

Jesus on Life
The Sermon on the Mount
Part 2

Matthew 5–7

Sermon 8: People of Integrity

Matthew 5:33-37

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout these sermons you'll see the notes we used to communicate with the media team. A worship outline for this series can be found after the last sermon.]

Many of us here today would agree that we have an integrity problem in America. Everywhere we look we see a lack of ethics. ***[Note: the following examples of ethics violations were currently happening when this sermon was preached. You will need to use up-to-date ethics illustrations when you preach this sermon, which, unfortunately, are never hard to find.]*** For example, take the world of politics. ***[slide: photo of ex Governor Blagojevich]*** This is the governor, or I should say ex-governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich. I'm probably butchering his name. I usually just refer to him as the corrupt governor with the bad haircut. He was impeached a couple of weeks ago for trying to sell Barack Obama's senate seat. The person he appointed to the senate is now being investigated for perjury. It seems like everywhere you look in politics, you see a lack of integrity.

The same thing is true in the business world. ***[slide: photo of Bernard Madoff]*** This man, Bernard Madoff, ran a ponzi scheme for years. He stole fifty billion dollars of assets. He ripped off the life savings of all kinds of people, from schoolteachers to movie stars. He also stole entire endowment funds from charitable organizations. What kind of man does that? Sadly, there are thousands of other business people out there, who, like Madoff, are corrupt. What ever happened to ethics in business?

The same dynamics can be seen in the sports world. ***[slide: photo of A-Rod, Alex Rodriguez]*** This is A-Rod, one of the best and most famous baseball players in history. Katie Couric once asked A-Rod on national TV, "Have you ever taken performance-enhancing

drugs?” He looked straight in the camera and said no. He was lying out his teeth. He now admits that he took performance-enhancing drugs for three years, along with other baseball greats like Mark McGuire, Barry Bonds, and Roger Clemens. And that’s just baseball. The same story can be found in every other sport, including the Olympics. Whatever happened to integrity in sports?

Integrity problems also exist in the world of entertainment. **[slide: from Time Magazine, “Singer’s Little Helper”]** This article ran in Time Magazine just last week. The story is called, “Singer’s Little Helper.” This article tells all about a computer program called “Auto-Tune.” This computer software, which is being used by numerous pop singers, can take a singer’s less than ideal voice and give him or her perfect pitch. We’re thinking about buying this computer system for our choir! I’m just kidding. But it’s a sad day when even our pop singers are cheating. **[end slide]**

From the political world, to the business world, to the sports world, to the world of entertainment, and most everywhere else, ethics seem to have disappeared in America. In fact, this whole economic mess we are in today began because of a lack of integrity in the financial market. **[slide: of foreclosure sign in front of a house]** For example, mortgage lenders made totally irresponsible loans to people who had no ability to repay. In order to make a quick buck, ethical standards of fiscal responsibility were ignored, and now we are all paying the price. Whatever happened to integrity? **[end slide]**

All of which brings me to today’s text. If you are a guest, we are currently walking through the **Sermon on the Mount**, which records Jesus’ teachings on many subjects, including integrity. Let’s look again at today’s passage.

[slide: “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” (Matt. 5:33-37 NIV)]

For us in the modern world, today’s passage sounds strange. All that stuff about swearing in the name of heaven, or by the throne of God, or by the earth, or by Jerusalem, or by the hairs

on our heads—it all sounds weird. But in Jesus’ time this kind of oath giving and swearing was done all the time. People would swear by God, or by heaven, or by Jerusalem, or by the hairs on their heads. This strange, ancient system of oath taking was based on the premise that people lie all the time. An oath, therefore, was supposed to give more weight to what you said and lend credibility to your word. It was sort of like saying, “Scouts honor,” or, “Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” Well Jesus rejected this whole silly system. Instead, Jesus said, “You don’t need oaths. Simply say yes or no. Let your word be enough.

[end slide]

The meaning of today’s text is crystal clear. Jesus is telling us to be trustworthy. Be honest. Shoot straight with people. Be a person of your word. Say what you mean and mean what you say. In short, be a person of integrity. Have integrity in your family, in the marketplace, at school, at church, everywhere. Don’t lie. Don’t cheat. Tell the truth. Be honest. Don’t compromise your standards and ethics, even if it hurts your bottom line or keeps you from getting a promotion, or makes you less popular at school. Be an example of true Christian integrity and honesty even if others around you are not. Why? Because in the end, being a person of integrity is worth more than almost anything else in life. You might lose your health, your wealth, your job, or your home, but don’t lost your integrity because without it you have nothing.

Several months ago I watched an interesting movie about a used-car salesman. It was called *Flywheel*. ***[slide: cover of Flywheel DVD box]*** The movie is an extremely low-budget film. It was made by a local church for just a few thousand dollars. As a result, the sound quality and picture quality were weak. And the actors in this film, all volunteers from the church who made the move, won’t win any academy awards. The movie also has a heavy hand when it comes to religion and evangelism, which is what you would expect from a movie made by a conservative evangelical church. But the storyline was extremely engaging. ***[end slide]***

Flywheel tells the story of a used-car salesman named Jay Austin who lacked integrity. For two years Jay operated a used car lot that regularly ripped people off, including teenagers, young couples, old ladies, and even a minister. ***[Note: If you have projection capabilities, you can show several clips from the movie to tell the story. This first clip shows Jay taking advantage of an uninformed buyer. Since the sound quality is weak, you will want to use the subtitles. See chapter 3, 7:00 to 7:53.]***

Flywheel does not suggest that all car salesmen are crooked. Many people in the car business are people of integrity and run their business with high ethics. But Jay Austin did not. Well, over time, Jay's lack of integrity began to bother him. Ultimately, he became disgusted with himself. He had no self-respect, his own wife was embarrassed by his dishonesty, and he knew that God was unhappy with his lack of ethics. Jay had a turning point where he got right with God and knew he had to change his business practices. Therefore, he made the decision that he was going to run his car lot with integrity, whatever the cost, even if it cost him his business. He made the decision that from now on he would charge a fair price for a car and no more. When Jay announced his decision to his staff, they were not happy. In fact, his two salesmen quit. ***[Note: If you are using projection, show chapter 12, 50:43 to 52:11.]***

In spite of setbacks, Jay was true to his word. He began selling every car on his lot for a fair price. And while it felt good to be a businessman of integrity, he was bothered by all the people he had ripped off the previous two years. He began to play around with idea of going back to all those people and making things right with them. He pulled out all the sales receipts of the previous two years, calculated how much money he had overcharged people, and decided to refund that amount. It took every dollar he owned to return that money. But he wanted a clear conscience before God, himself, and his family so he did it. He went back to every customer he ever overcharged and gave them a refund, which as you might expect, made quite an impact on them. ***[Note: If you are using projection, use the following clips: chapters 19-20, 91:09 to 93:42, then 94:03 to 96:00.]***

Although Jay had some ups and downs, he stuck with his commitment to run his business with integrity. Ultimately his integrity paid off, as it almost always does. But even if Jay had lost his business, there was no going back for him. He was now a man of integrity and always would be. Jesus would be pleased.

###

Sermon 9: Clint Eastwood Verses Jesus Christ

Matthew 5:38-48

Like many of you, I've been watching Clint Eastwood movies my entire life. **[slide: photo of Clint Eastwood]** I've watched his old ones like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *Two Mules for Sister Sarah*, and *Dirty Harry*, and his newer ones like *Unforgiven* and *Million Dollar Baby*. I love Clint Eastwood movies. So back in January when his newest movie, *Gran Torino*, came out, I went to see it. *Gran Torino* is vintage Clint Eastwood. He plays a grumpy, inflexible, Korean War veteran and retired auto worker named Walt. **[slide: photo, if you can find it, of Clint Eastwood's character Walt in Gran Torino, perhaps with his dog]**

Walt lived in a neighborhood that had radically changed over the years. Virtually all the white people had left, with Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks taking their place. His next-door neighbors were Asian, and Walt, somewhat of a racist, did not like them. Early in the movie their teenage boy attempted to steal Walt's beloved, mint-condition, 1972 Gran Torino, straining relations between the neighbors even further. However, over time, Walt and the teenage boy struck up an unexpected friendship. Walt even became a mentor to the boy. He taught him how to use tools and fix things and helped the boy get a job. They became close friends.

In that neighborhood was a gang of violent teenage boys. They begin to pick on Walt's teenage neighbor and friend. At one point they attacked him and beat him up pretty bad. Walt was outraged. He was a tough man, an ex-marine and war veteran who had killed men in battle, and he knew how to fight. So in retaliation Walt went to the apartment where the gang members lived in. When one of the gang members came outside, Walt beat the tar out of him. I mean, he smashed that boy's face over and over and over. And while I hate to admit it, being a minister and all, I loved it! That gang member was getting exactly what he deserved. It was satisfying to see the bad guy get beat to a pulp by Clint Eastwood. **[end slide]**

Most of us here today can relate to Walt's desire for revenge and retaliation. If somebody attacks us or someone we care about, our first response is to attack back. If somebody at the office shafts us, we shaft them back. If our spouse screams at us, we scream back, even louder. If someone in the community snubs us, we snub them back. If somebody criticizes us,

we criticize them back. We've been taught well. Don't let people push you around. Don't take abuse from anyone. Defend yourself. When attacked, retaliate. Just like Clint Eastwood did in *Gran Torino*. I mean, that's the American way.

However, that's not the Jesus way. Did you listen to today's text? It's a difficult passage. Let's look at it again. **[slide: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" (v. 38 NRSV)]** We understand "an eye for an eye." If somebody hits you, you hit them back; you retaliate like Clint Eastwood. But Jesus says, **[slide: "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." (v. 39 NRSV)]** Obviously, this is not easy to do. When attacked, our first response, our natural response, is to retaliate. So Jesus' method of nonretaliation, of turning the other cheek, is hard to accept.

Let's look on in our text. **[slide: "And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your [shirt] as well." (v. 40 NRSV)]** This is like saying, if you go to small claims courts and get sued for a thousand dollars, then give the person two thousand dollars. It makes no sense to us. Let's look at the next verse. **[slide: "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." (v. 41 NRSV)]** In Jesus' day Roman soldiers could force the citizens of Israel to carry their stuff for one mile. The Jews hated the Roman soldiers, and doing this was humiliating and disgusting to them. But Jesus said, "Don't just carry their stuff one mile as required by law, but carry their stuff two miles." I can hear the crowd saying, "Are you kidding!" This is hard. And it gets even harder. Jesus goes on to say in today's text that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Anybody can love their friends, says Jesus. True Christianity means loving even your enemies. **[end slide]**

Before we move on, I need to make an important point. In this text Jesus does NOT tell us to accept abuse. As my old seminary professor Glen Stassen says in his book on the *Sermon on the Mount*, **[slide: "Jesus does not say, 'Do what your abuser is forcing you to do, comply with oppression, and live with powerless resentment.' Instead, Jesus teaches us to do something at our own initiative, under our own power, something that we are not forced to do, something surprising that breaks the cycle of retaliation."—Glen Stassen)]** (Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* [Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2006], 93.) This is an important insight. Turning the other cheek, giving our shirt in addition to our coat, going not one mile but two—these are OUR choices, OUR actions, NOT something we are forced to do

by another person. These are creative alternatives to retaliation that we FREELY CHOOSE in an effort to end the vicious cycle of retaliation. **[end slide]**

Well Clint Eastwood and Jesus Christ have two different views. Clint Eastwood says to beat up bullies and thugs. But not Jesus. Instead, Jesus says, “Don’t retaliate. Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Love your enemies.”

The problem with all of this turning the other cheek and going the second mile stuff is that, if we are honest, it sounds a little crazy. Most of us prefer Clint Eastwood’s strategy of retaliation over Jesus Christ’s strategy of nonretaliation. But when you really think about it, maybe Jesus’ advice isn’t so crazy after all. I mean, what good does retaliation do? I don’t want to ruin the movie for you, but retaliation didn’t work for Clint Eastwood in *Gran Torino*. After Walt beat up that gang member for hurting his teenage neighbor, the gang came back with a vengeance. They shot up the teenage boy’s house and brutally beat up and raped his sister. In the end Walt came to realize that violence only leads to more violence. So he chose a different strategy to solve the problem. If you are interested, you can watch the movie and see what strategy he chooses.

Clint Eastwood’s movie *Gran Torino* reminds us that attacking people who attack us only causes more attacks. Responding to evil with retaliation, revenge, bitterness, and hatred only produces more evil and more retaliation, revenge, bitterness, and hatred. Perhaps the best example of that is the Middle East. **[slide: a scene of conflict between some Palestinians and some Israelis]** The following scenario happens all too frequently. Feeling oppressed by Israel, Palestinians decide to kill some Israelis. In response, the Israelis kill some Palestinians. So in return the Palestinians kill some more Israelis. In response to that, the Israelis kill some more Palestinians. Then the Palestinians kill more Israelis so the Israelis kill even more Palestinians. And on and on it goes, year after year, decade after decade, over and over again, more blood, more violence, more hatred, more funerals without end. Now let me ask you a question. Has retaliation done any good in the Middle East? No, it’s just makes things horribly worse. You might even say demonic. The only hope for that cycle to end is for one of the two sides to come up with an alternative to retaliation. **[end slide]**

Of course, you and I don’t live in the Middle East. Nor do we live in armed conflict with our neighbors. So let’s talk about issues closer to home. When our spouse yells at us, does

yelling back really make things better? Does it make for a happier home, a stronger marriage? When a fellow employee does us wrong, does it make it better to do them wrong in return? Does it make the workplace a better place to be? When a member of the community criticizes us, does it really make things better to criticize them in return? No, it never does. The way of the world, the way of returning evil with evil, only leads to more evil.

So Jesus offers us a creative alternative. A way to stop the insanity of retaliation. A way to end the brokenness and hatred. He says, "Return evil with good." When faced with hostility, respond with a surprising initiative of love. Only that can stop the cycle of retaliation and begin the possibility of reconciliation. So Jesus says, turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Refuse to retaliate. Love your enemies. That's what Jesus taught. That's how Jesus lived. And that's how Jesus died. When they put our Lord on a cross and murdered and mocked him, he could have retaliated with violence and hatred. Instead he said, "Father, forgive them." Jesus' response of returning evil with good was so unexpected and so powerful that a Roman guard said, "Truly this man was the son of God." You see, returning evil with love does far more good than revenge and retaliation. It worked for Jesus, and it can work again if Christians would only give it try.

If we took these words of Jesus seriously, it would have a profound impact on our daily life. For example, if our spouse attacked us with anger, what would happen if we responded with understanding and compassion and love? If our employer treated us wrongly, what would happen if we just worked harder and better? If somebody treated us badly in town, what would happen if we just loved them more and prayed for them harder? Jesus' way is a hard way, a risky way, an unnatural way. And it may not work. There is no guarantee that it will. But it's a lot better than the never-ending cycle of retaliation and revenge.

Many years ago, near the end of the civil war, Abraham Lincoln tried to follow these teachings of Jesus. *[slide: picture of Abraham Lincoln]* Although Lincoln was devastated by the war, he never hated the South. Instead, he wanted both sides to forgive each other and for healing to come after the war was over. Had Lincoln not been assassinated, the bitter post-Civil War years might have been very different indeed. At a large dinner party near the end of the war, Lincoln spoke admirably about southerners. He praised their great determination, their fighting spirit, and their willingness to defend their values. Even though he was at war with southerners, he spoke about them with great admiration. A woman at the dinner party

got extremely angry and upset. She asked Lincoln how he could speak kindly of his enemies when he should be destroying them. Lincoln responded by saying, ***[add to slide: “Madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”]***

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Sermon 10: Who Is Your Audience?

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

[Note: The idea for this sermon came from a sermon I heard many years ago by John Claypool, and I want to give him full credit for his insights into today's text.]

I once served as the editor of a preaching and worship magazine. Although I enjoyed that role, there was one part of the job I hated—rejecting articles of hopeful writers. And unfortunately, I had to reject hundreds of them every year. Articles were rejected for many reasons—poor writing skills, for example, or bad theology. However, one of the most common reasons for rejection was that writer did not understand the audience of the magazine. My magazine's audience was pastors. And the focus of the magazine was preaching and worship. However, I regularly received articles that were written for other audiences—articles targeted to teenagers for example, or senior adults, or parents. I even got a recipe once. Yea, that chocolate cake recipe would make a great call to worship or sermon illustration! A lot of hopeful authors wanted to write for my magazine, but they did not understand the audience. So when I traveled around the county leading writing workshops, I always asked the participants: “Who is your audience? Whom are you writing this article for? Whom are you targeting?” In writing, it's crucial to know who your audience is.

In a way we are all like aspiring writers. We all have an audience that we are trying to reach. Everybody has somebody he or she is trying to impress, whether a group or an individual. So the question I want to ask today is, “Who is your audience?” ***[slide: photo or image of a man or woman, NOT a familiar celebrity who we will recognize, standing on a stage all alone, with a microphone in his or her hand, facing an audience of people, with the caption: “Who is your audience?”]*** Whom are you trying to impress? Whom do you want to please? By the way the idea for today's sermon came from the late John Claypool, and I want to credit him.

So who is YOUR audience? That's the issue behind today's text in the ***Sermon on the Mount***, which we are currently walking through. In order to understand today's text, you need to know that in Jesus' day there were three great expressions of spiritual activity: ***[slide (interior of a synagogue in background): 1. Almsgiving 2. Prayer 3. Fasting]*** One would

assume that people would do these things for God alone, that God would be the intended audience for these three activities. But, Jesus notices, with great insight, for whom these acts were often performed.

Let's start with charitable giving. **[slide (background image of offering plate):**

1. Almsgiving] In Jesus' day almsgiving had been developed into a great fanfare by the Pharisees. They would wait for the busiest part of the day, when they had the biggest audience, and then drop their money, coin by coin, into the metal coffers. By their actions they would say, "Look at me! Look at how generous and holy I am." Jesus talks about that in verse 2. **[add to slide: "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men." (Matt. 6:2 NIV)]**

Next Jesus addresses the subject of prayer. **[slide (background image of person praying):**
2. Prayer] In Jesus' time the Jewish people had several set times during the day when they would pray. But rather than being at home or in some quiet place at prayer time, the Pharisees would make sure to be in a public place where they would be seen by others. When they had an audience, they would raise their hands and voices to heaven in prayer. Their actions said, "Look at me! Look at how holy and pious I am." We see that in verse 5. **[add to slide: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men." (Matt. 6:5 NIV)]**

Jesus' final example was fasting, **[slide (background image of food on a table):**
3. Fasting] going without food for an appointed time for spiritual purposes. But once again the Pharisees used fasting as a way to impress people with their holiness, as we see in verse 16. **[add to slide: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting." (Matt. 6:16 NIV)]**

From almsgiving, to prayer, to fasting, Jesus exposed this whole charade for what it was, religious acts played out not to please God but to impress other people. Their audience was not God but the people around them. **[end slide]**

All of which raises the question, who is OUR audience? **[slide: "Who Is Your Audience?" (same image mentioned earlier)]** Whom are we playing our lives to? Most of us, if we are

honest, would have to answer, our audience is our PEERS. **[add to slide: Our Peers]** The people at our church, or club, or neighborhood, or office, or our friends at school. Most of us are consumed with the opinion of our peers. We constantly wonder: “What will they say? What will they think? How can I earn their approval and avoid their condemnation?” Therefore, the audience to whom we play out our lives is not usually God but a group of our peers whose approval we crave at any cost. Our desire for peer approval impacts the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the section of town we live in, the civic organizations we belong to, the activities we engage in, and most everything else we do. Unfortunately, if we are not careful, our intense desire for peer approval can become a form of bondage. **[end slide]**

As we all know, this kind of peer pressure is especially powerful among teenagers. Sadly, some young people will do anything to please their peers, including smoking, drinking, taking drugs, or becoming sexually active. Let me give you an example. Years ago, in another church and another state, we had a teenage boy in our youth group named Allen. Allen’s family had few financial resources, but he was brilliant. His goal was to get a full scholarship at an Ivy League College, and we had no doubt that would happen. But when Allen became a junior in high school, everything changed. The popular kids at his high school determined that it was not cool to get good grades. So kids like Allen, who excelled academically, were ridiculed and not accepted by this group. Allen desperately wanted to be accepted by these kids. As a result, he purposely got bad grades for two years, destroying his chances for getting into a top-drawer school or getting a scholarship. Allen could have gone to Harvard or Yale or Princeton or Vanderbilt, or anywhere else he wanted. Instead he ended up attending a mediocre community college. All because he chose the wrong audience to please and impress.

Unfortunately, peer pressure does not go away after our teenage years. The fact is, peer pressure continues well into adulthood. For example, throughout my career I have always participated in a ministerial support group. Years ago, when I was serving a church in another state, one of the pastors in my support group, a man named Steve, was telling us about serious problems at his church. Steve was trying to lead his congregation to relocate their facility to a more desirable part of town. But there was massive resistance and conflict over the proposed relocation, and the whole thing got terribly ugly. It was causing horrible strife for Steve. His blood pressure was sky high, he was not sleeping, his digestive track was totally messed up, and his anxiety level was out the roof. Finally, one of the members of our group

asked Steve a profound question. He said, “Steve, who are you doing this for?” There was a long silence. You could have heard a pen drop. Steve finally said, “That’s a hard question.” After a long discussion Steve admitted that at least one of the reasons he was pushing so hard to relocate his church was to impress his peers. He wanted other clergy to know he was a strong leader and that he could make his church grow. He was trying to prove to his peers that he could be successful, but it was killing him—literally. His audience was other preachers and their opinion of him, and it was a form of bondage.

Although our audience is usually our peers, that’s not what God wants for us. That audience only shackles us and limits us and puts us in bondage. Blind conformity to the crowd is slavery. To keep up with the Joneses, to please the crowd, is not worth the cost. It is folly, says Jesus, to play for the crowd. If we do play to the crowd, says Jesus, we have our reward, and it isn’t very much. Three times in today’s text Jesus says, **[slide: “I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.” (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16 NIV)]**

Well, if our peers are not a worthy audience, who is? Jesus makes that clear in today’s text. Let’s read together verse 6. **[slide (background image of person praying in solitude, like a bedroom): “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matt. 6:6 NIV)]** Who should be our audience? The answer is God. **[end slide]** We should play out our life to God and not to people. God should be the one we try to please. He is the best possible audience we could have. Having God as his audience was Jesus’ great secret. He didn’t worry much about pleasing others. His purpose was not to please the crowd but to please God. This was the key to both his power and his joy. Jesus knew that trying to please the crowd brings slavery and bondage while trying to please God results in true freedom.

A good example of a person who tries to make God his audience is ex-president Jimmy Carter. **[slide: photo of Jimmy Carter]** Like all of us, Jimmy Carter has his weaknesses, and he certainly did as president. But it seems clear, at least to me, that for most of his life, Jimmy Carter has tried to please God rather than to please than the crowd. And that has cost him at times, both in business and in politics. That’s especially been true in the area of race relations. Jimmy Carter has always stood for equality in racial matters, which was not always popular in his home state of Georgia. Not long ago I heard about an incident in Carter’s life

that occurred way back in 1955 when he was still a peanut farmer. One day leaders from a racist organization called the White Citizens Council in Plains, Georgia, came to visit Jimmy. This group was more subtle in their racism than the KKK. They didn't wear white robes or burn crosses in people's yards. But the group was racist to the core, and Jimmy Carter knew it. The group informed Jimmy that he was the only businessman in the entire community who had not joined the White Citizens Council. They warned him in a subtle but clear way that failure to pay the twenty dollars dues would have serious repercussions for his then struggling peanut business. Carter refused to pay the twenty dollars. It was certainly not the token fee. He refused because he knew that the White Citizens Council was a racist organization and his Christian convictions would not allow him to be a part of it. When pressured further to contribute twenty dollars to the Council, Jimmy Carter took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and told his visitors, "I'll flush this money down the toilet before I'll give it to you."

That kind of life—playing to God and God's values rather than playing to the crowd—has hurt Jimmy Carter at times, both in business and in politics. But he is a far richer and freer man for it. You see, Jimmy Carter decided many years ago that God, not his peers, would be his primary audience, and that decision has served him well his entire life. ***[end slide]***

In today's text, Jesus asks us an important question. "Who is your audience?" We would do well to ponder that question for some time to come.

###

Sermon 11: Jesus and Wall Street

Matthew 6:19-24

An elderly man was walking along the beach one day. During his walk he noticed something shiny sticking out of the sand. When he pulled it out, he realized it was a magic lamp. So he rubbed the lamp and out came a genie. The genie said, as they always say, “Because you have released me from thousands of years of imprisonment in the lamp, you can have whatever wish you desire.” The man thought for a moment, then replied, “My brother and I had a big fight some thirty years ago, and he hasn’t spoken to me since. I wish he would finally forgive me.” There was a sudden thunder clap, a big puff of smoke, and the genie declared, “Your wish has been granted. Your brother has forgiven you.” And then the genie said, “You know, I’ve been around a long time. Most men would have wanted gold and jewels and palaces. I’m quite touched. You only wanted the love of your brother. Is it because you are old and dying?” “No way,” the man said, “I’m not old and dying, but my brother is, and he’s worth over one hundred million bucks.”

We are currently walking through the ***Sermon on the Mount***, and today’s text deals with money. Let’s look again at today’s text. Jesus begins by saying, ***[slide (treasure chest image): “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.” (Matt. 6:19 NIV)]*** Well, right out of the shoot we are in trouble. We do exactly the opposite of what Jesus says here. We store up all kinds of treasures on earth. In fact, we’ve stored up so much stuff that a huge industry has developed in America called clutter control. There are a large and growing number of clutter control consultants throughout the country. They offer clutter control classes and write clutter control books. Here’s an example. ***[slide: cover of Eliminating Clutter from Your Life by Susan Wright]***. Here’s another one. It’s called, ***[slide: cover of Clutter Control: Putting Your Home on a Diet by Jeff Campbell]*** There are dozens of these kinds of books out there. In spite of Jesus’ command not to, we have stored up all kinds of treasure on earth. ***[end slide]*** It’s hard not to in America. We are daily bombarded with messages to buy more and more stuff. In fact, buying more stuff than we can afford and putting it on credit, from credit cards to mortgages, is one of the major causes of this awful recession we’re in. It’s so easy in America to get sucked into the trap of accumulation. It’s like an old Indian parable I recently came across.

A guru had a star disciple. He was so pleased with the man's spiritual progress that he left him on his own. The disciple lived in a little mud hut. His only clothing was a loincloth, a small covering around his midsection. He lived simply, begging for his food. Each morning, after his devotions, the disciple washed his loincloth and hung it out to dry. One day he came back to discover the loincloth torn and eaten by rats. He begged the villagers for another loincloth, and they gave it to him. But the rats ate that one, too. So he got himself a cat. That took care of the rats, but now when he begged for his food, he had to beg for milk for his cat. "This won't do," he thought. "I'll get a cow." So he got a cow to feed his cat, but now he had to beg for hay to feed his cow. So, in order to feed his cow, he decided to till and plant the ground around his hut. But soon he found no time for contemplation, so he hired servants to tend his farm. Overseeing the laborers became a chore, so he got married to have a wife to help him with the farm. His wife didn't like the mud hut he lived in and demanded a real and very large home. She also wanted nice furniture and lots of clothes. So the man had to grow even more crops and hire more servants to keep his wife happy.

In time, the disciple became the wealthiest man in the village. Years later this man's guru was traveling nearby so he stopped in to see his old student. He was shocked at what he saw. Where once stood a simple mud hut, now loomed a palace surrounded by a vast estate worked by many servants. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked his disciple. "You won't believe this, sir," the disciple replied. "But there was no other way I could keep my loincloth."

It's easy to get sucked into a materialistic lifestyle of accumulation. But, said Jesus, it's no way to live. Why? For one thing, it's ultimately a dead-end pursuit. Let's look further at today's text. **[slide: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal." (Matt. 6:19 NIV)]** This stuff we spend so much time accumulating is not permanent. We can easily lose it all. Either to a fire, or a thief, or a layoff, or a disability. Or, as we've seen recently, a stock market crash. The stuff in our life is not reliable; it's easily lost. And even if we manage to hang on to our stuff throughout our life, one day we're going to die, and the old cliché is true—"You can't take it with you." Therefore, spending our life trying to accumulate more and more stuff is a dead end. It's too small of a master, too small of a god. It's not worth giving our life to because in the end, one way or another, it will all be taken away. **[end slide]**

I once heard about a father who took his daughter on a unique outing. When his daughter was seven years old, they spent an afternoon at the city dump. **[slide: photo of a landfill with a large assortment of junk]** Their purpose was not to dump garbage but to observe waste. The father backed his Oldsmobile up against the mounds of refuse and placed his daughter on its roof. With pencil and paper in hand, he asked her to list every item she could identify. The results were astounding. **[end slide]** There was a plastic swimming pool, a barbecue, and several old lawn chairs. There were Barbie dolls, bicycle frames, skateboards, refrigerators and stoves, radios, and televisions. As they drove back into the city, they happened to pull alongside a double trailer truck. Piled on each trailer were five hunks of scrap metal bundled together, the remains of old automobiles. There they were—ten crumpled cars, magnificent object lessons for a father and daughter who at that very moment were discussing the value of things. The father leaned over and reminding his daughter that the beautiful Oldsmobile in which they were riding was ultimately headed for the same scrap heap. That day at the dump was a day this father and daughter will never forget. It served as a powerful lesson that someday everything we own will be junk. In some city dump the things that have captivated our attention and dominated our lives will smolder beneath a simmering flame amid stinking mounds of rotting garbage.

Accumulation of a lot of stuff, says Jesus, is ultimately a worthless endeavor. In addition, it's dangerous to our spiritual life. Making the accumulation of stuff the center of our life is cancer to our soul. Jesus put it this way in today's text, **[slide: "No one can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve both God and Money." (Matt. 6:24 NIV)]** If making a lot of money and buying a lot of stuff is our primary purpose in life, we are not living a Christian life. Jesus is clear on this. Making money and the things money can buy destroys our soul. **[end slide]**

So Jesus warns us, don't get consumed with the accumulation of more and more stuff. Don't store up treasures on earth. Oh, we have to have some money, of course. Jesus knows that. It's not sinful to buy needed items, or to live a modest life, or to save some money, or to prepare for retirement. But don't make that your life's priority. Instead of storing up earthly treasure, Jesus advises us to store up treasure in heaven. Storing up treasure in heaven means to invest our lives in the things of God, like love and justice and integrity and character and service and relationships and caring and compassion and generosity. It's our choice. We can spend our life storing up treasure on earth; many do. Or we can spend our life storing up

treasure in heaven. But know this. The long-term yield on heavenly investments is far better than the long-term yield on Wall Street.

I want to conclude today by telling you a folktale about an old farmer from the island of Crete. He so loved his land that he asked to be buried with a handful of Crete's soil in his hand. He soon died and was buried, as he requested, with the soil in his hand. He appeared before Saint Peter at the pearly gates of heaven. Peter welcomed him and invited him into heaven. As the old farmer was about to go through the gates, Saint Peter said, "In order to get into heaven, you must let go of the possessions of your past life, including the handful of earth you are clutching so tightly." The man was reluctant to let go of the soil and protested, "Why must I give this up?" Peter said, "That's just the rule. You come into the world with nothing, and you have to leave the world with nothing." Finally the old farmer said, "I'm sorry, but I cannot let go of this soil from my beloved island of Crete. What's inside these gates of heaven I don't know. But this soil I do know—it's my life, my family, my work. It's all that I know and love. I will not let it go!" So the man remained outside the gates of heaven.

Years went by. Finally an old friend of his appeared, urging him to come and enjoy God's banquet. The old farmer agreed it was time. But as he got close to the gate, he changed his mind. Shaking his head sadly, he said, "No, I can never part with my soil from Crete." Another decade went by. Then his son came to him, saying, "Please Dad, you will enjoy life at God's table. Please come with me and greet all the saints." Still he would not let go of the soil. Many years later the old man's granddaughter came to see him. She pleaded for him to let go of the soil and enter the kingdom of God. Moved by his dear granddaughter's invitation, he finally agreed. She reached out her hand to his hand. He slowly let go of the soil from his beloved Crete, took her hand, and walked with her through the gates of heaven. As he entered paradise, he was shocked. The first thing he saw was his beloved island of Crete in all its glory.

###

Sermon 12: Don't Worry Be Happy?

Matthew 6:25-34

I once heard about a man who was a chronic worrier. He worried about everything. He was constantly stressed out and full of anxiety, and he looked it. One day, however, his friend noticed this man smiling and looking cheerful. His asked, "What has happened to you? You don't seem to have a worry in the world." The chronic worrier answered, "I don't have worry in the world. In fact, I have given up worry. Instead, I have hired a man to do all my worrying for me." His friend said, "That's amazing. How much do you pay this man to worry for you?" The chronic worrier replied, "A thousand dollars a week." "A thousand dollars a week!" the friend exclaimed. "How can you afford to pay him?" The chronic worrier said, "That's his worry!"

We are currently walking through the **Sermon on the Mount**, and today we come to the subject of worry and anxiety. In today's text Jesus says, "Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life" (Matt. 6:25 NIV). And if we are honest, we would probably admit that Jesus sounds a bit naive here. Are we really not supposed to worry? Jesus' words sound a bit like the old hit song by Bobby McFerrin called "*Don't Worry Be Happy*." It went like this. **[Note: If you don't have projection, you can still play a few seconds of the song on your sound system.] [slide and music from Bobby McFerrin's "*Don't Worry Be Happy*" song. It's on YouTube with images of the songwriter. Let's listen to second 30 to second 60]**

"Don't Worry Be Happy" was a cute song but not very realistic. So is today's text Jesus' version of "*Don't Worry Be Happy?*" Not at all. For one thing Jesus is obviously exaggerating here. He does so throughout the Sermon on the Mount. For example, he says, "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out" (Mark 9:47 NIV). Jesus didn't mean that literally. It's hyperbole, an exaggeration to make a point. The same is true here. Jesus knows people are going to worry from time to time. If the doctor says it's malignant, you are going to worry. If your boss says, "I'm going to have to lay you off," you are going to worry. If the bishop says, "I need to talk to you," you are going to worry! Even Jesus worried occasionally. For example, when Jesus faced the end of his life, he went with his friends to the garden of Gethsemane. **[slide: photo from *The Passion of the Christ with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane praying in agony*]** The Bible says he fell on the ground to pray, that sweat dropped off his face like drops of blood, and that Jesus was deeply distressed and worried. Nobody can live a worry-

free life, not even Jesus. **[end slide]** So when Jesus said, “Don’t worry,” he didn’t mean that we will never be anxious. What Jesus is saying is, “Don’t worry so much. Don’t worry so excessively.”

The truth is, most of us worry far too much about far too many things. So Jesus tells us, “Don’t worry so much about these things.” In today’s text Jesus gives us three reasons why we should worry less and three ways how to worry less. Please look at your listening guide in the order of worship, and let’s quickly review today’s text. **(Listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.)**

One reason we should worry less is because many of our worries are insignificant. **[slide: (at top in large print put) Why Christians Should Worry Less (then add under that) 1. Because many of our worries are insignificant. “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?” (Matt. 6:25 NRSV)]** Many, if not most, of our worries are insignificant, secondary issues. Jesus says, “These kinds of issues are not worth worrying about; they are not important enough to worry about.”

A second reason Christians should worry less is that many of our worries are pagan. **[slide: (at top in large print put) Why Christians Should Worry Less (then add under that) 1. Because many of our worries are insignificant. 2. Because many of our worries are pagan. “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things.” (Matt. 6:31-32 NRSV)]** Jesus says, “Gentiles, nonbelieving pagans, worry about these kind of issues.” When we get all tied up in knots about our standard of living and how much money we have and our status and popularity, we are behaving like pagans, like people who do not trust God. Christians have more important issues to focus on than petty worries.

The third reason Christians should worry less is because worry does no good. **[slide: (at top in large print put) Why Christians Should Worry Less (then add under that) 1. Because many of our worries are insignificant. 2. Because many of our worries are pagan. 3. Because worry does no good. “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (Matt. 6:27 NRSV)]** The answer to his question is, of course not. Worry is a waste of time and energy.

I once heard about an interesting study on the subject of worry. **[slide: (at top put) Worry Research]** **The study revealed that 40 percent [add to slide: 40% – Never Happen]** of our fears and worries never happen; 30 percent of our worries **[add to slide: 30% – Past Decisions]** are about past decisions that we can do nothing about; 12 percent are caused by **[add to slide: 12% – Erroneous Assumptions]** misinterpreting the feelings and words of others, assuming things that don't exist; 10 percent of our worries **[add to slide: 10% -- Health Issues]** are about personal health, which only gets worse as we worry. The study concluded, therefore, **[[add a line below all of that, like a math formula, then below it put) 92% – Wasted Worries]** that 92 percent of our worries are a total waste of time and even harmful to our health. So, Jesus says, don't worry so much! Many of our worries are about insignificant things, many of our worries are pagan, and worry doesn't help anything. In fact, it usually makes things worse.

Not only does Jesus tell us why we should reduce our worry; he also offers three ways to reduce our worry.

The first way we can worry less is to trust God more. **[slide: (at top in big print put: How Christians Can Worry Less)]** **[add to slide: 1. Trust God more. “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?” (Matt. 6:26 NRSV)]** If God can feed the birds of the air, God can be trusted to meet our basic needs of life.

A second way to worry less is to focus on more important things. [slide: (at top) How Christians Can Worry Less (then add) 1. Trust God more. 2. Focus on more important things. “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt. 6:33 NRSV)] Jesus says, instead of worrying about petty issues, be a kingdom Christian. Prioritize love and relationships and service and justice and Christian values. And if we will do this, many of the little things that we worry about so much will become far less important. Our worries will pale in comparison to kingdom issues.

A third way to worry less is to live one day at a time. **[slide: (at top) How Christians Can Worry Less (then add) 1. Trust God more. 2. Focus on more important things. 3. Live one day at a time. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” (Matt. 6:34 NRSV)]** Instead of fretting about

yesterday or worrying about tomorrow, Jesus tells us to live one day at a time. If we will follow his advice, our worries will be far more manageable and therefore will dramatically decrease. [end slide]

This passage is only part of God's word to people who are struggling with anxiety. This is not God's sole word to people facing crisis. If you are going through a divorce, or struggling with cancer, or grieving the loss of a spouse, God has much more to say to you than we find in today's text. For example, God promises us strength and courage and hope in all circumstances, even if we walking through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4 NIV). Today's passage in the Sermon on the Mount is primarily for those of us who tend to worry too much about small things. In that spirit, let me tell you an old story.

Once upon a time a mighty dragon lived in a cave in a mountain high above a peaceful village. Every day, sometimes all day, the mighty dragon would stand outside the cave and roar, a roar that could be heard far and wide. Looking up, the fearful people of the village saw the dragon brooding, glowering, and threatening, and they wrung their hands and were sad that they had to live in the shadow of this fearsome monster. It is no wonder that even the bravest people in the village were afraid and spent their whole life worrying about the monster.

Then one day a small boy announced that he would fight the dragon. With great maturity he said, "I will not live where fires cannot be lighted, where children do not go outside to play, and where men stay away from the fields because they live in fear. I will go and face the dragon," the boy proclaimed. Although the elders of the village and all his fellow villagers tried to dissuade him, he went. As the boy made his way up the mountain, he discovered a strange thing. The closer he came to the dragon's cave, the smaller the dragon seemed to be. At last when he boy arrived at the cave opening, the mighty dragon had become a creature so small that the boy could hold him in the palm of his hand. So the boy took the tiny monster and carried it back to the village and kept it as his pet.

Everyone here today faces some kind of dragon in his or her life. And that dragon may seem mighty indeed, so we worry about it a lot. But if we will trust God more, and focus more on the truly important things in life, and face our worries one day at a time, we'll learn that the dragon isn't as big as we had imagined and that with God's help we can face it with courage.

LISTENING GUIDE
Don't Worry Be Happy?
Matthew 6:25-34

WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD WORRY LESS

1. Because many of our worries are _____

“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?” (Matt. 6:25 NRSV)

2. Because many of our worries are _____

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things.” (Matt. 6:31-32 NRSV)

3. Because worry does _____

“Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (Matt. 6:27 NRSV)

HOW CHRISTIANS CAN WORRY LESS

1. Trust _____

“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?” (Matt. 6:26 NRSV)

2. Focus on more _____

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt. 6:33 NRSV)

3. Live _____

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.” (Matt. 6:34 NRSV)

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Sermon 13: Jesus on Judging

Matthew 7:1-5

I once heard about two Baptist groups who met in Europe. One group was from America and the other from Germany. At the dinner table several of the American Baptists began to smoke. The German Baptists were aghast that these Americans could be so sinful. In fact, the Germans were so shocked, they almost dropped their mugs of beer.

We are currently walking through the ***Sermon on the Mount***. Today we come to the section about judging others. Unfortunately, most of us are pretty good at judging other folks. But Jesus tells us in today's text, "Do not judge." Jesus wasn't saying you should never evaluate a person's character. This doesn't mean we overlook lying or cheating or stealing or criminal behavior. For example, Jesus often made ethical judgments about injustice, and so should we. Jesus is saying that having a self-righteous, superior, judgmental, condemning attitude toward others is wrong. Today we're going to examine four reasons Jesus discourages us from judging others. To do so we'll look at today's text, along with some other passages in the Bible. Please look at your listening guide in today's bulletin. ***(Listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.)***

The first reason we should not judge others is because it's not our job. That job is already taken. ***[slide: 1. It's not our job.] Look with me at the verse on your listening guide, [add to slide: "There is one lawgiver and judge. . . . So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?" (James 4:12 NRSV)]*** God, not us, is the judge of this world.

Several weeks ago I heard a story about Billy Graham that I had never heard before. The story occurred over ten years ago, right after the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinski scandal hit the headlines. ***[slide: photo of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski]*** Soon after the news broke, Billy Graham attended a rally for President Bill Clinton. ***[slide: photo of Billy Graham]*** He was later asked why he attended the rally, given the sinful behavior of the president. In fact, he received a lot of criticism for going. Explaining his decision to attend the rally, Graham said, ***[add to slide: "Because it's the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge, and my job to love."]*** That attitude is one of the reasons I like Billy Graham so much. And he's right. It's not our job to judge. That job belongs to God and God alone.

A second reason Jesus discourages us from judging others is because we don't have the right. **[slide: 2. We don't have the right.]** Jesus tells us not to judge others because we have plenty of faults of our own. Please read with me this passage from today's text in the Sermon on the Mount. **[add to slide: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3 NRSV)]** Grady Nutt once paraphrased this text by saying, **[slide: "Don't worry about the splinter in your neighbor's eye when you have a 2 by 4 hanging out of your own eye."]** Jesus knows that each one of us has all kinds of flaws and sins in our own lives. Since that is the case, we have absolutely no right to judge others. Only perfect people should judge others, and there are no perfect people in the world except Jesus, and he chose not to judge. Why shouldn't Christians judge others? Because judging is not our job and because we don't have the right. Let's look at a third reason not to judge.

The third reason Jesus discourages us from judging others is because we don't have enough information. **[slide: 3. We don't have enough information.]** The truth is, we never have all the facts. We don't have enough information about a person's life to make truly objective judgments. As Jesus said in John 7, please read with me **[add to slide: "Do not judge by appearances." (John 7:24 NRSV)]**

Since we never fully know what's going on in other people's lives, we should be slow to judge them. Many years ago Stephen Covey shared a powerful example of this truth that I've never forgotten. He was riding a subway in New York. People were sitting quietly—some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm and peaceful scene. Then suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed. The man sat down next to Covey and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people's newspapers. It was very disturbing. And yet the man sitting next to Covey did nothing. It was difficult not to feel irritated.

Covey could not believe this man could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated too. So finally Covey turned to this father and said, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a

little more?” The man lifted his gaze and said softly, “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.” If we knew all the facts about people’s lives, we’d be much less apt to judge them. The Bible teaches us that we have no business judging others. Why? Because it’s not our job, because we don’t have the right, and because we don’t have enough information. Let me mention one final reason Jesus discourages us from judging others.

We should avoid judging others because people need grace, not judgment. **[slide: 4. People need grace, not judgment.]** Look at this verse in your listening guide. This comes from the story in John 8 about the woman caught in the act of adultery that the Pharisees wanted to stone to death. Please read this with me, **[add to slide: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. . . . Jesus . . . said, . . . ‘Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you.’” (John 8:7, 10-11 NRSV)]** (If you have projection capability, you can show a depiction of this text from the old movie *Jesus of Nazareth*. You can get the clip from the DVD or access it at www.wingclips.com. Look under judging, *Jesus of Nazareth—First Stone*. It’s 2:52 minutes long.)

Jesus didn’t ignore this woman’s sin. In fact, he told her to go and “sin no more.” But he knew that this woman, like all of us, needed grace and mercy, not judgment. Jesus knew that people don’t need criticism and condemnation and judgment. They get plenty of that from others and even from themselves. What people desperately need is some understanding, some forgiveness, some mercy, some acceptance, some grace.

So why does Jesus discourage us from judging others? Because it’s not our job. Because we don’t have the right. Because we don’t have enough information. And because people need grace, not judgment.

I’d like to conclude by telling you about my favorite Broadway musical, *Les Miserables*. As many of you know, *Les Miserables* tells the story of a French man named Jean Valjean. When he was a young man, he stole a loaf of bread to feed a starving family member. Tragically, he was sentenced to a nineteen-year term of hard labor for stealing the bread. Jean Valjean gradually hardened into a tough convict. No one could beat him in a fistfight. No one could

break his will. At last, Valjean earned his release. However, in those days, convicts had to carry identity cards, and nobody would give this ex-convict a job or even a place to spend the night. For four days Jean wandered the village roads, seeking shelter against the weather, until a kindly priest, a bishop actually, had mercy on him. That night Jean Valjean lay in bed until the bishop and his sister drifted off to sleep. He rose from his bed, rummaged through the cupboard for the family silver, and crept off into the darkness.

The next morning three policeman knocked on the bishop's door with Valjean in tow. They had caught the convict in flight with the stolen silver and were ready to put the scoundrel in chains for life. The bishop responded in a way that no one, especially Jean Valjean, expected. "So here you are!" he cried to Valjean. "I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good two hundred francs. Did you forget to take them?" Jean Valjean's eyes widened. He was now staring at the priest with an expression no words can convey. Valjean was no thief, the bishop assured the policemen. "This silver was my gift to him." When the policemen withdrew, the bishop gave the candlesticks to his guest, now speechless and trembling. "Do not forget, do not ever forget," said the bishop, "that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself an honest man."

I wish you could see that moment in the play and hear the song Jean sings in response to this unexpected grace. That act of mercy and grace and forgiveness changed Jean Valjean's life forever. You may be interested to know that he never sold the candlesticks. He kept them as a precious memento of grace. Near the end of the play, when Valjean is near death, he still has the candlesticks. They burn brightly, giving him light in death, just as they had given him light in life.

LISTENING GUIDE

Jesus on Judging

Matthew 7:1-5

1. It's not our _____.

"There is one lawgiver and judge. . . . So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?"
(James 4:12 NRSV)

2. We don't have the _____.

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3 NRSV)

3. We don't have enough _____.

"Do not judge by appearances." (John 7:24 NRSV)

4. People need _____, not _____.

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. . . . Jesus . . . said, . . . 'Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you.'" (John 8:7, 10-11 NRSV)

###

Sermon 14: Taking Faith Seriously

Matthew 7:13-29

Several months ago we began a journey through the ***Sermon on the Mount***. Today that journey comes to an end. Every week during this study, I've said something like, "We're currently walking through the Sermon on the Mount." That statement about "walking through" the Sermon on the Mount reminds me of an experience I had years ago at a church youth camp. During the evening worship service, the preacher was preaching an extremely long sermon. About forty-five minutes into the sermon, he said, "I did not plan on preaching this sermon tonight. I got it together this afternoon as I walked around the campground." The person next to me said, "I wish he had not taken such a long walk!" Well it's been a long walk through the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, today is our fourteenth visit to this portion of the Bible. Although it's been a long walk, I've enjoyed this study and hope it's been helpful to you.

Today's final text is about taking faith seriously. In this passage Jesus warns us against having a casual, nominal, halfhearted faith. Instead, Jesus calls for serious commitment to God. We see that throughout the passage. Let's review just a few examples. In verse 13, we read, ***[slide: "Enter through the narrow gate." (Matt. 7:13 NIV)]*** In verse 20 we read, ***[slide: "By their fruit you will recognize them." (Matt. 7:20 NIV)]*** In verse 21 we read, ***[slide: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 7:21 NIV)]*** In verse 24 we read, ***["Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." (Matt. 7:24 NIV)] [end slide]***

Throughout today's passage, Jesus calls us to a serious commitment to God. Unfortunately, American Christians don't do a very good job of that. We tend to be nominal and casual about our faith. For example, take worship attendance. I know there is far more to being a Christian than attending worship services. On the other hand, weekly worship is a crucial part of following Christ. God deserves our worship. We need to worship. And our church needs us to worship. You can't do authentic Christian living without regular congregational worship. Unfortunately, worship attendance figures among American Christians are dismal. Several studies have revealed that less than 25 percent of American church members bother to show up on any given Sunday.

I came across a letter recently that a pastor received from a family in his congregation. The family had not attended worship in several months, so he wrote them a letter saying he missed seeing them at worship. About a week later he received the following letter from the family:

Dear Pastor, Thank you for your kind letter. And, yes, we haven't been in church for several months now, so maybe we should explain. In the summer we go to the lake every weekend. Our kids are young now, and it's so important that they learn how to water-ski and become expert skiers. And we like to get away too, Jack and me, because there's so much going on in our lives, and we just need a break. But then when summer's over, soccer begins, and our kids all play in the most competitive leagues. They have games every weekend, and sometimes the games are out of town, and when they are in town, we go to the soccer games either on Saturday or Sunday, and there is just no way we can make it to church. We will be back to church. Don't give up on us. There's a brief period of time when soccer is over, and basketball hasn't yet begun, and it's too cold to go to the lake, and that's a great time for us go to church. But then again, it's Christmas, and you know how hectic that is. And after Christmas we just have to go to Colorado to ski, so that time's got a problem, too. But one of these days, don't be surprised when you look up and see us out there in the congregation because we just love you, and we just love our church."

I laughed when I read that but in a painful way. Commitment to God and church among many American Christians is not what it should be. In fact, many people are more committed to their civic groups than to their church. For example, when I joined the Rotary Club years ago, I was told that I had to attend at least 60 percent of the meetings. That got me to thinking, what if our church had the same requirement? What if everyone in the church had to attend worship at least 60 percent of the time? Here is how that math would work. At the end of last year, our church had 1,243 adult members. **[slide (at top of screen): 1,243 Adults]** We had 271 children. **[add to slide (under that number in a column fashion): 271 Children]** We also had 177 constituents. **[add to slide: 177 Constituents]** Constituents are people who have not joined the church but are connected to the congregation. Finally, between January and June of this year, we have added 70 new members. **[add to slide: 70 New Members: Jan—June]** So the total number of people connected to our church is 1,761. **[add to slide (put a line under the above number like a math equation and then put) 1,761 Total]** So, if the people at our church met just the bare Rotarian minimum and came 60 percent of the time,

we would average 1,057 in worship every Sunday. **[add to slide under the last number: 60% = 1,057 Average Worship Attendance]** That number, 1,057, is almost exactly what we ran on Easter Sunday this year. So, if we met just the minimum Rotarian requirement, it would be Easter Sunday here every Sunday of the year. [end slide] I may be old-fashioned, but it seems to me that our commitment to the church of Jesus Christ our Lord should at least equal our commitment to the Rotary Club!

Again, I know that being a Christian involves more than attending weekly worship. It also involves living a life of integrity, being a person of character, having Christian values, being compassionate, serving others, seeking justice, and affirming core beliefs about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But sadly, many American Christians exhibit little of this kind of commitment to Jesus Christ.

God wants more than that. God deserves more than that. And so, in today's closing text from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to take our faith more seriously. You see, authentic faith should make a significant difference in our lives. Yes, it should impact our Sunday morning schedule. Unless we are sick or out of town, we should be at worship. But our faith should also impact the way we spend our money. And the way we spend our time. And the way we treat other people. And the way we serve our community. It should impact how we treat the environment, and how we relate to people of other races, and how we treat the poor, and on and on. God does not want us to have a nominal, casual Christianity. God wants more. He wants more for God's sake, and he wants more for our sake. Christianity "lite" is no way to live. Instead, God wants us to have a vibrant, committed faith—which is the best life possible.

A couple of weeks ago, the Questors Sunday school class invited me to their class. They gave me a list of questions to answer. Some were quite interesting. One of the questions was, "If you could snap your fingers and change anything about Lebanon First United Methodist Church, what would you change?" I said, "I would put a beach right across Main Street with really good surfing waves." "After that," I said, "I would have the members of this church take their faith and their church membership vows more seriously." I wasn't picking on our members. My wish for more committed members has been true for every church I've ever served. It's the same wish every pastor in America has for his or her church. My wish is that I, and all our members and friends, would take our faith more seriously. That our faith in God

would seriously impact the way we live. And that's not just my wish. As we see in today's text, that's Jesus' wish as well.

This past week has been one of the most difficult weeks of my tenure in Lebanon. As most of you know, Shelley—the mother of two young children and one of our faithful members and one of the sweetest people you'll ever know—died Tuesday morning, evidently murdered by her husband. When you face that kind of tragedy, when it comes down to life-and-death issues like that, you have to have more than a halfhearted, casual, nominal faith. When you come face-to-face with tragedy and death and grief, you need God to be at the very core of your being—like Shelley made God the core of her life. Brothers and sisters in Christ, don't be satisfied with nominal faith. Don't settle for Christianity lite. Instead, make your faith deep; make it the center of your life. As Jesus tells us in today's text, take your faith seriously. That's the only way to truly live, and as I was reminded this week, that's the only way to die.

A few weeks ago I heard a story about a seventh-grade girl in Texas. She was on the junior high girls' track team at her school. For some reason an important Saturday track meet was postponed to the next Saturday. It just so happened that was the same Saturday the girl was scheduled to be gone on a church mission trip. She went to her track coach and told him about the conflict. He told her, "Your teammates are counting on you, and you can't let them down. I expect you to be here for the meet." Well, she went home in tears. The next day she talked to the coach again. He responded, "You are either here for the meet, or you turn in your uniform." More tears from her that night. The next day she went to her coach for a third time, handed him her uniform, and walked away. That evening, she explained her decision to her family. She said, "This is about God. And God is more important than sports." (*adapted from Kyle Childress, "Expecting a Call" in the "Living by the Word" column, Christian Century [January 9, 2007], 19.*) May her tribe increase.

Worship Outline for the Series

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. (Matt. 6:9 NRSV)

Opening section of worship, including singing, passing of the peace, opening prayer, etc.

He began to teach them saying (Matt. 5:2 NIV)

Scripture reading, any special music, sermon

Your kingdom come, your will be done (Matt. 6:10 NRSV)

Song of response, invitation, affirmation of faith, baptism, etc.

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:20 NRSV)

Offering. If you take up an offering before the sermon, you can place this before the sermon.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6 NRSV)

Holy Communion

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matt. 7:24 NIV)

Closing benediction and closing song, sending forth to serve God

