

Great Expectations

February 5 – Matthew 5:17-48; Luke 6:27-36

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Day 36 – 329 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading...

Jesus spoke about the Law of Moses related to several subjects. The Law of Moses was given to the nation of Israel and is found in the books of *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, and *Deuteronomy*. The foundation or framework of the Law is found in the Ten Commandments (*Ex. 20*). The Jews were very familiar with the Law, so it was appropriate for Jesus to address it.

While Jesus established a new covenant, He made it very clear that He was not abolishing or replacing the Law, but rather He was fulfilling it (*Matt. 5:17*). The Law was very demanding and impossible for the Jews to follow. But the Law was never meant to be a means to salvation, rather it was meant to express God's holy standards and to expose man's sinful, rebellious heart. The Jews could not follow the Law. Therefore, they could not please a holy God. The Law was meant to reveal man's need for a Savior (*Gal. 3:24, 25*), for the penalty for breaking God's law was death.

Thus, when Jesus said that He came to fulfill the Law, He accomplished the impossible task. He followed the Law completely. He met God's holy standards and pleased the Father fully. He not only fulfilled the Law for us, but He also paid the penalty of the Law with His death on the cross. Therefore, those who put their faith in Christ are no longer under the Law of Moses but are now under the law of Christ.

While we are no longer under the old law but under grace, we are not without standards. Christ is now our standard, and **His expectations of righteousness are higher than the Law of Moses** (*Matt. 5:20*). The old laws regulated external actions, but Christ addressed internal thoughts and motives. While the Law of Moses expected outward purity, Christ now expects internal purity, which is only possible through a regenerate heart in salvation and the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Daily Reflection

Christ gave examples of how His expectations are greater than the old Law. First, he expanded murder to include anger, hate, and name-calling (*v.21-26*). Second, He expanded adultery to include lust (*v.27-32*). Third, Jesus expanded false vows to include all forms of swearing (*v.33-37*). Swearing or oath-taking was a form of deceit and hypocrisy. Jesus' followers should be honest and keep their word.

Fourth, Jesus changed the old method of "keeping score" to forgiveness and grace (*v.38-42*). Christians should go above and beyond, give and do more than asked, rather than seek revenge or repayment. Finally, Jesus challenged His followers to love all people, not just those who love us. We are to return good for evil and to pray for those who persecute us (*v.43-47*).

Check the areas in which you struggle most.

- Anger, hate, and name-calling
- Lust or impure thoughts and desires
- Deceit or hypocrisy
- Keeping score and desiring retaliation
- Loving all people, even my enemies

Take time to think and pray about this area. Why do you struggle? What is the root? How can you overcome this sin in Christ?

Christ has great expectations for you, but you need His help. Confess your failures and ask Him to help you where you fall short.

Pretenders

February 6 – Matthew 6:1-34

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Day 37 – 328 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading...

We covered the second section of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus addressed several topics. While we could look at each one individually, let's consider them as a whole.

Most of this sermon is framed around Jesus' warning in *Matthew 5:20*, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." He was making a distinction between their actions and ours.

Three times Jesus called these religious leaders hypocrites (v.2, 5, 16). The word *hypocrite* originated with Greek actors who wore masks and pretended to be someone else. The Pharisees were actors who pretended to be spiritual, godly, and caring but who were just the opposite. They were only interested in attention, applause, and acclaim. Thus, Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them, otherwise you will have no reward with your Father in heaven" (v.1).

Then, Jesus provided three clear examples. First, He warned against giving publicly so that others would see and know it (v.2-4). Second, He warned against praying before others in a prideful manner, to display phony spirituality (v.5-13). He even added a warning about holding grudges, saying those who don't forgive others will not be forgiven (v.14, 15). Third, He warned against those who fast in such a way that everyone sees their sacrifice and self-discipline (v.16-18).

God sees through these charades and so do others. Phony faith is only falsehood. Pretenders "have their reward in full." **They get everyone's attention but the One who matters most.** God desires humility, sincerity, and faith that glorifies Him rather than self (v.33).

Daily Reflection

Jesus' teaching on hypocrisy didn't end there. Next, He addressed the things we treasure (v.19-24). While we say that we love God most, our actions prove otherwise. Our energies are spent acquiring and accumulating the things of this world. We pretend He is our God, but we desire more money and stuff. **When we say one thing and do another, that is the definition of hypocrisy.** Is that you?

Finally, Jesus addressed the topic of worry (v.25-34). Once again, we say that we have faith in God, but our actions undermine our words. We believe that God is sovereign, that He is in control, and that He cares for us and will meet our needs, but then we worry and fret about so many things. **Do we really have faith, or are we pretending?**

In what area(s) of your life are you most challenged by Jesus' teaching? Explain how.

What adjustments do you need to make in order to demonstrate humble, sincere faith in God?

Uncommon Sense

February 7 – Matthew 7:1-29; Luke 6:37-49

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Today in Your Reading...

We finished the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the simplest and clearest teaching in the Bible. People were amazed when they heard it for the first time, and we still marvel at it today. Jesus was (and is) the Master Teacher, and if we, His students, listen and apply His wise counsel, we will be wise like Him (*Lk. 6:40*).

At first, the topics of Jesus' teaching seem disjointed, but they are not. They are tied to the theme of wisdom. That's why He concluded by saying, "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them may be compared to a wise man; but He who hears them and does not act on them is a foolish man..." (*Matt. 7:24, 26*). His words are sound and stable. They have stood the test of time and the storms of life.

Reconsider His wise words.

Avoid judgmentalism. Before pointing out others' faults, humbly examine yourself (*v.1-5*). You too have sins and shortcomings. Instead, be gracious and forgiving (*Lk. 6:37, 38*).

Treat others the way you wanted to be treated (*Matt. 7:12*). This "golden rule" should be the driving force for all your words and deeds.

Just because someone sounds religious or godly doesn't mean that they are. You must not be taken captive by wolves in sheep's clothing (*v.15-23*) but rather discern if their fruit is real or fake. Don't be blind men following other blind men, or you will be led astray (*Lk. 6:39*).

Your words reveal your heart (*v.45*). If your heart has been changed by the Lord, then your words will reflect that change. Following the Lord and His ways are not easy (*Matt. 7:13, 14*). He will lead you upstream against the flow. But His way leads to life. Following the crowd leads to a dead end.

Daily Reflection

Uncommon sense. That's what comes to mind when I read the words of Jesus. But, if His words and ways are so wise, then why is it so uncommon to find people following them?

First, we have a spiritual enemy who deceives multitudes. Second, our sinful, rebellious nature rejects such unselfish thinking; and third, obedience is a choice. The wise man chooses where to build his house, on rock or sand.

Hearing the Lord's words is one thing; acting on them is another. Can you say that you've acted on these wise words of Jesus? If you have, what benefits have you experienced? If you haven't, what consequences have you endured?

Do you need wisdom today? God gives wisdom to men (*Prov.2:6; Jas. 1:5*). Ask for wisdom, and He will give it. Seek wisdom, and you will find it. Knock on wisdom's door, and it shall be opened (*Matt. 7:7-11*). **God's wisdom may be uncommon in the world, but don't let it be uncommon in your life.**

From Death to Life

February 8 – Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-17

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Today in Your Reading...

Jesus healed a centurion's servant and raised a widow's young son from the dead. Both cases illustrated His incredible power, as He healed the servant from a distance by just saying the words, and He woke up a dead man from his coffin. Can you imagine Jesus stopping a funeral procession today, opening the door of the hearse, touching the coffin inside, and bringing out the man who had been proclaimed dead? That story would make some headlines!

But, as always, there is more to the story than what's on the surface. The Roman centurion was not a Jew but a Gentile. Gentiles were typically despised by the Jews as ungodly pagans. However, this man was esteemed in the community for his benevolent deeds. Thus, when he asked Jewish leaders to go to Jesus on behalf of his servant, they complied.

The contrast in the story that follows is noteworthy. The Jewish leaders, who did not esteem Jesus, claimed that the centurion was worthy of Jesus' time and attention because of his works (*Lk. 7:4, 5*). However, the centurion, who esteemed Jesus highly, considered himself unworthy to be in Jesus' presence (*v.6, 7*). He also exhibited great faith in Jesus' authority to heal, even without being present to do so.

Simply put, the Jews had the wrong view of Jesus and of men (worthy because of works), but the Gentile had the correct view of Jesus and of himself (unworthy to be with Jesus). Jesus pointed out the contrast by saying, "I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (*Matt. 8:10*). Then, Jesus made a prediction that would've both surprised and angered the Jews. In essence, He foretold that many Gentiles will be "in the kingdom of heaven," but many Jews will not (*v.11, 12*). Jesus repeated this prophecy several times during His ministry (*Lk. 13:28, 29*). Even at His ascension, Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples of all nations, not just the Jews.

Daily Reflection

Praise God that we who are not Jews were included in God's salvation plan! Jesus is the Savior of all nations, not just His own. But what about the second story? We can find great encouragement and comfort there as well.

Someone who was once dead was made alive! Not only is the power of our Lord on display here, but it was a symbol of Jesus' entire ministry. He appeared in this place of death and darkness and brought light and life!

Furthermore, **while humans view death as insurmountable and final, Jesus treated death as trivial.** It was as if the man in the coffin was asleep. Jesus just said the word, "Arise," and the dead man awoke as from a nap (*Lk. 7:14, 15*). The witnesses were awe-struck at first, then they glorified God (*v.16, 17*).

Read *Ephesians 2:1-5* and *Colossians 2:13, 14*. Connect these verses to the funeral miracle.

Now, read *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*. What hope and encouragement do you find in these verses?

Cranky Kids

February 9 – Matthew 11:1-19; Luke 7:18-35

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Day 40 – 325 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading...

John questioned the role of Jesus, and Jesus confirmed the role of John. John was imprisoned by King Herod for pointing out the king's affair with his brother's wife (*Lk. 3:19*). Thus, all he could do was watch Jesus' ministry from the sideline. While he heard great news about the Messiah, he was growing impatient, for Jesus had not yet fulfilled all that John had predicted.

John prophesied that the Messiah would bring judgment on the world (*Matt. 3:10, 12*), and when Jesus did not do as John had said, John began to wonder if he was wrong, or if Jesus was not the Messiah after all. However, both men were right. John was, indeed, the forerunner to the Messiah, and Jesus was the Promised One. So then, what was the problem?

Simply put, John did not fully understand the timing of his prophecies. While his words were correct, and Jesus would judge the world, the judgment would not occur until Jesus' second coming. The Jews believed that the Messiah would accomplish all predictions at one time, overcoming both their sins and their enemies when He arrived. While Jesus would accomplish both, He would defeat sin's curse during His first advent, but He would not defeat His enemies until His second advent.

Though John was confused, Jesus confirmed his role and ministry. Of all the prophets, John was the greatest because he got to see and introduce the Messiah. However, Jesus said, "The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (*Matt. 11:11*). As great as John was, he did not get to see the rest of Jesus' ministry, all that He accomplished on the cross and through His resurrection. John was not alive when the Holy Spirit came and indwelt believers. That means that we are more privileged than the greatest Old Testament prophet because we live on this side of the cross, and we know Jesus as our Savior.

Daily Reflection

Despite all that was taking place, most of the Jews missed what was happening. In fact, Jesus said, "He who has an ear, let him hear" (*v.15*), which basically means, "Pay attention!" But the Jews were not paying attention. **Jesus described them as cranky kids who complained about everything.** They were blind to the greatest moments in history. They whined about John, and they grumbled about Jesus. Nothing seemed to satisfy their insolent hearts.

How do you suppose they became like that?
What makes a person impossible to please?

At times, we are no better than the Jews. We gripe and complain about everything and miss the good that God is accomplishing in our midst. Would Jesus' words describe you? How did you become like that? How do you break that habit?

Cranky kids are selfish and spoiled. God is doing great things all around you. Are you watching? Are you listening? Or are you griping?

Break Out of the Trance

February 10 – Matthew 11:20-30

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Day 41 – 324 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading...

Jesus rebuked three unrepentant cities then invited those who were willing to come to Him. So far in His ministry, Jesus had spent most of His time in the region of Galilee, particularly in three cities – Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (His headquarters). The people there had witnessed most of His miracles and heard most of His teaching, yet they were, in large part, unmoved. As a result of their indifferent attitude, Jesus prophesied of their eternal condemnation (v.20-24).

Why weren't the people in these cities more responsive to Jesus? We are not told exactly, but we can deduce some possibilities. Perhaps, they were caught up in the old traditions and rituals to respond to something new and different. Perhaps, they were stubborn and unbending like their ancestors. Or, perhaps, they were blinded by the deceptions of pious religious leaders who scoffed at prophets (v.18, 19, 25) and, instead, tried to save themselves by compliance with the laws of Moses (v.28).

Whatever the reason for their indifference to His offer of salvation, Jesus trusted in God's will and focused on those whose hearts were child-like and receptive (v.25, 26). Of course, Jesus' comments do not insinuate that the wise or intelligent cannot be saved but rather that the wise and intelligent are less responsive to Christ. Because of their knowledge, they become proud, and because of their pride, they become self-righteous and scoff at the possibility that they might be wrong.

In light of these truths, we can better understand what Jesus meant when He said, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (v.28). No amount of wisdom or works will save us from sin. Only Jesus can provide eternal rest for our souls. We only need to drop our burdens at His feet and surrender to His amazing grace!

Daily Reflection

While I love Jesus' gentle and humble invitation (v.28-30), I was struck by the hard hearts of those people in the cities that He denounced. Those who were the most fortunate to be in the presence of the Savior were the least responsive to His message and miracles? How can this be?

But then, I thought of us today. Are we not the most fortunate and comfortable society in history, yet our hearts are hard and cold? Even in our churches, **those who most observe the Gospel's message and miracles are entranced by routine and overexposure.**

A trance is a half-conscious state, somewhere between sleeping and waking, in which one is alive but hypnotized. Can you verify this description of the American church, that **God's people are often trapped in a religious trance?** How does it happen? Has it happened to you?

How can we **break out of the trance** and experience Jesus in fresh and meaningful ways?

Debt Forgiveness

February 11 – Luke 7:36-8:3

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Today in Your Reading...

Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. While Simon's motive is uncertain, we can assume it was either curiosity or to trap Jesus and accuse Him of an offense (v.49). However, the Lord used the opportunity to share the gospel.

The dinner invitation must have been open to others as well, for there was a disreputable woman in attendance (v.37-39). She was visibly convicted by Jesus' presence, for she was wetting His feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. Then, she kissed and anointed His feet with costly perfume. The Pharisee dismissed Jesus as a prophet, otherwise He would've known this woman's reputation.

Evidently, Jesus knew Simon's thoughts and told him a story about two debtors (v.40-43). The point of the parable was to explain the actions of the woman compared to the inaction of the Pharisee (v.44-47). In the presence of Jesus, our holy God in the flesh, the woman recognized her sinfulness. She knew of nothing else to do but to bow at His feet in shame and humble repentance. On the other hand, the Pharisee had not honored Jesus in any way or demonstrated basic hospitality.

When Jesus forgave the woman of her sins, He was proclaiming the gospel (v.48-50). **Before God, we all owe a great debt, and only He can forgive that debt.** Though the Pharisee and his dinner guests were just as guilty as the woman at Jesus' feet, they did not recognize their sinfulness but rather judged Jesus for thinking that He could forgive sins. As a result, they missed the Savior and His gospel.

The prophet Isaiah once got a glimpse of our holy God in all His glory and immediately realized his depravity (Isa. 6:1-5). **When we realize how rotten we are before God and how gracious He is to forgive us of our sins, we will respond appropriately.**

Daily Reflection

I was once asked what it was that motivated me to do the things I do. My immediate response was, "Gratitude. Once I recognized who I am, what I've done, and all that I have been saved from, I can only respond with gratitude." Jesus said of the woman, "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, therefore she loved much."

This woman was not the only one in the passage today. There were others like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, who followed and gave to Jesus (an act of worship) because of what He had done for them.

What about you? From what great debt has the Lord forgiven you? What is your motivation to follow and serve Jesus?

Does your response to God reflect your gratitude? Do your words, worship, service, giving, or love for others reflect what God has done for you? If not, perhaps it is because you have not yet recognized the great debt from which the Lord has freed you, a debt you were unable to pay.

Remember Jesus' words, "He who is forgiven little, loves little." Simply put, **your response to God's grace is either evidence of your understanding of sin or your ignorance of it.**