

June 5-9, 2023 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 75

Two Ways Of Living

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

June 3/4, 2023



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them. Matthew 5:1-2 (NLT)

Reflection: As we head into the final week of our study on the Sermon On The Mount I thought it might be a good idea to sort of do a reset and remember everything that Jesus has said up to this point and the context in which He said it...

First off that the sermon on the mount is an explanation of what God's kingdom would look like here on earth. If you recall, after His baptism in Matthew chapter 4 and His temptation in the wilderness the Bible says:

Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon-possessed or epileptic or paralyzed-he healed them all. Large crowds followed him wherever he went. Matthew 4:23-25 (NLT)

The large crowds are very interested in this "kingdom" Jesus is preaching about. They are blown away by His power and so Jesus sits them down and begins to explain to them what this kingdom is all about.

Jesus begins His history shaping message with the beatitudes. Blessed are the meek, poor in spirit, those who mourn, etc. What's the deal with the beatitudes? They are not so much a prescription for how to live life as they are a surprise statement about who is blessed- the poor, the hungry, the powerless... basically the outsiders (everyone there that day were outsiders) are blessed. Why? Well not because it's good to be poor or hungry or powerless but because now, even the powerless are invited to join in the blessed life of God's kingdom. Nobody had ever told them they were blessed before!

Now Jesus moves on to the next section of the Sermon on the Mount- a discussion on salt & light. He tells this ragtag group of outsiders that they are the ones who will fulfill God's promise through Abraham that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him.

But this group of misfits aren't there yet. They aren't currently living lives that will be salt to a decaying world and light to people stumbling in the darkness. So what Jesus does in the rest of the sermon on the mount is describe what a life that is filled with salt & light will look like. This is not an invitation to life as usual or the way that makes sense to us. This is a radical, new way of looking at life that won't make any sense at all to the people trying to live it or to people watching those who are trying to live it. Many will misunderstand. So Jesus explains what this misunderstanding will lead to...

There are all these groups of people who think they know how life is supposed to go. They will look at me and misunderstand. They will resist me, persecute me, eventually they will arrest me, put me on trial, and kill me. And do you know how I will respond? I will love them. I'll love even the ones who resist me the most.

And then when I am resurrected and ascended to heaven, you my little ragtag group of misfits- you will carry on my way of life. They will misunderstand you. They will resist you, persecute you, and many of you will be arrested, put on trial and some of you will even be killed. And then do you know what you will do my little band of powerless outsiders? You will love them all- even the ones who are killing you. You will learn how to handle your anger, your greed, your lust... and the world will be a different place because of it.

Now you may be wondering... what's in it for me? Why should I do that if the people I'm doing it for don't appreciate it? Because this isn't just about the people you're doing it for. Salt & light are valuable and rare commodities in this world and when you choose to develop a life that brings freshness to a decaying world (salt) and light to a world stumbling in darkness guess who benefits the most? You do. You will become a person you never dreamed you could be. It won't be easy but you can't put a price on looking in the mirror every morning and being proud of who you are becoming.

And as Jesus finishes this amazing sermon He wraps it all up in Matthew 7:13-27. It's an absolutely amazing conclusion that I missed the power of for many years. I can't wait to tell you about it... well, maybe I can wait. So we'll do that tomorrow. Until then spend some time thinking about whether you are salt & light to a world that desperately needs salt and light.

Prayer: Father, It's not easy to live my life the way Jesus teaches me to live it. Give me the strength and courage it will take to move beyond just managing my anger so I can live a life that makes you proud to be my father. In Jesus Name, amen.

Tuesday:

Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it.

Watch out for false prophets! They dress up like sheep, but inside they are wolves who have come to attack you. You can tell what they are by what they do. No one picks grapes or figs from thornbushes. A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. Every tree that produces bad fruit will be chopped down and burned.

You can tell who the false prophets are by their deeds. Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in. On the day of judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, "We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles." But I will tell them, "I will have nothing to do with you! Get out of my sight, you evil people!"

Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock. Rain poured down, rivers flooded, and winds beat against that

house. But it did not fall, because it was built on solid rock. Anyone who hears my teachings and doesn't obey them is like a foolish person who built a house on sand. The rain poured down, the rivers flooded, and the winds blew and beat against that house. Finally, it fell with a crash. Matthew 7:13-27 (NLT)

Reflection:

How are you feeling after reading that conclusion to the Sermon On The Mount? Is it just me or does that seem like a strange and abrupt way to end the most influential speech ever given? I used to think the conclusion to the Sermon On The Mount was just the story of the wise man and the foolish man. But this last week as I've wrestled with this passage of scripture I've seen the conclusion goes all the way back to verse 13.

If you look closely you'll see that Jesus begins in verse 13 throwing out pairs of things that look quite similar. Two roads. Two prophets. Two trees. Two fruits. Two houses. What do all of them have in common? Have you figured it out yet? Go ahead and look at it again. I'll wait.

Ok... the thing that all of these metaphors (is it a metaphor? Or is it some other high faulting English... uhhhhh... thingy that I didn't quite learn as well as my college English professor would like?) have in common is that they all look very similar on the outside. Ok... the two roads might be the exception to this rule (one's wide and one's narrow) but the other ones totally work.

The false prophet looks EXACTLY like the true prophet (the false prophet is disguised as a sheep so he looks just like the other guy)... the only difference is what's inside, his motivation. The two trees are identical. It's not like one has fruit and the other one doesn't. They both have fruit. Even the fruit is identical (scholars say the words Jesus chose to describe the fruit make it clear He was making this point... "bad fruit" is poisonous but doesn't look poisonous). And the houses... the only difference between them is the foundation they're built on. Jesus concludes this speech by reminding his listeners to pay close attention to two different ways of living/being. But what are those two ways?

I used to think Jesus was saying, "choose the good life... don't be evil and do bad things... be good and do good things." And I think Jesus would say that was good advice but it's not what He's doing in the Sermon On The Mount. In the Sermon On The Mount Jesus is constantly contrasting two ways of doing things that look incredibly similar outwardly yet the difference between them is the difference between pleasing God and having Him call you a hypocrite.

Think about it. What does Jesus tell the people to be careful of? Being like the Pharisees, right? He doesn't say, "there are two kinds of people... people who pray and people who don't pray. You make sure and pray, ok?" No... Jesus says, both kinds of person prays... just don't pray like the Pharisees. Both kinds of person gives to the poor. Just don't give to the poor like the Pharisees. Over and over again Jesus contrasts outward religious actions with inward heart transformation. The difference between them is VERY difficult to see. In fact only Jesus truly sees the motives of our hearts. I've given up trying to judge why someone is doing something (I used to do it A LOT but not anymore... well... not as often anyway

and when I catch myself doing it I immediately stop myself and ask God to help me stop having that be my first reaction) because I can't see into their hearts.

So what hope is there? I can see into my heart. And you can see into yours. If together we decide to read the conclusion of the Sermon On The Mount and spend some time looking within at our own motives maybe together we can work on letting Jesus transform our hearts by trying to do the right things (pray, give, forgive, accept, etc.) for the right reason. And when Jesus sees someone doing the right things for the right reasons do you know what the result is? Wisdom. Strange, huh? That wisdom would come from doing the right things (what we already know we should be doing) with the right motives- that's the point of that last illustration of the wise man and the foolish man.

Prayer: Father, today open the eyes of my heart to see why I do the things I do. I want to prepare my heart to be transformed in new and miraculous ways by You. Show me how to live a life that makes You proud to be my Father. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Wednesday:

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority-quite unlike their teachers of religious law.

Matthew 7:28-29 (NLT)

Reflection: What does it mean that Jesus taught with "real authority"? Did it have to do with His teaching style? Did He yell a lot and jump up and down and pound the pulpit? Or was it that He didn't rant and rave and was just real quiet and let His words do the job?

I don't think it was either of those things. I think it was actually a combination of things. First off this group of people that He's preaching to are the people that He healed of their diseases. They saw first hand that He had authority over sickness, paralysis, madness, demons, nature... nobody had ever seen anything like it. They had heard stories of people who had limited authority over these things but nothing like what Jesus was demonstrating.

Then there was the way He taught. In the first century if you wanted to teach something it had to be an agreed upon teaching or nobody listened to you. In other words... if you wanted to teach something to your listeners you would use the phrase, "it has been said" or "you have heard it said". This was code that a committee of religious leaders had given their stamp of approval to a certain teaching and now it could be taught because it had the authority of the committee behind it. That must have been strange. Everything you heard was something you had already heard. I guess the only thing that could change was how you strung together time tested and honored teachings.

It reminds me of the story of the traveller who stopped at a diner in a small town to get some lunch. As he sat at the counter he heard a man yell out, "number 15"! Everyone laughed hysterically. A few minutes later someone else yelled out, "number 23"! Again everyone laughed except the new guy. After a few more numbers and rounds of laughter the new guy asks the server, "what's the deal with all the numbers people keep calling out"? She told him that since the town was so small everyone had already heard everyone

else's jokes so they compiled a list of the jokes and numbered them so they could save time. Now when someone wants to tell a joke all they have to do is call out the number and since everyone already knows the joke they can laugh without the wasted time of saying the whole thing.

She showed the guy the list and he read over it. When he found one he liked he called out, "number 9!" but there was no laughter... just an awkward silence. He looked over at the server and shrugged as if to say, "what's the deal"? The server just shook her head and said, "not everyone can tell a good joke".

Ok... so it's not exactly the same but it's close. Jesus bypassed that whole system without worrying about the what the committee would think of His new teachings. If you've been reading through the Sermon On The Mount with us you know Jesus is continually saying things like, "You have heard it said, you shall not murder. But I say to you..."

He does it over and over. People must have been blown away the first time He did it... although they were probably still trying to digest the brand new information that they were blessed... that they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world so maybe that first one got through without much gasping. But as He continued preaching He followed that pattern again and again. At least 6 times in the Sermon On The Mount He does it. Why? What does it mean?

Well for the people listening it meant He had some kind of authority that they had never dreamed of. No ordinary Rabbi in his right mind would buck the religious system in Israel. But Jesus wasn't any ordinary Rabbi. He did indeed have an authority that they had never seen before. God had never come down to human beings in such a understandable way to teach them. But now everything is going to change. Jesus is going to really shake things up and nothing would ever be the same again.

So what does Jesus' authority have to do with us today? Only one thing. Jesus' authority now, in 21st century Alaska (or wherever you are in the world as you read this), and in your life is totally dependent on whether you decide to give Him authority. He won't take it. In Revelation 3:20 He says this:

"Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in.

Even though there isn't a door in the universe that He couldn't kick down and walk right through He won't do it with the door to your heart. He believes that much in free will. He desperately wants you to give Him the authority in your life to steer you into the life He dreamed of for you before He even created the world. But that choice is yours. Today's devo has been a lot of writing to get to this one question:

Will you give Jesus the authority to direct your life? Because when it comes to that question you have been given complete authority to say yes or no.

Prayer: Father, today I will choose to recognize Your authority over my life. Today I open the door to my heart and invite you in. Make Yourself at home. Create in my heart the kind of person that you created me to be so that I can have freedom from guilt, regret, fear, anxiety, worry & a meaningless life. Today I begin a new habit... starting each

new day asking, what do You want us (that would be you and Jesus) to do today. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday

I have given them the glory you gave me. John 17:22 (NLT)

Reflection: Have you ever felt like your prayers just weren't doing any good? Felt like you could see God's power flowing into the lives of people you know but that when you asked for something not much happened? What's up with that?

Well you never know for sure, but one thing you may want to take a look at is whether or not you are really following Jesus. I mean REALLY following Him. REALLY listening to what He says. I'm not just talking about "believing" in Jesus. The Bible says even demons "believe" that Jesus exists but they don't live the way He teaches us to live. So often what we as human beings do with Jesus is ask Him to bless certain areas of our lives while trying to hold on to control over other areas because we're afraid He might change things if we let Him into those areas. We say, "Lord, bless this area of my life (usually health or financial or relational or some other singular issue that we'd love Aladdin's genie to zap a fix for us) but please keep Your hands off these other areas of my life. I've got those under control and I'm afraid if I let you into that area You'll change everything so please just keep your hands off that part of my life... but hurry up with this other stuff that I would like Your help with."

Most of us would never pray that prayer out loud. But that's how we often live our lives with God. Then we wonder why our prayers aren't more effective. We start to wonder if maybe God isn't as powerful as we thought.

We talk about this a lot at Riverside... God only shares His power, presence, knowledge & wisdom with those who are actively developing the character of His Son. That might seem unfair but let's look at it from God's side of things. To share His power and wisdom and knowledge with someone who wasn't developing the character of Jesus would be a dangerous combination. The result is that our prayers are only as effective as our attempts at following Jesus and trying to do what He teaches. The more we surrender... the more power God shares.

I'm fascinated by the scripture we read today from John 17. Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemene just hours before His death. He's praying and do you know what He was praying for? He spent a little bit of that time praying for Himself. But overwhelmingly what Jesus prayed for that night was for you (and me too... really all of us who would believe in Him because of what the original followers would say about Him). He prayed mostly for our unity. And He makes one really interesting statement in verse 22:

I have given them the glory you gave me.

I grew up thinking that life here on earth was just something we had to endure until we died and only then did the party really begin. But Jesus says in John 17 that He's not waiting until we die to give us the glory that God gave to Him. He's giving it now. But only in proportion to our willingness to REALLY follow Him.

So the question for today is, what areas of your life are you holding back? What areas are holding you back from REALLY following Jesus? As God to open your eyes to those areas so that you can let go of them and then His power will start to flow into your life like nothing you've ever dreamed of.

Prayer:

Father, open my eyes to the areas in my life that I have not truly surrendered to You. Give me the courage to give them to You knowing You will give back what is good for me and keep what isn't. This is hard... show me the way. In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash." Matthew 7:24-27 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... this is it. The final devotional thought for this marathon lesson series. And we're finishing it up the same way Jesus did. The story of the wise man and the foolish man.

What was the difference between them? It wasn't what they heard. They both heard the words of Jesus. So the problem can't be knowledge. Obviously knowledge is a good thing but it's not the most important component of a life that honors God. So what is?

Doing what Jesus says. Doing what He says is the thing that divides the wise from the foolish. But what is He talking about when He says, "anyone who hears my teaching and follows it..."? We're back to the question of whether He's contrasting an evil life with a good life. A moral life with an immoral life. Is that what He's doing?

Nope. He's bringing it all back your heart. Why are you doing the good things you do? Turns out transformation of the human heart has been what the whole sermon on the mount has been about. Why? Why is Jesus so concerned with our motives? Well one thing is, it turns out which direction we go on the wise -vs- fool meter depends on it. But there's one more very important reason. The temperature of your heart.

You can focus on what you do rather than why you do it. You can become someone who gauges how well you're doing with how much you're doing... even if you're doing it with the wrong motives. But if you do that you're going to be judgmental, you'll despise people on the inside even as you do good things for them so you can say you followed the rules. You'll become rigid and heartless. You'll use your religion to exclude people who don't think exactly the same way you think. You're going to become bitter and angry and cold. You may be a very moral person like the Pharisees did but your morality will become just like a snowflake: perfect, intricate, symmetrical, & freezing... & fragile.

But Jesus says there's another way. Relationship. A way of being where you do what you do not out of obligation but out of gratitude.

This is what leads to the transformation of the human heart and that's ultimately what is at the heart of the Sermon On The Mount. Transformation comes by hanging out with Him. Finding the blessed life. Becoming people who are the salt of the earth... people who are the light of the world. Blessed to be a blessing. Ultimately this is the message of the most influential speech ever given.

After that speech was given almost 2,000 years ago the multitudes were amazed. But most of them went home and didn't change how they lived. But there were a few who listened and something started burning deep inside them. They heard Jesus' Spirit whisper that they were made for so much more than this. They decided to give it a shot. They decided to follow Him. Throughout the rest of His ministry the crowds would ebb and flow (that's right... I used the phrase "ebb & flow"... turns out I got some learning you didn't know nothing about ;o) but there was a solid core of about 120 people who stuck with Him. Who worked it out in their lives. By following Him they grew in wisdom in a miraculous way. Read through the gospels. These were not paragons of human wisdom in the beginning. Their biggest argument was always about who would be greatest when He continually told them that was a dead end. Once when a town wouldn't accept them they got angry and wanted to know if Jesus wanted them to call down fire from Heaven... Jesus said no. Another time they heard someone was preaching about Jesus but it wasn't one of them, so they asked if they should stop the guy... Jesus said no. Once He fell asleep in a boat and when a storm came they freaked out and woke Him up. Once when He wanted them to stay awake they fell asleep. Peter was a blustery bumbler, John & James had HUGE tempers, Matthew was a cheat, Thomas was a doubter... you'd have to wonder where He found these guys, maybe Disciples 'R Us?

But then read what happens in the book of Acts. These same bumlbers are changed. They are transformed. And I really love what the Bible says about Peter & John when they shocked the Sanhedrin (the most powerful organization in the Jewish nation) with their courage and wisdom:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13

That's my prayer. That people will take note that I've been with Jesus. That following Him will so change me that people will say, "what happened to him?" And someone else will say, "he's been hanging out with Jesus".

So how about you? What are you going to do with this new information you have? You can be amazed by Jesus' words and then turn around and keep living pretty much the way you always have, just with some new religious trivia under your belt. Or... you could try doing what Jesus said. You can allow Him to transform your heart. And if you do even though you won't be perfect at it at first, I know the day will come when someone will say about you, "that one's been hanging out with Jesus... and you can tell".

Prayer: Father, Thank You that we've gotten to spend the last 15 weeks focusing on the most influential speech ever given. I know that this speech changed the world but I want it to change my heart. I want to do what You taught me to do. I want to follow You. Today I will do that. In Jesus' Name, amen.