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Second Baytown Small Groups

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WEEK 6

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WEEK 6: KNOWING GOD FULLY, NOT SUPERFICIALLY

Looking Back: What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

Looking Up: Play the video and go through the discussion questions.

Did you have an imaginary friend when you were young? Why do you think having an imaginary friend is so common among children?

Many relate to God as an “imaginary” friend because they perceive Him the way they want Him to be, not as He actually is. What are some ways people might do this?

Read Proverbs 14:12 and Isaiah 55:8. How are any of us able to see God as He really is? How can you?

Read Matthew 5:8. What does it mean to be “pure in heart”?

Read Matthew 7:7. How do Jesus’s words here relate to purity of heart? What does it mean, practically, to ask, seek, and knock in relationship to the Lord?

Does knowing God fully, not superficially, happen at once when you come to faith or is it a process? Explain and give a personal example.

First Samuel 16:7 assures us that God knows our hearts, whether divided (impure) or undivided (pure). Since you can’t truly know your heart (see Jeremiah 17:9), what would be some evidence that your heart is divided? Undivided?

God wants you to experience the miracle of seeing Him rightly. What are some ways you can join Him in that?

Looking Forward: How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few minutes to plan your serve project and spend some time in prayer together.

WEEK 6: KNOWING GOD FULLY, NOT SUPERFICIALLY

DAY 1—READ MATTHEW 5:8

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

There is a big difference between real purity and the appearance of purity. The Pharisees faked purity by their outward behavior, just like people can fake purity with their good works today. But purity of heart isn't something that can be manufactured; it's given by God to those who recognize their deep need for Jesus and seek His righteousness. We all struggle with impure thoughts and motives, but the pure in heart don't try to fake it. That's because their desire for fellowship with God is greater than their desire to be admired by people.

And it's a process. The Bible uses images of a crucible to explain the refining nature of purity (Proverbs 17:3, Zechariah 13:9). As a metal worker heats silver or gold in a crucible, the heat of the fire removes the metal's impurities. The worker knows the metal is pure when he can see his reflection in it.

The same is true about us. The more impurities are purged, the more clearly we see God. This is what the last part of this verse means. There is blessing for those whose hearts are truly devoted to the Lord: we are able to see who God is and who we are with more clarity. The more pure we are, the closer our communion with God is, and His joy becomes alive to us.

How does culture define purity of heart? How is culture's definition different from Jesus's definition?

Is purity something you desire? If not, why not? If so, what has led you to that place?

As you look back over your walk with the Lord, what are some ways you have come to see Him more accurately?

Thank God for revealing Himself to those who seek Him with their whole hearts. Ask Him to give you an undivided heart to know and follow Jesus.

DAY 2—READ JEREMIAH 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

We live in a culture that tells us to follow our hearts. But Jeremiah 17:9 places a magnifying glass on our hearts and tells a different story. The truth is, our hearts are the last thing we should follow since they are deceitful and sick from sin.

We tend to associate our hearts with our feelings. However, the ancients would have viewed the heart as also being the seat of understanding and human will. So, our thoughts, feelings, and volition are all sick because of sin. And that's a problem, because inward sin leads to outward rebellion and disobedience. In our human nature, we can't be blessed in knowing the reality of who God is or by living that reality out in our lives.

So where is the hope? Jeremiah 17:9 helps us recognize the true condition of our hearts and teaches us that we desperately need redemption in every area of our lives, including our relationship with the truth. It teaches us that all of our thoughts and feelings need to be tested by the Spirit of God and by the truth of His Word. Our hearts lie to us all the time—about who God is and who we are. So we need hearts ready to seek God and surrender to Him.

Why is it important that we rely on the Bible and not on our own hearts for the truth about who God is?

In what ways are you most easily deceived by your own mind and emotions? What dangers would there be for you this week if you “listened to your heart” instead of the Holy Spirit?

Where do you need the Holy Spirit to lead you in truth? What lies are you tempted to believe in this season?

Thank God for the gift of a new heart and His Spirit within you. Ask Him to guide you into the truth you need, surrendering your heart, thoughts, and feelings as you go.

DAY 3—READ MATTHEW 7:7-8

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."

When have you persistently sought after something? When you were younger, maybe you tried to get your parents to change their minds about something. Or maybe you had a longstanding crush on someone and were trying to move out of the friendzone! We can be persistent as adults, too, when we set our sights on things like a promotion, attending a certain event, or the successful completion of a project. Some level of persistence is a necessary part of receiving many of the truly meaningful things we are after.

Jesus indicated that persistence is an important spiritual quality too. A commitment to prayer demonstrates a heart that is undivided in devotion to and expectation of God. Asking, seeking, and knocking gives evidence that we believe He is the Giver of all good gifts and that He is listening and able to answer even if for a time we do not hear that answer.

We tend to pray for blessings, especially related to our physical needs. But what we must understand is that God blesses us beyond physical answers to our specific prayers. Even when our requests don't align with His perfect will in a situation, He blesses us with a deeper understanding of who He is. As we humbly seek Him in faith, our hearts are purified and we see God for who He is. God is the perfect Father—all-loving, all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful, and always present with us. But for us to truly understand Him in those ways, we must ask, seek, and knock.

Based on these verses, what can you know is true about God, even when He does not give you what you specifically ask for?

How does Matthew 7:7-8 connect with Matthew 5:8?

What does your prayer life reveal about your dependence upon God?

Thank God that He blesses those who depend completely on Him. Invite Him to continue to show you who He is as you ask, seek, and knock.

DAY 4—READ PSALM 24:3-6

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? ⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. ⁵ He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation. ⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

In Matthew 5:8, we learn that those who are pure in heart are blessed to see God. In Psalm 24, David gave personal testimony to that truth. In addition to being holy in action and attitude, the truly blessed person is undivided in adoration of God—they do “not lift up [their] soul to what is false.” Another translation describes clean hands and a pure heart this way: someone who “does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god” (NIV).

We tend to think of idols in their Old Testament form—statues and images representing other gods. But in its purest sense, we make something an idol when we give it more value and power than God. If you seek truth, trust, security, or power in something other than Jesus Himself, then that thing has become an idol in your heart. It has divided your adoration of God, made it impure, and withheld promised blessings.

Don’t misunderstand. This psalm doesn’t propose sinless perfection in terms of behavior—it describes patterns that characterize a pure-hearted person who is walking with the Lord. Jesus agreed and declared people who exhibit particular characteristics to be divinely blessed. But these blessings are not something we can achieve by our own merit, they are gifts related to Christ’s presence within us.

What modern “idols” tempt us to live for them instead of the one true God? What things are easiest for you to idolize? Why?

How do you know if your posture before God is one of holy adoration?

Understanding that purity of heart is a gift, in what ways can you guard and treasure that purity?

Thank God that true purity is a gift, not something you must achieve. Invite Him to show you how you can better honor that gift in the way you love and seek Him each day.

DAY 5—READ JOHN 14:6-9

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us."⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

As we've been learning this week, seeing God happens when we are pure in heart. And the absolute greatest revelation of God is given to us in the Person of Jesus Christ. To see God means we gaze intently into the eyes of Jesus.

In these verses, Jesus was not just speaking of visually seeing something with your eyes. The original language tells us He was referring to cognitively, mentally, and intellectually understanding and knowing what something means. To see Jesus in this way, we have a personal relationship with Him. We devote ourselves to understanding Him and learning His ways—not a passing association, but devotion.

Jesus is not only the object of our purity, but also the perfect example of purity. His relationship with God was undivided. Jesus faced temptations to sin just like we do, but He never did give in to the temptation. The good news for us is that once we have seen and known Jesus, we can live in purity too. Jesus did not set an impossible standard in the Beatitudes; rather, He set one that can only be achieved through trust in and dependence on Him. Through His blood, we are cleansed and made pure (see Colossians 1:21-22). Through this purity, we see God.

How does John 14:5-9 give us insight into Jesus's meaning in Matthew 5:8?

What are some ways you can consider Jesus in daily life?

How might focusing intently on Jesus lead to purity in your thoughts and actions?

Praise God for making you pure through the sacrifice of Jesus. Invite Jesus to help you know Him better.

WEEK 1

MATTHEW 5:3

In any century, a poor person has little reason to be happy, based on outward circumstances. Jesus, however, clarified in the first words of his sermon that he was not speaking of physical poverty, but spiritual poverty—poor in spirit. The beginning of repentance is the recognition of one's spiritual bankruptcy—one's inability to become righteous on one's own. The blessing or happiness that belongs to the poor in spirit is because such a person is, by his admission, already moving toward participating in God's kingdom plan, acknowledging his need for a source of salvation outside himself. Old Testament uses of this concept would have been familiar to Jesus' listeners and Matthew's readers. (Familiar Scriptures would have included Pss. 40:17; 69:29–30, 33–34; Isa. 57:15; 61:1; 66:2, 5.)

ISAIAH 66:2

66:2a The third rhetorical question is part of God's answer to these questions. In it God explains why a temple is not the main thing God considers when evaluating his relationship to people. In this question God could be asking who made the temple stones, wood, gold, and sacrifices, but in light of 66:1 it is best to broaden out the question to include "all these things," a phrase which must encompass everything in the heavens and the earth. Since he is the Creator of everything, God's hands caused all these things to exist. This means that giving back to God some neatly stacked stones that form a temple and giving him a few sacrificial animals that he made is like a child giving a father a gift that was found lying in his father's closet. The key things of importance are the thoughts and intentions of the child, not where the child found the gift. So with God, the temple and its sacrifices are not the key things that God considers (he made and owns all these things) but the worshipful thoughts and reverent intentions of his loving children.

66:2b What does God "esteem" (or "look for, consider," from *nābat*)? Three terms describe the kind of people (not the place and all that goes on there) that God looks for so that he might have a relationship with his people. The first trait is that they are "humble" and dependent on God. The second term describes a person with a "contrite spirit," a term that does not refer to being despondent but lowly and dependent on divine help (57:15). The third characteristic of the people God wants to have a relationship with is that they "tremble" at God's word (cf. Ezra 9:4; 10:3). People like this stand in awe before the King of kings who made the heavens and the earth. They deeply respect what God has said, take it very seriously, internalize it and make it part of their worldview, and then they implement it in their daily walk and thinking.

PHILIPPIANS 4:13

Paul spoke from experience. He had been through the extremes: surplus and poverty. He knew how to weather the dangers of both. This was his secret. Greek and Roman religions had secret initiation rites. Some religions and philosophies prided themselves on secret knowledge. Paul had a different kind of secret. His secret was his reliance on Christ, a reliance gained through his Christian experience. Stoics relied on personal will to gain contentment. Paul did not claim such personal inner strength. His strength came from Jesus living in him. Paul was in Christ and thus content no matter what his circumstances.

J. Vernon McGee writes:

Whatever Christ has for you to do, He will supply the power. Whatever gift He gives you, He will give the power to exercise that gift. A gift is a manifestation of the Spirit of God in the life of the believer. As long as you function in Christ, you will have power. He certainly does not mean that he is putting into your hand unlimited power to do anything you want to do. Rather, He will give you the enablement to do all things in the context of His will for you (McGee, *Thru the Bible*, V:327–8).

The Christian life is not only difficult; it is also impossible unless we acquire the power to live it through Christ. To be sure, this truth does not come naturally to us but must be learned.

LUKE 17:20-21

17:20–21. The focus shifts again from disciples to Pharisees. They had another question for Jesus: When will the kingdom of God come? The Pharisees had logic and reason behind their question. They knew all the apocalyptic expectations raised by the Jews as Roman oppression grew and the era of prophecy faded further into the dark pages of yesteryear. Would Jesus openly admit he was the Messiah, bringing the kingdom, and thus make himself an enemy of Rome? Would he affirm the signs and wonders of contemporary apocalyptic writings and teachings? Or would his teachings be so radically new that the people would quit listening to him?

As usual, Jesus confounded them. They wanted to know signs of the times. They wanted to be able to be the first to predict and be prepared for the in break of God's kingdom on earth to reestablish David's rule. You will not see anything different, Jesus told them. The kingdom stands among you right now. People do not have to go out searching for it and come back reporting that they have found it here or there. The kingdom of God is present wherever Jesus is present. It is present in a different manner than they expected. Signs such as the healing of the lepers should show them the presence of the kingdom.

JOHN 15:5

15:5. Here we have the key verse of the passage, although it only expands what we have already learned on the first paragraph. Gromacki writes, "Christ identified Himself as the true Vine, the believers as the branches, and God the Father as the vine dresser (John 15:1, 5). The fruit of the vine is Christlikeness. Although the Holy Spirit is not called a vine, He is a producer of fruit. The analogy could refer to a grapevine or to a fruit-bearing tree" (Gromacki, p. 57).

Let us go back to the Galatians passage and see how this teaching of John 15 links closely to what Jesus has already said in John 14 about the Holy Spirit: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other" (Gal. 5:24–26). In my view, John 15 is not a passage on evangelism and the fruit does not describe new believers. This passage probably deals with discipleship and fruit describes godly behavior.

WEEK 2

MATTHEW 5:4

This beatitude is also dependent on Is 61: “He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted ... to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion; to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, festive oil instead of mourning, and splendid clothes instead of despair” (vv. 1–3). The context of Is 61 portrays mourning as expressive of Israel’s sorrow over the exile that their sins had caused. In this light, Mt 5:4 expresses the grief of those suffering the consequences of sin. Theirs is an attitude of repentance.

JOHN 11:33–35

11:33–37. Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. The Greek word for deeply moved in spirit is *embrimaomai*, used five times in the New Testament, always of Jesus (Matt. 9:30; Mark 1:43; 14:5; John 11:33, 38). It probably suggests anger over sin and death which could cause such agony in Mary, Martha, and their friends in Bethany. The second word (troubled) translates *etaraxen*. It seems to emphasize agitation, again perhaps over the grief of the sisters.

Of the phrase deeply moved in spirit Carson writes, “It does not refer to the Holy Spirit, but it is roughly equivalent to ‘in himself’: his inward reaction was anger or outrage or indignation.” And of the word troubled, “the same strong verb used in 12:27; 13:21. It is lexically inexcusable to reduce this emotional upset to the effects of empathy, grief, pain, or the like” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991., p. 415). When Jesus approached the tomb, he could no longer control himself and wept. John used a different word than the word he chose to describe the weeping of Mary and the Jews. Perhaps the intent was to show that Jesus’ tears emerged for a different reason—not grief over Lazarus; he had that situation well in hand. Surely the same unbelief and theological ignorance that prompted his anger also produced his grief.

This response to the death of Lazarus on the part of Jesus is very contrary to the Greek idea of gods, but very much like the promised Messiah of the Old Testament (Isa. 53:3). The question of the group

in verse 37 seems fair enough, but it has an obvious answer. Jesus could have kept this man from dying, but he chose not to for reasons he had already explained to the disciples earlier in the chapter.

PSALM 34:18

Brokenhearted and crushed in spirit further develop the image of oppression, although the emphasis in these terms is on internal suffering. The Lord is near those who are broken and humble (51:17) as opposed to one who has a “heart of stone” (Ezk 11:19; 36:26).

PSALM 119:50

119:49–56 The righteous person is comforted by the Lord’s judgments, certain that he will execute justice with integrity (v. 52). As the Lord rescued Israel in the past through his miraculous intervention, so the expectations of the psalmist were based on the testimony of God’s works. The psalmist expressed righteous indignation against the arrogant and the wicked who neglected the instructions of God.

ROMANS 6:23

6:20–23 As slaves of God, believers produce fruit (see Jn 15:1–8). This is the work of sanctification or holiness in their lives, and the final product is eternal life. Lest the figure be misunderstood as a payment for merits earned, eternal life is a gift of God through Christ. One master (sin) pays an earned wage of death; the other master (God) pays in unearned grace, resulting in eternal life (Jn 17:3).

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–4

1:3 Frequently Paul used a form of the verb thank at this point in his letters. For this letter and Ephesians, Paul used blessed (see Eph 1:3). God is praised as the source of all blessings. Jesus had taught that “your Father also is merciful” (Lk 6:36), or kind to the needy. Isaiah 40:1 speaks of God’s comfort or relief to the sorrowing.

1:4 Believers are to be a channel passing on to others the comfort they have received from God. Paradoxically, affliction—viewed properly—may be a conduit of blessing to others (v. 6).

WEEK 3

MATTHEW 5:5

Like the preceding Beatitudes, this one parallels Is 61; Isaiah 61:7 (LXX) uses the words “they will inherit the earth,” an exact parallel to Mt 5:5b. The first three Beatitudes thus confirm Jesus’s identity as the Servant of Is 61. This identification is important for understanding the sacrificial nature of Jesus’s death since Is 52:14–53:12 describes the Servant as suffering the punishment that sinners deserved (see Mt 8:17 and 12:17–21 which appeal to Is 53:4 and 42:1–4). This beatitude also echoes Ps 37:11 in which the humble are those who trust God and surrender to his authority even when they cannot make sense of their circumstances. Inherit the earth (land) in the OT refers to inheriting the promised land of Canaan. Thus most of Jesus’s hearers recognized that his disciples were a new Israel that would inherit the land promised to Abraham. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, “inheriting the earth” involves more than the promise of living in Palestine. It refers to living in a recreated earth over which Christ rules eternally. Matthew 19:28 anticipates the renewal of earth and assures Jesus’s disciples that they will enjoy great reward in the eternal kingdom.

1 PETER 1:6-7

1:6. This kind of care from God the Father suggests a response of great rejoicing. Verse 8 repeats this emphasis on joy, calling it an inexpressible and glorious joy. Such joy springs from the contemplation of God and of the salvation that comes to us from God.

This joyous response occurs even in the midst of grief caused by suffering through all kinds of trials. Suffer grief forms a metaphor derived from a military expression for being harassed. It includes the inner mental distress or sadness that comes because of painful circumstances. All kinds of trials literally means “varied, multicolored, or diversified” trials. This takes on a depth of meaning against the background of the ghastly persecution led by the Roman emperor Nero. In that persecution, Christians were wrapped in freshly

slaughtered animal skins and fed to dogs and wild animals. They were dipped in pitch or tar and set on fire as torches to light Nero’s gardens at night. This persecution was the first of nine that took place under the Roman Empire during the next 250 years. Peter himself very likely died during this first persecution.

All of this sheds some light on the expression Peter used to describe these varied trials: a little while. Suffering here is brief in light of our inheritance that lasts for eternity. Regardless of how long our trials last, that length of time is nothing in light of eternity.

1:7. Why does God allow this suffering to occur? Faith is being proved genuine through the trials. One purpose of trials is to sift out what is genuine in a person’s faith. Followers of God, in both the Old and New Testaments, know that God uses trying circumstances to test the hearts and lives of his people in order to mature them spiritually. Through difficulties God often tests whether our faith is genuine.

Peter cemented his point with the illustration of a goldsmith. To form a useful object, raw gold must be cast into a mold. For that to occur, the solid ore must be melted, requiring a temperature of 1,900 degrees Fahrenheit. When the gold is melted, the impurities rise to the surface, where they are skimmed off or burned off. A goldsmith knows the gold is ready to cast when the liquid gold becomes mirror-like and he can see his face reflected in the surface.

The parallel in a believer’s life is obvious. Through the refining heat of trials, we as followers of Jesus Christ grow spiritually and thus reflect more of Christ’s character in our lives. The language of this illustration may also refer to the first-century process of making pottery. Potters baked clay pots to give them strength. The process sometimes cracked pots that had flaws, but the ones that survived the process were then marked with the same Greek word that Peter used here (dokimos) for “genuine.”

Warren Wiersbe reminds us, “The trials of life test our faith to prove its sincerity. A faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. A person who abandons his/her faith when the going gets tough is only proving that he/she really had no faith at all” (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Hopeful* [Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1982], p. 25.)

Peter moved his focus from our present life to look forward to the day of the second coming of Christ and the testimony our approved faith will declare on that day. The faith of these first-century Christians met with scoffing, rejection, and persecution on earth. When the Lord returns, the scene will be reversed. Gold is certainly valuable, Peter said, but it is not as valuable as our proven faith. Gold is temporary, but our proven faith is eternal. The fact that our faith in Jesus is tested and has been proven genuine results in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

God’s purposes in present grief may not be completely known in a week, a year, or even a lifetime. In fact, some of God’s purposes will not even be known when believers die and go to be with the Lord. Some will only be discovered when Christ is revealed to everyone at the Second Coming.

PSALM 142:5

In this lament the psalmist does not just bemoan his fate, and he does not impulsively vent his feelings, but he takes his feelings to the Lord. Because he has no human refuge (v. 4[5]), he now calls on the Lord as his refuge. His confession of trust has been anticipated in v. 3b[4b], but in this verse the psalmist expands his earlier mention of trust into a full-throated song of confidence that prompts his petition that follows in vv. 6–7a[7–8a]. Although his life is precarious, he trusts that the Lord is his place for safety and his portion for living (cf. Pss 73:26; 119:57).

PSALM 37:9-11

37:8–9 The psalmist’s anger was apparently caused by the observation that the wicked were prospering and God had not judged them (v. 1). The prohibition on anger and agitation is repeated, as is the reason—the promise of the destruction of evildoers.

37:10 Although from the human perspective God was delaying the execution of his justice, from his perspective it was only a little while (Jb 24:24; 2Pt 3:8–9).

37:11 The humble are similar to the “poor,” “needy,” and “afflicted” in other psalms. They are those who are “brokenhearted” before the Lord.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10

12:9b. As a result, Paul determined that he would boast all the more gladly about his weaknesses. He quit complaining, so that Christ’s power might rest on him. The terminology translated “rest” (episkenoo) may be translated as “to tabernacle” or “pitch a tent.” It is likely that Paul drew upon Old Testament imagery of the glory of God coming upon the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38). If so, he learned that taking delight in his thorn actually brought the blessings of God upon his life.

12:10. From this understanding of his weakness, Paul concluded that he would delight in weaknesses rather than abhor them. Insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties were causes for joy because in these times of weakness, Paul was strong in the power of God.

WEEK 4

MATTHEW 5:6

Hunger and thirst are metaphors for a disciple’s fervent desire for righteousness. The words they will be filled are in the passive voice, indicating that righteousness is not something disciples can achieve by their own efforts. The verb here, like those in the promises of vv. 4, 6–7 (and possibly v. 9), is a “divine passive” that describes an act of God. He alone imparts the righteousness for which disciples hunger and thirst. This is crucial to understanding the theology of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus required his disciples to keep the least of the commandments (v. 19), surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20), and to “be perfect

... as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). Such demands can be twisted into a false theology in which righteousness is achieved by works, but the righteousness Jesus demands of us is actually a divine gift given to his followers.

MATTHEW 5:10-12

5:10 The purest form of righteousness is pursued by disciples who know that their good deeds will demand great sacrifice and will result in pain rather than immediate reward. This is the epitome of the kingdom righteousness demanded by the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus pronounced that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who suffer for righteousness. In the Greek text, theirs is shifted from its normal position at the end of the clause to the beginning instead. This gives the pronoun a special emphasis indicating that the kingdom belongs to righteous sufferers and to them alone. Those who always endeavor to evade persecution are not true disciples and will not have a share in the kingdom because true disciples follow Jesus even at the cost of their lives (16:24–27). The kingdom of heaven is the reign of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Righteous sufferers are subjects of God's rule through their submission to Jesus's authority. Jesus inaugurated this kingdom during his ministry, but it will be consummated in the end time.

5:11–12 Jesus's words show that persecution is typically either verbal or violent. Verbal forms include insult and slander. The word persecute includes acts of physical violence like the slap of Mt 5:39. Jesus promised that the cost of discipleship will be offset by the enormity of the reward the disciple enjoys in heaven. Jewish leaders rejected and vehemently persecuted the OT prophets, and Jesus repeatedly denounced this persecution (21:34–36; 23:29–37). By treating Jesus's followers in the same way they had treated the prophets, Jewish persecutors unwittingly bestowed on them a prophet's honor.

MATTHEW 6:33

6:31–33. With these three verses, having illustrated and supported his theme, Jesus built his climax. In verse 32, he made two more points about anxiety. First, it was downright pagan; anxiety was the attitude of those who were not a part of God's kingdom. Second, it

was totally unnecessary to worry about what to eat or drink or wear, because your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

If our life is not to be preoccupied with fretting over basic needs, what is our concern to be? The answer is, his kingdom and his righteousness. Those two terms are almost synonymous. God's kingdom means his sovereign rule in heaven and on earth, most particularly in and through the life of the individual believer. To seek his kingdom is to seek to ensure that his righteousness is done in heaven, on earth, and, most particularly, in and through our lives.

We are to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. Everything starts here. This is to be our consuming priority. So it is important to remind ourselves of some basic kingdom realities. How does a person find God's righteousness that characterizes his kingdom? Jesus started his sermon by pointing out our utter spiritual bankruptcy. We have no righteousness of our own. Even our best attitudes and actions do not procure it. Righteousness comes as a merciful gift, grace through faith (Eph. 2:4–10).

The first reference to righteousness that we find in Scripture is Genesis 15:6. Abraham knew how a person received grace, and the apostle Paul confirmed it (Rom. 4:2–25). The New Testament makes it clear that the righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:22–24). That is the only way we may enter into God's kingdom. Jesus clarified this issue for Nicodemus (John 3:3). We cannot see the kingdom of God unless we are "born again."

So everything begins with our seeking his kingdom and righteousness. In fact, we are to keep on seeking God's kingdom and righteousness. But we are not to seek in the sense of looking for something hidden. Rather, we are to look for every opportunity to expand more fully his already established rule in our lives and in our world, in anticipation of the day when believers will reign with him (Matt. 19:27–29; Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26–27; 3:21) when he establishes his kingdom fully on this earth.

Notice how this passage (6:25–34), which seemed to be taking us in a new direction, actually returns us to the theme of 6:19–24—that we are not to allow anything to distract us from total devotion to God and his kingdom. This is the one priority we must embrace. Money and other concerns can distract us.

Three times in verses 32 and 33, we find the phrase *all these things*. We might imagine Jesus using it somewhat disparagingly. This was not to belittle the importance of basic necessities, but to place them at the back of the mind of his disciples, far behind his kingdom and righteousness in importance. “All these things” are what pagans (and the Pharisees) scrambled after. “All these things” are thoroughly known by the Father. “All these things” will fall into place when we put God’s kingdom and righteousness in its proper place and serve the kingdom’s interests.

JOHN 6:35

6:35, 48 I am the bread of life is the first of Jesus’s seven “I am” sayings in John. Subsequently he said he is “the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5); “the gate” of the sheep (10:7, 9); the “good shepherd” (10:11, 14); “the resurrection and the life” (11:25); “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6); and “the true vine” (15:1). Apart from these sayings, there are statements where Jesus referred to himself as “I am” (6:20 textual note; 8:24, 28, 58; 18:5), a clear allusion to God’s identification as “I AM” (Ex 3:14).

1 PETER 4:12-14

4:12. Four times this section uses the words *suffering* or *suffer*, and this verse talks about the painful trial. This phrase could be read as “the painful trial that burns among you.” The original readers would hear this as martyrdom by being burned at the stake. It could describe the fact that followers of Jesus in the city of Rome (where Peter wrote this letter) were being dragged from their families, dipped in tar, and used as living torches to light the gardens of Nero. At the very least, Peter described experiences of pain comparable to the pain of being burned with fire, though his definition of these trials remains deliberately vague.

Verse 14 does hint at one specific type of persecution: being insulted because of the name of Christ. “Insulted” refers to being slandered by someone. It describes the dismantling of a person’s character with false information. This reminds us of James’s words: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (Jas. 3:6).

Believers must not be surprised when things like this assault their lives. Surprised means to be “astonished, upset, and bewildered.” It does not refer, however, to the very normal and short-term surprise or shock that an individual experiences in the face of this kind of pain. The present tense of the verb suggests a continuing attitude of bewilderment and astonishment at what is happening in the believer’s life.

Hidden in the word *surprised* is not only the thought of being bewildered over time, but also the idea of becoming resentful and bitter about the circumstances. Long-term bewilderment often leads to long-term bitterness, but believers should not view suffering as something strange or foreign. Our sufferings are not accidental, nor are they interfering with God’s purposes for our lives. In fact, these sufferings are part of his purpose.

This insight is suggested by the phrase *painful trial*. This expression contains the picture of a refining fire or a testing process that produces a positive result. The fires of suffering are designed by God to purify and strengthen the lives of his followers.

4:13. Again, the believer should not be surprised at this. Our suffering is the same kind of thing that Christ received, and therefore, in some sense, suffering is an indication of the believers’ identification with Christ. Believers participate in the suffering of Christ. Participate is taken from the familiar word *koinoneo*, “to share or fellowship with someone.” How does this work? Think of it this way: Your closest friends are those with whom you have suffered and hurt. As you stumble and crawl through pain together, you grow together as friends.

The same thing happens in our spiritual lives. As we view our persecutions as suffering for Christ and with Christ, we love him more deeply and trust him more completely. As this occurs, we are able to rejoice in the midst of our pain. Our present-tense joy will be turned into super joy when the pain is gone at the return of Jesus Christ (when his glory is revealed). This kind of joy should not be surprising, but in fact it should be expected. However, it is the present tense rejoicing that comes as a surprise.

Joy in suffering is not a trick of the mind. Rejoicing in pain has nothing to do with deriving pleasure from being mistreated in some way. Suffering has meaning as it puts us into deeper fellowship with Jesus Christ. As this occurs, our level of trust in his wisdom and care in our lives increases so that we are able to rejoice. Joy, in its most sublime meaning, is a deep confidence that God is in control of every area of our lives, even the painful places. The fullness of joy comes from a deep sense of the presence of God in a person's life. Joy occurs when our pain drives us to depend upon God.

4:14. This verse mentions a specific kind of suffering: if you are insulted because of the name of Christ. Insulted means “to be abused or slandered.” It pictures unjustified denunciations being hurled against the believer. For sensitive people, “there is often more bitterness (in such attacks) than in the loss of goods, or in the torments or agonies of the body” (Hiebert, quoting John Calvin, 268).

The Christian who suffers these kinds of abuses is uniquely blessed of God because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. This refers to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit within those who are believers in Jesus Christ. “Rests” indicates that the Holy Spirit is within the believer continually to refresh and to strengthen. At any moment we can draw on the Spirit of God. Especially in moments of crisis and suffering, God's Spirit is available to strengthen and refresh the believer.

WEEK 5

MATTHEW 5:7

5:7. Kingdom servants must reflect in their own hearts the heart of the king. That they are part of the kingdom implies that they are objects of mercy. They are “others-oriented.” What we have received in such abundance, we must dispense abundantly. Jesus repeated the concept in different words in 6:14–15. Kingdom servants are compassionate toward others.

MATTHEW 5:9

5:9 The ministry of peacemaking involves resolving conflict by making prompt apologies and acts of restitution, refusing to seek revenge, and humbly serving and loving one's enemies (vv. 21–26, 38–41, 43–48). The promise that peacemakers . . . will be called sons of God probably means that Jesus's authentic disciples emulate God by undertaking the ministry of reconciliation. Thus at the final judgment they shall be accepted as the sons (and daughters) of God.

MATTHEW 18:32–35

18:32–33. The angry king held one more audience with the first servant, this time to bring him to account for failing to follow the merciful king's example. God the Father values his children for different reasons. Like this king, the Father does not want any of his children harmed or taken out of his service through mistreatment by others.

We will answer to the Father for our stewardship of the relationships he has entrusted to us—particularly those with other children in his family. Keep in view here the Father's zealous oversight of his “little ones” earlier in Matthew 18. He is protective of all his children—sin and all—and this includes mistreatment from other children in the family.

18:34. The king was so angry at the first servant's mistreatment of the second that he rescinded his previous order to release the first servant and forgive his debt. He imprisoned the servant and turned him over to the jailers to be tortured. The parable reveals the anger of the king and his refusal to tolerate an arrogant lack of forgiveness among his family. But notice there is nothing said here about eternal damnation. These are family issues. Family forgiveness restores what was lost (relational intimacy) and is unrelated to what can never be lost (imputed righteousness and therefore eternal salvation).

18:35. Jesus' closing application was sobering. Each of you brings the focus to the level of individual responsibility. We can imagine Jesus scanning the faces of the disciples as he closed his discourse. We can also imagine him looking out through the words of Matthew into our hearts with his warning lingering in our conscience. Jesus insisted that his servants be characterized by forgiveness.

In this parable Jesus spoke in hyperbole about his anger toward an arrogant, rebellious child. The language may be exaggerated to cause us to take the teaching on forgiveness seriously. This passage warns about the consequences of failing to forgive others. The point is that every Christian has a duty to be forgiving toward others, just as the Father has been forgiving toward us.

EPHESIANS 2:14-17

2:14–16 Who made both groups one: These verses emphasize the centrality of Jesus Christ in bringing Gentiles and Jews together, not only with one another but also with God. Christ is both our peace and our peacemaker. His reconciling death on the cross has made the two—Jews and Gentiles—into one. Gentiles do not become Jews, but the two groups become one at a deeper level than ethnicity, forming Christ's church. The new humanity is greater than the former humanity; God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility and removed the hatred forever. By "dividing wall" Paul likely had in mind the area in the Jerusalem temple that separated the court of the Gentiles from the temple. The temple was constructed on an elevated platform. Around it was the court of priests. East of this was the court of Israel. Farther east was the

court of women. These three courts were all on the same elevation as the temple. From here a walled platform was five steps away. Fourteen steps away was another wall, which was the outer court of the Gentiles. There was an inscription on this wall warning Gentiles of their ensuing death if they entered the enclosure around the temple. In Christ this dividing wall was broken down, thus banishing the specific commandments that separated Jews from Gentiles because Gentiles did not observe the Jewish law. The burden of the commandments was taken away at the cross in our Lord's crucified body.

2:16 Reconcile both to God: The phrase extends the concept of "peace" and involves the idea of restoration to a unity. The goal was not merely to reconcile two groups but to reconcile them to God. The one body is the church, the new humanity, the place of peace. At the cross, everything that caused the disunion was destroyed.

2:17 Far away and near refer to Gentiles and Jews and derives from Is 57:19.

ROMANS 12:18-21

12:17–21 Christians often suffer hatred and persecution from society (1Pt 1:6; 2:11–12; 3:14–17; 4:12–16; 5:9). The normal response is to retaliate, but Christians are called to serve and minister God's grace to a lost and hostile world. Jesus is our model. As much as possible, we are to live at peace with everyone. God is the sovereign who can convert even a Saul who persecuted the church. God is the judge and the administrator of wrath. Our role is to display God's grace and love in our lives. God in Jesus conquered evil on the cross. We are not to let evil conquer us but to conquer evil with good.

WEEK 6

MATTHEW 5:8

The words pure in heart refer to someone who is authentically righteous in the inner person. Righteousness can be faked, as was the case with the Pharisees (23:25–28). Jesus said true purity is attained when God grants it to the person who hungers and thirsts for it. Complete fulfillment of this divine promise will occur at Jesus's return, but the identification of his disciples as those who are pure shows that dramatic transformation occurs even in this lifetime. The promise that Jesus's disciples will see God looks forward to the time when they will literally behold God in all his glory. The words are not to be interpreted figuratively as if they refer merely to special insight into God's nature or to a visionary experience. The new Moses promises his followers access to God that not even the ancient Moses was allowed to experience (Ex 33:12–23).

JEREMIAH 17:9

These verses contain three wisdom sayings: (1) The heart is more deceitful than anything and is incurable (lit "perverse" or "beyond cure," 13:23). (2) I, the Lord, examine the mind (Hb, "heart"), I test the heart (lit "kidneys"). The "mind" and the "heart" are hidden elements of a human personality, but God sees them perfectly. (3) The partridge (perhaps a sand grouse) hatches eggs it didn't lay. Some people amass wealth via the sweat of others, but like these birds, they will discover that their wealth does not last forever (Pr 23:4–5).

MATTHEW 7:7-8

7:7–8 While some people interpret these verses as a promise that God will give disciples whatever they pray for, linguistic connections between these verses and other portions of the Sermon on the Mount suggest that Jesus promised that those who ask, search, and knock will be invited to enter his kingdom. The command to ask is tied to the promise of "good things" to those who ask in v. 11. In the Lukan parallel, these good things are interpreted as the Holy Spirit who transforms the disciple and makes him fit for the kingdom. Seek uses the same Greek verb as 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of

God and his righteousness." Since the word door is not in the Greek text of v. 7, and because ancient people knocked on gates as well as doors to request entrance (Ac 12:13), knock likely refers to knocking on the gate of the kingdom (mentioned in Mt 7:13–14).

PSALM 24:3-6

24:3–4 The use of rhetorical questions about those who are worthy to enter into the Lord's presence is similar to Ps 15. Clean hands and a pure heart represent innocence and integrity (73:13) in a similar sense as a person who "lives blamelessly."

24:5 Righteousness can mean "vindication" here.

24:6 Inquire or "seek" means more than looking for something that is lost or hidden. It means turning to someone for advice and help; it is thus synonymous with trust (9:10). This is reinforced with the fact that seeking the Lord results in life (Am 5:6).

JOHN 14:6-9

14:5–7. Thomas was an honest follower though always the skeptic, so he was the first to ask, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus' response is the key verse of the passage, memorized by Christians all around the globe. Jesus is the way—reconciliation; Jesus is the truth—illumination; Jesus is the life—regeneration. This is the exclusive gospel. The New Testament knows nothing of universalism—the idea that God will find some way to save everybody. What could be clearer than Jesus' words in verse 6, No one comes to the Father except through me.

Why did the disciples need all this talk about trusting Jesus? Why do we need it? Because like them, we do not know Jesus well enough; so we struggle to understand the Father. Repeatedly Jesus emphasized the link between the heavenly Father and the Son, but right up to the end the disciples did not get it—and we struggle with the concept as well.

This is one of those places at which we would like to have audio aids for the Bible. What was Thomas's tone of voice when he said this? Is he still the skeptic? The pessimist? The negative thinker? It would appear so, but we admire his openness and vulnerability. The impact of Jesus' answer echoes through the centuries to the present hour. He embodies the way to God, the truth about God, and the life in God. And if the disciples really knew him as they should, they would understand the inseparability between the Father and the Son.

This announcement in John 14:6 prepares the way for the author of Hebrews to write, "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body" (Heb. 10:19–20).

14:8–11. Philip either did not understand his Old Testament well or he failed to link the Father and the Son. Or perhaps he was born in Missouri, the "show me" state. If Jesus could produce physical evidence of the Father, Philip claimed the disciples would finally be satisfied.

We must remember Jesus' response. There is no difference between the Father and the Son; they are both God—equally powerful. Here again we find the theme "believing is seeing" that surfaced so clearly in 11:40. Notice Jesus' emphasis on both words and work in verse 10. Jesus' words reflected his deity much more than his work did. The disciples had been fascinated by his work, but they had not listened carefully enough to his words. Almost in frustration, the Lord said, at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

What is God like? I once heard a sermon on this topic. The pastor talked on and on about God being like flowers, sunsets, the cry of a newborn baby, the beauty of a clear blue sky. Certainly, all those are part of God's natural revelation and therefore reflect him. But he never got to the bottom line: God is like Jesus Christ.

In actuality, Philip's confusion is typical of the disciples throughout the first four books of the New Testament. The depth of theology in these discussions overwhelmed the disciples, probably until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Even Christians today who hold the entire Bible and enjoy the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit struggle with the doctrine of the Trinity and oneness of the Father and the Son.

Tenney's point is instructive: "Furthermore, if a personality must be employed to represent God, that personality cannot be less than God and do him justice, nor can it be so far above humanity that it cannot communicate God perfectly to men. For this reason John says that 'the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known' (John 1:18). The way Jesus made known the character and reality of the Father was by his words and works. The truth of God filled Jesus' words; the power of God produced his works" (Tenney, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John*. Expositor's Bible Commentary. Vol. 9. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981., p. 145).



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