

A GUIDED WALK
THROUGH THE
NEW TESTAMENT

Personal notes from a lifetime of reading
the most important literature in the world

by Ron Holmes

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FOREWORD

RON HOLMES has produced a unique collection in these writings, because they are both easy to read and to enjoy. They are written from an obviously long lifetime of personal experience and study.

I have known Ron since he came to South Australia in 1964, and have followed his ministry at many churches from my position as President both locally and nationally as a part of Churches of Christ, and from his time as my own pastor.

He has taught me to read the whole passage, and not be satisfied reading one or two verses and possibly taking them out of context. That is the importance of the examples that are covered in these books which give meaning to life's experiences as you read the background to the various passages.

The personal experiences he quotes are very practical, and communicate the message that he wants to give with simple explanations that are so easy to adapt into the readers own life experiences.

A worthy set of volumes which can be read by all to learn from the Author's lifetime of practical experience and study. I have also used it as a valuable study guide.

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A GUIDED WALK IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Preface

BEFORE BEGINNING it is necessary to correct a thought that may come to some on reading the title of this book. It certainly came to one of my friends. He immediately wanted to know when I had toured the Bible lands and had I enjoyed it as much as he did. Since I had never toured the Bible Lands and, to be honest, had never experienced a desire to do so, I had to explain that this was a guided walk among the writings of the New Testament documents, not a tour of the lands where they were written.

I know many Christians have found visiting the places where Christ walked enlivened their faith. But there were people who actually lived in the area where these documents were written, and who may have even met Jesus or his disciples in person, yet had no idea of what the term “New Testament” meant. I belong to those who have had the enormous privilege of having the documents available in my own language with opportunity to study and live by the message they contain. That to me has always seemed far more precious than a visit to Bible lands.

At theological college we were taught Koine Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written. It was not the classical Greek but the ordinary person’s language which had spread throughout the known world at that time, much as English has today. I never became a Greek scholar but imbibed enough to look up Greek words for their original meaning when a problem arose in the English translation. In 1971 I bought a study Bible which consisted of the latest English translation – Good News For Modern Man or Today’s English version – plus alongside it on each page the Greek text of the United Bible Societies. There was also plenty of room for personal notes. Over the past 35 years or so I have used this constantly, reading from cover to cover, about a chapter at a time. When I finished, usually a couple of years later, it all began again.

This book is based on the marginal notes made in that New Testament plus others made earlier, over a lifetime of reading. It is not a Bible Commentary. There are plenty of those available. It is simply a record of the thoughts that have come to one person as he has read the English translation of the Christian documents on a fairly regular basis as an aid to spiritual life and growth. It is offered as a helpful companion to others who do, or would like to do, the same.

I am aware that this material may not be attractive to the professional theologian because it avoids long words and theological jargon. The fundamentalist may not like it because it is not interested in questionable human theories about inspiration and infallibility. On the other hand, liberal theology types who have been persuaded that scripture is nothing but “myths and legends” may find the records taken much too literally for them.

However, for the average serious Christian who sees the New Testament writings as the only concrete connection we have with the historical Jesus, and who wants to know what Jesus said about what it means to be a Christian, it is my hope that these thoughts will be as helpful to you as they have to me.

While some of the ideas expressed have come to me from various sources, the majority have simply come into my mind as I have read and meditated on the scriptural material. Many Christians could write a book like this, and many have.

Indeed I suggest that you do so yourself by having a notebook with you whenever you read. I have sometimes been amazed, on reading some passage again, to see what I wrote on an earlier occasion. It seems to be a completely new thought!

Finally, this material is not meant to be read on its own. My main concern is that you follow the road of the New Testament writings yourself. As you do so, use this as the help of a companion who has been that way before and may be able to point out some of the important sights and guide through some of the tricky bits.

In the ‘Your Notes’ version each alternate page is blank for ‘Your Notes’. Here you may jot down your own thoughts about the passage. You may even feel it necessary to disagree with my interpretation!

MY APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

MY INTEREST in the subject goes back to my childhood. I was born in 1924. Brought up in a Christian family, I attended church and Sunday school regularly and received a middle of the road Protestant style education of preaching and teaching. Being a member of Churches of Christ, the Australian branch of what was commonly called The Restoration Movement, linked with Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches in America and England, **there was a heavy emphasis on the New Testament as the only authority for the church.**

However there was also a strong belief in **the whole Bible as “God’s Word”**. The attitude to both old and new Testaments as being “inspired” and thereby, in most people’s minds, different from all other literature, was generally accepted.

Those, like myself, who trained for ministry in a Churches of Christ college were given a theological education in which they were required to define what they meant by “inspired”, given broad rules for how to interpret the scripture, and introduced to a wide range of thought in the religious area.

While the acceptance of the Bible as ‘inspired’ was the standard position in our College, there were questions about what, exactly, particular people meant by this. Basically it was that those who wrote were moved by the Spirit of God to write what they did.

For some, ‘inspired’ meant that the Bible was a book which had the answer to every question of the universe and that it was totally infallible and literally true at every point. They took a view usually called “Verbal Inspiration” which is very similar to that taken by Muslims concerning their sacred books. **This was usually called the Fundamentalist position.**

If this position was questioned, some, because they found it too difficult to separate their whole Christian faith from a particular view of the Bible, maintained the position that “salvation was for Bible believing Christians only”. By this they usually meant those who believed as above.

Others, impressed by liberal theologians, swung to an entirely opposite view that the Bible was nothing more than “myths and legends”. **This was usually called the Modernist or Liberal position.** In this case, if their faith was dependent on an infallible book, instead of an infallible God, they sometimes gave up their faith.

My own view was neither of these. I considered myself a “Bible believing Christian”, but that, for me, meant **believing what the Bible claimed about itself, not what other people claimed about it.**

Perhaps I was fortunate. I did not go from a normal church life into theological college. **For the three years which were the most significant in my Christian development, I was - to use a phrase more common in another area - ‘without benefit of clergy’.**

From when I turned 18 until after I turned 21 I was in the services during World War Two. My service was in small units where we had no chaplains and were so isolated that I rarely had opportunity to go to church. **Therefore I did most of my Bible reading and thinking with the Bible alone as my source book.**

I also did it in an environment where I had to live my faith and be prepared to discuss it and support it with my fellow servicemen, all of us involved in a war situation which sharpened up everyone’s attitude to what they believed about life and death and God’s part in it, if there was a God!

My very first ‘sermon’ was preached to a congregation of which half were American submariners and half were Australian RAAF personnel. I had no reference books except my Bible and I knew anything I said would be followed up carefully in both conversation and application to practical living. These were men I lived and worked with day and night. My New Testament had to give me something relating to real life, and it did!

It is also perhaps worth recording that in the then new and secret field of Radar, in which I worked, most personnel came from an intellectual background and held a wide range of religious belief and non-belief. We spent long hours in serious discussion and anyone's views had to stand up to challenges from competent debate.

During these years I had opportunity to do something I suspect many church-going Christians in normal life do not do. That is, read the Bible from cover to cover just as you would read any other book, without being told as you go along what this means and that means, but rather thinking deeply about what it actually says. It is an entirely different experience from reading short sections in Bible study groups or listening to texts expounded in sermons.

One of the major truths I learned early was the difference between the old and new testaments. It soon becomes clear that **the O.T. was the religious record of the Israelite nation** recording the **old agreement** between God and the Jewish nation based on the law of Moses. Salvation was by obedience to law.

On the other hand, **the N.T. is the guidebook for the Christian church** recording the **new agreement** between God and **all nations** based on the good news of Jesus. Salvation is by faith in Jesus.

The letters to the Galatians and to Hebrews make it clear that **for Christians the New entirely supersedes the Old.**

The simple proposal that the Old Testament reveals what was known about God before Jesus came and the New Testament what was known about God after Jesus came solves many major Bible problems.

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EXPLANATION:

This book has two sections:

The first three books are complete treatments of three different types of literature, originally produced as separate study guides:

1. Narrative (Matthew's Gospel),
2. Counsel to a Christian Community, at a particular place and time: (1st Corinthians)
3. A coded message in picture language: (Revelation).

*The remainder consists of notes on the rest of the New Testament based on the principles of interpretation explained in the first section
The first section should be read first.*

This material is not intended to stand alone but rather to be read in conjunction with the New Testament.

You will need to have a copy of the New Testament, in English, in front of you while reading. "The Message", by Peterson, is in wide use today, but as some copies do not utilise the break-up into verses, which makes study references possible, I would suggest "The Good News" version which I have used for the past 40 years.

My purpose is to encourage people to read the basic documents of the Christian faith for themselves.

A GUIDED WALK
IN THE
NEW TESTAMENT

“The Gospel”
according to Matthew

Personal notes from a lifetime of reading
the most important literature in the world

by Ron Holmes

INTRODUCTION

JUST BEFORE we start on the first book in the New Testament I want to say a few words about its title, in particular the words – **“The Gospel”**.

In Churches of Christ when I was young almost every church had two services each Sunday. In the morning there was the Worship Service. This was intended for a congregation composed mostly of church members and was centered around the celebration of the Lord’s Supper or Communion. The sermon was aimed at teaching Christians how to live the Christian way.

In the evening was the Gospel Service. This was intended for a congregation that included people not yet committed to the Christian faith and featured a sermon aimed at persuading them to ‘believe the gospel’ and become Christians. Preachers were expected to present ‘teaching sermons’ in the morning and ‘gospel sermons’ in the evening.

During my first year at College, in which I was required to concentrate on secular subjects since I had not matriculated at High School, I was invited to speak at the Gospel Service in a suburban church. This was my first sermon since entering College so I gave it considerable thought. **My New Testament told me that Jesus came preaching “the gospel of the Kingdom”** so I used some of his teaching about the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, and concluded with an invitation for my hearers to become citizens of this kingdom which was so different from the kingdoms of this world.

There was no response, but that was not unusual, so I pronounced the Benediction and went to the door to shake hands with the people as they went out. One of them, an elderly lady, fixed me with a severe eye and remarked, “That was an interesting little talk you gave us tonight young man. Last week we had brother B... It was wonderful to hear the gospel!”

Brother B... was a fervent evangelical preacher with a simple offer of salvation to anyone who was prepared to come out the front and

confess their faith. He belonged more to the “fire and brimstone” line of preachers. So I knew what she meant. But as we go on our journey we will look more than once at what the New Testament writers meant by “**the gospel**”. Where we are now it appears to mean **the whole story of Jesus** as told by a reformed tax collector called Matthew.

MATTHEW CHAPTER ONE

(Please read the N.T. passages first. Then the notes)

The Family Tree of Jesus v.1-17

THIS RATHER DULL list of both well-known and obscure names is a reminder that **all were important**. The “unremembered” names in the list remind us that no one is insignificant. All these and many more had a place in the line leading to Jesus even if they were not aware of it. **So our lives, which may seem small and obscure, can have a place in the great plan of God for His universe.**

The Genealogy Problem. Already in this first chapter of Matthew we have a problem for some views of the Bible. If you compare the list of the ancestors of Jesus in Matthew with that in Luke 3:23 to 38 you will find that in the first ten generations back from Joseph few names match. Also in the total list or “genealogy”, when compared with the Old Testament records, a number of names are left out. Bible commentators over the years have suggested reasons for these apparent “mistakes”.

For example – In Matthew the division into sets of fourteen required leaving out some names. It was a device to assist memorisation. It is important to remember that printing and mass production of books was unknown in Bible days. **For most people memorisation was the only way of learning.** Three sets of fourteen helped a lot!

It is also suggested that Matthew follows the legal line of succession through the Kings of Judah and their heirs, which was not always identical with the line from father to son.

Another suggestion is that Luke gave the line of Mary while Matthew gave that of Joseph. The main purpose of genealogy was to provide an historical background indicating who a person was. Gaps of some generations are unimportant.

Basically there is no problem for those who take the New Testament for what it claims to be – the most important historical record of all time bringing us the story of Jesus and his church and God’s plan for the salvation of mankind.

When the New Testament is studied and understood as such a record, rather than as a “magic” book, like the Koran or the Book of Mormon, it is indeed God’s Word to the world.

The Birth of Jesus v.18-24

It is important to remember that the problem of how a virgin could possibly give birth did not originate with modern theologians. Sometimes they give the impression that it was only believable to primitive unscientific types of ancient times. **Actually, the first person to notice the problem, after Mary herself, was her fiance, Joseph.** He certainly did not believe in virgin birth. (See v.19)

A Bigger Problem

Whether Jesus was born of a virgin is something which at this point of time we either believe or disbelieve. No one can prove, from a scientific approach, what happened, or did not happen, some 2000 years ago.

Since I believe in Jesus as the Son of God I have no problem with the virgin birth. *The question which is more important and which we can do something about is whether we want Jesus to save us from our sins.* (See v.21) ‘Saviour’ was the meaning of his name. No doubt we all want to be saved from the guilt and penalty of sin, but what about being saved from ‘our sins’?

MATTHEW CHAPTER TWO

(Please continue to read all sections)

More About The Birth Of Jesus v.1-12

THE COMING of Jesus “troubled Herod”, (v.3) but made the wise men “happy”.(v.10). Why? Because Herod was selfish, the others were wise men. **So, in us, the selfish part is troubled by Jesus but the wise part rejoices.** After they had found Jesus the wise men went home “by another road”. After meeting Jesus we too will walk “by another road”.

The First Attempt To Kill Jesus v.13-23

Why all boys up to two years? Compare v:16 with v 7 where Herod found out exactly when the star appeared. **It could well have taken two years of travel and search for the wise men to arrive at Jerusalem.**

MATTHEW CHAPTER THREE

The Work Of John The Baptist v.1-12

THE HEART of the preaching of Jesus was the Kingdom of heaven. **There is very little in the Bible about “Heaven”. There is a great deal about “the Kingdom of heaven” or “the kingdom of God”.** In verses 1 & 2 John the Baptist announces that this kingdom is near.

In **verses 7 & 8** we find men who came asking for baptism but the preacher turned them away! **It was because they were only looking for forgiveness and not a changed life.** They wanted to be saved from sin’s penalty but not **from their sins!** (See 1:21)

Verse 9 shows that those who think that lineal descent from Abraham brings salvation are wrong, whether they look to Jewish descent or to such things as the British Israel theory. **Only entrance to the Kingdom of God and a changed life counts.**

Verses 11 & 12 – The judgment of Jesus between the wheat and the chaff is something that happens at his first coming: “he has his winnowing shovel *with him*”. It is not just some future event. It happens whenever He comes into a situation bringing the cleansing of His spirit and the fire of his judgment.

Baptism Today v. 13-17

This short passage shows us several things. One is that the word baptism in the N.T. has its original Greek meaning of immersion in water. That is why John was *at the river* to baptise people.

However meaningful the later practice of baptism as the sprinkling of an infant has become to many people, few would argue with the fact that **in the New Testament record, baptism was the immersion of responsible people who asked for it.**

Secondly, just as John refused to baptise those who came without recognising that it signified a rebirth into a new kind of life, (v.8) so he tried to avoid baptising Jesus **because he was aware that he was already living that kind of life!**

More than fifty years ago during my Bible College days I was assisting one of our older preachers named Thomas Hagger. He was a well-known evangelist among our churches. I can still hear him saying on the many occasions when we had a baptismal service – “Unless your baptism means that you are committing yourself to God and intend to live a new life with Christ as your Lord, all that happens is that you go down into the water a dry sinner and come up a wet one.”

The baptism of Jesus was the public opportunity he took to show his complete surrender to the will of God. And Jesus became aware that God had responded to that act in his vision of the Spirit of God and the voice of God.

It is worth noting that there is a sense in which something like the experience of Jesus recounted in verses 16 and 17 happens with every true baptism.

MATTHEW CHAPTER FOUR

The Temptations Of Jesus v.1-11

THE TEMPTATIONS of Jesus following His baptism can teach us a lot. Our temptations once we have become Christians can be like those of Jesus.

1. To concentrate on God's gifts rather than his voice. (v.3)

When writing to the church at Corinth regarding spiritual gifts, the apostle Paul reminds them that the ability to do miracles means nothing compared with Christian love put into practice. (See 1 Corinthians chapter 13)

2. To expect God's protection when we do not deserve it. (v.6)

The idea that because God will look after us we can take stupid risks, e.g. fast driving, is an idea from the devil. Yet I know of some Christians who promote and practice this.

3. To deny God altogether in hope of worldly advancement. (v.9)

There is no point in being active in the church on Sunday if we are using questionable methods in the business on Monday.

We can also learn from Jesus use of scripture to meet temptation.

He shows -

1. Knowledge of scripture – (v.4)

We should read it regularly to know what it says..

2. Understanding of Scripture as a whole – (v.7)

We should think carefully to understand what it means.

3. Obedience to the reality of God behind scripture – (v.10)

All three are necessary.

It is worth noting in verses 8 and 9 that Jesus was offered by Satan a “Kingdom of this world” and rejected it. He tells us in John 18:36 that **his Kingdom does not belong to this world.** It is not an earthly political state with armies to protect it or enforce its powers.

Yet there are still those, as there were in Jesus’ day, who look for the fulfilment of the Kingdom in terms of the political establishment of the Old Testament Israel or some other earthly kingdom. **As with the word “Gospel” we will come many times to the word “Kingdom” and gradually learn what it means.**

Jesus Begins His Work v.12 -25

We will hear more about John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, later. For now it is simply noted that Jesus had heard about him being put in prison by Herod.(v.12) **John had completed his task of preparing the way for Jesus and now Jesus set out to start on the task God had given Him.** As the fulfilment of the Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets Jesus moved into the area Isaiah had indicated as the location of his work. (v.13-16)

Immediately we are shown the core of his message. “Turn away from your sins! The Kingdom of heaven is near!” **“The Kingdom of Heaven” or “The Kingdom of God” was the primary theme of Jesus preaching.** In particular he emphasises that it is close, or near, not far away.(v.17)

He chooses his first disciples from among the working class – a group of professional fishermen.(v.18-22) **Here is an early indication that Jesus was not interested in setting up a “religion” led by learned theologians or gurus, but rather giving ordinary people a new approach to daily living.** Jesus did not say that he came to give people *religion*. He said, “I have come in order that they might have *life*, life in all its fullness.” (John10:10)

Again we find that wherever Jesus went his message was **“the good news (or gospel) of the Kingdom.”** (v.23) Again we are helped to understand what “preaching the gospel” may mean. *The word “gospel” in itself means simply “Good News”.*

But as well as teaching and preaching, Jesus came **healing**. All kinds of physical and mental troubles were cured by him.

An interesting little side issue is that one sometimes hears it said that, in those days, people believed that all sickness was caused by demon possession. Notice here that there is a division into **physical illness**, **demon possession** and **mental troubles**.(v.24)

(The Greek word for mental troubles is related to the moon, as is our word “lunatic”. Some translations use “epileptic” which was also associated with the moon. The words come from an old belief that associated strange activity with different phases of the moon.)

MATTHEW CHAPTER FIVE

Jesus Begins His Teaching v.1-12

WE NOW come to one of the most important parts of the New Testament known as “**The Sermon on the Mount**”.

I once visited a church in America and noted on the order of service that the sermon title for the day was apparently “The Sermon on the Mount”. I didn’t notice until later that what it actually said was “The Sermon on the Amount”. It happened to be their annual Stewardship Sunday!

I have to say that during my three years in service life the next three chapters of Matthew’s gospel giving the teaching of Jesus in detail was a part of the Bible I studied and meditated over perhaps more than any other, yet when I came back into normal church life I found it given little attention, particularly by “gospel” preachers. How could this be?

Part of the reason is found in the first two verses. “His disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them.” **This teaching is for those who have decided to follow Jesus as Lord. The word “disciple” means pupil or follower.** Most “Gospel” preachers see their task simply as persuading people to accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

*They emphasize the “forgiveness” received through his sacrifice on the Cross and the promise of “eternal life” for believers. In my experience they often fail to point out the implications of accepting him as Lord. **To accept Jesus as Lord means committing yourself to following the way of life he taught.*** It hardly seems fair to ask people to do this if they are not clearly taught its implications. As in any other field people should not be encouraged to accept benefits without the responsibilities which go with them.

In the next three chapters of “*The Gospel according to Matthew*” we see the way of life Jesus sets before those who want to follow him.

Notice (v.1) that Jesus “sat down” to teach them. This was apparently the normal procedure for teachers in those days. However, it does suggest a relaxed attitude which the stressed pulpit thumping preacher of yesterday, and sometimes today, could do well to note.

The Secret of Happiness (v.3-11) These few verses took on a new meaning for me when I read a book by J.B. Phillips entitled “Your God Is Too Small”. He compared Jesus’ list of what brought happiness with that of the “man of the world”. My copy of the book has disappeared from my library, probably because I loaned it to someone, but my memory brings back something of what he said. (My apologies to the great translator.) **See Fig. 1 overleaf.**

Salt and Light v.13-16

This little section shows us a typical word from Jesus where he uses picture language to make his spiritual point. **Salt and light** were two of the most common commodities in the daily life of most of his audience. Salt was used to preserve food, to enhance its taste, and as an antiseptic in healing wounds. No home would be without it. And every evening the oil lamps would be lit to make it possible to live and work without bumping into trouble.

His followers, Jesus said, would be like salt and light **for the whole world**. Preserving the good, giving life taste, healing the injuries, **like**

Jesus Says...	The World Says...
Happy are those who feel poor in spirit. They will find the way into God's Kingdom.	Happy are those who are full of self-confidence. They will get on in the world.
Happy are those who mourn for the sin and sorrow of the world	Happy are those who don't worry about other people's problems.
Happy are the meek who humbly accept their lot in life.	Happy are the pushers who make sure they get ahead.
Happy are those whose desire is to do what God requires.	Happy are those who only do what they want to do.
Happy are those who show mercy to others.	Happy are those who make sure nobody puts it over them.
Happy are the pure in heart, always honest and sincere.	Happy are those who do whatever it takes.
Happy are the peacemakers.	Happy are the stirrers.
Happy are those prepared to suffer for doing the right thing.	Happy are those who stay in the comfort zone.
Happy are you when you are looked down on because you follow Jesus' way.	Happy are you when you keep in with the right people because you follow their ways.

Figure 1

salt. Showing the pathway so that people would not stumble and fall, **like a lamp. The Christian has the responsibility of influencing total society!**

But, he points out, this will require his followers to keep pure and potent like fresh salt and showing the right way by their own actions and attitudes like a clear light. What is very important is that this is to be

done **on view in the world** – the salt in the porridge, not on the shelf: the light on the lampstand, not hidden under a bowl. **If you are a Christian it will show.**

The Old Law and The New v.17-20

Jesus was a Jew and he was talking to Jews. They had all been brought up to obey the laws of Moses and the teaching of the old prophets. **Jesus was about to give them an entirely new version of how God expected them to live.** But it did not deny the old morality, simply lifted it to a new level.

The main problem was that the old law was more talked about than obeyed, especially by some of those who were professional teachers of the law like the Pharisees. **Jesus was not only going to give people a higher standard by which to live, but was also going to give them the spiritual power enabling them to live it.** We will find plenty of evidence of this later.

They Used to Tell You..., but I Tell You. v.21-48

The Law About Murder. v.21-26 Most are familiar with the commandment translated in the King James version of 1611, "Thou shalt not kill". "Do not murder" is a more correct translation as the Old Testament makes it clear that then, as now, there are various situations not considered murder, e.g. war, accident, self-defence.

Jesus changes the level from the act of murder to the attitude of mind which may lead to murder. When we consider a fellow human being worthless we are mentally murdering that person.

The Law About Adultery. v.27-30 Again Jesus moves from the act to **the attitude of mind which may lead to the act.** Control the desire for the partner of another, cut off the looking and the touching, (the eye and the hand). Sexual desire is God-given and natural but it must be kept under control in the same way that any other natural hunger must be controlled.

The Divorce Question. v.31-32 Divorce is not mentioned in the ten commandments. It comes up in the book of “Deuteronomy”. The name means the second giving of the law. Here may be found a repeat of the ten commandments followed by a long series of laws, rules and warnings about all kinds of situations the Israelites may be faced with.

Deuteronomy 24:1 indicates that in Old Testament days divorce was simple for the husband. If, after he had married a woman, he discovered there was something about her he did not like, all he had to do was write out a divorce paper, give it to her and send her away. There is no mention about a wife being able to divorce her husband.

Jesus opposes the Old Testament practice and says that only if his wife has committed adultery is a man entitled to divorce her. He does not deal with the question of a wife divorcing her husband. The possibility would not arise in the culture of that time. In Matthew 19 we will find a fuller statement of Jesus on the matter.

One point to think about is that all of Jesus’ teaching related to presenting the ideal, not to giving a legal statement. One sometimes finds people using Jesus words about one thing **as if it were a legal statement**, (e.g. some churches refusing to remarry divorced people regardless of the circumstances), but in other areas taking Jesus’ teaching as **the ideal which few of us can expect to reach**. For example look at the final verse of chapter 5. This is obviously an ideal to be striven after rather than a law to feel guilty about when we fall short. Jesus presents the perfect pattern which we can only reach through “Christ in us”.

The Matter Of Swearing v.33-37 The word swearing in our common usage tends to mean “bad language”. However, its origin is still related to what Jesus talks about here – the making of a vow. For example the common Australian adjective “bloody” is said to be based on the ancient Catholic vow – “By Our Lady”.

It is also interesting to note that the oath often used by more refined people – “by heavens” is one which Jesus specifically says not to use.

Swearing in its original sense is still sometimes found in a court of law where people are asked to swear “on the Bible” or when making a legal declaration. Some have maintained from this passage that Christians should not make a statement “on oath” in a court of law. But again Jesus is getting at **the meaning or reason behind the law**, rather than making new legal statements.

His point is that the Christian will be honest. His “Yes” will mean “Yes” and “No” will mean “No”. Anything more than this comes from the Evil one because it assumes that the normal thing is to lie. **It is not a legal statement that a Christian must not make a vow. It is simply that he doesn’t need to.**

Reacting To Others v.38-42 The old law said “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” In one sense this was a restriction rather than an opportunity for revenge. You could only punish your assailant to the extent that he had hurt you. Of course the old law was responsible for never- ending feuds between neighbours or nations.

Jesus had an entirely new approach – **you got rid of your enemy by turning him into a friend.** At least you tried to do so.

There are a couple of points that seem to me worth noting. One is that Jesus is talking here of **your personal response toward those who hurt you.** Defence of others is not mentioned. Jesus allowed evil men to crucify him, but he did not allow them to desecrate God’s temple.

The other is that sometimes people take verse 42 too literally and out of context. **It does not mean that we should give everyone what they ask for.** I have been in many situations where people came to me and asked for money. I soon learned that to give them what they asked for was the worst thing I could do for them. It was better to help them in other ways. Verses 40 to 42 remind us that people are more important than things. So by the same token they need to be interpreted with a view to **the welfare of people as the highest objective.**

Loving Your Enemies v.43-48 Jesus’ teaching here has been one of the most talked about sections of all. The old way was to love your friends,

hate your enemies. Jesus points out that everybody does this without trying. **The Christian is called to love everybody, the same way God does.**

Sometimes people argue that a Christian cannot join the defence forces on the basis of this teaching. I would disagree, although I respect those who were prepared to stand by an unpopular position during wartime. The government had a provision for exemption from war service for those who registered as “**Conscientious Objectors**” to military service. Many Christians sympathetic to the pacifist view joined the forces in hospital units and did excellent and often dangerous work.

However, in the three years I spent in the services during World War Two I never met a single serviceman who was **not** a conscientious objector to war. **They objected all the time!**

But in a situation where their homes and families , or those of their friends, were being threatened by the Nazi war machine and its allies, lead by a man convinced that his destiny was to rule the world, they felt they had **no option** but to defend the people they loved and the freedom they held dear.

In 1942, the year I turned 18 and enlisted in Australia, our shores were being bombed and a militant Japan appeared to be aiming at invading this country. In that situation I had no great problem reconciling joining the defence forces with my Christian beliefs.

Surely “loving your enemies” does not mean allowing them to kill your friends whom you also are required to love. **Loving one’s children does not mean allowing them to do anything they like.**

On the contrary it means disciplining them when they do wrong, even forcibly controlling them if there is no other way. Not because you hate them, which would be against Jesus’ teaching, but because you love them and want the best for them.

Jesus taught that we should love all people, the same way God loves them. God’s love is a forgiving love, but Jesus makes it clear that

those who deliberately disregard God's love and God's ways will suffer the consequences. No sane person wants war but many would feel that in some situations they have little option.

MATTHEW CHAPTER SIX

Religion and Life v.1-34

IT IS SOMETIMES claimed that religion has caused more trouble in the world than anything else. There is some evidence for this position when all religions are taken into account, including some versions of Christianity. **It has always impressed me that Jesus never claimed to have come to give us a new religion. He said in John 10:10, "I have come in order that they might have life, life in all its fullness."**

In this chapter of the gospel according to Matthew Jesus talks about some of the things people associated with religion – giving to charity, prayer, fasting, faith in God – and presents them in terms of **the way to live life**, not as the way to practice religion.

Charity (v.1-4) One problem about "religious" people is that they sometimes want to show how well they practice their religion. In verses 1 to 4 Jesus tells us that **the secret of Christian charity is that it is done in secret**, not to show people how kind we are.

Prayer (v.5-15) The same applies to prayer. Then it goes on to give us a sample of the kind of prayer God appreciates. **Apparently He is not impressed with long prayers.**

Little Jimmy, who had just received his first wristwatch, said to his mother after church one day, "We know a lot more about prayer now than they did in Jesus' day, don't we." "Why do you say that Jimmy?" "Well, the Lord's prayer only takes thirty seconds but our minister can pray for a quarter of an hour!"

Problems of prayer. While many of the problems associated with an intellectual study of prayer are set aside when we see what Jesus meant

by prayer, there are still a couple often pointed out in relation to what he says here.

One is the statement – “Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him.” Some have said, “If this is so why pray at all?”

This question arises from the assumption that prayer is simply asking God to give us things we want – a very limited understanding of prayer. Few of us can help turning to God for assistance in situations we find difficult. We tell him what we want and ask him to do something about it.

This is **petition** and is certainly one aspect of prayer. **The trouble arises when God does not make it turn out the way we want and we decide that prayer doesn't work or that there can't be a God after all.** Notice that Jesus says God knows what we **need**. That is not necessarily what we **want**. *Take a long look at Matthew 26:39.*

The Lord's Prayer. Reams have been written on the Lord's Prayer. Many have pointed out that it should really be called the Disciple's Prayer.

Here are just four points to think about.

- A.** It is a pity if it is only used as a hurried recitation in a worship service. Use it as a guide in personal prayer, thinking into the implications of each line.
- B.** Note that the first half is a prayer for what God wants and which we can help supply. The second half is for what we need and which God can help supply.
- C.** See how the coming of God's kingdom so that his will may be done on earth is primary. This covers most world problems. Our personal physical and spiritual needs come next.
- D.** The fact that we cannot expect forgiveness if we are not willing to give it to others is re-emphasised in verses 14 and 15.

Fasting (v.16-18) The idea of abstaining from food in association with prayer is very old and no doubt represents a desire to concentrate on

spiritual rather than physical sustenance. Again Jesus teaches against the temptation to make a religious show of our self denial. God knows and that is all that matters.

This seems to me another evidence of Jesus' dislike of "religion", in which people carry out "religious activities", over against simply a different way of life.

Churches of Christ ministers in Australia never wore the 'clerical collar' or 'robes of office'. Even so, one of our leading ministers in recent times raised eyebrows among the conservative with his dress and appearance, especially when appointed to some of our most dignified positions. ["Jeans and a pony-tail? That can't be the Conference President!"] I once heard him say that he determined from the beginning that no one would be able to tell that he was a Christian by the way he dressed. There had to be a life difference. I suspect that Jesus would agree.

How To Be Really, Really Rich (v.19-21) Read the newspaper and you will find countless schemes on how to be rich – how to lay up 'treasures on earth'. Read the Bible and you will find a better plan – how to lay up 'treasures in heaven'.

Jesus doesn't deny the necessity of money nor the proper use of material things. He just points out that your heart will be where your treasure is.

If the treasures of earth are your main interest then your heart will eventually be with a pile of things subject to moth-holes, rust and robbery – on the rubbish heap.*

[The word Gehenna, translated as 'hell' in Matt.5:29, referred to a valley outside Jerusalem believed to have been a rubbish dump.]*

On the other hand, if your main interest is in the kingdom of right living, peace and spiritual joy, (Rom.14:17) then your heart will always be with God regardless of the state of your bank account.

In a transit camp at Townsville, during World War Two, a group of us on our way to New Guinea were discussing what was the most

valuable thing in the world. It was over half a century ago but I still remember clearly the contribution of one member of the group. He said: "Peace of mind."

I don't know whether he was a Christian or just a philosopher, but I am sure he was right. Whatever else you have, without peace of mind, it is of little value. "Peace of mind" is but part of the riches offered to those who follow Jesus.

How You Look Is Important (v.22,23) There is some truth in this saying if we are talking about applying for a job. However, that is not what Jesus was talking about.

There is an old story about a farmer selling a horse. When asked the price he scratched his chin, cast his eyes over the horse and said, 'He doesn't look too good. You can have him for fifty dollars.' The buyer could hardly hide his grin, reached for his wallet and said, 'I'll take him.'

Three days later he brought the horse back and complained to the farmer, 'This horse is useless, he's nearly blind!' To which the farmer replied, 'I told yer he didn't look too good, didn't I?'

When Jesus was talking about how we looked he was referring not to how other people saw us but rather to how we saw other people. How we look at life, the things that get our attention, the values that are important to us, will determine the kind of people we become.

The Secret of a Worry-free Life (v.24-34) The section about where our eyes are focused leads into the remainder of the chapter.

Here we have one of the gems of all literature which we should read again and again. It contains the secret of happiness, the source of peace of mind, the answer to stress- in other words, what everyone is looking for but usually in the wrong place.

First, says Jesus, you have to make up your mind about what is important to you – spiritual treasure or material treasure.

He is not saying that we do not need to work to obtain money to provide for our needs. **He is saying** that money is purely a means to an end. To worship its possession or be anxious about its shortage can cause us to miss out on the real joys and the very purpose of life.

Instead of worrying about material things Jesus advises us to give first place to making God our King and doing what He requires. We can leave the rest to Him. No worries!

To those who are sceptical about the likelihood of God looking after them, **and** to those who are inclined to leave everything to the Lord, take a close look at verse 33. **If everyone obeyed those words then no-one in the world would be without the necessities of life.** Think about it! God has not promised to do it all alone.

Verse 34. This is one of my favourite verses in the Bible. I have preached on it many times. On one occasion a man came up to me afterwards and said, *“I’ve been attending church for thirty years. That is the most helpful sermon I have ever heard.”* On another, a doctor said to me at the door, *“If everyone did what you said in that sermon I would lose more than half my customers.”*

The title of the most popular book I have ever had published, **‘Enough For One Day’** came from that verse – “One day’s trouble is enough for one day.” (J.B.Phillips translation) When a friend who was a prison chaplain used extracts from the book in counselling prisoners it was so successful that the prison authorities ordered enough copies to have one placed in every section of the prison.

At the other end of the scale a retired minister I held in high regard found it so helpful in the closing stages of his life that he wanted copies for all his family.

One reason I am telling you these things is that **in spite of all the above being true, most of my health troubles in the ministry have been caused by forgetting to put this text into practice!** In other words – **knowing** what Jesus said is one thing, **doing** what Jesus said is another thing altogether.