

A photograph of a forest path. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow. The path is covered in fallen leaves and is flanked by lush green foliage. The overall mood is peaceful and refreshing.

Sept/Oct 2021

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**CHANGED TO
LIVE LIKE JESUS**

ALSO: JESUS IN THE PSALMS

Dear Friends:

The Bible's 150 psalms stand out as beautiful prayers and songs. They express a wide range of emotions about living for and with God in this world, and they include lots of themes—wisdom, celebration, lament, history, meditation, prophecy, and more—while engaging us in many situations. As a result, it can be a bit challenging to see how the book of Psalms holds together in a unifying way.



In September, Pastor Bob Arbogast uses the theme of “Jesus in the Psalms” as a unifying thread to listen to and apply the psalms to our lives. While this isn't the only way to listen to psalms, there's something right about this approach that encourages and deepens our love not only for the psalms but also for Jesus himself.

For October's devotions, Pastor A.J. Gretz explores Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. There we find the “nuts and bolts” of what it means to be followers of Jesus in our daily lives. Jesus calls us to live with a pure heart for God each day rather than just being religious. Though none of us can reach the high bar Jesus sets, we can begin to live like Jesus as we learn to follow him and seek God's will in our lives. And in God's strength we can trust that he will help us stand strong, whatever storms come our way.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

Today

Sept/Oct 2021

refresh, refocus, renew



**“Jesus in the Psalms”
Bob Arbogast**



**“Changed to Live
Like Jesus”
A.J. Gretz**

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

TODAY (USPS 185-140),
Volume 71, Number 5,
published bimonthly by
ReFrame Ministries, formerly
Back to God Ministries
International, at 1700 28th
Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI
49508-1407. Periodicals postage
paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan,
and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes
to Today, 1700 28th Street SE,
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

Copyright © 2021, Reframe
Ministries. Printed in U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture
quotations in this publication
are from The Holy Bible, New
International Version®, NIV®.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984,
2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by
permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.

Cover photo: Dave Hoefler/
Unsplash



**ReFrame
Ministries**

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

october

Changed to Live Like Jesus

A.J. Gretz

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most famous passages in the Bible, and it has fascinated people for centuries. In this sermon and all its teachings, Jesus covers a wide range of topics dealing with the “nuts and bolts” of discipleship (that is, living for God in God’s world each day). Jesus’ goal in sharing these teachings is that his followers will be “pure in heart” and pursue true righteousness rather than merely religious activity.

Though Jesus sets the bar high, we do not need to be discouraged or to worry. We are not saved by our own good works or actions—we are saved only by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. As Jesus reminds us at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, a life that is built on the foundation of trusting in God will stand against any storms that might come along (see Matthew 7:24-27). These teachings give us a glimpse of who God is shaping us to be through the grace we have received freely in Christ.

A.J. Gretz is a pastor in Grandville, Michigan. He is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and has previously served churches in Ohio and in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He and his wife have three children, and in his spare time he enjoys running, biking, and complicated board games.

A FACE IN THE CROWD

[Jesus'] disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

—Matthew 5:1-2

Jesus taught and healed people as he traveled through several regions, and even early in his ministry he was followed by large crowds. Sometimes he needed a break from all that, and he just wanted to teach his disciples, his closest followers. But soon the crowds would build up around him again.

As he begins his Sermon on the Mount, recorded for us in Matthew 5-7, Jesus is teaching his closest disciples. But by the end of chapter 7, it seems a large crowd has formed around Jesus again, eager to listen in.

Today, 2,000 years later, there is still a crowd around Jesus. People study him as a teacher and philosopher. They are curious about his ideas and they connect with many of his teachings, and yet many of these people remain on the

outer edge, unable to accept his claim to be the Son of God.

Where do you find yourself as you listen to Jesus today? Are you one of his close, committed disciples? Have you been moving away from God lately? Are you on the edge of the crowd, simply curious—or exploring the ideas of faith?

No matter where you find yourself, Jesus' words are for you. He invites us into the blessings of living in obedience to God. This is not always comfortable or easy. But Jesus shows us how we are created to live. May we all embrace his words for the truth they contain.

Father, help me to open my mind and heart to the teachings of Jesus. Show me what I need to learn, and how I can draw near to you. Amen.

BLESSED

"Blessed are [you]. . . ."

—Matthew 5:3

The Sermon on the Mount begins with a series of "blessing" statements. These are often called the Beatitudes. Each statement begins with the Greek word *macarios*, which can be translated as "blessed" or "happy."

Some of us today might say we are #blessed because we got a bonus or we didn't have to stop for a red light on the way to work. But being *macarios* is about more than just feeling good or making a gain on our bank account. True blessing is about living in line with God's will, the way we are created to live. In the Bible, one who is blessed is described as whole and flourishing through a strong connection with God. Living in tune with God, or in step with the Spirit, may not bring us more money or an easier life, but it will lead to peace and wholeness as we walk with God.

This is important to keep in mind as we reflect on the Beatitudes over the next several days. Jesus makes some puzzling, provocative statements here, and we may not always feel so "happy" about putting his commands into practice. Even so, the Sermon on the Mount begins with a picture of what it means to flourish in relationship with God. When we live out these Beatitudes, we step into the kind of life we are intended to live, and we experience a kind of settledness and wholeness that can't be found anywhere else.

Father, help me to understand that blessing is about having a stronger relationship with you. Help me to obey and follow you. Amen.

POOR IN SPIRIT

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
—Matthew 5:3

How would you define success?

For most of us, success is about our accomplishments or status in the eyes of others. We tend to feel "successful" when we earn a promotion, raise well-adjusted kids, or receive good grades. More often than not, we define success by how much we have gained or accomplished.

But here in the first beatitude, Jesus turns our definition of success upside down. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," using an image of poverty and feeling worn down to describe what it means to be right with God.

Jesus wants us to understand that no matter what our job title is, or how much money we have in the bank, we are spiritually destitute. We are sinners, each and every one of us, alienated from our Creator

and unable to live faithfully for him. Only when we face the truth of our spiritual condition are we rightly called blessed. And only by letting go of what we can do in our own strength can we receive what God has done for us.

Jesus wants us to understand that a disciple is not someone who must have all the answers or achieve great things. A disciple is honest about being sinful, comes to God empty handed, and trusts that our gracious Father will provide everything needed for real, full life.

Father, help me to understand my poverty of spirit, and to see my need for a relationship with you. Thank you for having mercy on me, and help me to trust in you for all my needs. Amen.

THOSE WHO MOURN

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

—Matthew 5:4

Life is not always easy. Regardless of how much money we have or how successful we appear to be, each of us has to struggle against the curse of sin, which has poisoned every inch of God's good creation.

In your life, you may find yourself trying to overcome destructive habits, only to fall right back into your old patterns. You might experience the pain of losing a friend or a family member who dies at a young age. Or maybe as you look at the daily news, you feel overwhelmed by the suffering of people around the world.

These things are uncomfortable to admit, and it's tempting to use work, or hobbies, or socializing to distract ourselves from life's many problems.

But Jesus challenges us to confront sin head on, and to let ourselves grieve all of the de-

struction it has caused. When we understand the depth of our need, and we understand that neither politics nor technology, business, or therapy will fully heal this broken world, comfort is available. Grieving the world's sin and brokenness leads us to turn to God as our only comfort, trusting in his power to put things back together, since we cannot do that ourselves.

Father, help me to confront the hard realities of life in this troubled world, that I may understand the need for your grace and know the comfort of your promise to make all things new. In Jesus, Amen.

MEEKNESS

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

—Matthew 5:5

When we hear the word *meek*, or *meekness*, we might think it means the same as *weakness*. We might picture a guy in our workplace who never stands up for himself, or a nervous student who blushes whenever a teacher calls on her. We might think that being meek means acting like a doormat around others. And who wants to be like that?

Meekness, however, is actually about making the choice to put someone ahead of yourself. A friend of mine describes meekness as *restrained strength*, laying down your rights, your authority, or your power for the sake of another.

Jesus calls us to be meek as he is meek. Jesus is one with the Father, and yet he left heaven and became a helpless baby. Jesus subjected himself to teething and puberty, hunger and thirst, bickering

disciples and uncomfortable beds. When Jesus was arrested, he could have poured out his wrath and destroyed the entire Roman Empire if he wanted to. But instead he chose to accept the taunting and beating, the excruciating pain of hanging on a cross, and death. Jesus displayed meekness so that you and I could be free from our sin, so that we could be made right with God.

As disciples, we are now called to go and live like Jesus. He calls us to die to ourselves and to carry our own cross. He calls us to lay down our power and privilege as we point others to Christ and his kingdom.

Lord Jesus, help me to follow the example of meekness you set for us. May others see you at work and know the way to eternal life. Amen.

HUNGER

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."
—Matthew 5:6

When was the last time you were hungry? Not just "I could eat something" hungry, but really, actually in need of something to eat? Maybe it happened while you were on a long trip. Or maybe you had just finished a long workday. Maybe you had no money left for food. Whatever the case, you know there is a big difference between wanting some food and really needing it because you are *hungry*.

Jesus says we are blessed when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, when our longing for God's will is more than just an interest—it's a consuming desire. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness means we are desperate to see sin uprooted, and we are longing for justice to win. It means we don't excuse our wrongdoing or try to shrug off the world's problems, but instead we give

all we have to make the world more like the kingdom of God.

Then, says Jesus, we can look forward to being filled, because God will be faithful in making things right. He might not give us the house of our dreams or a big promotion, but he will bring justice and righteousness to every inch of his creation. If that's what we truly care about, we can't help being satisfied as we partner with God in his work in this world.

Father, help me to make justice and righteousness the greatest priorities in my life, and empower me to be your partner in the work of renewing all things. Amen.

MERCY

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

—Matthew 5:7

At first glance, it may seem that Jesus is saying we will be shown mercy *because* we have shown mercy to others. Then we might think we are racking up "mercy points" every time we respond patiently to a screaming toddler, or we choose not to make fun of our boss for sweating through his shirt. And when all is said and done, we think God will look at our tally and reward us with mercy for all the times we have been merciful to others.

In that view, God's mercy depends entirely on how well we perform.

But if that's the case, the gospel is bad news for many of us (myself included).

Thankfully, the gospel is the good news that God has freely shown us mercy although we don't deserve it. Jesus came into the world to save sinners

before they ever did something to earn it. God's mercy flows out of his character. It's part of who he is, and how deeply he loves his people.

We find that we are blessed when we show mercy, because it's evidence that we belong to God. Mercy is proof that we have been changed by God's mercy. It shows we realize that our own forgiveness does not rest on our ability to be merciful. Instead, our capacity for mercy is a sign that we understand God's forgiveness, and that we want to show his deep and unconditional love.

Father, help me to be merciful to everyone, as a way of showing your love in this world. Amen.

PURE IN HEART

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

—Matthew 5:8

One of the things God detests more than anything is hypocrisy from his people. Throughout the Old Testament, God rebukes Israel for going through the motions of religion while they keep living in sin and worshiping idols.

Here Jesus picks up on that same theme. Even after we come to faith, we battle with our "old selves" as we try to live our new life in Christ. Though we sometimes obey God and show his love to others, we can also slip up and go back to our old ways. Or we might do the right things for the wrong reasons, such as giving something away while expecting to get something in return.

As we'll see later in the Sermon on the Mount, we can show up for worship, pray, or give generously and still have a heart that is far from God. True righteousness is about more than

just checking religious boxes. It's about humbly and sincerely seeking to serve God instead of ourselves. If we are pursuing faith out of a desire for attention or personal gain, then we are hypocrites, and our worship amounts to nothing.

But when our actions come from pure faith rather than self-interest, we are able to see God and to experience his presence in a deeper way. Jesus calls us to examine our hearts and to ask God to help us truly show his love in all we do.

Father, purify my heart of sinful desires and selfish motives. Help me to serve you in humility and with pure intentions each day. Amen.

PEACEMAKERS

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
—Matthew 5:9

One of the best and worst parts of having kids is seeing different parts of yourself in them as they grow up. I can look at my children and see some of my facial features and my hairline, my love for books and tacos, and more.

But I can also recognize my anxieties and sinful tendencies already present within them. And I lament those things that they have learned or received from me. As the saying goes, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

As Christians, we are not only forgiven but also adopted into a new spiritual family. And in this beatitude, Jesus reminds us that an essential part of being God's children is to act as peacemakers wherever we go. We are called to model the generous and undeserved love of the Father in our relationships with everyone. Just as

Jesus came with a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5), we are called to be reconcilers in our workplaces, families, neighborhoods, and marketplaces.

In the face of fragmented cultures and political divisions, this is no easy calling. Peacemaking is hard, tedious, often thankless work. And yet Jesus assures us that when we make the effort, we are living as children of God.

Father, help me to be a peacemaker in all of my relationships. Forgive me when my speech or actions foster division, and help me to work for reconciliation and unity at every opportunity. Amen.

PERSECUTED

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." —Matthew 5:10

It's ironic that these verses come immediately after Christ's call to be peacemakers. We are called to bring healing and hope to a world that desperately needs it. We are *on God's side*, trying to serve in the best interests of others.

And yet, people sometimes choose to repay us with anger, hostility, or outright persecution. According to Jesus, it's not a question of *whether* this will happen but of *when* and *where* it will happen.

Persecution may come in a variety of forms. A snarky comment. A broken relationship. Physical or emotional abuse. Some of you reading this know the pain and the cost of following Jesus. You have lived it, or you might be experiencing it now.

Jesus seeks to encourage us in these difficult moments. When

the world fails to understand why we live the way we live, Jesus promises that the kingdom of heaven is ours. If we stand firm and hold to our hope in Christ, we can experience a measure of peace.

That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt when people reject us and mistreat us. But, deep down, we have comfort, knowing that God will provide for our every need. And in the end, we will share in his victory over sin. And death. And every enemy.

Father, help me to stay faithful in the face of adversity and persecution. Help me to resist the temptation to compromise, and may I continue serving you in hope, trusting in your promise of victory. Amen.

SALT AND LIGHT

"You are the salt of the earth. . . ."

—Matthew 5:13

OK, how many of us get really excited when we see a bag of chips or a box of crackers that says "reduced sodium"?

Well, probably none of us.

Because salt is delicious. It's why chips and crackers and French fries and pizza and many other things taste good. Salt exists to make food better. That is one of its God-given purposes.

In this passage Jesus says we are "the salt of the earth" . . . and "the light of the world." He doesn't say we "can be" or "should be" these things. He says we already are, by way of our new identity in him. Jesus expects us to bless people, to build them up, and to do what we can to help meet their needs. He expects us to use our words and our actions to stick out in this dark world, pointing people to the kingdom of God.

This isn't limited to formal ministry in the church. The ways we treat our spouses, talk to our coworkers, and use our resources or engage with social media are all examples of how we are called to be salt and light. Every sphere of life presents us with salt and light opportunities.

If we walk in step with Christ, putting his desires ahead of our own, we are like a welcome seasoning to enhance the taste of good food, or like a beacon of light shining in this dark world.

Father, help me to be salt and light in my community, and to use my words and my actions to show the world what you are like. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. . . ."
—Matthew 5:17-20

Imagine that you were living in the first century and Jesus had just come to your village. If you heard Jesus claim to be "one with the Father," or if you heard him challenge the religious leaders, how do you think you would have reacted?

Would you be interested—or perhaps even excited—by Jesus' teachings? Would you be delighted to see the Pharisees (the religious leaders) put in their place?

Or would you have been skeptical of this stranger who claimed to speak for God?

As Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, he understood that he was speaking to a mixed crowd. Many of the people in the crowd were Jewish, while some came from other cultures and traditions.

In this passage Jesus shows that he wanted everyone to under-

stand his right to teach and to gather followers as the promised Messiah.

The entire Old Testament story, from Genesis to the Ten Commandments, and from the time of the kings to the exile and beyond, pointed to the Messiah who would come to restore God's people and God's world. Jesus had come to bring life as it was always meant to be lived in relationship with God.

Today we still have to decide if Jesus can be trusted to bring us the words of life. Has he come in fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets? Or does he merely speak for himself?

Father, help me to trust in Jesus as your Son, the Messiah. Give me the courage to trust and obey, wherever he leads. Amen.

MURDER

"I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment."
—Matthew 5:22

In this passage Jesus frames anger in terms of the sixth commandment ("You shall not murder," Exodus 20:13), knowing that most of his listeners would think they hadn't broken it. But rather than congratulating them for being obedient, Jesus explains how they have violated the spirit behind the command.

He does this by giving two examples of angry speech that are judgmental or condemning. The Aramaic word *Raca* can be translated as "idiot" or "stupid"—it's a way of questioning the mind of someone who has wronged you. The second word Jesus uses, which is translated as "fool," is a judgment on another person's character.

It may seem like a stretch to compare angry speech with physical murder, but Jesus wants us to understand the power of our words. Angry

speech is destructive against another person made in God's image. It can push them into shame or self-loathing, rather than leading to fruitful repentance. And oftentimes our angry words create a cycle of retaliation and escalating anger.

So we must learn to control our anger and not to speak rashly. Thankfully, through Christ, we can find the grace to root anger and its hurtfulness out of our lives, and to become the peacemakers we are called to be.

Lord, help me not to rush into judging people out of anger. Move me to greater grace and compassion for everyone, even those who might hurt me. Amen.

ADULTERY

"I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

—Matthew 5:28

I love walking through a bike shop and "window shopping." Never mind that I already own a road bike and an off-road bike. Never mind that I have nowhere to put another bike. Never mind that I have a family to care for. I enjoy the fantasy of owning something new.

On the one hand, this can be harmless fun—who doesn't like to daydream about new stuff? But on the other hand, my desires can easily go too far, and I have to guard my heart against doing something unwise that could hurt my family and our relationships.

Jesus understands that sometimes we might be around an attractive person and feel tempted to "window shop." When he speaks of lust in this passage, it's more than just noticing someone—it's a look or a fantasy with *intent*. It means

treating a human being as an object we'd like to have.

In today's world, that kind of fantasizing is called normal and is even encouraged. But Jesus explains that it violates God's commands.

When we lust after another person, we violate them, ourselves, and our current or future marriage. We take a part of our heart that belongs to our spouse and give it to someone else. So Jesus warns us that we must avoid temptation and keep our hearts in line with his.

Father, help me to be on guard against the temptation to lust and to treat people like objects. Help me to develop a healthy heart that is in line with your will. Amen.

DIVORCE

"Anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery. . . ." —Matthew 5:32

God's design for marriage is for a husband and wife to leave their families and form something new. This involves much more than a contract, or even a commitment. A married couple makes a *covenant* together, committing to love one another with the same gracious and undeserved love that God has shown to us.

Our model for marriage is Christ himself, who loved us and gave his life for us. But for us, this kind of self-giving love is not easy to imitate. Marriage calls for learning and growing, and it reveals the limits of our kindness and generosity, often exposing our selfishness and pride. Unfortunately, many Christians struggle in silence to love their spouses. And division and conflict can lead to divorce.

In an imperfect world, divorce is a reality we must contend with. Adultery, abuse, or abandon-

ment by a spouse can break a marriage beyond repair. And people who are fighting to keep their marriage must be encouraged, supported, and prayed for by the church.

We must also create spaces for open and honest conversation where people can process their hurts and hardships alongside their brothers and sisters. People who have experienced the pain of divorce are deserving of grace, care, and empathy as they discern God's will for their lives moving forward.

Lord, we lament the reality of divorce in our world. Please give healing and hope for people who have divorced, and please fill all who are married with your merciful love. Amen.

SPEAK THE TRUTH

"All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."
—Matthew 5:37

Oath-making isn't common in many cultures today.

But have you ever taken a "sick day" from work when you were not sick? Have you ever told your friend that you forgot to do something you said you would do, although you really just didn't feel like doing it? Have you ever told a co-worker that you have finished a project—and then you hurry to finish it quickly, hoping they won't notice?

We bend and stretch the truth all the time. Pastor Tim Mackie of the Bible Project calls this "airbrushing" the truth. Just as a photo studio might airbrush a person's photo to remove blemishes or wrinkles, so we tend to "airbrush" the boring, inconvenient, or incriminating parts of our lives in order to make ourselves look better.

We do this out of our insecurity. We don't trust that we will be liked and accepted the way we are—with all of our faults, inconsistencies, and boring stories.

But Jesus is clear in this passage. Our yes should be yes. And our no should be no. As God's distinct people in the world—as salt and light—we know that our words are part of our witness.

Jesus is calling us to be people of integrity, knowing that we are secure in God's love for us as his children.

Father, forgive me when I fail to honor my word, or when I stretch the truth to try to appear better than I am. Help me to rest in your love and to speak the truth in every situation. Amen.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'"
—Matthew 5:38

When another person hurts us, we tend to want to do some damage in return.

What do you do when your spouse forgets to pay a bill on time? Or when your friend makes an insensitive comment? Or when another driver cuts you off? What is your first instinct?

Maybe you are the kind of person who wants to fight back when someone hurts you or makes things difficult for you. You raise your voice. You make personal attacks.

Or maybe you're not the type to lash out. Instead, you give people the silent treatment. You stop returning texts or you walk out of the room and refuse to discuss any more.

The desire to retaliate is actually rooted in a God-given desire for justice. We understand intuitively that people should

be held accountable for things that they've done. But our ideas of justice are easily tainted by our own anger and our feelings of self-righteousness.

In this passage Jesus leads us in a better way, inviting us to let go of revenge and to trust God as our defender. God sees and knows our suffering. He longs for justice to be done. And in his mercy, God also desires that all people would turn from sin, come to faith, and have new life in him.

Father, help me to turn my hurts over to you rather than seeking revenge. Give me the wisdom to respond with patience and compassion when I feel offended. Amen.

LOVE FOR ENEMIES

"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
—Matthew 5:43-44

It's easy to love people who think like us and treat us well. But if we want to be like God, who gives sunshine and rain to provide for everyone—whether good or bad—we have to learn to be more generous than most people.

Jesus wants us to understand that the way we treat people who are rude, obnoxious, lazy, selfish, or unkind reflects the state of our relationship with God. It's one thing to get along with our friends. But the way we treat the people who drive us crazy matters too, because it's part of our witness to the scandalous grace of the gospel.

In order to do this, we have to start with an accurate understanding of who we are. You and I are sinners. We have been selfish. We have done wrong. We have hurt others. We have failed to fulfill our responsibilities. Much of Matthew 5 has

been showing us just how deep our sin runs.

And yet even though all of this is true, how does God feel about us? How does God respond to us?

While there may be consequences for our actions, ultimately God chooses not to lash out or to write us off. Instead, God extends mercy and compassion and stays in relationship with us. And he calls us to go and do likewise—even to people who have become our enemies.

Father, give me a love for my enemies that I do not naturally possess. Help me to see them as you see them—people who need forgiveness and grace. Amen.

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them."
—Matthew 6:1

We like to be recognized for doing the right thing. Sometimes we do something nice for our spouse, but often it's because we expect a favor in return. Or we might give money for a worthy cause or praise someone for their work, but then we also tell others so that they will know about it. Sometimes we might also put in an extra effort when certain people are around because we want them to think well of us.

This was a rampant problem in the community where Jesus was teaching. The Pharisees and other religious leaders often made a show of their "righteousness," giving to the poor in visible ways or bragging about their obedience to the law. Such behavior might draw praise or attention from others, but Jesus saw it for what it was. Although these people appeared to be close to God,

their motives were selfish, and their hearts were actually far away from him.

Let's pay attention to our actions and think about how often we do things to get the attention or praise of others. Jesus knows how tempting it is to find our worth in the approval of other people. In this passage he challenges us to fight that temptation by keeping a low profile, and to do acts of kindness and generosity in secret as much as possible.

Father, purify the motives of my heart, and help me to love and serve others as a gift of love, without expecting attention or favors in return. Help me to rest in your love, regardless of what others might think. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

"Our Father in heaven . . ."

—Matthew 6:9

Maybe you have heard of the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus begins to teach his followers in our passage for today. When it comes to praying, sometimes we might think we have to find just the right words, or to say things in just the right way, for God to hear us.

But Jesus shows us that isn't the case. God is not some remote figure who must be awakened or impressed. There are no magic words; there is no secret formula to memorize in order to get God's attention. In fact, God is eager to hear from us, and he is ready to welcome us at any time.

That's because God, the Lord and Creator of the universe, is our *Father*. He is loving and attentive, and he understands the needs of our hearts.

Because of that, it's safe to come into God's presence

just as we are. We can pray with confidence, even without knowing a lot about our Father, or knowing what to say. We can enter God's presence in prayer because he wants to receive us and hear us, just as a loving parent wants with their child. God wants to spend time with us always, even when we are emotional or struggling.

Our loving Father who is in heaven invites us into his presence. To pray. And listen. To have a *relationship* with him. That's what Jesus has come to offer.

Father, help me to believe that you want to hear from me and receive me, just as I am. Help me to see you as my loving Father who cares for all my needs. Amen.

THE LORD'S WILL

"Your will be done. . . ."

—Matthew 6:10

Let's look a little deeper into the Lord's Prayer today. God our Father, who loves us and wants a relationship with us, also calls us to do his will. That's because he wants the best life possible for us, even if we can't always see that.

It's not easy to surrender ourselves to God's will or control. I like going to church, and I like finding comfort in God's promises. But I'm not always eager to follow God's will in my life. I usually just want to do what I want to do.

But with that attitude I can end up settling for fleeting, earthly treasures rather than the full life that God wants for me. And then I fail to recognize that it is better if God's kingdom comes instead of mine.

When I follow Jesus' example, however, and I pray for God's kingdom to come, I'm opening

my life to be filled by the sovereign God of heaven and earth. I'm inviting God to do whatever he thinks is best, even if it means change. Or discomfort. It's a pledge to pursue God's purposes above all else.

Are you prepared to pray for that? Are you ready to pray that God's will be done, even if that means changing jobs or giving money away or spending time with someone you don't like? What are you willing to risk in order to see God's will done?

Father, help me to trust that your will is far better than mine. Give me the grace to submit to your purposes and to embrace your call on my life, wherever you may take me. Amen.

FASTING

"Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."
—Matthew 6:18

In this passage Jesus is again critical of people who try to get attention for the good things they do (see Matthew 6:1). And this time it's about people who practice fasting in order to be noticed.

The discipline of fasting, like prayer, is meant to draw us nearer to God. When we abstain from food or drink, we engage in what Scot McKnight calls "body talk," an embodied form of prayer.

Thus we can see why Jesus would be so critical of people who misuse fasting, or any spiritual discipline, by trying to get attention for it. The disciplines are meant to make us "pure in heart" before God. But showing off in front of others only shows how impure a person's heart really is. And even if some people are fooled by a showoff, God is not fooled. If we are more interested in the

attention of others than in our relationship with God, then our attention-seeking is an idol and makes a mockery of God.

Our spiritual practices are meant for God, for our relationship with him alone. So we should be careful in talking about them with other people or posting about them on social media. While there may be a genuine need to process or share experiences with others, we must guard our hearts against the temptation to turn others' attention into an idol.

Father, help me to focus on the goal of strengthening my relationship with you in all I do. Please guard me against having impure motives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TREASURE

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

—Matthew 6:19-24

You might think of yourself as a well-adjusted grownup. But what happens when someone puts a scratch on your new car? What happens when the dog gets a hold of your new shoes? What happens when the market drops?

When things like that happen, we can get upset. And even if we stay calm and collected on the outside, on the inside we might get really angry, grow bitter, and even fall apart. Because that thing that we treasured has suddenly been taken away.

There's nothing wrong with caring for your stuff, or saving for retirement. But Jesus wants to guard us from the temptation to turn material things into idols. If we're not careful, we can make decisions based on the size of our paycheck or the gains in our portfolio instead of following God's leading.

So Jesus rightly warns us when he says that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. Our time, attention, and resources can easily be given over to our money and our stuff if we aren't paying attention.

Jesus' desire is that we come to see our relationship with God as our most valuable treasure. Full life with God, the source of our joy and comfort and purpose, is greater than we can even imagine.

Father, help me to have a right relationship with you, recognizing that money and possessions are mere gifts that cannot satisfy. They can never be more important than you, the Giver. Amen.

DO NOT WORRY

“Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’”
—Matthew 6:31

Jesus' early disciples lived with war, violence, disease, and famine in a way that is foreign to many of us. On any given day, people could lose a child or lose their harvest or be robbed by a Roman tax collector. And, unlike today, there were no safety nets. There were no stimulus payments, no social security checks, no food stamps, and no hospitals.

This is not to say that our struggles in 2021 aren't real, or that they somehow don't matter. But it's helpful to understand that even in the harsh environment of the ancient world, Jesus had the audacity to tell his followers not to worry about their lives. He was reminding them that God called them into a relationship with him. And if God watches over plants and provides for animals, if these other parts of creation have what they need,

then we can trust that God will provide everything we need. Why wouldn't we expect our Father in heaven to provide for his children?

Jesus is showing us how to find relief from our worries and anxieties, no matter what they are. For God is our loving Father. If there's something we need, we can ask him to provide it. If there's a struggle that we face, we can ask God for help. If we feel totally lost or confused about what we should do, we can ask him for clarity. And as we pray these things, we can trust not only that God *can provide* what we need, but also that *he will*.

Father, no matter what challenges I face, help me to remember your love and your faithfulness to me. Amen.

JUDGING OTHERS

"You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye. . . ."

—Matthew 7:5

When I see someone doing something wrong, my first impulse is to lash out. I want to get angry and condemn what I see in their behavior. I like to think I'm doing the world a favor by pointing out their sin.

But in this passage Jesus urges us to slow down and ask ourselves if we have ever done such a thing—or worse.

Do I talk to people that way? Do I treat my kids that way? Do I waste my resources that way?

And if so, what do I need to do in order to change?

This doesn't mean we never confront others. But doing some self-reflection first helps our conversations to be more helpful, and less critical, because we are coming from a place of humility rather than judgment.

All through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been challenging us to focus not only on our behavior but also on our thoughts, our attitudes, and our motives as well—even in times of conflict.

Before you pass judgment on someone else, take a good, long look at your own heart. And make sure you have dealt with the plank that's sticking out of your own eye. Because if you don't, you will come off as hypocritical. And unhelpful.

Father, help me to recognize my own faults when I experience conflict with someone. Help my speech to point others to you, and let it be gracious and seasoned with wisdom. Amen.

ASK, SEEK, KNOCK

"Ask and it will be given to you. . . ."

—Matthew 7:7

Some time ago I was at a grocery store looking for something, and I could not find it. Meanwhile, an employee stood by, about five feet away, stocking the shelves.

Did I ask for help? No. Instead, I turned the other way to avoid making eye contact, because something inside me didn't want to admit that I needed help.

Maybe you can tell a similar story. It's hard to reach out for help with small things like groceries—let alone the important stuff in life.

We don't like asking for help for a lot of reasons. But I think the main reason is that we don't want it to seem like there's something wrong with us. We don't want others to think that we aren't good enough or smart enough to solve our own problems.

Unfortunately, we bring this mentality into our relationship with God. We act as if everything in our life depends on us, instead of leaning on God and aiming to live in line with his will (Matthew 6:10).

Jesus encourages us to turn to God—just as a child turns to a parent—and to ask for the things we need. We can trust that God loves us enough to provide. And, wanting to do God's will, we can also ask for all kinds of things that will build up his kingdom!

Father, help us to bring our needs before you in prayer, trusting in your love and provision. And guide us to ask for and find ways to work with you in this world, as you build your kingdom. Amen.

TWO GATES

"Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."
—Matthew 7:14

Jesus lays out a clear choice that each of us must make. There is a wide, easy road that leads to destruction. And there is a harder, narrower road of discipleship that leads to life.

It can be easy to assume that the broad road includes only people who do not believe in God, or maybe people of some other faith who do not know Jesus. So we might assume that Jesus is drawing a contrast between people in the church and those who are completely outside of it.

But in light of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, there's another way to think about this passage. Jesus has been showing his listeners that they need to move from outward religion and ritual into a true relationship with God. We need to go beyond merely *behaving* ourselves to

actually *walking in union* with the Father.

So as we read this passage, we need to realize that Jesus is describing not only a choice between faith or no faith. There's also a choice between empty, surface-level religion and genuine discipleship.

The call of this passage is to move beyond rituals or cultural faith and to truly enter a full-life relationship with God, marked by dependence and submission to his will.

Father, help me to move beyond "religion" and to open myself to fully living with you. Lead me, guide me, and mold me in your image according to your good and perfect will. In Jesus, Amen.

FALSE TEACHERS

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” —Matthew 7:15

Jesus warns about false prophets and teachers who come to us with twisted ideas about belief in God and how to live our lives. These people might use the right religious language or seem to be great leaders. But the truth, Jesus says, is that they are like wolves who will wreak havoc within a sheepfold (the church) if they are allowed to go unchecked.

When we read through the New Testament, we see that the bar is really high for pastors and teachers in the church, because they have a huge responsibility. And the church is right to set safeguards to keep bad leaders away. When leaders mess up and teach something false, they are likely to take other people down with them. So anyone in leadership—pastors, teachers, mentors, elders—should be humbled by this warning. They must make

sure that their teaching and actions line up with God’s will.

Jesus warns that you can’t trust a false teacher or leader, and he points out that you can recognize them by their fruit (actions). If a leader is unfaithful to their spouse, if they are selfish with money, if they play favorites in the community on the basis of wealth or status or acting like bigshots, if they never apologize or acknowledge their own sin, they are dangerous to the community. And they must be dealt with accordingly.

Father, help your church to discern when leaders need to be challenged or even removed. Help me to set a positive example, and to live in a way that lines up with your teachings. Amen.

NOT EVERYONE

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. . . .”
—Matthew 7:21

Out of the entire Sermon on the Mount, this might be the most challenging of Jesus’ teachings.

The wide gate and the broad road are full of people who have rejected God and have gone their own way (Matthew 6:13). But there are also people on that road who think they are right with the Lord—people who, from the outside, appear to be doing all the right things. But it can turn out that they’ve actually been far from Christ all along.

The most important thing about us isn’t how many times we have gone to church. It’s not how much money we have given or how often we have volunteered. We’re not saved because we avoid R-rated movies or do not steal.

Instead, the most important thing is knowing, and being known by, Jesus. This means

losing our lives in him and putting our agenda aside so that we can honestly say, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). People who try to follow Jesus from a distance risk his rejection because he demands our whole hearts and our whole selves.

If that doesn’t make you a little nervous, it should. Jesus is calling everyone, both in and outside of the church, to do some self-examination: Is my faith genuine? Am I on the right path? Do I really know him? And does he really know me?

Father, I place my whole life in your hands. Help me to know you, and to be known by you. Show me where I may be holding back, and help me to serve you wholeheartedly in all I do. Amen.

TWO BUILDERS

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

—Matthew 7:24

The Sermon on the Mount takes place near the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel. People who were building homes in that area would have been tempted to build on the sand, which was firm and stable during the dry months of the year.

However, during the rainy season, there would be storms and flash flooding, and houses that were built on sand could easily get ruined and washed away.

By contrast, a wise builder would dig about ten feet below the sand to find the solid basalt rock underneath. That provided a much firmer foundation. You can imagine how much work that would be in those days, without any power tools or excavators. But the hard work proved worthwhile whenever storms came.

Jesus wants us to have a secure foundation to base our lives on—and that means doing some hard work to put his teachings into practice. It's not enough just to listen to Jesus' teaching as we go through life. Jesus calls us to be followers; he urges us to be not just hearers but "doers" of the Word. Obeying his will helps us to avoid unnecessary storms of our own making. But even when we face tough times in life, we can trust that we will have what we need in the sure hope of God's love for us.

Lord, help me to do the work of putting your teachings into practice so that my life is built on the strong foundation of a sure relationship with you. Amen.

JESUS' AUTHORITY

[Jesus] taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.
—Matthew 7:29

We started this month thinking about the crowd gathered around Jesus. Believers and skeptics alike listened to Jesus' great teachings. And in response they recognized that he had authority and did not teach like the religious leaders of that day.

Jesus is one with the Father, and his teachings reflect the will and desire of God himself. His authority doesn't come from his rhetorical skills or his fascinating stories. It comes from the divine presence of God, working in and through him as he points his listeners to the road of faith and full life.

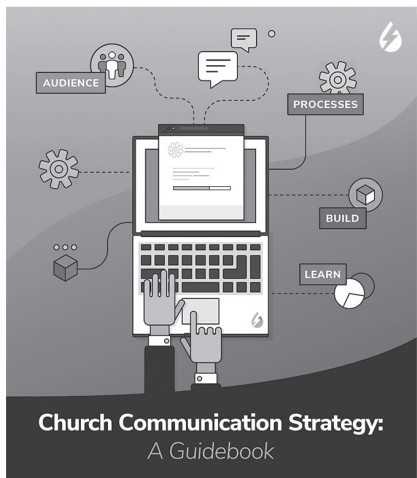
I hope that you have heard a voice of authority speaking into your life this month. You may still have questions or doubts about what it means to follow Jesus. And you may struggle with the work that you sense God is calling you to do

after reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount (I certainly do). But at the very least, you can recognize that you have heard the voice of God himself in this sermon from the Savior.

God invites you to know him, and to be known by him. He also invites you to take your next steps in following Jesus, trusting that he will lead you and guide you in his perfect love for you. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Lord, help me to recognize you as the One who has authority over my life. Give me the courage to submit to your will and to do the work you are calling me to do. Amen.

Energize your church communications with **CHURCH JUICE**



Get our free ebook "Church Communication Strategy: A Guidebook" when you subscribe.

Sign up at ChurchJuice.com/StrategyGuidebook.



RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED
PORT DE RETOUR GARANTI

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

3475 Mainway
Burlington, ON L7M 1A9
P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8
905-336-2920
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional

Periodicals postage paid at
Grand Rapids, Mich., and at
additional mailing offices.

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ReFrame
Ministries

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

1700 28th Street SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407
800-626-3060
info@todaydevotional.com
www.todaydevotional.com
facebook.com/todaydevotional
