

August 25, 2024 (Unit 23, Session 1)

Jesus Taught About Character

(Matthew 5)

What do you think would happen if you stomped on a ketchup packet? Would you expect only air to escape the contents of the packet? Undoubtedly, the pressure of the stomp would result in an explosion of ketchup, and perhaps a messy shoe.

Oddly enough, we don't always predict our responses to specific situations accurately. In moments of extreme pressure or challenge, we are surprised at our own responses and decisions. The beginning of The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 contains what we often call the 'Beatitudes.' In these eight verses, there are specific descriptions of people who could be seen in a negative light. Poor, mourning, humbled, hungry, thirsty, and persecuted are all words that describe a posture seen as less than favorable in our culture. Yet, this text speaks of the blessing of each of them.

The blessings result through a God-centered perspective. The poor in spirit, hungry, humble are those who have set their hope in God and His eternal kingdom. The poor in spirit have recognized that they are utterly lost without God. Those who mourn acknowledge the guilt of their sin and the pain of a broken world. The hungry and thirsty understand that nothing in this world will satisfy like Jesus. The character of the people of God reveals a response of faith in Him.

Who we are isn't determined by how we respond to pain and hardship; however, our character is often displayed in these moments. The choices we make and the way in which we fill ourselves during times of peace and rest are often revealed during high-pressure situations. Those being transformed by the power of God will display faithfulness and virtue in these times. Those not gripped by the Spirit of God will display their graceless state.

Don't be surprised that what you have filled yourself with comes out when you are pressed. And don't be surprised when God shows Himself to you in a distinct way in these times of trouble.

Jesus Taught About Behavior

(Matthew 6)

Have you ever wondered, *Does Jesus care more about what I believe or about what I do?* That's one of those questions that can't be answered in a word.

We learn in the Bible of the danger of a "belief" that is only external. We find warnings like Matthew 15:8: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." On the flip side, we also learn in the New Testament that "Faith without works is useless" (James 2:20). This is not evidence of the Bible contradicting itself but of the Bible teaching that these two are not mutually exclusive. So, what is it that the Bible tells us God is looking for? Scripture seems to suggest both belief and action: faith and works.

In Matthew 6, Jesus used the Sermon on the Mount to emphasize this further by spelling out some of the specific actions that true belief will produce. Jesus speaks of giving, prayer, fasting, and holding a right perspective on our possessions.

The irony of Jesus' explaining the appropriate actions that flow out of genuine faith is that elsewhere in the New Testament we learn that Jesus is the central ingredient in the faithful production of these behaviors in our lives.

Second Timothy 3:16-17 reminds us that the Word of God is able to teach, rebuke, correct, and train us so that we are fully equipped for the work that God created us for. Considering the whole counsel of God, Jesus is identified in John 1 as the living Word of God. Therefore, Jesus does not simply teach us about the behaviors He calls us to, He is the very One equipping us to live out of these behaviors.

In 2 Peter 1, we find this idea spelled out even more directly: "His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Jesus is deeply concerned with what we believe and what we do. His expectations are high, but He promises to give us everything we need for both faith and works. This is a promise we can count on.

Jesus Taught About God's Love

(Luke 15)

Let's set the scene: It's Monday morning, you're running late for work, where you have an important meeting scheduled first thing. But before you can make it to work, you have to drop off the kids at school. And before you can drop the kids off at school, you'll need to get everyone in the car, which means you'll need the car keys. And therein lies the problem. Where are the car keys?! A panicked search ensues, sofa cushions are tossed to the ground, bags are emptied, pockets are turned inside out. You have the car, you have the kids, you have the backpacks, lunchboxes, and your wallet, but without the keys, no one is going anywhere.

Every time I read the three parables that Jesus shares in Luke 15—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—I can't help but imagine such a scene. A valuable target that's worth the risk and resources to go and get.

From these three stories, it's fair to ask, "Who is it that Jesus is after?" A close look at the context where Jesus shared these parables helps us understand.

Jesus has been approached by tax collectors and sinners. These are the worst of the worst in the eyes of the religious people of the day. But there's another audience as well. The Pharisees and scribes had gathered. And while they complained about Jesus being with such terrible sinners, Jesus started to make a point that leveled the playing field.

These three parables illustrate that Jesus is concerned about the far-off sinner who has either wandered from faithfulness or has yet to taste and see the goodness of God. But He is also concerned with the outwardly righteous, inwardly sinful Christians who consider themselves deserving of the grace of God. Both are in great need of the love of God.

As we read Luke 15 it should stir our hope for those around us that are far from God and in need of salvation or restoration. But it should also cause us to see our own need for the love and grace of God.

The love of God is relentless, coming after us in our time of need. Whether He is leading us to Himself in salvation or leading us to repentance from our sin, Jesus is in pursuit. We are all always in need of his love and grace.

September 15, 2024 (Unit 23, Session 4)

Jesus Taught About God's Kingdom (Matthew 13)

Jesus often used parables to teach about the kingdom of God. These were fictional stories that illustrated larger points, and those who heard them were often perplexed by their meaning. In Matthew 13, Jesus gave clarity to two important questions that readers of the parables often ask: why does He teach this way, and what do these things mean?

Jesus had a specific purpose in everything He did. Not one moment in the life of Jesus was purely accidental or circumstantial. Jesus had clear intention in all that He did.

Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Why are you speaking to them in parables?" Jesus explained that He did this not to confuse them but to fulfill the prophecy that those who belong to the kingdom of God will hear and understand, but those who do not will hear and not understand.

In this same chapter Jesus also explained some of these parables. All of them were intended to show the unique, surprising, and powerful nature of the kingdom of God. As you consider this week's Bible story, reflect on two realities illustrated by these parables about the kingdom of God.

First, the kingdom of God will appear to be made up of those who are true believers and those who are not. There are some good fish and some worthless fish, some wheat and some weeds. But in these parables, we learn that there is no confusion for God in who His children truly are. In the end God will separate the two, which means we don't have to. God will take care to guard His eternal Kingdom.

Second, the kingdom of God may look small or weak, but in the end, it will prove to be larger, more powerful, and more beautiful than we can imagine. The kingdom of God is worth giving up all you have, though starting from a small seed it will grow to be the most prominent tree, and the leaven of the kingdom will impact every bit of the flour.

God's kingdom is unlike anything else we've ever known, and the way Jesus sought to explain that was through parables that demonstrated the beauty and power of the Kingdom. These parables allowed God's people to hear and understand, yet left those of this world to hear and wonder.

September 22, 2024 (Unit 23, Session 5)

We Are Part of God's Kingdom

(Matthew 22; Luke 14)

What makes someone worthy? Have you ever wondered that? What makes someone worthy of the situation they find themselves in? What makes someone worthy of high degrees of responsibility or leadership? What makes someone worthy of recognition or acclaim?

For someone who has been exposed to the things of God, it's common to ask, what makes someone worthy of the blessings of God?

Jesus told a parable in Matthew 22 that speaks to this question. The answer is that they have responded to the invitation of the King. Metaphorically, this parable teaches that, "Many are invited, but few are chosen." And those that are chosen are *worthy*.

Contrary to what our culture tells us, what makes someone worthy is not their accomplishments, their position, or the acclaim. The ultimate answer to this question is not found in what someone does, but by the grace of the King of the universe.

Ephesians 2:8-10 says, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do."

The good that we do is an outflow of our worthiness, given to us by the grace of God through faith in Him. It is not the other way around. We do not do good works to earn His grace or to prove our worth.

We ought to be careful to understand that worthiness comes out of a gift that has been given by God. And that He is the only King able to assign us worth. He did that when He created all of us. Let us seek to find our worth in nothing less than this.