

LESSON IV

(Sermon on the Mount, continued)

Matthew 6:

Treasures in Heaven

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.¹

²²“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy,^[e] your whole body will be full of light. ²³But if your eyes are unhealthy,^[e] your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Do Not Worry

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life^[e]?

²⁸“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 7:

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

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³ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

⁶ “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Ask, Seek, Knock

⁷ “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹ “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! ¹² So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

The Narrow and Wide Gates

¹³ “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

True and False Prophets

¹⁵ “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

True and False Disciples

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

The Wise and Foolish Builders

²⁴ “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

²⁸ When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

COMMENTARY

In chapter 7, we begin to see the usual way that Jesus' sayings are presented. They are very often a series of unrelated sayings one after another like charms on a bracelet.

Chapter 7 opens with sayings about judging. While self-evident, judging others is more difficult to put into practice than it is to understand. It is easy to see faults in other people; it is hard to see faults in ourselves. Sometimes, trying to fix other people is a way to turn our attention off ourselves. But Jesus tells us to turn our attention on ourselves. Fix ourselves. There is enough in our own selves to deal with, without worrying about others.

This passage tells us about the Christian way. It tells us that we have the power to fix ourselves. Some Protestant traditions say that only God can fix us, and any human effort tarnishes God's redemptive work in us. Faith will save us, not our works. But these words tell us that salvation is a matter of self-improvement. Jesus' words are clear, "take the plank out of your own eye" (7:5). How can we remove the plank from our eye if we don't have the power to reform ourselves? It is a God-given power. God gives us the insight to see where we fall short of His Way, and God gives us the power to halt our unhealthy ways. Swedenborg illustrates this with a little anecdote: it is as if a servant comes to his or her master and says, "Master, clean me." The master replies, "I have given you soap and water—clean yourself." Casting our pearls before swine may be a little harder to understand. One way to understand it is in how we show our faith to others. I have had powerful and deep experiences of God's work in me. This could be called spiritual intimacy. And we don't share our intimate experiences with just anybody. People may not understand, at best. At worst they will argue against these holy experiences and denounce them, even ridicule them. This does damage to our faith, "they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces" (7:6). I think it also relates to pressing others with our own faith. Trying to force others to believe the way we believe does little but engender anger. Most people have their own beliefs, their own way of negotiating their way through life. This can be related to the plank in our own eye versus the speck in our neighbors. Our religion works for us, just as others' religion works for them. We may certainly volunteer our beliefs and practices when invited. But we cannot force our religion on others.

Jesus says to ask, and it will be given us. Does this mean everything we ask for will be given us? This saying comes right after Jesus words against worries for this world. Jesus has just said not to worry about food, drink, and clothing. He has just told us not to seek treasure on earth. There are preachers of the "prosperity gospel" who use quotes like this to say that if we ask for it, we will get wealth. I don't think this passage can be interpreted in reference to worldly wealth.

Rather, when we seek truth, ask for God's love, knock on the door of heaven, then we will be given. Given truth, love and righteousness, and heavenly joy. And it is a promise. "Everyone who asks receives." We know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more so does the all-powerful God give to us, whom he loves more, even more than a parent does their children. This saying can be read in the light of the passage about worrying.

³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

I would read the passage about the wide and narrow gates metaphorically. I don't think that only a few people find their way into the narrow gate. I think rather that it is about the paths we are presented in life. Wide and broad are the gates that lead to worldly success. Our society everywhere teaches us to seek money, fame, and power. We are even taught that spending money is the way to make ourselves happy. But the narrow gate, the still, small voice of God says, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." That is the way to life, to a life that is rewarding, peaceful, and filled with happiness and joy. Broad and wide are the worries of this world, the gate we pass through so easily. But that is no way to live. When we have faith that God wants to give us the kingdom, when we orient our lives to this faith, we live in peace, serenity, and without worry.

The next 3 passages are all about doing. A good tree bears good fruit, only those who do the will of God enter heaven, and wise builders put Jesus' words into practice. Again we see how much Jesus' words emphasize good works, doing good, being good. Faith matters, but only when put into practice. Then the spiritual home we build will withstand the deluge of falsity we are continually flooded with, and the winds of misinformation that blow against the foundation of truth we have constructed throughout our spiritual lives. When we hold fast to truth, when we put these truths into practice in all our affairs, then the fruit we bear will be good.