

NT LESSON #9

“SEEK YE FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD”

READING: MATTHEW 6,7

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: “What’s in it for me?” This is an almost universal question. All of us who embark on a new adventure, who try a new job, who make concessions in a relationship, who put forth extra effort in an assignment, who give up something desirable, are inclined to want to know the answer to this question before we begin. But in the beginning of Matthew 6, the Savior teaches another law—a higher law—a law which requires us to look for benefit and welfare for others rather than for ourselves. The overriding sense of the first 21 verses of Matthew 6 is that we ought to deal with others much like a friendly clerk in a neighborhood market: “What can I do for you?” If we mean to take advantage of the gospel and its teachings and opportunities, we must turn the focus of our lives away from ourselves.

I met a man once whose entire focus was on having his calling and election made sure. A worthy goal, without question, but with him it was a burden of immense proportions, consuming all of his energy, his hope, his love. Every other principle of the gospel was subordinate to this passion of his. When he borrowed and refused to return several books from a seminary library, I asked him what he was trying to accomplish.

“I need those books,” he replied. “You don’t. Your students don’t. You don’t understand what you have here, but I do.” He would not give them back.

When I asked him why they were so important, he told me of his dream, his goal, his *need* to make his calling and election sure. The books had insights and statements he thought would aid him in his quest. Missionary work was a diversion. Service an abstraction. Church callings an inconvenience. “I don’t have time,” he said. “I might die and not be ready.”

Years later in a religion class at BYU, the concept of calling and election came up again. The instructor, a wonderful Christian and a marvelous teacher, seemed to feel as much a longing for this blessing as my book-stealing acquaintance of old,

but as he explained how he felt about it he said, *"I would like to forget myself right into it."*

I have never forgotten that simple and powerful insight. I believe he was right. The greatest blessings of the gospel do not come when we focus on ourselves, but when we forget ourselves and focus on others. This is the message of the first part of Matthew 6.

I. KEEPING IT A SECRET

In the JST, Matthew 6:1 begins *"And it came to pass that as Jesus taught his disciples, he said unto them, Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in Heaven."* My uncle, Hans Flammer, seemed to have this concept figured out. I wrote a tribute to him many years ago, at the time of his death. He was a man who did all the right things, and did them for all the right reasons. He did what he did, not because he wanted recognition, and not because he wanted a reward; he did the right thing because it was the right thing to do. He never cared who was watching or even if anyone at all was watching. He knew that his Father in Heaven was always watching.

HANS

Hans was Swiss, but of German parentage. He came to America when it still felt like a land of promise. He had not been here long when two young men knocked on his door and brought the Savior and His gospel into Hans' life.

Three months later Hans was in St. Johns, Arizona, a new Christian, looking for the best place to serve the Lord. However, his enthusiasm to move on was tempered by his love for Arizona. Not the sagebrush, cedar, and cactus, of course. The object of his affection was Arizona Gibbons, and she reciprocated.

They married and moved to Linden, Arizona, where neighbors taught Hans an unforgettable lesson about the right ways to do alms.

An unexpected, devastating fire destroyed had destroyed every possession the family owned. Hans was burned so severely in the fire that he and his family remained in the neighboring city of Snowflake

for a month while a doctor cared for him. His son wrote the following about their return to their property.

Toward the end of the month Uncle Aut and Aunt Jayne Frost came to Snowflake. They asked us to ride with them up to the ranch to "look at the remains of the cabin and see how the crops were growing." (My parents owned forty acres of mostly forested land adjoining the Frost Ranch.) As we came to our place, Uncle Aut turned into it. We could not imagine why he wanted to take us there since there was no through road to his place and there were no crops to be seen. He and Aunt Jayne gave us some excuse and insisted. As they drove through the trees into the center of our land, there hidden among the large trees stood a new frame house!

It took Dad and Mother a moment to comprehend and to believe what their eyes were seeing. It is not possible for me to adequately describe the emotional scene as my parents began to realize what it meant. Our neighbors had built us a new home without our knowledge or any help from us. Some of those neighbors now emerged from the house to witness our homecoming, to share in our amazement, and then our joy. My parents were completely overcome with emotion; tears of gratitude and happiness were plentifully shed by them and by all present. (Gordon H. Flammer, *Stories of a Mormon Pioneering Community*, Excel Graphics Inc., 1995, p. 1)

Hans finally left Arizona and traveled to Utah, and to Cache Valley.

Arizona was my father's sister, so Hans was always Uncle Hans to me. He moved his family practically into our back yard. He was always smiling, always laughing. He was happy to be alive and refused to keep it a secret from his face. Paul's teachings about being reconciled with God found a magnificent mortal example in Hans.

He was eccentric in his habits and set in his ways. He would not learn to drive a car. Perhaps he could not see the sense in it. Hans had his bicycle. For twenty years it got him to work and it got him home. The bike started on the coldest mornings, ran on regular, parked anywhere, and repaired easily. But the reality was that he had no need to drive, and he enjoyed the quiet passage of the seasons of Nature's beauty as he pedaled along.

Of course driving would save time, but he did not need more time. Everything he wanted to do he was doing already. Everything he needed, he had. He was master of his world because he was master of himself. He was not a slave to greed, lust, or unsatisfied desires. Money was important for his family's welfare, and so he was careful and frugal. But anybody who needed money more than he did could have it. He conceded time to sleep, but arose every morning at 5:00 to study the scriptures and to accompany himself on the piano as he sang a hymn--to start his day the way a day ought to start. He had a garden in which a weed more than an inch high was a personal insult; in which rows were always and irrevocably straight; in which he labored long, hot hours every spring and summer; and from which any neighbor (or nephew) in need was free to harvest.

For this man of simple tastes, life was a constant banquet. His soul was in perfect harmony with the purpose and meaning of living, because he had something important and wonderful to contribute: himself. The lessons of the new frame house in Linden were never lost to him. No job was too insignificant if it was for someone else. Broken fences and doors just seemed to mend themselves in our neighborhood. The nine widows who lived on *his* two-block section of Center Street knew they had a benefactor watching over them, practicing pure religion with a hammer and a wheelbarrow.

In fact, Hans owned the world's first wheelbarrow to go one hundred thousand miles without a major tune-up. He hauled enough dirt, cement, and gravel around our neighborhood to rebuild Glen Canyon Dam. As often as not, his benefactors never knew he had come or gone. ***He did not do his good deeds on the sly. He did not try not to get caught. He simply did not care if anyone knew. He was the Teacher's man, doing the work of the Teacher. He did not believe in labels or limits. He believed in helping people with their***

problems. He believed in service.

One evening I was at his home, watching television with his son, when his daughter dashed into the room and begged her mother to iron her dress, a pleated skirt. She had a date, was late, and (for dramatic effect) was nearly hysterical. Her mother was occupied with a small household chore. Hans told her to carry on. He picked up the skirt and turned on the iron. He was simplicity and serenity as he worked, one eye on the pleats, one on the T.V.

Hans was just finishing when Diane came back into the room. It surprised her a little to see him ironing. I could see it in her eyes. She slowed her mad rush long enough to look at him for a moment. Then she kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "Thanks, Dad" But I don't think she understood. I don't think any of us understood until he fell.

His Stake built a new church in the vacant lot next to his home. Hans was so pleased. He had retired from his carpentry work at the university and his days were free. Helping build that building became his new dedication. The disciples of the Savior had once built him a new home; now he would help build a new home for the Savior and some of His disciples. Hans spent his days there, all day, every day, doing what had to be done, giving and serving without pay and without remorse. Then one day, as he worked in the cultural hall lining up the roof joists, the scaffolding shifted. He fell headfirst to the concrete floor below. We rushed to him and found him bleeding, conscious, coherent. He said two things. With his steady good humor peeking out through eyes glazed with pain he whispered, "It will feel better when it quits hurting" And then, as a wave of dizziness and agony washed over him, he added, "Don't call the doctor. I have to set up chairs for the ward party tonight."

He slipped away from us then, into a coma. He never returned. His gravestone is small and simple, an appropriate symbol. But his true monument stands on Center Street, majestic and grand, among the houses of *his* widows: that new church, for which Hans gave what he had always given: himself.

In the book, *The Mansion*, a man on a tour of heaven asked this question:

"What is it that counts here?"

Came the reply, "Only that which is truly given. Only that good which is done for the love of doing it. Only those plans in which the welfare of others is the master thought. Only those labors in which the sacrifice is greater than the reward. Only those gifts in which the giver forgets himself" (pp. 364-68; cited in "Anonymous": Elder Thomas S. Monson, C.R., April 1983).

In 1919, President Charles W. Penrose said it this way:

Oh, my brethren and sisters, why waste your time, your talents, your means, your influence in following something that will perish and pass away, when you could devote yourselves to a thing that will stand forever? For this Church and kingdom, to which you belong, will abide and continue in time, in eternity, while endless ages roll along, and you with it will become mightier and more powerful, while the things of this world will pass away and perish, and will not abide in nor after the resurrection, saith the Lord our God." (Conference Report, pp. 36-37).

The Savior makes this point three times as he discusses alms, praying, and fasting. "You will not be paid twice for these things," he seems to be saying. "You can do the righteous things for the reward that comes with earthly recognition, or you can do them for the reward that comes with heavenly recognition."

The counsel given here about praying is worth special attention. The Lord talks about why we pray, where we pray, and how we pray.

Why we pray: Any of us who have been in the Church long enough have listened to prayers that seemed to be more for the ears of the congregation than for the ears of the Lord. Matthew 7:1,2 teaches us that we must be careful about judging in this matter, but we must know that praying is not a theatrical production. It is not a religious ritual. It is not a duty. It is a conversation. Joseph Smith said, "It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another," (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 345)

Where we pray: But for that conversation to be effective it must generally be private. "Enter into thy closet," the Lord says (Matthew 6:5). In Alma 34:26, Amulek suggests that we pour "out [our] souls in [our] closets, and [our] secret places, and in [our] wilderness." Privacy gives us the opportunity to focus on the parts of prayer that matter most. We can there focus on our own hunger and we can pour ourselves into the cups of our words without concern for what anyone but the Father might think. We can pray with real intent. We can concentrate on what we say rather than how much we say. "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking" (Matthew 6:7). In addition, a closet or a secret place or a wilderness might free us from the distractions of a blaring TV or radio, from extraneous conversations, from unexpected interruptions. Since the Father knows what we need before we ask him (Matthew 6:8), the true purpose of prayer is not for us to get his attention, but for him to get ours. It is in the process of prayer that we get ourselves ready for his answers.

How we pray: "After this manner therefore pray ye . . ." is the Lord's introduction to his example of prayer. This prayer is worth a careful review with the question in mind, "What is he trying to teach me about prayer?" We find here examples of worship, acknowledgment of weakness and the need for divine assistance, honorable requests for things of great worth . . . This is a superb pattern for prayer.

In Matthew 7:7-11, the Lord gives additional instruction on prayer. In verse 7, the most common verb used with teachings about prayer appears three times. That verb is "shall." "Ask, and it **shall** be given you; seek, and ye **shall** find; knock, and it **shall** be opened unto you . . ." (Matthew 7:7) There is nothing ambivalent about this counsel, and it shows up many times in the standard works. For example:

Luke 11:9

And I say unto you, Ask, and it **shall** be given you; seek, and ye **shall** find; knock, and it **shall** be opened unto you.

3 Nephi 14:7

Ask, and it **shall** be given unto you; seek, and ye **shall** find; knock, and it **shall** be opened unto you.

D&C 88:63

Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye **shall** find me; ask, and ye **shall** receive; knock, and it **shall** be opened unto you.

A dear friend once taught me, "God answers every prayer, either in the way we want or in a better way."

One final note here on doing the right things for the right reasons. Many years ago as I handed my tithing envelope to a member of the bishopric, I made a comment to a nearby sister designed to draw her attention to my faithfulness, the evidence of which was in the envelope I had just surrendered. I wanted to "appear unto men" (Matthew 7:17,18) to pay my tithing, which in this case I certainly did, a fact which she called to my attention in a gentle and painfully educational way. I have tried never to forget her excellent lesson. Again, with fasting, we are taught this concept: if we care too much about what men think of our spirituality and religious endeavors, we must not expect praise and blessings from the Father because of what he thinks.

Let us remember . . . and always keep in mind the words often quoted by President Harold B. Lee: "There is no limit to the good that you can do, if you don't care who gets the credit" (Antoine R. Ivins: C.R., April 1946, p. 42).

II. WHERE IS YOUR TREASURE?

All of this instruction is clearly related to the passages about treasure that follow (Matt. 7:19-24) and *treasure* seems to be used here as a symbol for that which motivates our actions.

While yet on earth men may lay up treasures in heaven. These treasures, earned here and now in mortality, are in effect deposited to our eternal bank account in heaven where eventually they will be reinherited again in immortality. Treasures in heaven are the character, perfections, and attributes which men acquire by obedience to law. Thus, those who gain such attributes of godliness as knowledge, faith, justice, judgment, mercy, and truth, will find

these same attributes restored to them again in immortality.
'Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.' (D&C 130:18.) The greatest treasure it is possible to inherit in heaven consists in gaining the continuation of the family unit in the highest heaven of the celestial world (Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, Vol.2, p.152 - p.153).

How often, in one dramatic way after another, do we find Him who had not where to lay his head, teaching that worldly wealth is of little eternal worth; that men should lay up for themselves treasures, not on earth, but in heaven; that they should seek first the kingdom of God and let the things of this world take a position of secondary importance; that one thing above all others is needful -- to love and serve God and the Son whom he hath sent! (Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, Vol.3, p.191).

Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." (Col. 3:2) No amount of accumulated property will be adequate compensation for an eternity in a lower kingdom. Years ago in a Literature class at Utah State University I read an interesting line in a poem: "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind" (Emerson, in an Ode to W.H. Channing). It is this inclination of many of us to allow things--stuff--to dictate the courses of our lives that caused the Savior to make these declarations. You cannot have both heavenly and earthly treasure. If you seek and obtain the heavenly treasure first, then any earthly treasure you might subsequently obtain will be used to insure your heavenly treasure. Review the words of Jacob:

But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God. And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good--to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted (Jacob 2:18,19).

We are required by divine decree to make a choice in this matter.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.

Ye cannot serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24).

The counsel of Matthew 7:22 give this direction—we must insure that our “eye be single . . .” drawing our attention away from **stuff** to the goodness and glory of God, and to his light. Otherwise, if our “eye be evil . . .” if our attention is focused on earthly things, our lives will be filled with darkness.

In 3 Nephi 13:25 (the verse that corresponds to Matthew 6:25) the Lord indicates that the following instructions (25-34) are specifically for those called full-time into his service:

And now it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words he looked upon the twelve whom he had chosen, and said unto them: Remember the words which I have spoken. For behold, ye are they whom I have chosen to minister unto this people. Therefore I say unto you, take no thought . . .

We who labor for a living in the minefields of mortality must take some thought for our lives and our livelihood, what we eat and drink and wear. “Six days shalt thou labor . . .” is also a part of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:9). These things, however, can not be our primary priority, for we must also “seek . . . first the kingdom of God and his righteousness . . .” (Matthew 6:33). But it is not generally required of us to seek it exclusively, as it was and is of the Twelve and some others called to a special ministry in the kingdom.

III. “DO YE EVEN SO TO THEM”

The JST changes Matthew 7:1,2.

Now these are the words which Jesus taught his disciples that they should say unto the people. Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged; but judge righteous judgment.

We are still listening in, as it were, to a sermon given in a Priesthood Leadership Seminar. But these instructions were to be passed on; they were teachings that his leaders “should say unto the people.” This matter of judging, so difficult to understand and apply without the JST, receives further attention in Matthew

7:15-20, where the Lord directs us to judge carefully those to whom we give our allegiance. In Mosiah 23:14, Alma taught his people:

And also trust no one to be your teacher nor your minister, except he be a man of God, walking in his ways and keeping his commandments.

This is the counsel he is giving in Matthew 7. We must judge men by their fruits (7:16-20). Righteous appearances are not enough (see Matthew 7:21-24).

The JST applies the example of the beam and the mote specifically to the Scribes and Pharisees, but that does not lessen its general application to all of us who would rather criticize than repent. This matter of sawdust and beams is an interesting example from one who must have spent time as a youth in the carpenter shop of his father. He had no doubt had a speck in his own eye, and knew something of the difficulty of removing it.

And again, ye shall say unto them, Why is it that thou beholdest the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and canst not behold a beam in thine own eye?

And Jesus said unto his disciples, Beholdest thou the scribes, and the Pharisees, and the priests, and the Levites? They teach in their synagogues, but do not observe the law, nor the commandments; and all have gone out of the way, and are under sin.

Go thou and say unto them, Why teach ye men the law and the commandments, when ye yourselves are the children of corruption?

Say unto them, Ye hypocrites, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. (Matthew 7: 4-8, JST)

We are told continuously to call people to repentance, but we must do so when it

is appropriate, with a repentant attitude. We are not calling from the top of the hill to those struggling toward our lofty station from below; rather we are all climbing together, counseling and helping and struggling and growing together.

In Prov. 24:29, we read "Say not, I will do so to him as he hath done to me . . ." What we should say is "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12) This is one of many injunctions against revenge given in the scriptures. We are not allowed to do things to others because they have done them to us. Rather we are to treat people in precisely the way we would like to be treated. This is not easy counsel, but it is counsel that will enable us to obey "the law and the prophets" and "enter in at the strait gate."

IV. SAND, OR ROCK?

The final metaphor of this remarkable sermon has to do with the building of houses (lives!) on a foundation that will last through the ages. While I lived in a small, hilly community in Arizona, I watched a number of homes under construction. Because the soil contained so much clay, special precautions were in order in some parts of the town. The house on the edge of the hill across the street from me was constructed only after huge supports were driven into the soil and through the clay to the rock below. It required extra work and expense, of course, but when an excess of rain deluged the area and the new home 150 yards down the street settled and cracked, with 3-inch gaps between the bricks along two walls, this house stood firm. It was built on the rock.

I had a friend who disagreed with the counsel of his bishop about the way in which he ought to conduct himself in the fulfillment of his calling. He refused to follow counsel contrary to his own convictions. He argued with every priesthood leader who tried to correct his course. He had houses to build—dream castles—in which he was the chief architect and only inhabitant. Our ways parted, but when next I heard from him, he had a business card which identified him as *PROPHET, SEER, AND REVELATOR OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST*. He built a house on sand, because he would not "hear" and "do" the things the Savior's disciples counseled. When the storms came and the winds blew, his house fell, and he was too blind to know it.

It is interesting to consider this final counsel of the Savior in light of the parable of the Three Pigs. The winds are there. The adversary is there in the form of a big, bad wolf. Even the falling houses—those not built on the rock (not built with brick) are there.

Joseph F. Smith spoke powerfully of this matter. He said:

But the men and the women who are honest before God, who humbly plod along, doing their duty, paying their tithing, and exercising that pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father, which is to visit the fatherless and the widows in their afflictions and to keep oneself unspotted from the world, and who help look after the poor; and who honor the holy Priesthood, who do not run into excesses, who are prayerful in their families, and who acknowledge the Lord in their hearts, they will build up a foundation that the gates of hell cannot prevail against; and if the floods come and the storms beat upon their house, it shall not fall, for it will be built upon the rock of eternal truth. I pray that this vast congregation will build upon this imperishable foundation, upon the principle expressed by the words of Joshua, "as for me and my house, we will serve God," and as also expressed by Job, "though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." If you have that spirit toward God and his work in these latter days, you will build steadily and slowly, it may be, but surely, upon a foundation that will endure throughout the countless ages of eternity. And if you do not get any great manifestations, you need not worry about it. You will get the testimony of Jesus Christ in your hearts, and you will know God and Jesus whom he has sent, whom to know is life eternal, just as well as those who receive visions. For those who do receive visions, the devil will try to make them believe that they were delusions, and if they commit sin, he will be sure to make them believe it. God bless you, is my prayer. Amen (Apr. C.R., 1900, p. 42, also in Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, p.7).

CONCLUSION: There is no place for mediocrity here. The Sermon on the Mount demands our best efforts in discipleship. "Good enough" will likely never be good enough. Our commission is to serve God with our hearts, minds, might, and strength. I found a poster of the leaning tower of Pisa on the Internet. It had a

caption something like this: "Mediocrity: it saves time and money and no one will notice until it is too late."

The truth is, someone will notice. You can count on it.

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