

## CHAPTER 5

### The Summary Parable

*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it has been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.*

(Matthew 7:24–27)

I remember watching a news clip of a house on the Outer Banks during one of the hurricanes that all too often hit that part of the North Carolina coast. Because there is no bedrock close to the surface on those barrier islands, houses are built on pilings sunk deep into the sandy soil. Sand, unfortunately, shifts rather easily when it is flooded by water.

This news clip showed the house being battered by waves. As each successive wave crashed against the house, more sand was washed away until the posts that were part of the pilings began to tilt. The tilt increased with each additional wave, and eventually the posts gave way and the house collapsed, subsequently being sucked into the surf and destroyed.

We are all buffeted by winds, rain, and waves during our lives. Tragedies, losses, and bitter disappointments are all part of the human condition, as are temptations, desires, and our own persistent ego. How we respond to this battering depends on our own moral grounding—our foundation, if you will.

This moral foundation gives us the strength to withstand all of life's buffeting blows. Without a strong moral foundation, we are like that house in the parable built on sand, swaying back and forth with each blow until we collapse, like the house, only to be engulfed by the cares of the world and lose our relationship with God.

Jesus is not telling us that we will be without troubles in this world. What He is saying with this parable is that following the teachings contained in this sermon will prepare a person to withstand all of life's buffetings and will thereby strengthen that person's relationship with God. Consider how the teachings in this sermon provide us with a firm moral foundation. The Beatitudes alone teach a series of progressive steps to become a person of high ethical standards. These steps allow us to structure our internal and external outlook on life to produce actions that are pleasing to God. With just these steps, the Sermon would be considered a great moral teaching. There is much more, though:

- Our proper role as Christians and how we should display our faith to the world is presented in the "Leadership Metaphors" section.
- "The Law" section teaches that we must look to and obey the spirit of the law and not simply the letter of the law.
- The "Piety Redefined" section teaches a new way to pray and rules for growing closer to God, with our actions having a pure intention, stripped of any motivation to impress other humans.
- Practical rules for evaluating situations we may encounter in life are contained in the "Standards for Living" section. These rules allow us to discern what is of value to God and to live our life accordingly.

All of these are meant to develop internal fortitude and a right way of thinking in different aspects of our lives. It is this internal fortitude that can be seen as the rock foundation to which Jesus refers. Without this fortitude, we can be susceptible to succumbing to the storms of life as well as life's temptations, both great and small.

This fortitude is developed by living out the steps presented by Jesus in the Beatitudes. Just as an athlete trains with harder and harder goals, so, too, we must continue to do harder and harder things, actions which may go against our own human nature. The guidance provided by Jesus in the latter sections give us practical ways to shape our response to the inevitable buffetings that we will face as residents of this physical world.

Jesus ends the Sermon with the metaphor of comparing a person who hears the words of the Sermon and acts on them to a person who builds their house's foundation on rock. The words *hear* and *act* are key in this final section of the Sermon.

There is more to the verb *hear* in this context than just recognizing the words. It is discernment of the actual meaning, or spirit of the words, that is essential. It should be no surprise that Jesus placed the "the Law" section, which deals with discerning the spirit of the law, shortly after the Beatitudes. Each concept that Jesus presents in the Sermon must be evaluated to discern the actual spirit of that teaching. Once this actual meaning has been discerned, then we must internalize it. This is the true meaning of "hearing" that Jesus is calling us to. Once we hear the meaning, we will be able to act according to God's will.

## **Living the Way**

These days, if you want to go to a certain place, you only have to enter the address in your smartphone or your car's GPS, and you will get turn-by-turn directions on how to get there.

Even if you don't know the address, you can enter the name of the place, and technology will deliver directions.

In life, however, there are no turn-by-turn directions available. Each day, we are confronted by multiple choices, each one impacting our life, our future choices, or the lives of others. What we need is a strong idea of our destination and a set of standards to be used in our daily decision making in pursuit of this ultimate destination—a code, if you will. We are all travelers on the road of life, and we need such a code. Otherwise, we are like the foolish man who built his house on sand, subject to the buffeting and waves of whatever life sends his way.

As we have learned, the Sermon on the Mount is not just a series of stand-alone rules but a unified code for living a life pleasing to God. The challenge for each of us is how we incorporate this code into our own personal lives.

The first step is to evaluate how we view God and, if necessary, change that perception. Many of us were raised in a religious tradition that depicts an “angry God.” This is the idea of an easily ticked-off God who is always looking for us to step out of line so that we can be punished. I call this the Traffic Cop God. We need to discard this concept of God and instead think of God as the heavenly Father Jesus describes in the Sermon. This heavenly Father loves us with unconditional love and is ready to accept us back if we would only come to Him with love and repentance—just like in the parable of the prodigal son.

It is all about love—love of our heavenly Father and love of our neighbors. If we love someone, we will strive to do what pleases them and avoid what displeases them. Jesus has given us a very good idea in the Sermon of what pleases God as well as some of the things that displease Him.

Thinking back to the analogy of a path up the mountain I presented at the beginning of the book, I think of adopting this new view of a loving God as putting on our walking shoes as

we sit in the parking lot at the bottom of the path that leads up the mountain to the castle at the top. We need to accept the vision of a loving heavenly Father before we can begin to start loving God and our neighbors as ourselves.

Once we have adopted this vision, our next step is to begin our trip up the mountain path as spelled out in the Beatitudes. I suggest that you take it one Beatitude at a time, moving on to the next one once you feel you have reached mastery of that particular Beatitude. Some backsliding is inevitable, so don't be afraid to go back and work on those areas that need extra attention.

Our journey following this message may be difficult and tiring, but the reward once we reach the end of our journey will be eternal. Aside from the personal development steps of the Beatitudes, Jesus also gave us tools to deal with the challenges of living out the message. Among these tools are the following.

The "the Law" section of the Sermon taught us to follow the spirit of the law instead of just the letter of the law. This is a good place to begin our process. We can use this rule to discern if our thoughts and emotions are in harmony with the will of God. For example, if the commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother," we can ask, is avoiding our parents' phone calls following the spirit of the law? While this may be a rather trivial example, it does indicate the type of logic we are to use in discerning the spirit of the law. Are we truly honoring them if we avoid talking to them?

In the "Piety Redefined" section of the Sermon, Jesus teaches that our piety must be directed inward and not done in public where we could gain attention or approval from others. The goal is to use our acts of piety to draw ourselves closer to God, and private acts are the way to accomplish this without ulterior motives for recognition and approval. So we should strive to direct our acts of piety toward God, seeking to please God in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Many of the touchstones presented in the “Standards for Living” section can help us in our quest for a pure heart. Building up our treasure in heaven is an important one. Every thought, word, and action done to please God is more spiritual treasure accumulated in our heavenly “bank account.”

Entering by the narrow gate is another important touchstone in our quest for a pure heart. If we concentrate on pleasing God, it may not be easy at times, and there may be shortcuts that are much easier. Despite the difficulty, we need to persevere in our quest by doing the right thing. The ultimate reward will be worth all of the difficulty.

The support of other believers in our journey is also an important factor. I encourage you to seek out a like-minded faith community. Don’t be afraid to shop around; you will know when you’ve find the right one. The early church used the term *koinonia* to describe what you should be looking for. This term can be defined as a sense of community, communion, joint participation, sharing, and intimacy.

Finally, we should acknowledge that we will fail from time to time in our quest for purity of heart. We are fallible human beings, and being pure of heart is contrary to human nature. When this happens, which it will, we need to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off spiritually, and ask God for forgiveness. God created us and understands our imperfect human nature, so God will forgive us if we ask for it. Our intent is to please God, and this desire itself pleases God.

In the Sermon, Jesus is calling us to an active faith where our actions reflect His teaching. When we act following the spirit of each of these teachings, we put these concepts into practice. It is our actions that are in accordance with the spirit of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon that build up our treasure in heaven.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable that deals with this type of treasure. In the parable, a man going abroad entrusts his money to his servants. One servant got five bags of gold, another got two bags of gold, and a third got one bag of gold. When the man returns after a long absence, he calls in the servants to account for the money he'd given them for safekeeping. The man with five bags of gold had increased it to ten, and the master rewards him with greater responsibility. The man with one bag of gold buried it in the ground and had only the original bag to give back to his master. He was dismissed and thrown out into the darkness.

The man who buried the one bag of gold is like those of us who ignore the gift God has given us and hide it, afraid to use that gift. We therefore lose the opportunity to use that gift to build our own heavenly treasure.

Many of us would identify with the man who had been given the two bags of gold. He wasn't given all that much, but he did manage to double the number of bags. We might not be the most physically gifted or the most intelligent, but God has given us talents we are good at and should use these gifts as best we can to the furtherance of God's plan. When the man gave his master the four bags, the master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Since you have been faithful in small matters, I will give you much greater responsibilities. Come and share your master's joy" (Matthew 25:23 NCB).

One day, each of us will pass from this earthly existence and into the spirit realm, where we will find ourselves standing in front of Jesus. When Jesus asks, "What have you done with this life which my Father has given you?" may we have many good things to show Him. Then, blissfully, we will hear Jesus respond, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share in your Master's joy!"

