. This is expressed in Psalm 119, which opens with a beatitude:

How blessed are those whose way is blameless who walk in the Law of the Lord!
Blessed are those who observe his instructions, who seek him with all their hearts.

In this way the faithful members of the people of Israel attempted to respond to the injunction of the law: ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’ (Leviticus 11:45). Even closer to the present context is the following:

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy ... You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin ... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

– Leviticus 19:2,17-18

God’s holiness radiates out to every land and every people. So must it be with us if we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus. Jesus gave a perfect response to God’s perfect love. The same kind of perfection is required of those who follow Jesus (19:21): a perfection that calls us ever forward in a process of purification that will find its culmination in the beatific vision (5:8). Christians are called to share in the creative work of God in this world, till all is as God wills.

Disciples and almsgiving

¹ Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² 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.

**³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

Matthew changes focus from the law to practices of piety: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. We read in Tobit:

Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness.

– Tobit 12:8

Matthew's opening sentence is a general introduction to the present passage on almsgiving, and to the following two passages in which he looks at prayer and fasting. He contrasts two kinds of behaviour. There is the behaviour of actors (the literal meaning of 'hypocrites') who do what they do on stage precisely to move their audience; and there is behaviour that is not concerned to impress, but that flows from the secret of a person's heart and is concerned with making a true response to grace.

The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

– 1Samuel 16:7

Giving alms 'in secret' is not meant to contradict the command already given: 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (5:16). The phrase 'in secret' refers to motivation: Jesus' disciples must want only the glory of their Father in heaven, not a praise which is directed at themselves. The 'reward' (see already 5:12) has been described in the beatitudes: it is the experience of the blessedness of sharing in Jesus' own communion with God.

Disciples and prayer

There is an obvious parallel between the first part of this passage (6:5-6) and the previous passage. Prayer is not something to be done on stage. It is not done to impress. Prayer is the response of a person and of a community to the presence of God, the 'Father'. Its sole aim is to give expression to this mysterious and intimate communion and, in this sense, is something done 'in secret'. The 'reward' given by God is the communion itself.

These verses are directed primarily to those members of Matthew's community who are Jews and who, prior to their conversion, may have been caught up in this attention-seeking prayer 'in the synagogues and at the street corners'.

The mixed nature of Matthew's community required a warning also against the heaping up of empty phrases that some of the Gentiles in the community were used to (6:7-8). Here again, Jesus focuses attention on the personal nature of the relationship which his disciples have with God. There is no need of such verbal clutter: 'your Father knows what you need before you ask him'.

⁵ '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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

9 'Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

verses 9-13 compare Luke 11:2-4

verses 14-15 compare Mark 11:25

The Lord's Prayer

It is in the context of prayer as a personal relationship with God (6:5-8) that Matthew places the 'Our Father', treasured in the community as an example of Jesus' own prayer and as an example for them of how they, as his disciples, should pray. We can pray this prayer only while contemplating Jesus and accepting his invitation to join him in the intimacy of his communion with God. God is addressed simply as 'our Father in heaven'. The practice of calling God 'Abba', the intimate address used by Jesus, is found in Paul's letters:

Because you are children [literally, 'sons'], God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'

– Galatians 4:6

You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

– Romans 8:15-16

This is the Spirit of God that descended on Jesus at his baptism (3:16), the Spirit that searches the 'depths of God' (1 Corinthians 2:10), and the depths of the human heart. To pray to God as 'our Father' is to be conscious of our union with Jesus. It is to join with his prayer and to allow his Spirit to move our hearts and minds to share his sentiments. Christian prayer is the prayer of Jesus drawing his disciples with him towards God. It is the prayer of the 'poor in spirit' (5:3) responding to the assurance of a Father's loving presence. As the following oracle from Jeremiah indicates, a Jew could look upon God as a father:

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord.

- Jeremiah 31:20

The level of intimacy that is found in calling God 'Abba' seems to have been something unique to Jesus. Certainly it was especially characteristic of him. The first words of the prayer express the deepest longing of the heart of Jesus: 'Hallowed be your name'. To be 'hallowed' is to be recognised as holy and treated as such. 'Holy' is a word kept solely for God. It refers to the unique beauty and mystery of God who transcends the whole of the created universe. In Isaiah's vision, the seraphs cried:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the earth is full of his glory.

– Isaiah 6:3

If people are said to be ‘holy’ as they sometimes are, this is not a statement about some quality which they possess; rather, it asserts that God, the Holy One, is in them. Similarly with a place. It is declared to be a ‘holy’ place, a sanctuary, because of a special encounter with God that has occurred there. Who God is has been revealed in creation, in the history of God’s ‘holy’ people and, for Matthew and his community, most beautifully and in a perfect way in Jesus.

The ‘Name’ of God is God as the one we invoke and to whom we pray. God is revealed as one who wishes to relate to us personally. Jesus understood his mission as letting all know who God really is, so that people would see the glory of God’s being radiantly manifest and would respond in delight and praise (compare John 12:28).

The first movement of prayer in the ‘our Father’ makes it clear that this is to be the primary focus also of the prayer of Jesus’ disciples. They want God to be praised and glorified everywhere and by everyone in a creation that clearly radiates the beauty of God. They pray that God’s powerful Spirit will continue to recreate them and their world so that this will happen. They long, too, for the final goal of creation when all is purified and recreated and there is nothing to obscure God’s glory.

The second phrase, ‘your kingdom come’, points to the way in which this primary longing is to be realised. Matthew sums up the proclamation of both John the Baptist and Jesus in the words: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’(3:2; 4:17). The kingdom of heaven is already present, as we learned in the first of the beatitudes, in those who are ‘poor in spirit’(5:3).

It follows that the more people respond in delight to the revealed glory of God (the more God’s ‘name’ is hallowed), the more God’s kingdom will be present in this world. It is for this that Jesus is giving his life, and he invites his disciples to share this mission and this prayer. God is present in Jesus, ‘Emmanuel’(1:23). God is to be radiantly and obviously present in the community of Jesus’ disciples, which is to be the ‘light of the world’(5:14). The longing expressed in ‘your kingdom come’ will be fully satisfied only when all live as Jesus lives, when God is ‘all in all’(1Cor. 15:28).

The implications of this are expressed in the third phrase: ‘your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. God does not control the world like a machine. God has chosen to make the carrying out of his will dependent on our free and loving acceptance. Nothing is forced. This part of the prayer corresponds to the call for repentance in Jesus’ initial proclamation. It is a prayer that the disciples themselves, and ultimately everyone who comes to know God’s self-revelation in Jesus, will allow God’s loving design to be done through them. It is a prayer, in other words, that everyone will ‘enter the kingdom of heaven’ by doing ‘the will of my Father in heaven’ (7:21).

Let us not forget that our ability to obey God is itself a gift: everything comes from divine initiative. This third petition is a plea that God’s wonderful design for the world (confer Ephesians 1:5-12), a design made manifest in Jesus, will be effected. This will only finally happen when all creation is reconciled (Colossians 1:20), when there is a ‘new heaven and a new earth’, and all creation joins in celebrating the wedding feast between God and mankind (Revelation 21:1-3).

The Lord's Prayer

Matthew's community would have prayed these initial petitions from three related but different perspectives. They would contemplate Jesus in whose person and life their prayers had already been answered. They would have reflected on the life of their own community, and have seen that their prayer was in the process of being answered. They would be looking forward to the time when the whole of creation would heed the good news, and God would be 'all in all'.

So far the heart of Jesus and the hearts of the disciples have been caught up in contemplation of God, longing that what has become obvious to them of the radiant beauty of God may become obvious to all. Jesus, recognising the frailty of his human condition, now pleads with his Father for three things, and invites us to do the same.

'Give us this day our daily bread'. This is the 'bread' that Jesus was tempted to provide for himself in the first temptation (4:3). Jesus, however, knows that the bread we need is always 'manna from heaven'. God alone has the wisdom to know what 'bread' we really need and he will provide this, but only enough to last us from day to day. Jesus invites his disciples to share this trust (see also 6:25-34). That this trust does not come easily is made clear later in the gospel, when, after the two scenes in which God provides 'bread' in the desert, Jesus still has to say to his disciples:

You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?

– Matthew 16:8-10

The fact that, as early as the first century, the 'our Father' was solemnly recited just prior to the reception of the Eucharist is an indication of how the early church understood 'bread' in this context. The bread of life, the manna from heaven, is, before anything else, Jesus himself given to us while we await our participation in the heavenly banquet.

'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'. The 'have forgiven' seems to imply in English that our forgiveness has come first and that it is a model for how God should treat us. Luke avoids this impression by using the simple 'forgive', and in doing so interprets the original Aramaic correctly for his Greek-speaking readers. It is the consciousness of God's forgiveness that brings us, in the prayer itself, to forgive others.

It is impossible to repay God for all that God has given us, and so Jesus asks his Father to cast aside the debt. Jesus embraced the human condition. His heart, though beautifully sinless and entirely loving, was still a heart that knew the limitations of the human. In the weakness he shares with all the human race, he asks his Father to keep giving him life, love, the Spirit, and the blessed communion that sustains him, knowing that, as man, he would always be in God's debt. It is this total generosity of God that enables God to not measure the love he offers and to keep giving (to 'for-give').

Jesus, the sinless one, invites his disciples to make the same request. We have already seen that this will mean that we have to suffer many injustices (5:11) and continue to give love to those who respond with malice (5:44). We will see later that God has given us the power to forgive (9:8), and that we must exercise it without limit (18:22). This is what is asked of someone who is 'blessed' to be a disciple of Jesus. Only thus, sustained by the daily bread from heaven, can we be instruments to bring about the kingdom of God.

The final plea is a cry from the heart to our Father that he will be powerfully present with his grace, so that when times of trial come we will not fail the test. Jesus remained faithful, and when he was entering the final struggle he warned his disciples once again to pray that they would not enter into evil at the time of trial (26:41). Paul assures us:

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

– 1Corinthians 10:13

We must resist the temptation is to be scandalised in Jesus (11:6). Jesus' behaviour shocked many of his contemporaries who would have considered themselves religious. He did not fit their expectations of a man of God. It is all too easy to create a Jesus in our own image. If we lose faith in the real Jesus, we will lose faith in the only true God whom he reveals.

As Jesus' disciples we are invited to pray, like him, to 'endure to the end' (24:13). This can happen only if God 'rescues us from the evil one' (6:13), as he will rescue Jesus from death by taking him into his eternal embrace in the risen life.

We are reminded of the final words of Paul's last letter:

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom.

– 2Timothy 4:18

The final saying in this section (6:14-15) focuses again on the importance of forgiveness. We are sinners. We can respond to God in love and so to others, only if God continually purifies our heart by forgiving our sins. For this to happen our heart must be open. If we harden it against others by refusing to forgive them, we will not be able to accept the forgiveness that God longs to give us.

Matthew is emphasising the close connection between forgiveness and prayer (see also 18:15-35). A community can genuinely pray Jesus' prayer only to the extent that its members have forgiven one another, for how can we call on the one Father when we refuse to accept each other as brothers and sisters?

Disciples and fasting

¹⁶ ‘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.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,

¹⁸ 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 message here is the same as in the previous two passages. Fasting, like almsgiving and prayer, is not to be done to attract the attention of others. The experience of need which it provokes is meant to face us towards God, the source of all good, and its only reward is to know that we enjoy that blessed communion with God our Father which Jesus enjoyed.

A heart fixed on God

Jesus is concerned with the purity of our heart. Entry into the heart comes especially by way of the eyes. If we fix our gaze upon the corruptible things of earth, our eyes will become diseased and our hearts will be plunged into darkness. How great that darkness is when we allow ourselves to be fascinated by, and treasure, the gross things of this earth.

Jesus invites us to look beyond the surface distraction of the things of earth and to see things as God sees them. He invites us to live our lives from this divine communion. This is to 'store up treasures in heaven'. He invites us to listen to the longings of our heart and to fix our sights on the mystery of God that is being enacted in our lives. The purity of God will purify our hearts.

The lesson reaches its climax in the third saying (6:24). If we serve God, our hearts will be pure, there will be light within, and we will be a source of good to those around us. If we serve wealth, our hearts will be impure, there will be darkness within, and we will cause only harm to those around us. Disciples must make a radical choice for God. Like the needle of a compass, our hearts must be fixed on God (6:21), to 'love' and to 'serve' God (6:24).

¹⁹ *'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;*

²⁰ *but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

²¹ **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

²² **The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light;**

²³ **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!**

²⁴ **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.**

compare Luke 12:33-34

verses 22-23 compare

Luke 11:34-36

verse 24 compare Luke 16:13

25 '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?

26 *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?*

27 *And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?*

28 *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.*

30 *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?*

compare Luke 12:22-28

Trust in God

Let us look at what Jesus is not saying. He is not encouraging irresponsibility and he is not inviting us to escape into a make-believe world. After all, birds do starve and lilies sometimes die before they bloom. So do people, including those who have placed their trust in God and have looked to him in their need only to find themselves victims of famine, war and persecution.

Jesus himself cried out to God in his agony (26:39), but he still died an excruciating death. Matthew and his community were not strangers to persecution and suffering (5:11-12).

This passage is bringing out the implications of the previous one. We are not to 'strive for' things like food and clothing, forgetting that it is God who provides them and who cares for us. This is the kind of life lived by 'Gentiles', that is, by those who do not know of the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus. While living responsibly, we are not to 'worry' about these things. This same call to trust God is repeated by Matthew: 'When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time'(Matthew 10:19).

Worry can suffocate us: 'As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares ['worries'] of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing'(13:22). Paul expresses well the proper focus in life for a disciple:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

– Philippians 4:6-9

As Peter says in his first letter:

Cast all your anxieties on God, because he cares for you.

– 1Peter 5:7

We find the same message in the Letter to the Hebrews where there is a close connection also with the theme of the previous passage:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you'.

– Hebrews 13:5

Matthew concludes with an expression that will recur throughout his gospel: 'you of little faith' (see 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). Jesus is inviting his disciples not to be closed to the wonder of God's action in this world.

God knows what we really need, and will always provide it (compare 6:8). We see a powerful example of this towards the end of Jesus' life. What Jesus wanted in his agony was one thing; what he really needed was another. What he really needed on the cross was the love of God to sustain him and to enable him to endure his suffering in love and to commit his spirit to God. His eyes were not distracted from looking to God and his heart remained fixed on God, and so his whole body was 'full of light' (6:22). He is inviting us to the same trust.

Jesus is calling us to be 'poor in spirit' (5:3). While living responsibly, we are to be like children, peacefully leaving tomorrow in God's hands and living today in trust. Our whole desire should be to belong to Jesus and so share in the kingdom of God which is already present in him while we work to do the will of God and bring about the final goal of God's beautiful and loving design for the world.

And tomorrow? There is no point in being anxious about it. While tomorrow is tomorrow it is a figment of our imagination. As such it is all too easy for it to engage our worst fears, our lack of trust in ourselves as loved, the wounds left from past hurts. If tomorrow is ever to have reality it will only be when it is today. We can handle the real. Jesus invites us to face today's problems in trust, for God is more than sufficient to achieve his gracious design through these problems or in spite of them.

³¹ **Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?"**

³² **For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.**

³³ **But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

³⁴ **So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.**

compare Luke 12:29-32

Do not judge

¹ ‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.

² For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

³ Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

⁴ Or how can you say to your neighbour, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” while the log is in your own eye?

⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.

Disciples are not to sit in judgment on others

Jesus is not speaking against discernment. Of course we are required to make judgments in regard to our own actions and also in regard to the actions of others. There will be times when it is our duty to point out to others their faults, and to oppose them, so long as this is done humbly and in love (Matthew 18:15-20).

The command not to judge is a command to refrain from passing judgment on *people*. Firstly, we are in no position to know their real motivation; and, secondly, we are not free from our own subjective perceptions and our own blindness to see clearly enough to judge correctly. Judgment is to be left to God. Discernment must take place without condemnation, for we are not to impute guilt or determine responsibility.

We are called to love. If we are willing to suffer the purification necessary to become instruments of God’s judgment — a judgment that is concerned to save, not to condemn — then, and only then, may we attempt to take the splinter out of another’s eye.

If we do judge others, this is a sign that we are acting blindly, that we are out of touch with reality and acting on appearances (the meaning of ‘hypocrite’, 7:5). We are foolish to pretend that our own poor self-image is improved by looking down on others. Where is this need to feel superior coming from? Are we unaware of how much harm we do by sitting in judgment on others?

Jesus insists that we will stand condemned for our blindness, pride and hardness of heart. James and Paul have the same teaching:

Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy.

– James 2:13; see also 4:12

You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself.

– Romans 2:1; also 14:10

Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

– 1Corinthians 4:5

compare Luke 6:37-42

verse 2 compare Mark 4:24

Disciples need to be discerning

A first century catechism, 'The Teaching of the Apostles' (The *Didache*), applies this saying to the Eucharist:

Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptised in the Lord's name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs'.

– Didache 9:5

While refraining from sitting in judgment on others or condemning them, we are to be discerning, loving God and people 'with all our mind'. Just as the Eucharist is to be offered only to those who belong to the believing community, so this same reverence for what is holy obliges us not to expose to disrespect any of the revelation given to us by Jesus.

The gospel is to be proclaimed with all the patience, fidelity and love of Jesus, but if people are determined to hold it up to ridicule, disciples are to 'shake the dust from their feet' (10:14) and go elsewhere.

⁶ '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.'

Disciples are to petition God with confidence

⁷ 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?

¹⁰ Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?

¹¹ 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!

This is the prayer of the 'poor in spirit'(5:3) who know that they are completely dependent upon God. Like little children, they simply ask for what they want, knowing that they will receive 'good things' from one who loves them.

Jesus leaves us in no doubt: 'it will be given', 'you will find', 'the door will be opened for you'. This applies to 'everyone'.

However, like children, we do not always have the wisdom to know what is good for us. A little child may not be able to distinguish between a stone and a small loaf, or between a fish and a snake. The human parent, seeing the child reach out pleadingly for a stone or a snake, knows that the child really wants bread or fish and so satisfies not the immediate request but the need that the request attempts to express. Even more so is this true of God.

Jesus therefore encourages his disciples to ask. In asking we are turning so as to face God and we are opening our arms and our hearts to receive the grace that God is offering us all the time. We do not pray so as to change God but so as to be open to receive. We may not have the wisdom to know what is good for us. We are invited simply to ask with our eyes fixed not on the object of our request but on God our Father. God is wise and God will certainly give us what we need, lead us to find what it is we are really seeking, and open for us the door that leads to life.

We might recall the words of Jeremiah:

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.

– Jeremiah 29:13

compare Luke 11:9-13

A summary of the ‘Law and the Prophets’

It is important to understand the precise meaning of ‘law’ in this statement. Jesus is referring to the ‘Torah’, the five books which contain the central revelation of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. A better translation of the Hebrew ‘Torah’ would be ‘way’, for these books describe the *way* in which God has chosen to reveal himself in the formation of the people of Israel, as well as the *way* in which the people are to respond. The English ‘law’, like the Greek *nomos*, expresses only this second sense.

The word ‘prophets’ refers to the prophetic books which reveal the action of God in the history of Israel (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings), as well as the books that are associated with the name of one or other of the prophets. The expression ‘the law and the prophets’ summarises the essential revelation and spirituality of the Old Testament.

The scribes regarded the ‘law’ as a gift given them by God. For this reason they took meticulous care to search in it for the slightest indication of God’s will, and to follow it with delight. For the ‘law’ directed their hearts towards the Infinite, guiding them to communion with the loving God. It also directed them as to how they were to achieve a righteousness that was in accordance with God’s will.

One of Matthew’s major themes is that Christianity is not contrary to the revelation cherished within Judaism. Jesus did not abolish the law and the prophets, he fulfilled them (5:17). The summary given in this passage draws on and confirms the best wisdom of his people (see Sirach 31:15). Rabbi Hillel, the leading Rabbi in Jerusalem when Jesus was a boy, was asked to sum up the Law, and replied:

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Law, while the rest is commentary; go and learn it.

– The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat II,5,31a

Jesus’ summary of the essential message of the law and the prophets is consistent with these sayings. What is new for Jesus’ disciples is Jesus himself and the way he lived this love. In bringing to fulfilment the essential insights of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus revealed perfectly both the way God deals with us and the way we are to respond. Paul writes:

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

– Galatians 5:14; see also Romans 13:8

¹²*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;*

for this is the law and the prophets.

compare Luke 6:31

13 '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.

14 For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

The two roads: disciples must decide

The Latin *decidere*, from which our word 'decide' derives, mean to 'cut away'. It is an appropriately strong word, for to decide means to cut away all possibilities that are incompatible with the decision we are taking. The greatest dignity of the human being is to be able to make decisions freely, and it often demands great courage. Moses knew that to decide to respond to God demands a choice. He concludes his teaching on the 'law' in the following way:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments ... then you shall live ... But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish.

– Deuteronomy 30:15-18

As we approach Matthew's conclusion to the 'new law', we find ourselves presented with a similarly demanding choice. If we want to find life, following Jesus is not an optional extra. It is not something that can be fitted in. We are making a decision between life and death, or, as Jesus puts it here, between life and destruction.

Jesus is lamenting the terrible truth that many of us waste our lives in self-destructive ways and fail to experience the blessedness offered us by God through him. Some of us never know the experience of the beatitudes, because we take the way of self-indulgence. Others of us remain locked in our fears, afraid to trust our hearts. Each of us has his or her own barriers to grace. There is a way that leads to life, and it is the way lived by Jesus. It demands courage, faith, hope and love. To follow this way is to let go everything that comes between us and his call. Each of us is faced with an unavoidable life and death decision. However, let us not forget Jesus' words: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost'(18:14).

However narrow the gate and however difficult the road, they have to be as wide as the arms of Jesus stretched out on the cross, and it is he, the loving one, who is the gate (John 10:9), as well as the way (John 14:6). The gate is narrow (compare 19:24), and the way is hard. We have to take up our cross and follow him (16:24). Even though Jesus says here that few find this road, he does speak elsewhere about 'many' coming from the east and the west (8:11), and of his offering his life as a ransom for 'many'(20:28). We must, whatever the cost, avoid complacency.

compare
Luke 13:23-24

False prophets

As he approaches the conclusion of Jesus' statements about discipleship, Matthew is aware of the necessity of the community being open to Jesus' Spirit if it is to interpret Jesus' words in the spirit in which Jesus uttered them. A prophet is a person who speaks or acts 'in the name of the Lord' (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5); that is to say, in obedience to God's inspiration. A false prophet is one who claims to be speaking or acting for God but is not. How can we know that we or others are in fact acting under God's inspiration?

Finding appropriate criteria by which to discern genuine from false prophecy exercised the minds of the theologians of the Old Testament. One important test was whether the life of the prophet and the content of the prophecy were consistent with the moral requirements of a life devoted to the Lord (see Jeremiah 23:9-40 and Ezekiel 13:1 - 14:11). Jesus proposes a similar criterion here: 'You will know them by their fruits'.

If the fruits of a person's words or deeds are clearly grace-filled, we can be confident that what he or she is saying or doing comes from God, for God is the only source of grace. Jesus spoke of himself as a vine. If we are attached to the vine, we will bear a harvest of grapes. The more closely we are in communion with Jesus, God's focal word, the more our words and actions will truly be prophetic.

Some of the fruits of grace have already been mentioned. A genuine prophet is one who is becoming 'perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (5:48). A genuine prophet is one who is 'poor in spirit' as outlined in the eight beatitudes. A genuine prophet is one whose righteousness 'exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees' (5:20) in the ways outlined (5:21 - 6:18). The heart of a genuine prophet relies on God (6:21-33). Paul provides us with an excellent list of the kinds of fruits we should expect to find in a genuine prophet:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

– Galatians 5:22-23

A tree that bears rotten fruit is cut down and burnt. So it must be with us. The fire into which we are cast is the purifying fire of God's judgment, which is the purifying fire of God's love. If there is something in us that is genuine, it will remain when the fire has done its work, and we will go on to produce the fruits of purified, repentant, love.

¹⁵ *'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

¹⁶ **You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?**

¹⁷ *In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.*

¹⁸ **A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.**

¹⁹ *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

²⁰ *Thus you will know them by their fruits.*

compare Luke 6:43-44
verse 16 compare
Matthew 12:33

The test of discipleship: doing the will of God

²¹ *'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.*

²² *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?"*

²³ *Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."*

compare Luke 6:46
verses 22-23 compare
Luke 13:25-27

It is not enough to claim to be Jesus' disciple. It is not enough to recognise him as 'Lord' (compare 1 Corinthians 12:3). It is not enough to point to all that we have done in his name. We must demonstrate by our actions that we are committed to doing the will of his Father. We recall Paul's words:

If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

– 1 Corinthians 13:2

When John the Baptist heralded the coming of Jesus, he, too, insisted that change of heart must be genuine: people must 'bear fruit worthy of repentance' (3:8). He reminded them of the 'wrath to come' (3:7).

Here, as in the previous passage, our minds are projected forward to the final judgment, now expressed in terms of our personal relationship with Jesus. If, in spite of our claims, our actions are evil, that is, not in accordance with the will of God, Jesus himself will have to say to us: 'I never knew you; go away from me' (see also 25:41). What an awesome conclusion to Jesus' teaching!

The whole of the 'sermon' has been about what it means to belong to Jesus. This terrible declaration by Jesus puts the demand for choice in the starkest of terms. If we do not hunger and thirst for righteousness like Jesus (5:6); if we do not share Jesus' passion that the will of God 'be done on earth as it is in heaven' (6:10); if we do not 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness' (6:33); if we do not do the will of Jesus' Father (7:21), he, the one who gave his life to rescue us, will have to say that, in spite of all our words, we never belonged to him.

Disciples are to hear Jesus' words and act on them

This comes as a culmination of the lesson of the previous two passages. It is necessary that we hear Jesus' words, as we have throughout this first of Matthew's five discourses. But hearing is not enough. We must act on them. If our lives are not based on the life and teaching of Jesus, whatever we build will collapse when put to the test.

24 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

25 *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.*

26 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.

27 *The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!*

compare Luke 6:47-49

Conclusion

The discourse has been addressed to disciples. They are the ones who listen to and heed his teaching. Here at the conclusion, as at the beginning (see 5:1), Matthew draws attention to the presence of the 'crowds'. True disciples must remember that they are always missionaries. Jesus' revelation is meant for all.

While Jesus' teaching is in continuity with the Law, his person and the way he teaches introduces something wonderfully new, having 'authority', because it makes profound connections with the 'author' of life, God himself (compare 11:27; 28:18), a connection lacking in the teaching of 'their scribes'.

28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

compare Mark 1:22
Luke 7:1; 4:32