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Ford vs. Carter

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Election time again.

And no matter who wins, there will be changes.

A new Congress. New cabinet members. A new vice-president for sure.

And as much as possible the President will do his best to see that his subordinates see things from his perspective and do things his way.

That's only right.

The Lord Jesus had just chosen His "cabinet." After spending the night in prayer (not a bad example for anyone about to choose associates!), He named (Luke says "elected," 6:12) twelve to be with Him and do His work.

But those chosen needed to be trained, and trained especially in the perspective of their Leader. So He took those twelve up to a level spot on the side of one of those beautiful hills that slope up and away from the lake of Galilee, and there He gave them some necessary perspectives.

We call it the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps we should call it a briefing, rather than a sermon. No evangelistic sermon was this (though toward the end when the crowds caught up with the group He warned them to examine their foundations, Matt. 7:13-27). This was a briefing for disciples, then and now.

Do you remember that association game teachers and students sometimes play? The teacher says a word or phrase, and the student responds with the first thing that pops into his mind. If you and I were playing, I might say, "School," and you would reply, "Grades," or "Recess." I might say, "Mother," and you would respond, "Love." If I said, "Moody Monthly," you certainly would say, "Good reading!"

If I describe someone as meek, pure, merciful, a peacemaker, what kind of person comes to mind? An introvert? An extrovert? Agressive? Harsh? Passive? Milquetoast?

But these are exactly some of the terms Christ used that day to describe His disciples. Poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers-- these comprise Christ's idea of what He wants His disciples to be (Matt. 5:3-9). This is almost exactly opposite to our usual image of leaders.

Yet such a person is not non-aggressive. He seeks righteousness, shows mercy, works for peace.

Such a person is not a non-entity, for his life arouses opposition. Otherwise, why would he be persecuted and spoken against (5:10-12)?

Such a person is no passive conformist, for he stands out like a bright light in a dark room (5:14-16).

Such a person is no milquetoast. Rather, he is like salt, working to stem the flood of corruption in this world.

Such a person is no appeaser, for he campaigns for righteousness.

In a word, such a person is like his Lord.

A testimony I have often heard new men entering the seminary give after being in classes for about a week goes something like this.

"When I went to Dr. Blank's class this week I was so impressed that I determined I would be like him. Then I went to Professor Blank's class and I decided that I wanted to pattern my life after his. By the time I had attended all the classes of the week I was so impressed with all the faculty and wanted to be like all of them that I became frustrated because I knew I couldn't. So I concluded that the Lord just wanted me to be me."

That testimony misses a very important point, the same point Christ was making that day on the mountain. It is this: all disciples should have similar character traits. While it is true that God has placed different members in the body of Christ for different functions, it is equally true that He wants all the members of that body to be like the Head. In other words, there should be a sameness about all Christians whether they function as arms or feet in the body, whether they are choleric or sanguine in personality, whether from this cultural background or another.

Happy is the person who exhibits these character traits of mercy, meekness, purity, etc. But how can you achieve this? One way is to check your goals. Do you hunger and thirst after righteousness? Do you long for purity of heart? Does mercy or callousness characterize your outlook? Do good works flow from your life? Christlikeness seeks these goals, and happy is the person who is like Him.

That mountainside experience was also designed to brief the disciples about holiness. Not that they didn't know anything about the subject before. They did know their Old Testament, and they were trying to live according to God's standards as revealed in the law of Moses.

God has always been concerned that His people be separated from all that is not sacred (that's what holiness means). People too often seem to be concerned with how much of the secular they can be involved in and still appear to be holy.

The Pharisees had made holiness a mechanical matter, an outward conforming to the law, rather than an inner transformation.

A friend of mine who is in Christian work has a wife who is a great

help to his holiness. Whenever he tends to pomposity or when he begins to spout forth pious platitudes to cover his inner hypocrisy with a facade of holy words or actions, she will smile and sweetly observe, "Now, dear, don't be a pious fraud!"

That's what the Pharisees were--pious frauds. Christ wants His followers to be genuinely holy.

So He briefed them that day about anger. It was, He said, potentially murder. Adultery, He reminded them, originates in the heart and moves to the eye before it erupts in the act. The marriage vow is sacred. Speech should be straightforward and trustworthy, not punctuated with expletives (the kind that need to be deleted and any other kind!). Disciples must be generous and loving especially to those who are in no position to return kindness (that keeps motives pure!). Holiness is no mechanical keeping of any law, even God's. Yet, the holy person will keep the law, but out of love for his Lord and not for self-promotion (Matt. 5:21-48).

Then to sharpen the focus of what He had been saying, the Lord paraded in front of His disciples several examples of pious frauds. These were examples commonly seen among the people and typical of those whose piety was only a surface kind and whose motives were to glorify themselves.

Here comes the piety parade!

First in line (Matt. 6:1-5) is the person who does good things but only for the recognition it will bring him. Such people do not really give to others, they try to buy recognition with their good works ("alms" in the King James version means all good works, not only giving money). By contrast, the proper perspective on good deeds, including giving, results in being quiet and private about what you do. "Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." This does not mean that gifts should never be

acknowledged or publicized (read Numbers 7), but it does mean that the prospect of recognition must never be the motive for giving.

In 1911 someone wrote these words: "In this advertising age, in which a man hardly needs to sound his own trumpet, because there are so many who are ready to sound it for him . . . Christians have the sincerity of their benevolence marred by the knowledge that it is sure to be published." If those words were true 65 years ago, they are even more sobering today. Disciples must always check their motive for giving; Christian organizations do well to check stimulants they use to motivate people to give.

Second in the parade of pious frauds is the man who prays to be
(6:5-8)
heard by other people. And when they hear him and comment favorably on the beauty of the words he uses or the length of his prayer, he has his reward. By contrast, the proper perspective on prayer is gained in one's inner room, in praying privately where no one else but God is present. Why do you pray, the Lord asks? To impress others, or to express to your heavenly Father your love and needs?

Next in the parade comes the person who fasts to be seen and praised
(6:16-18)
for his piety. So he shows up in the crowd gloomy, unwashed and disheveled, so everyone knows he is fasting. The Mosaic law required fasting only on the Day of Atonement. Custom demanded two additional fasts--on the day before Purim ("Esther's fast") and the day commemorating the fall of Jerusalem. The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12). No command to fast appears in the Bible after the Day of Pentecost, though it was practiced by some (Acts 10:30; 13:2-3; 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27). So no Christian needs to fast today to obey God's commands, but if he chooses to do so, then he must be sure no one but God and him know about it.

Mind you, in all this there is no question as to whether a disciple should be holy or not. The parade focuses on the question, what motivates me to be holy?

Although the Lord taught many other things in the Sermon on the Mount, there is one more I want to point out, for it gives a helpful perspective on the problem of unanswered prayer. After encouraging the disciples to persist in prayer (ask . . . seek . . . knock), He promised them that God hears and answers prayer, because He is our heavenly Father. Of course, He said, no earthly father would give his child whom he loves a stone if he has asked for bread, or a snake if he has asked for a fish. "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him" (Matt. 7:11).

Here is light on unanswered prayer. Observe a fact of life.

When our children were younger, I used to try to bring each one something when I came back from an out-of-town speaking engagement. Usually it was something they could play with, and usually it didn't cost very much or last very long!

Like all children, they soon caught on to how to con me into bringing back something they wanted. For example, if they knew that I was going to a place where I could legally buy firecrackers, they would beg me to bring them some. But I never did, for two reasons: firecrackers are not legal in Dallas, and I was afraid they might get hurt using them. I still carry a long scar on my leg from a firecracker that went berserk when I was a boy and they were legal. So I didn't want my children to have scars, and I didn't bring them firecrackers.

Now, the Lord said, at best all earthly fathers are evil, yet earthly

fathers do know better than their children what is good and what is not good for them. So when we give them gifts we give them good gifts. Not only did I refuse to give them firecrackers, but I avoided poorly made toys that might injure them in some way. Often I brought something to wear, a good gift, useful, and always appreciated because their father had chosen it for them.

Our Father in heaven is perfect. When we ask, He answers by giving us good gifts. Good from whose viewpoint? From His, and those gifts are the best for us.

Often our perspective on what we need or what would be good for us is different from God's, so we conclude that our prayers have not been answered when we fail to receive what we want and ask for. But not to give firecrackers is a good gift. Earthly fathers know that. Children of the heavenly Father must learn that.

One of the poorest illustrations of prayer is that it is like a blank check which God has signed and which He extends to us to fill in for any amount we want. The illustration is poor because it fails to point out that what is written on the other lines of a check is just as important as whose signature is on the bottom line. A bank will not cash a check made out to no one. It must be made out to someone, but sometimes I put my own name on the line when I ought to put someone else's. A check must be dated properly. Perhaps sometime or other you postdated a check so it would not be cashed until you had time to make a deposit to cover it. Or perhaps you tried to cash a check dated a year or so before. You discovered that it had to be reissued before it could be cashed. Often the timing of our petitions in prayer is wrong, and God makes us wait for the right time and appropriate kind

of answer. There is more to it than signing the check. Our Father wants to guide us in filling in all the other lines as well.

These are some of the perspectives we gain from Christ's briefing session with His disciples--perspectives on character goals, on genuine holiness, and on prayer. It is rather astounding to realize that the Sermon on the Mount contains no blueprint for winning Palestine to Christ. There are no orders to evangelize the world in it. There is very little in it about the disciples' future activities. Christ would speak of those matters later. The emphasis centers almost totally on what they should be, rather than on what they should do. And that is the correct order. To be is more important than to do, for the person who is what he ought to be will then do what he ought to do.

This was the briefing session. One day there will be for all disciples a debriefing time. Those who live their lives on earth according to the heavenly perspectives of the Sermon on the Mount will be able to report, "Yes, Lord, you were right. Everything you said worked."