

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Over the years, I've found my life changing and my faith deepening as I met with our heavenly Father in His word. This has been especially true as I've been writing these devotionals and having to live what I write.

I long for you to be able to say the same as you read through Matthew's perspective of Jesus as he wrote in his Gospel.

As I've gotten to know Matthew, I'm overwhelmed by how he was changed by knowing and walking with his Lord and how much he must have longed for us to know Him as he did.

These first seven chapters of Matthew lay a foundation of Jesus coming to earth and beginning His ministry through Matthew's eyes. Please take your time working through each section and ask the Father how He wants you to respond to what you're seeing and learning.

Blessings on your time as we take this walk with the Father,

Margie Martin



Israel in Jesus' Time

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Matthew 1:1-17

"... the father of..."

If ever a father's importance is highlighted in the Bible, it is in these first few verses of the New Testament. Every man in this genealogy is known by his father. Fathers and sons are closely connected, whether their relationship is positive or unhealthy. When God wanted to reveal His Father's heart, He came to Abraham and promised him a son, but first God had to make Abraham into the father Isaac needed. Did you notice that I said Abraham had to become the father Isaac needed—not what he may have wanted? I wonder if this is true in all of these relationships. I bet it is, and I bet it is true in our lives. Our heavenly Father knows what we need from our earthly fathers so we can know Him as He wants to be known.

Are you a father or a father in the making? You have a whole history of men to learn from, but remember that the first Father has His own goal in mind for you.

Perhaps you are a mother or a mother in the making. We have four women we can learn from in these verses: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary. Our heavenly Father fashioned them into the women He wanted them to be so they could be examples of mothers for us.

Maybe you've been running away from being a father or mother because of pain in your own childhood. Or maybe you've been trying to be a parent on your own without looking to God for your parenting standards and skills. You may be thinking that you can operate on your own without His perspective or help, that He doesn't care about you, or that He isn't powerful enough to bring good out of your situation. If this is your thinking, let's look at the last sentence in this section:

- *14 generations from Abraham to David*
- *14 generations from David to the exile*
- *14 generations from the exile to Jesus being born*

Could this exact number of generations between these major events be a coincidence? If so, it's a miracle, not a coincidence. More than likely God knew what He was doing, He had a plan, and He executed it so well that Jesus came at the perfect time:

"But when the fullness of the time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law," Galatians 4:4

I'm sure that any father or son (or mother or daughter) living in the 41 generations before Christ could have thought that God wasn't in control and didn't care. But the 42nd generation made all the difference because God sent His own Son to fulfill all of His promises and bring hope to the hopeless.

More than likely we're living in such an in-between time. Maybe we need to have patience and wait with God for Him to act, because when He does, it'll be worth the wait. Let's trust the Father who knows what He's doing.

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Matthew 1:18-25

"Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man . . ."

Of all the couples God could have chosen to give His Son a home to grow up in, He chose Joseph and Mary. So why were they so appealing to God? Commentators tell us that since Joseph came from David's heritage, Matthew is giving us Jesus' pedigree that proves His right to be king. A good king is one who has the big picture of what's going on in his kingdom and accepts the responsibility of caring for those under his protection.

Surely Joseph is this kind of man with his family. We're told that he's a righteous man; he knows God's standards and lives them. He cares for Mary's well being and reputation before he even knows what's going on behind the scenes, so unusual in a society that didn't treat women well. When the angel of the Lord came to him in a dream, Joseph doesn't argue or rationalize; he "did what the angel of the Lord told him to do." Joseph doesn't go to all his friends and family, asking them what they think he should do. Because God has told him exactly what's happening, Joseph doesn't need others' input. Joseph accepts the role God has given him and carries it out in all its details—from naming the child per the angel's instructions to keeping Mary safe and protected even after the child is born.

And Mary let Joseph do his job. She didn't try to take over or pull the "mother-of-God's-Son" card. She trusted her husband and let him care for and protect her. We'll learn more about Mary in Luke's account of this story, but for now we see her accepting, appreciating, and trusting her husband's love for God and for her.

This couple is a picture of God's view of marriage and how to live as men and women who love and follow Him. God chose the right man to raise His Son the way He wants all children to be raised. How we actually live often falls far short of this standard, but this is why God sent His Son—to give us the opportunity to start over with Him and do it His way. "And they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us."

When you read about Joseph or Mary, do you see yourself in either one of them, or do you see how far short you've fallen from the standard they set? Our confident hope (not the *maybe* hope of the world) is that Jesus is "God with us." We can always stop the direction we're going in, turn around, and walk in God's direction. James tells us that when we come near to God, He will draw near to us. (James 4:8)

Is the nearness of God your hope and confidence today as He was for Joseph and Mary?

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Matthew 2:1-12

"When King Herod heard [that the king of the Jews was born] he was disturbed . . . When [the Magi] saw the star, they were overjoyed . . . and they bowed down and worshipped him."

A good friend from years ago, Marti Carlson, taught me to always look for contrasts in the scriptures because then I could see which direction I wanted to choose to walk in. Today's section offers a powerful contrast to the news of the Messiah, the Savior and King, being born.

1. Herod is *disturbed* and, as we'll see tomorrow, so angry that he wants to kill the child and possibly the messengers (the Magi).
2. Chief Priests and teachers of the law are either disturbed like Herod ("and all Jerusalem with him") or *blasé*, thinking that this couldn't possibly be the time, that God's promises wouldn't affect them, and that life would always be the same.
3. Magi were probably astronomers from Babylon who were in the line of men influenced by Daniel and his friends 14 generations before. They had traveled a long way and spent a lot of money to find the one promised in the stars. Their response was *joy, humility, and worship*. They left their gifts, treasures, and wealth that were due to a king and that would support the family during the travels God knew they were going to have to take. The inclusion of these men from the East, *worshipping* Jesus while He was with His mother, show that from early on God wanted His Son to be known by *all* men and women.

For me Christmas is about a month away, and I've been thinking about when to decorate the house, what to write in our Christmas letter, and which Christmas movies to watch. But as I'm writing, I realized that what I really need to be thinking about is which of these three examples I want to follow.

Regardless of when during the year you read these words, the choice is still the same: do you want to be disturbed, angry, or blasé, or do you want to experience joy and humility so you can worship our Lord through your words, actions, and how you spend the resources God has allowed you to have?

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Matthew 2:13-18

"So [Joseph] got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt."

How many times have you moved in your life? The most mobile I've been was when I moved from Iowa to California right after grad school and put everything I owned in my car, but even that trip took weeks of planning. Joseph, after hearing of Herod's threat through the angel, moved his new family in the middle of the night. Would you, could you, move that fast? As a wife, I may have wanted to have my say in the matter, but Mary trusted her husband because he was a righteous man, and she knew he listened to God.

Commentators tell us that the Greek translation for the English word *child* means a toddler, so we see that Joseph and Mary stayed in Bethlehem for a couple of years after Jesus was born. I've often wondered why they stayed. Was it because the census took that long to complete, because they liked Bethlehem and wanted to start their new life there rather than return to Nazareth and have to live with all the gossip, or because God hadn't told them to leave?

Whatever the reason, they had made their home in Bethlehem. Joseph probably set up his carpentry business, and they were making friends in this little town. How convenient that they were there so the Magi could find them as the scriptures had promised. The Magi came, worshipped the King, left their gifts, and went home another way after being warned in a dream.

Herod was furious when he realized the Magi had outwitted him and so ordered that all boys under the age of two be killed. How amazing that Joseph took his family out of danger just in time. The nation mourned over the loss of these children, and I think this great mourning mirrored the grief in God's heart over what sin does in a human heart. All of Jesus' playmates were dead, Mary's friends were grieving, and Joseph's friends could do nothing to avenge the death of their sons. What a perfect time for a Savior to be born.

Are you in the middle of a time of grief or emotional pain? Then what a perfect time for our Savior to come into your circumstances to grieve with you and give you His hope.

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Matthew 2:19-23

"So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets . . ."

Over the weekend I worked with a friend on completing the framework of a puzzle. I was amazed to watch the seemingly unrelated pieces fit together to produce structure and beauty. Perhaps you're seeing pieces of a puzzle in your life today; most pieces are probably unconnected and spread out in front of you; some may be connected to each other but aren't fitting into the puzzle itself. This last description fits me today, and I'm longing to see how awkwardly shaped pieces can be part of the final beauty. What's calming my heart as I write is that the puzzle of my life will be finished when the Father is ready for it to be done; meanwhile, I'm to be trusting that His plan is perfect and is for my good.

So how does my rambling fit into today's section in Matthew? When we think of the prophecies of the Messiah's coming, they seem like puzzle pieces: born in Bethlehem, a virgin birth, called a Nazarene, called out of Egypt, weeping and great mourning in Ramah. How could all these pieces fit together and make sense? God. Only He could complete the puzzle.

But what is our part in our stories? Like Joseph and Mary, we're to be quick to hear and even quicker to follow His direction, regardless of where this direction may seem to take us. Commentators tell us that Joseph and Mary were probably glad to leave Nazareth for the census because of the gossips who were making life hard for this couple. But when God had them return from Egypt with Jesus as a toddler, where did He have them settle? You're right, Nazareth. In Luke 2:52, after Jesus went to the Passover in Jerusalem at age 12, Luke tells us that Jesus "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52) The townspeople had changed their minds about Jesus and His parents and now accepted them as friends. Joseph and Mary had followed God's lead, and friendships were healed and gossip silenced.

Today is early January 2011 for me, and I honestly can't say *Happy New Year* because of some circumstances in Barney's and my life. The day is overcast and cold, matching my emotions and outlook perfectly.

But by faith I can say that God is on His throne and in control; Jesus is with us as we walk through job and family challenges; and the Spirit is in us as our strength to choose righteousness, faith, and courage.

What does your life look like and feel like today? If you're like me, choosing to walk by faith and not by sight is becoming more and more important. While we'd like to see the final puzzle picture, He's asking us to trust Him as He puts the pieces together. What will you do?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 3:1-12

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

When we think of someone needing to repent, isn't it usually someone who hasn't chosen to walk with the Lord yet or someone who has obviously given him- or herself to sin? But when John spoke these words, he was speaking to men and women who went to the Temple every week and who were waiting to hear from God. Though they heard God's words weekly from the priests, they wanted to hear from God Himself. When John spoke, fulfilling the prophesy in Isaiah, they knew what they needed to do: repent—because God is near.

Does this word repent mean anything to you? Here's what John was telling them:

- Make straight paths for Him—get rid of the twists and turns of rationalizing, blaming, and excusing.
- Confess your sins—own up to what doesn't agree with what God says.
- Produce fruit in keeping with repentance—choose actions and attitudes that agree with what you say you believe.

So, the word *repent*, or go in the opposite direction, isn't meant just for *them*; it's also meant for you and for me. Do you have some crooked paths, hidden sin, or sketchy actions that you're letting hang around? Then let's repent together and live in the kingdom of heaven with Jesus.

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Matthew 3:13-17

"Then John consented."

All of his life, John's mother (Elizabeth, who was Mary's cousin) and father had been telling him about Jesus. John knew that his God-given job of baptizing was to get the people ready for Jesus to come on the scene. John's earlier years prepared him for this moment. He knew what he was to do: point the way to his cousin. While Jesus' brothers didn't accept who He was (John 7), John did, and he was ready. But when the time came, he hesitated; what a human response. Jesus had to tell him to proceed. The question I'd like to explore, though, is, why should the One who is righteousness have to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness?

First, we need to know why baptism was a big deal to the Jewish people. Baptism was what Gentiles did when they wanted to align themselves with the Hebrew nation. The word comes from the idea of dipping a piece of cloth into something (think of blood or ink) so that it is forever changed, even though it is still a piece of cloth. Baptism in John's time was a public event so that everyone knew that this Gentile was turning his back on his heritage and background and embracing a new way of life and a new community in which to live.

However, the baptism John did was for *Jewish* men and women who so wanted what John preached—the Lord bringing the kingdom of heaven—that they were willing to turn their backs on their heritage and what they had known so they could embrace the Messiah. Such radical thinking.

While Jesus wasn't ready for John to bring Him to the attention of the people, I think He wanted to show them that He was embracing this new life and way of living rather than aligning Himself with the traditions that they had known. And John consented.

As Jesus came out of the water, a *miracle* happened. The Spirit of God, looking like a dove, came down and sat on Jesus' shoulder ("descended on him"), and the Father told all of them who Jesus was: His Son whom He loved and was well pleased with. (Luke 3:22) The Trinity was at work for their sake and ours.

So why today's verse, "*Then John consented*"? Because it's all too easy to *know* what God wants because we know scripture and have walked with Him for a while, just like John had. But then the Father tells us to go in another direction that seems preposterous. What do we do? Depend on our own thinking, or humble ourselves and give ourselves to what Jesus wants? The results of going His way can be miraculous for us too.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit . . . "

Did you notice the progression in these temptations?

Satan's Thoughts

"Hmm, 40 days, he's hungry."

"I can use scripture too."

"I can give you the future you've been promised without the pain and work."

Jesus' Words

"Our real food comes from the mouth of God."

"Don't misuse God's words."

"Elevating yourself was your downfall; worship and serve God only. Get out of here, Satan!"

I've often wondered why Jesus had to go through this experience of being tempted by Satan in the wilderness and whether it was for His benefit or ours. Today, however, I'm beginning to wonder if it might also be for Satan's benefit, so he'd know what he was really up against. Jesus in the flesh was a new experience for everyone, and I wonder if Satan thought that the flesh body of Jesus might have more control over Him when He was hungry and had been alone for so long.

Jesus passed the test with flying colors but was weak enough that the angels came to *attend* Him, to take care of His physical needs. Spiritual warfare is exhausting.

Are you tempted to give up and give in? It's easy to get to that point. Jesus' reminders have strengthened me today, and I'm ready to continue. You too?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 4:12-17

"In the area of Zebulum and Naphtali . . . to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah."

Interesting timeline:

Jesus in the wilderness → Satan dismissed → angels attend → John put in prison → Jesus travels north to Galilee and probably visits His family in Nazareth → Jesus goes to live in Capernaum by the lake (Sea of Galilee) in the area of Zebulum and Naphtali

We'll see more of John the Baptist in prison in Matthew 11 and in the other Gospels, but for now we find that he's been taken out of the picture because his job of making the way for Jesus was done. For now, this imprisonment seems to be the impetus for Jesus to become more public.

But what about Zebulum and Naphtali? Why did Matthew quote Isaiah about these two tribes? His readers probably understood this reference, but we don't. Here's what Isaiah wrote before the verses recorded in Matthew:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulum and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan.
Isaiah 9:1

In Genesis 49 when Jacob blesses his sons, Zebulun and Naphtali are the two gentle ones, the ones probably needing protection from their stronger brothers:

Zebulum will live by the seashore and become a haven for ships; his border will extend toward Sidon. Naphtali is a doe set free; he says beautiful words.

The note in my Bible says that those lands were devastated and the people deported by the Gentile Assyrian armies (2 Kings 15:29). Therefore, Isaiah offers a word of hope for those parts of his nation that had been most affected by war.

So as Jesus began preaching, He started with those who had been devastated, demeaned, walked over, forgotten, and unprotected. To those who had been living this way for so long, He says in so many words:

Stop living this way because what you've been hoping for is near.
Now you can live in a way that reflects the kingdom of heaven.

Is Jesus speaking to you today as He was to those in Galilee? Even if we've been following Him for a while, we can all too easily think, speak, and act as though He hasn't even come yet. The choice is ours, every day. Will you stay thinking of what's been, or will you live a kingdom life?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 4:18-22

"As Jesus was walking . . ."

In seven sentences we see Jesus calling His first four disciples who seem to leave their families behind to fend for themselves. I've often wondered how this decision could happen so quickly and what these family members must have felt as their loved ones left to walk with Jesus. I'm a pretty decisive person, but I know I couldn't have made such an important decision as quickly as Matthew seems to indicate.

My Bible references the other Gospel accounts of this event. While Mark doesn't give us any more information, Luke and John tell us what had happened that led to these conversations, the *rest of the story*, that Matthew probably assumed his readers knew about:

- Jesus had driven out an evil spirit of a man possessed in front of everyone in the synagogue on the Sabbath and then commanded him not to reveal Jesus' identity—and the evil spirit obeyed.
- People were amazed at Jesus' teaching because He spoke with authority.
- Simon (Peter) had asked Jesus to come to his home to heal his mother-in-law who had a high fever. When Jesus rebuked the fever, it left, and she got up and began serving them.
- Word had gotten out about the healing so that people from all over brought family members and friends with all kinds of illnesses to Jesus, and He healed them. Many demons had been forced to leave their hosts, and Jesus wouldn't let them say who He was.
- Jesus had proven to Simon (Peter) that He could catch a load of fish even when the fish weren't biting. Simon put it all together and realized who Jesus was. James and John were Simon's partners and saw all of this happen.
- Andrew (Simon's brother) had been one of John the Baptist's disciples and so had heard John speak of Jesus and probably saw John baptize Jesus. Andrew knew the Messiah was coming. Seems like Andrew spent a day with Jesus after the baptism. When John was arrested, Andrew probably went home to the family business. Andrew must have told his brother (Simon), business partners (James and John), and hometown friend (Philip) about Jesus.

And so, *as Jesus was walking*, He called His first disciples.

What is your story of how you met Jesus? I bet good friends are involved. Are these conversations about Jesus continuing to happen in your life today? Has Jesus made such an impact that you can't help but talk about Him?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 4:23-25

"teaching . . . preaching . . . healing"

Part of a job I had recently included discussions with ministry leaders about time management. I always used Jesus as our example because He did so much but was never in a hurry. He knew His priorities and kept to them and balanced his three activities of teaching, preaching, healing. I'm even more impressed by how He handled the gift (responsibility?) of time. How did He know where to go and when? When He got there, how did He know whether to teach, preach, or heal? Right, He walked with His Father, who isn't limited by time or space, and heard what He was to do.

So early in His ministry Jesus traveled all over Galilee, which is northern Israel. (Do you have access to a map of the Holy Land during Jesus' time? It helps!) News of His travels northeast crossed into Syria (a Gentile area), and people brought their friends to Him to be healed. Large crowds from all over began to follow Him. He taught, preached, and healed. But why are these three activities important?

- He taught -- affects how we think (our mind)
- He preached -- reveals what God is doing and how we can be involved (soul)
- He healed -- proves that He knows about our hurts and is powerful enough to do something about it (body)

No wonder the crowds followed Him. How His heart must have gone out to them as they came to be healed. But all too often we want the temporary healing of the here and now and don't realize how much our hearts, minds, and souls need to be healed.

Yesterday morning I knew I was *off* but tried to ignore dealing with what was going on. As my slow computer was coming online, I read a devotional that talked about self-pity—right where I was. I may not care that much about my deeper needs, but Jesus does, and starting with our next section, He's going to start telling us what He wanted the crowds to know.

Where are you today with Jesus? Do you just want the external parts of your life to be okay while ignoring what's inside like I did yesterday? Let's see how the good news of the kingdom is influencing us today and be healed from the inside out. Want to join me?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:1-12

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled."

Yesterday was a real shock for me. A job that God brought me to seven years ago and that has opened up worlds to me suddenly is gone by another's decision and not my own. Every time I try to think about what happened or begin to talk about it, all I can hear myself thinking is "*Sour grapes, Margie.*" Has this type of situation ever happened to you? Probably. All I've been able to say or think without sinning is that God is still on His throne. But I've known I needed more thoughts to be going through my mind and so came to today with longing in my heart to hear from our Father.

One description of my feelings that I had yesterday was that they were like a foster mom who had seen the birth and growth of her beloved foster child, and then after seven years, the child was ripped from her arms by the state officials who say, "It's not personal; it's business." It may be business for them but not for the foster mom or for the child. Maybe another foster parent will come along to care for the child, but this new parent won't know the beginnings, the first steps, the excitement of childhood, the history. And the first foster mom's arms are empty; she'll never hear her child's voice again.

So, I read Jesus' words today that if I hunger and thirst for righteousness, I will be filled again—and my words won't be *sour grapes*.

Even though all of the stages of grief are warring for control and my heart is broken, I'm going to choose hunger and thirst for righteousness by choosing to end my sentences with Him and looking forward to how He will fill me.

How do you need to be blessed today? Do you need:

- A place that is safe and pure, or do you need to be comforted in your place of need?
- To know that what is waiting for you is so much more than what you could have now?
- To be shown mercy?
- To see God for who he really is?
- To know your relationship to God is as a beloved son or daughter?
- To know that staying the course will head you in the direction you want to go?
- To know that God is worth whatever comes your way?

Then let's *be* what the Father wants for us.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:13-16

Salt without its saltiness, and a light under a bowl?

More and more TV shows, as well as the news, show us man's inhumanity to man and the baseness of our humanity. I live in a fairly affluent area north of Atlanta, and all around metro-Atlanta are many large and dynamic churches. But where God is working, Satan is close by. Atlanta is also an epicenter of drug distribution and child trafficking on the East Coast. Added to these horrors are daily shootings and family abuse.

When I read today's passage, I wondered about my own saltiness; I may be flavoring the lives of some, but am I preserving life in those who don't even know what real life looks like? My confidence is that I know it's not *me* who affects others but rather God who works through me, especially when I'm not even aware of it.

For the last seven years I've worked in a ministry that served other ministries, so I was always around Christians. I've often been in these environments over the years even though I've loved working in non-Christian companies since my faith and walk could more easily reflect the God of the universe. It's a lot harder to live as a Christian in a Christian world; the flesh creeps in so easily.

It's been a week since I've heard that God is radically changing my work world. I'm beginning to see possibilities of what He might have in mind, and I'm excited, even though my husband tells me it'll take a year to work through the painful events of last week.

How about you? *Is your saltiness still fresh so that it benefits others?* You know, salt by itself isn't worth much; it needs to interact with what it affects.

How is your light shining? Is it dimmed by fear or blahness, or is it doing its job of keeping you and others walking on the road instead of falling off the path?

The promise Jesus gives us is that as we walk with Him, we'll do good deeds for the right reasons and others will praise our Father in heaven. What could be better than having those who need salt and light be praising God for what you and I do and how we do it? What significance!

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:17-20

"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law . . ."

So, Jesus has been saying that when we are salt and light right where we are, God can be seen and praised for who He is. Then He starts talking about the Law and the Prophets and that our righteousness can surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

How can that be? How can the righteousness (or right living coming from right *thinking* and right *being*) of an everyday believer be greater than professional religious leaders and teachers? Is it really possible?

One observation to consider is that when Jesus talks about the law and the Prophets, He isn't referring to the hundreds of laws the religious leadership had heaped upon the backs of people. Jesus takes His hearers—and us—back to the truth of God's heart for how we're to live, which includes the topics that we'll be looking at over the next few days.

Another observation is that we tend to inflate the value of being a Christian leader, working at a church or in a ministry, or going overseas to serve Christ. These activities, or responsibilities, aren't more *spiritual* than working in an office or raising children. In fact, I've found that it's harder to live as a follower of Christ in Christian environments because it's way too easy to put on our good face rather than deal with attitudes or decisions that come from unredeemed choices. But in the office or on the soccer field, who we are in Christ can be seen in sharp contrast to those who take credit for what others have done, waste time instead of working, or treat people without respect. The best business practices are biblical at their core, not a waste of time.

When working *in the world*, I've been able to rub shoulders with highly intelligent and resourceful people and have had to learn how to work hard and pick up new skills.

The biggest challenge I've faced while working in church or ministry environments is to let others see the work God is doing in my life through and during hard times. It's so easy to put on my all-is-well mask or talk about what happened last month instead of letting others see the process of God being in charge.

Do you ever find yourself thinking that those who work in ministry are more spiritual, loved by God more, or are serving Him better? Or do you think that God has one set of standards for the professional religious people and a lower set of expectations for the rest of us? Then today's truth is for you as it has been for me. Our decisions in the small areas that no one else may ever see can have powerful results.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:21-26

"... anyone who is angry ... your brother has something against you ... your adversary"

A few years ago, I was able to take a series of classes to learn coaching skills, and my world was turned upside down. While I had read today's verses many times, it was when I was confronted with the coaching principle of seeing others as absolutely wonderful that I had to own up to my natural tendency of being critical of others and "dismissing" them or thinking that they needed my "help." Ouch.

As I processed the coaching standard against my own way of living, I saw that while I may not physically murder someone, I had failed to live up to this higher standard, which is what Jesus is establishing in this section. Since that initial look at what should be and what is, I've continually checked how I think about others, so I don't go down that judgmental road. You may even find that you have to check your thinking about how you view yourself.

Have you noticed how proactive Jesus wants us to be in our relationships within His family and with those not yet in the faith? He deals with us, not those who bug us.

1st paragraph – Do you let anger toward someone close to you (a *brother*) make its home in your heart and thinking? Eventually such anger clouds our thinking so we can't see life from God's perspective, and our perspective always gets us into trouble. Jesus says that when we set ourselves up as *the* standard of living and thinking, we're in danger of the fires of hell.

2nd paragraph – How easy it is to only see circumstances from our perspective. But what if we were to view a conflict or disagreement from the other person's point of view; what would we see then? Jesus tells us that our acts of worship mean nothing if we allow unresolved conflicts to exist. He says we're to humble ourselves and then go and be reconciled to our brother (or sister). Then we can worship freely.

3rd paragraph – Has a disagreement taken you to court? Jesus says we're to work out the conflict before we get there because we may not like the results. Perhaps a mediator could help before we get to that point.

What strikes me in all three instances is that adults aren't acting like adults. Humility isn't evident. Care for others is missing. And Jesus says the answer starts with us, not someone else.

Have some relationships come to mind as we've been hearing Jesus' words? Some have for me. Our enemy wants barriers to divide us, and I know you don't want him to win either. Let's do what we can to heal the splits because it's then that Jesus can be seen for who He is in this world that desperately needs Him.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:27-30

"But I tell you that anyone who looks at [another] lustfully has already committed adultery with her [him] in his heart."

Isn't it amazing how we easily think, "As long as I don't do _____ (fill in the blank), I can do anything else up to that point." But Jesus tells us that how we *look* at another person and then *think* about that person is absolutely critical.

I got married as I was turning 40. This meant that for the previous 25 years, I first looked at every man to first see if he was single, and then I decided whether or not I was interested in him (just from a look). If married, engaged, etc., he was safe for me to have as a friend; otherwise, he was fair game. And with the influence of movies, TV shows, and the internet, the pressure was intense to see a man in marital terms.

Then I got married, and any relationship with a man beyond friendship was off the table because I wanted it to be. But I found it hard to change my *habit* of how I looked at a man, unless I stayed intentional in my thinking.

Early on I decided that I was going to be a one-man woman and not even let my mind begin to go in the wrong direction. I chose to talk fondly about my husband to others so I could hear myself and so others would know my thinking. Whenever a different thought began to form in my mind, I replaced it with thoughts of my husband and why I loved him. This choice has become my hedge of protection in a sexual world for the last 20-some years. Other men are potential friends and brothers in the Lord.

From Jesus' viewpoint, I'm realizing that my before-marriage thinking was all wrong because I viewed men as a potential way to meet my needs. I wish that I would have looked to the Lord more and treated men with more respect as individuals.

So that's a lot about me; how do you look at others? In Jesus' day, I've read that most men and women were married so singleness wasn't an issue, but the same principles still apply. Men treated women as possessions rather than as equals, and women saw men as a way to meet their needs because it was so hard to support themselves.

If you've gone beyond looking at and thinking about others based on Jesus' standards, please heed His warnings and stop. Today. Now. Turn back to where you were before this all started and keep looking in another direction. So much is at stake. Are you turning?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:31-32

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife . . . causes her to become an adultress."

Have you ever stumbled over these words from Jesus? I bet you have if you were divorced before you came to know Him. So let's put His words into context and look at the big picture.

Jesus is talking to Jewish people who had a history of knowing God and what He wanted—2000 years in fact. They knew that marriage was God's idea and was extremely important to Him. But in their humanity their leaders had created workarounds to God's commandments found in Genesis 2 (1 man + 1 woman = 1 flesh forever), and they bought into the lie because it made life easier for them.

Also, in Jesus' day and in Israel's history, women were dependent on the men around them, and the men were held responsible for taking care of them. So, if a husband decided he didn't want to provide for and protect his wife, she was in a pickle, especially if her father had already died and her brothers already had their own families. Israel didn't have a middle class, so every woman provided for her family's food and clothing needs instead of going to the store and purchasing what she needed from others. This left-behind "wife" is forced into supporting herself in any way she can. A single man (or new widower) may marry her, but more than likely she's like damaged goods. The leaving husband is free to go on his merry way without consequences—so he thinks.

Because of the other passages in the New Testament about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, we know that the husband in a marriage is to be a picture to his world of God's love and commitment to us. Today we have Jesus' words to men to man-up and be who God created them to be so those outside the faith can see a true picture of God. Our sexual lives are to reflect the intimate and safe love relationship we have with the Father, but if we aren't taking this relationship seriously and keeping our sex lives holy and of a quality that reflects Him, we're no better than those who don't know Him.

Have you ever noticed in the apostles' letters that when believers are growing in their faith, sexuality isn't an issue? It's as though one of the first issues we have to settle as believers is who's in charge of our sex lives—whether we're single or married.

Wherever you are in this area of sexuality, the principle is the same: take God's instructions seriously, and don't allow any workarounds because so much is at stake. Any changes you need to start making?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:33-37

"But I tell you, do not swear at all . . ."

Have you ever heard someone say, "I swear by all that is holy that I will . . ." or "I swear on my mother's grave that . . ."? Why do we feel that we have to add something to what we say to make our statements credible? Is it because we're so used to not living up to what we say we'll do?

A TV show that was popular when I was young (and when we only had three stations available to watch) was *Have Gun Will Travel*, which is on Retro TV these days. Paladin, the main character, was a man of his word, and those around him could take his words to the bank. He was a man worthy of trust.

Jesus is also a man of His word, but it is so easy not to trust Him. We hear His words but don't take them seriously, so we change plans because something else comes up that seems to be more fun or exciting. We promise to stop eating chocolate or look at a co-worker (or neighbor) with improper thoughts. We demand a contract rather than accept a handshake. Second and third marriages are the norm. Divorce rates are skyrocketing, even among Christians. We don't think about how our actions could affect others.

So, Jesus sets a new and higher standard for us. He tells us to have our *yes* or *no* be words that can be counted on. This means that when I say *yes* to something, I need to write it down on my calendar or to-do list and then actually do it. I need to remember my marriage vows.

But my reality, and probably yours, is that all too often I don't remember what I've said, or I make promises just to make me look good. Do those in our families know that our *yes* or *no* can be depended on? Do I take my words seriously or just talk a lot?

Easter is just a few days away for me, and as I was signing Easter cards for my grandchildren, I was remembering that Jesus IS alive and He's living in me (and you) through the Spirit. The whole power of the resurrection is available to us every moment to live as Jesus tells us to live. It's not impossible.

If this sounds far-fetched to you, I suggest you start small. Keep a notebook or 3x5 card and pen or pencil with you and jot down what you agree to during the day, determine when to accomplish what you've agreed to do, and then do it. Stop promising what you would like to do but know you never will; be honest with yourself and others. Depend on Jesus' life in you to live what you say. Let's be people others can count on so they can begin to see that they can depend on God.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:38-42

"But I tell you, do not resist an evil person."

This passage has always confused me because I haven't been sure what Jesus is getting at . . . so here goes.

"Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" is mentioned three times in the law.

First reference is in Exodus 21:24 as part of a long list of laws given to the Israelites. The notes in my Bible state that these laws elevate the value of those who were typically oppressed: aliens, mistreated slaves, the poor, and those who had lost animals. We know that God's people hadn't been used to living as a nation because they had been slaves themselves in Egypt. So, as they were emerging as their own nation, God wanted them to reflect Him rather than the pagan nations around them.

Second reference is in Leviticus 24:20. The note in my Bible says that the law's original intent "was to set a standard for punishment in court. It limited vengeance and made certain that both rich and poor, native and foreigners, would pay the same price for their crimes." Now we know where Lady Justice got her blindfold.

Third reference in Deuteronomy 19:21 indicates that they were to take evil seriously and deal with it as a nation so they would be an example to those around them.

So back to today's section and wanting to figure out what Jesus is trying to tell them—and us. The note in the second reference mentions that in Jesus' day the people were taking the Old Testament commands literally (ouch!); they were standing up for themselves and fighting back.

I think this *fighting back* attitude is what Jesus is talking about. Instead of resisting an evil person, He wants us to have a bigger picture of letting them see the love and grace of God and be wooed into the kingdom of God by our behavior. This attitude doesn't mean that we're doormats or wimps—Jesus certainly wasn't—but that we're trusting God for the outcome of the conflict.

Why would Jesus ask us to respond this way? Well, when someone demands something, they're probably expecting a fight, or at least resistance; they're ready for a battle. But if they get love and grace and kindness in response, the wind goes out of their sails, and they're flustered. Because we're different, they get to see God at work. Heaven touches earth.

Are you fighting back in some areas? I am. As I write I know I should stop—but it's so hard. The other person may not even be all that bad or even wrong; he (she) is just on the other side of the issue. I guess the real question is, do I want to be right, or do I want God's kingdom to grow and prosper?

What's at stake for you today?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 5:43:48

"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons [and daughters] of your Father in heaven."

So, what's the difference between a neighbor and an enemy? Often neighbors turn into enemies when there's just a difference of opinion. This distinction must have been what was common in Jesus' day. God's people felt they had a right to just be nice to their friends. But the Old Testament reference that the editor of my Bible has for *love your neighbor* is from Leviticus 19:18:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

How did they go from *not bearing a grudge* to *loving your neighbor as yourself*? I'm not sure where *hate your enemy* comes from. This thinking shows how they had allowed rationalizing and their fallen natures to take over.

But Jesus wants us to live as sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. If God doesn't show partiality when He has the sun rise on everyone every morning, when He has the rain come to grow crops for us to harvest for food, or to provide our drinking water, why should we? If we're only nice to those we like or are drawn to, then we're no better than those who don't know God. Is God really our Father? Since children tend to imitate their fathers, are you imitating your heavenly Father?

I think the best way to live is to see every person as a potential child of God and so as a potential brother or sister in the faith. When Jesus says we're to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, it means we're to quickly call sin *sin* and choose to live lives that reflect Him. We won't show partiality, overlook someone, or elevate others because He doesn't.

Who are you having a conflict with? Jesus says to love and pray for them. Who are you ignoring? Jesus says to notice and reach out to them.

Application for me? My local Starbucks is in an international community, and numerous people from India live and work here. Typically, they sit with each other, and then there are the rest of us. I've wanted to make eye contact with at least one man, woman, or child every time I'm there. Recently a young couple with a preschool-age daughter has been sitting close to where my husband and I usually sit. Yesterday the husband and I made eye contact and smiled at each other because of what his daughter was doing. A small start, but a start.

I want to reflect on my heavenly Father to my world; you too?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 6:1-4

"Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

So, what do you do in secret, when no one is looking? Most of us would probably say that we're not proud of what we do at these times. When we do something we're proud of, we want the world to know about it.

But Jesus gives us a different way of thinking. He tells us that when we're honored by others and when we do our acts of righteousness in public, we're getting our reward in full. On the other hand, if we love and give and provide in secret, our Father will reward us. (So, this is where the phrase *the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing* comes from; another truth we've misused because we've taken it out of context.)

What would it look like if we didn't look for the approval and applause of others? Does just having God's *well done* satisfy?

An experience comes to mind. Years ago, when I was still single (a long time ago), I worked at a missionary organization in the data entry department just as large mainframe computers were becoming the norm. Our organization, Overseas Crusades, founded by Dick Hillis, supported the back-office work for 30 or so missionaries. My job was to maintain the databases for these missionaries. For this job, every time I finished what I was working on, I had to ask my boss what to do next. I didn't have any responsibility for thinking, only for doing what was in front of me.

My boss was born in China and had left with her family when the Communists took over. After I had been on the job for almost three years, she felt comfortable enough to leave and visit her family in Taiwan—for a month. I was to be in charge. After having no responsibility, I was to have total responsibility for the department, the other women who worked with us, and the temperamental sorting machine that could break down just by looking at it cross-eyed.

I really did well that month, so well in fact that I realized that only God knew how well I had done. Others could say "Congratulations, and well done," but they had no idea of the really good job I had done. Their words were nice, but God's *well done* satisfied my soul. This experience was so significant for me that I've rarely needed others' approval since then. I always appreciate hearing from those I respect, but my motivation now is internal. What I hear from God and repeat to myself drives me.

Where does your sense of *well done* come from? Do you hear your Father's *well done*? His rewards are amazing—both in this life and the next.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 6:5-15

"Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

So now we know that if we care for the needy and if we pray in secret, we will be rewarded. Sure does seem that what we do when no one else sees us is important if we want God's favor.

How would you rate your prayer life? Most of us would probably rate ourselves pretty low on anyone's scale. To be perfectly honest, I have a poor prayer life, but I love to spend time with the Lord in His word. I talk with Him, ask questions, laugh over wonderful times, wow over what He does and what He brings about, cry over sin, bring Him into everyday events to get His perspective, and thank Him.

These times started being satisfying when I had a conflict with a leader at my church; I couldn't talk with anyone about what I was experiencing because it would end up as gossip. So, I started having lunch with Jesus since I didn't feel free to be with anyone else. The first few days I started our conversations in my tried-and-true way: "Lord, help. I don't like this. I'm miserable. What do I do?" I soon realized that if these statements were all I said when talking with friends, they wouldn't be around for long. With friends I share joys and fun times. With friends I process my thinking. So, I changed my approach with Jesus and found that I loved it. I was now meeting with my Friend (John 15:14-15) and knew that He was also meeting with me.

For years as a single woman, I had dates with Jesus. We'd meet for breakfast, go to the park to talk, and just hang out and talk. These times got me through being single when all I wanted was to be married.

So how do you describe your times with Jesus? Forget about using *spiritual* words; what everyday words describe your times together?

Jesus says that when we meet with the Father, we meet *with* Him and not so others can see. He says it's good to have a regular place to meet when we won't be interrupted (put away the cell phone). He says to use everyday words rather than talk so much that we never have a chance to listen. He says to be confident that He knows what we need; He just wants us to come to Him and ask. He says to remember who God is and to want His will no matter what. He says to depend on Him for our daily needs like manna from heaven. He says He'll forgive as we've forgiven. He says to ask for help, so we won't go down the road to temptation. And He says He's the one to keep us from evil.

Time to revamp your times with the Father? I know I need to be forgiving more.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 6:16-18

"... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Do you include fasting as part of your spiritual life? I don't, mainly for health reasons, or so I've always told myself and others. I started wondering if Paul wrote about fasting in his letters to the gentile Christians so decided to research this question. My conclusions are at the end of today's writing.

My initial thought was that believers today fast because they want to be able to hear from God, especially if they're in a tough spot or need to make an important decision. It sounds like in Jesus' day the religious leaders wanted others to know when they were fasting, so they'd be in awe of how spiritual the leaders were. But Jesus says they have already gotten their reward on earth (by being so respected).

While we can ask ourselves if the religious activities we do are so others will see us, I think the real question is whether these public activities are just the tip of the iceberg or the totality of our spiritual lives. We can be involved in a lot of ministry and outreach activities or even lead a Bible study or small group, but if our choices and character don't match up to what we tell others their lives should be, if we're not growing in our love and kindness and self-awareness, what do our activities say to others about God?

Since fasting usually refers to food, perhaps we need to think about how much time we spend on what we eat versus the time we spend actually talking with the Father or doing what He's asked us to do? As a wife and mother, I've had to spend a lot of time planning, preparing, and cleaning up from family meals. All too easily I can see this work as a necessary evil because I'd rather be doing almost anything else, so I've had to learn to bring the Father into these times. I've known others who spend hours thinking about their next meal and how wonderful it's going to be. They spend a huge amount of money on buying food and eating out.

The real issue, I think, is the *quality* and *depth* of time we spend with our Father. That's been the theme of these three sections on giving to the needy (how we care for others), prayer (how we depend on the Father), and fasting (how we spend our time). How is your time with the Father?

* * * * *

NOTE: Concerning my question about Paul and fasting, I looked at the number of times he and the other New Testament writers wrote about fasting. While Luke records fasting three times in Acts 13 and 14, neither Paul, John, Peter, James, or Jude mentions it even once! I was amazed. My conclusion? Fasting was done so people could hear from God, but we have His Spirit living in us because of Jesus, who said, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you [the disciples]." John 14:26.

If we know Jesus, we already have the Spirit who longs to communicate with us; all we have to do is be willing to hear and obey. Sounds good to me!

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 6:19-24

"You cannot serve both God and money."

Have you ever been in a job where you've had two bosses who were as different as night and day? It's probably like a child whose parents don't agree on how they parent, so one is spontaneous but doesn't follow-through, and the other is strict and structured. The first is probably more fun, but the other is more dependable. What is a child to do? What are we to do if we're in such a job situation? I think this was how I operated for almost seven years in a job I've just left. I'm just beginning to realize now the stress I was under and why I now feel free. Thank you, Lord!

Jesus is allowing this untenable pressure to be in our lives, so we'll have to decide whether we're going to let money and possessions rule us or let God be in charge. I've known for a long time that one of the issues new followers of Jesus have to settle is who's going to be in charge of their sex lives. Lately I've been seeing that the issue of who's in charge of how I spend the money God allows me to steward can make or break the closeness of my walk with Him.

If you were to analyze the checks you write and the credit card transactions you make, what would they say about whether you're storing up treasures on earth or in heaven? I think I understand about treasures on earth: possessions, pleasure pursuits, what I want and think is important, and thinking that this life is all there is. So, I guess the real question is, what does it mean to store up treasures in heaven that are immune to moths, rust, and thieves? Here are a few of my ideas:

- Giving to where God is working, starting with our local church
- Spending time where God is working, starting with our own families and neighbors
- Paying attention to what God is doing in my life and in those around me
- Seeing life as God sees it because we are full of light [through the Spirit living in us]

I think we all know that our default thinking and behavior is all about us in the here and now, so living the way Jesus tells us to challenges us to the very depth of our beings. Have some changes come to mind that He wants you to make?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 6:25-34

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Are you a yesterday, today, or tomorrow type of person?

Yesterday people spend most of their mental energy on what happened years or months ago. When you talk with them, they often bring up uncomfortable events that have had a negative effect on them and that aren't resolved. It's as though the events just happened. *Yesterday people* can also see the past as the best times of their lives. As a mom of adult sons, this can be an easy trap for me as I think back to their high school years and how much fun we had as a family and how I miss those times now that they have their own families.

Tomorrow people love to plan and anticipate. Either they think that their tomorrows will look like what they know today, or they hope that all will be fresh and new and free from what has been without a lick of effort on their part. This often describes me.

Today people tend to act without learning from the past, or they believe that their choices won't have any consequences. They go for the gusto and get all that life has for them without seeing trends in behavior or possible results.

I think the men and women Jesus is talking to tended to be the tomorrow type of people, probably because the poor had lives that were hard, and the rich had an abundance that they thought they deserved. His words to them—and us—are just what we need to hear, whether we have little or much.

Jesus tells us to learn from what's around us: the birds always have enough to eat, and the lilies of the field (or trees that bloom every spring) bring a beauty to life that no man (such as Solomon) can duplicate. Our Father knows what we need and will provide because He loves us and isn't limited by time or space.

I'm living in this tension these days. Since I'm done with my part-time job, we're anticipating tightening our budget and accessing our retirement funds as necessary for large items since we're close to that age. I could easily look at our tomorrows and worry if we'll have enough to live on, but God is creatively having me look at my todays and how I spend my time for His kingdom sake. Just yesterday I had a call about a possible technical editing job similar to what I did for eight years. Our Father knows and provides (even if the job doesn't come through). Our choices today orchestrate our tomorrows. Seeking His kingdom doesn't mean inactivity or irresponsibility on our part; it means we either choose to trust Him for the unknown and what we can't change, or we choose to worry.

How are you relating to today's ideas? What is our Father putting His light on in your thinking?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 7:1-6

"Do not . . ."

Have you noticed the *do not*s we've been seeing recently? I just noticed them. Why would Matthew feel the need to give us all of these commands of what *not* to do?

Currently I'm reading *Matthew's Story* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and was struck by the religious training Matthew would have had. As a Jewish boy he was taught the Torah and knew what God expected. But then Matthew became a tax-collector—to the Jews a status worse than a sinner. What happened to him to get to go down this road? Have you been trained to go in one direction in life and now find yourself going in the opposite direction? Then you can relate.

If anyone knows how religious people can live without seeing their own weaknesses, it's Matthew. Day after day he had lived with them judging him because he was a Jew but never seeing how they weren't any different. If anyone knows how to judge others with criticalness and condemnation in his heart, it's Matthew as a tax collector. But we know that a life like Matthew's is one that Jesus loves to change through love and truth and grace. In this Gospel, we see Matthew as a friend and follower of Jesus, and he has a life that has been redeemed.

I think the truth in the first two paragraphs of Matthew 7 is easy enough to understand, but I want to make sure we understand what the word *judge* means—and doesn't mean. It means to take the role of the one who makes the final pronouncement. The judge in a court case has the law to support a decision. However, if we judge someone, we base our judgments on our own opinions and way of thinking. I don't think I'd want anyone to make such a judgment about me.

Judging *doesn't mean* having an opinion or point of view because we all have them. My preference is to dress up when I go to church on Sundays, but I'm not to think less of those who wear jeans and tee-shirts. [It's been about 10 years since I originally wrote this past sentence, and now I'm wearing jeans and tee-shirts the church provides to those who are on the Host Team. I guess never say never.]

So, what about the third paragraph with its dogs and pigs, sacred and pearls? From what I've read, Jesus is saying that we're not to set ourselves up as judges, but rather we are to evaluate where another person is spiritually and act accordingly. For example, if someone is hostile to the gospel, don't share a lot about your own walk with Jesus because the person will probably trample all over you. Be wise and discerning.

As another example, the church I attend focuses on those who haven't come to Christ yet and those who are returning to faith, so the topics covered on Sundays don't include topics for maturing believers, such as spiritual warfare and spiritual gifts, and the children's program doesn't include topics reserved for high school students.

Which of these encouragements do you need today? Do you need to evaluate the roles you play with others and why? Are you aware of our own sin issues and how they affect others? Do you need to practice more discernment with what you share with others for their sake? Isn't walking with the Father challenging?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 7:7-12

"ask . . . seek . . . knock"

This section has gotten me thinking about how I'm interacting with our Father as I'm going through major changes in my daily activities and wondering about what's coming next. Jesus is telling us that our relationship with the Father should be active and interactive. Sometimes I think mine looks more like railroad tracks: two lines occupying the same space but always separate (= = =). I remember my mom telling me that as a high school student, the only time I talked to my dad was when I wanted to use the car; not much of a relationship, I'd say, but oh so easy to have with our heavenly Father. How is your relationship with Him these days?

So, let's look at what Jesus tells us that the Father wants for us.

- He wants us to ask Him for what we need and want. If a human father gives bread and fish to a son (or daughter) when asked for food, rather than tease the child by giving a stone or a snake, how much more will our heavenly Father give to those who ask Him?
- He wants us to seek Him—in the pressures and in the joys of life. If we get to know Him by actively searching for Him in our circumstances, rather than just passively waiting *for* him to act, how much more will we get to know Him?
- He wants us to stay persistent in getting to know Him and asking Him for what we need. I tend to ask once and then give up or do what's obvious instead of being persistent about what's really important. You too?

I just celebrated my 40th spiritual birthday and so have been thinking about my early years with Jesus and all the lessons learned, especially during the tough times. But what about now as I walk with Him? This section has been a wake-up call for me. You too?

I'll let you know what happens.

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 7:13-14

"... small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life ..."

We've covered so many topics with Matthew through what's known as the Sermon on the Mount, so many areas in our lives where Jesus has shown us how we tend to live and then how He wants us to live. Let's review what He said:

- Our well being comes from humility, letting God comfort us, putting others first, seeking righteousness, being merciful, having a pure heart, being peacemakers, sharing in what Jesus went through for us. (5:1-12)
- Others are to see the difference God makes in our lives. (5:13-16)
- Our character should reflect God and His standards more than the lives of religious leaders we know. (5:17-20)
- Anger toward another or dismissing the values of another is to be replaced by respect and willingness to work out issues. (5:21-26)
- Faithfulness to our spouse begins in our thought life. (5:27-30)
- Marital unfaithfulness is the only acceptable reason for divorce. (5:31-32)
- Others should be able to depend on our *yes* and *no*. (5:33-37)
- God is to have room to work when we have a conflict with someone. (5:38-42)
- We're to see our "enemies" as God sees them—as potential sons and daughters of the King. We're to reflect Him in how we think of and speak of others. (5:43-48)
- We're to give to the needy in secret rather than letting others know how generous we are. (6:1-4)
- We're to pray and fast in secret rather than advertising how spiritual we are. (6:5-18)
- Our choice is to serve God or money; we can't do both. (6:19-24)
- Today we are to be grateful for how God provides without anticipating tomorrow's needs. (6:25-34)
- We're to look at our own issues before addressing another's. (7:1-6)
- Remember that God wants us to know Him as our Father who knows and cares; then we're to reach out to others with this relationship so they'll know Him as we do. (7:7-12)

This way of living is like a small gate and a narrow road that can seem limiting, but do we want to end up going in the other direction just because it's easier? The world will laugh at us and dismiss us, saying that we'll miss out on what this world can give us. But when Jesus was asked, "You do not want to leave me too, do you?" Peter said:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. (John 6:67-69)

Which of these topics strike you?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 7:15-23

"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."

Sobering words today. Even if we do all that we listed yesterday that summarizes the Sermon on the Mount, we might not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells us that all of our good works, including prophesying in His name, driving out demons, and performing miracles, are only good for this world. If we want more, we'll have to know what the will of the Father is and then do it.

But what about teachers among us who tell us differently? Jesus warns us to look beyond their words. Look to see the results of their teaching; see where it takes their followers. Look too at the teachers' own relationships: who respects them and spends time with them? Are their lifestyles healthy, humble, and maturing?

So, what does Jesus' warning today tell us about Him, His Father, and the life He wants us to live? My biggest take away is that the Father wants a one-on-one relationship with each of us. Instead of having us relate to Him as a nation (as in the Old Testament), and instead of having us relate to Him through the sacrifices performed somewhere by others (in the temple by priests), God is instituting a personal relationship with us that some in the Old Testament (the patriarchs, Moses, David, the prophets) had enjoyed.

God sent His Son so we could see Him as one of us. All those who had heard Jesus speak or interacted with Him knew that while He looked like them, He was totally different in what He said and how He acted. Jesus was always in sync with His Father, and so He always knew what His Father wanted him to do—and then He did it. If Jesus hadn't always been faithful and obedient, He would never have had the credibility to give us today's words.

Whose words and examples are you listening to and following these days? Are these words and examples encouraging you to be more *you-centric* and therefore accepting of everything but not standing for anything? Or are their words and examples challenging you to be wholly aware of the Father and what He wants so that you are growing in maturity, humility, and real love for others?

I just saw this difference played out in the TV show *The Glades*. A preteen character didn't like his mom's decisions and so chose to have *an attitude*. A father figure in his life called him on it and set the standards for him. The boy thought about it, made a decision, and made a 180° change in his behavior. He chose to be respectful and loving toward his mom. By the end of the show, he was a happy young man because he had changed his mind (repented) and started walking in the opposite direction.

Is this how you're responding to today's truth?

Walking With the Father Through Matthew 1-7

Matthew 7:24-29

"... hear those words and put them into practice."

Jesus' examples so put life into perspective, don't they? The issue isn't what our *houses* look like but rather what foundation we start with. The importance of the foundation is only seen when the storms of life assault us. Are you in the middle of such a storm today? I'm not (at least this morning), but I've been through enough of them that I know the truth of His words.

Unlike the example of houses Jesus uses, we can change the foundation we are building our lives on. What hope! All it takes is to put His words into practice. Easy to do? Heavens no—but possible and absolutely worth the effort.

As we're finishing these first seven chapters of Matthew's version of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, we see that what Jesus heard from the Father, He did. He was consistent and dependable. He knew who He was and what He was to do. He's the foundation on which we can build our lives.

Do you have this sense of confidence about who you are and what you're doing? Are you consistent and dependable? Your answer is probably the same as mine as we evaluate ourselves based on His standard. This conclusion takes us to the last paragraph of this section in Matthew 7 and an observation by the crowd that overwhelmed me years ago soon after I became a Christian.

When Jesus made Himself real to me, I was a year out of grad school where I had been studying literature. The first sermon series I heard was from Leviticus, chapter by chapter. While this book may be boring and hard to read, the teacher, Ray Stedman, made it alive and practical. That fall I started Bible Study Fellowship and began studying the nation of Israel starting with David and Solomon and then working through the writings of the Minor Prophets. In a weekly night study, we worked through the New Covenant teaching in 2 Corinthians 2:14 – 6:2.

I was amazed to see similar themes in all of these studies, Old Testament and New—and they all pointed to Jesus of Nazareth.

As an English major I hadn't been allowed to prove a thesis using original thought; rather I had to back up my reasoning from observations of those who had gone before me—just like the Pharisees. So, when I read, "the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law," I was also amazed by what I was reading and learning. I realized that I was to listen to and follow only Jesus. I could learn from others who had a track record of putting His words into practice, but Jesus was—and is—my authority.

Sometime during that year, I realized that I had been afraid that I'd have to put my analytical thinking, honed through my study of great literature, on hold to be a Christian. I found instead that walking with the Father was going to take every ounce of mental acuity I was capable of.

Is He challenging your thinking these days too? What are you going to do about it?
