

SIMPLE FAITH

Let's Keep It Simple

Matthew 5–7



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Of all the sermons that have been preached, none is more famous, more profound, or more convicting than the one Jesus preached on the mountain. It is timeless, ever-relevant, and never dull. With penetrating power, Jesus exploded the brittle veneer of Pharisaic hypocrisy and explained the essence of true righteousness. Weaving threads from the Old Testament through this new garment of truth, Jesus set forth principles that, to this day, refuse to be ignored.

Yet how few truly embrace His words! We analyze and interpret them. We outline and compare them. We admire and quote them. But those activities, while worthwhile, are not the reason Jesus preached this sermon. He preached it so that change might occur—so our lives might be different in this world gone wrong.

God's people are to be *thoroughly* Christian—a divine minority who live in contrast to a secular majority.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Our Times: A Display of Gross Hypocrisy

Politically, morally, and religiously, hypocrisy is very much in vogue.

Throughout its history, the church has also struggled mightily with the practice of hypocrisy. The habit of saying one thing and doing another has plagued every generation of humanity—believers or not. Hypocrisy is insidious. The hideousness of these hypocrisies makes authenticity all the more beautiful.



Quotable

The Sermon on the Mount reminds us we do not always search our motives.

Let's admit it.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Matthew 5–7

2. His Words: A Plea for True Righteousness (Matthew 5–7)

Jesus recognized the brokenness of the world, and in the Sermon on the Mount the Lord told His hearers not to be like the sinful nations. The Sermon on the Mount makes clear the ways that Jesus' followers are to differentiate themselves from everyone else in the world.

We can point to four broad principles that, when applied, will cause Christians to stand because of our righteousness. Jesus essentially told His followers *out with hypocrisy, down with performance, up with tolerance, and on with commitment.*



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Two-Faced Hypocrites

In Matthew 6:2, 5, and 16, the gospel writer recorded Jesus' use of the Greek term *hupokritai*, from which English derives its word “hypocrites.” Although the term was used in the biblical era and beyond in a strictly negative sense, early Greeks used the term in a more positive way. The term *hupokritai* was first used to describe actors and the craft of acting. In particular, the term was used in regard to the effective means of communication that is essential for actors to play their parts well. Ancient orators like Aristotle and Demosthenes used the term in this context to describe the specialized skill of speaking well before a crowd. Over time, as people began using the term outside its original acting context, *hupokritai* took on a more negative connotation. When everyday people spoke with the skill of professional actors, they were seen to be “playing a part,” presenting a face other than their own. This divide between the outward portrayal of one character and the inward reality of another helps us understand Jesus' use of the term in reference to those who act in ways inconsistent with their fundamentally prideful nature. It's unsurprising, then, that the term has come to indicate those we call “two-faced.”



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LET'S LIVE IT

How should we respond to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount? We should admit that:

- *We are not free of hypocrisy.* We all have hidden agendas. Admitting our failure in this area is the first step in recognizing our need to change.
- *We do not always search our own motives.* We need to put our motives under a microscope and root out those that do not belong—that are not properly Christian.
- *We have not stopped judging others.* At times, our intolerance of others can be blistering. We need to back off of our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as those who dwell outside the body of Christ.
- *We dare not continue as we currently are.* When we make this commitment, we are saying that hypocrisy, poor motives, and uncaring judgment have no place in our lives.

In what ways do you see yourself acting hypocritically? Which of your actions should change, and how?



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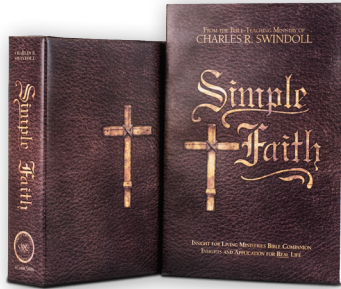
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Let's Keep It Simple

Matthew 5-7



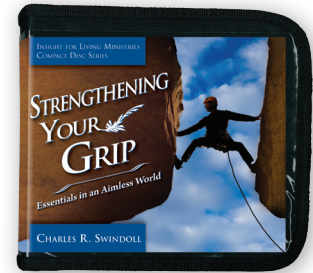
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MM01

SIMPLE FAITH

The Qualities of Simple Faith

Matthew 5:1–12



LET'S BEGIN HERE

We can read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in fifteen minutes or less. No teacher or preacher has ever packed more truth into such a brief period of time. For centuries, these words from Matthew's gospel have been scrutinized by millions of Bible students, authors, pastors, and missionaries. Yet, no one has even come close to exhausting Jesus' message.

Our hope in this study is to glean a few fresh, practical insights that will enable us to stay on course in living lives that are distinctively different. For as we shall be periodically reminded, the underlying challenge of this sermon is: *be different!* With this primary theme woven throughout, it's no surprise that our Lord began His famous sermon with a list of character qualities unheard of in a dog-eat-dog society.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Initial Observations of Jesus' Sermon (Matthew 5:1–2)

When approaching a sermon like this, it helps to glean some context about the setting and delivery of the message. How something is delivered is often just as important as the actual content and words of the speaker. In bringing context to the Sermon on the Mount, we can better understand the thrust of Jesus' message.

In particular, we can observe four interesting qualities about Jesus' most famous sermon. First, He delivered it outside, not inside. Second, He sat down instead of standing up. Third, He "taught" rather than "preached." And fourth, He blessed them rather than rebuked them.



Quotable

*No more humble
servant ever
preached than
Jesus of Nazareth.
Absolute authority
and humility.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

The Qualities of Simple Faith

Matthew 5:1–12

2. Fresh Examination of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12)

Understanding this passage of Scripture requires us to ask and answer two general questions before analyzing the specific beatitudes.

First, what does it mean to be blessed? Second, are the blessings of the Beatitudes available to us today?

We can claim the blessings of the Beatitudes today, even if we know that these blessings will fully arrive only in the future. That Jesus spoke in the present tense regarding possession of the kingdom (Matthew 5:3, 10) suggests that even the Lord expected that there were those whom He considered part of God's kingdom in the present, even though His kingdom had not yet come completely.

We have to recognize that the blessings of all the Beatitudes have not yet been fully inaugurated. The full comfort of God has yet to come to the mourners of this world, though many have received God's comfort in some measure. Therefore, as we think about these blessings, we should see them as available in part in the present and available in full when Jesus returns to inaugurate the fullness of His kingdom.



A CLOSER LOOK

“Blessed Are Those Who Mourn”: Living with Grief

Death was an intimate part of first-century life. People lived with death; they touched it, smelled it, and witnessed it. Families served as their own undertakers, preparing their deceased members for burial. They were fully aware of death's finality.

Grieving was an important part of Jewish burial practices—so much so that they hired professional wailers to announce a death to the community by playing flutes, beating their breasts, and letting out wavering, shrill cries.

Grieving also customarily included saving tears in a “tear bottle” or lachrymatory, a tradition based on Psalm 56:8. Jewish mourners filled these small glass vials with tears and placed them in tombs as symbols of love and respect. First-century Christians would have participated in such grieving customs; however, they grieved with hope—their loved ones would one day “awake.”



SIMPLE FAITH

The Qualities of Simple Faith

Matthew 5:1–12



LET'S LIVE IT

We can take two practical steps in making the Beatitudes more of a reality in our lives:

- *Apply one beatitude per day.* Trying to make all of the Beatitudes a reality in your life *right now* is probably not realistic. So instead, take them one at a time. Over time, the Beatitudes will become more of a reality in your life.
- *Start noticing the contrast between the world's message and Christ's philosophy.* See the world around you through the lens of the Beatitudes, so you can avoid those common pitfalls where the world doesn't measure up to the truth of Christ's teaching.

How do you think an increased practice of the Beatitudes would change your life? Pick one or two beatitudes and be specific.



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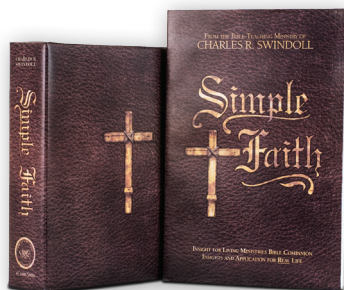
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The Qualities of Simple Faith
Matthew 5:1–12



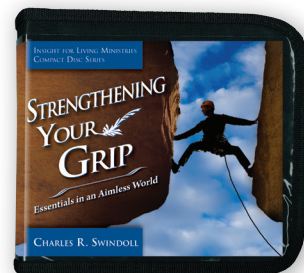
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MM02

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A Simple Counterstrategy: Shake and Shine

Matthew 5:13–16



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Influence . . . always a timely subject! We influence others when we direct them without exerting force over them. In numerous, intangible ways, we sway people's opinions and modify their lives. It's commonly called "impacting." Parents impact children. Teachers impact students. Leaders impact organizations, teams, and nations. The media impacts our thinking. But much of the impacting we see today is either negative or temporal. Power-obsessed people abuse their authority, relying on money, prestige, or even brute strength to get their way.

As Christians, we must focus on making a *lasting* impact for *good*—influencing others without resorting to force or other means of control. The crucial question is *how*? Jesus' answer in Matthew 5 is still the best. Though His words are familiar, we must apply them with greater diligence and more confident faith. They work!



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. How the World Reacts to Christians

Christians belong in the world, connected with our communities beyond the four walls of the church. God has placed us here. And yet, we recognize that our presence among nonbelievers poses risks. Jesus reminded us that many will hate or reject our beliefs and commitments (John 15:17).

We can expect persecution and tribulation during our time in this fallen world, because the world sits in the lap of the Evil One and because the world hates Jesus Christ.



Quotable

*People who are
salt and light
model God's grace
and help the lost
find direction.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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MM03

SIMPLE FAITH

A Simple Counterstrategy: Shake and Shine

Matthew 5:13–16

2. How Christians Impact the World (Matthew 5:13–16)

Our world is decaying, plunged into spiritual darkness. As a result, Jesus called His followers to spread the salt and shine the light. In other words, we need to work to stem decay in our world as well as bring light into the darkness of our world.



A CLOSER LOOK

Persecution: Its Nature and Effects

Many people these days believe themselves persecuted. Unfortunately, actual persecution often gets lumped in with perceived offenses, overly sensitive personalities, and simple disagreements. In the process, the meaning of *persecution* has been diminished and the hardship of those persecuted undercut. A more precise definition of *persecution* will help the term retain its power, while helping us not overreact to the little things.

Religious persecution involves the subjugation of a person or group due to their religious commitments. Christians receive persecution, then, when outsiders victimize us *because* of our commitment to following Jesus Christ. Christians suffering imprisonment for their faith constitutes persecution; Christian customers hearing store employees wish them “happy holidays” instead of “merry Christmas” does not.

Persecution comes to all kinds of people who are different in the world. Persecution comes to Christians when we are different *for Christ* in the world. We lack persecution for one of two primary reasons: 1) we are living in the world as those without Christ, or 2) we have removed ourselves from the world.

The first reason exposes a commitment problem on our part—we’ve chosen to live according to the ways of the world instead of the ways of Christ. When we act as the world does, fostering conflict, failing to show compassion to the suffering, and engaging in hypocritical behavior among other things, we blend in to such a degree that no one feels the need to bother with persecution.

Continued on next page



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A Simple Counterstrategy: Shake and Shine

Matthew 5:13–16

Continued from previous page

The second reason is less often discussed yet probably more insidious in the Christian community. Christians have taken to removing ourselves from the world, severing our connections with it, and thereby, removing the possibility of persecution. If we don't risk being in the presence of nonbelievers, we close off ourselves from the potential for persecution.

But Jesus expects His followers to be persecuted, meaning that He expects us to be the peacemakers, the compassionate, and the pure. He doesn't want us to cut ourselves off from nonbelievers the way that so many have. Instead, His expectation that His followers will be persecuted indicates that He wants us to live in the world, engaging with our neighbors and friends as we seek to make our communities better places.



LET'S LIVE IT

How should we best accomplish our “salt and light” calling?

- *Don't overdo it.* We shouldn't call attention to the fact that we are living as salt and light. We should simply live the life Christ called us to, which will, in turn, create a thirst in others. Don't talk about it. Just do it!
- *Don't hold back.* With our lives attracting the attention of others, we need to take on opportunities to make a difference in our world. We should find those niches in our communities where we can effectively help people and make the world a better place.
- *Don't worry about the few who resist.* Not everyone will respond positively to Christ. That's not something we can control. Don't allow yourself to get discouraged because you see some turn away. Remain faithful to spreading the salt and shining the light.

In what ways do you see yourself operating as light in the world, working to shine the light of truth and goodness into dark places? Where? How?



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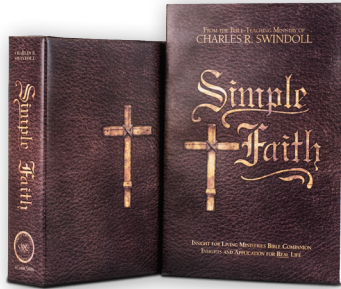
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Matthew 5:13–16



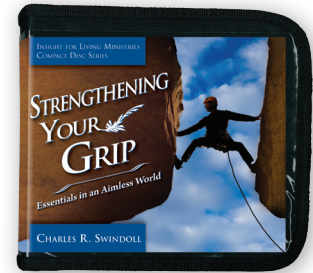
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MM03

SIMPLE FAITH

Simplicity Starts from Within

Matthew 5:17–26



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Though centuries have passed since He spoke them, Jesus' words remain just as penetrating as when they first fell on the ears of His original audiences. Because He alone spoke with anointed authority, people were amazed as they listened and ultimately became changed individuals.

Christ's teachings continue to bring about powerful transformation and arouse the attention of all who study them. Nothing Jesus stated was ever more profound than His Sermon on the Mount. With searching wisdom, He peeled back the externals of hypocritical religion and addressed the issues that really matter. In the section of Scripture we'll examine in this lesson, Jesus discussed the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic Law.

At the heart of Jesus' instruction is righteousness—the state of having sufficient grounds to stand before a holy God.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Authority of Scripture

Authority involves the ability to command obedience. Jesus possessed the authority to compel obedience because He was God in the flesh. In the same way, the Bible compels its readers to obey because it is the Word of God.

The authority of Scripture is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith because without it, we are all left to distinguish right from wrong by ourselves.



Quotable

*We cannot be
right with God
if we aren't right
with others.
Take the first step.
It's your move.*
— Charles R. Swindoll



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Simplicity Starts from Within

Matthew 5:17–26

2. The Fulfillment of the Law (Matthew 5:17–26)

Jesus taught with authority, a stark contrast to the prophets before and the apostles after who spoke in the name of the Lord or in the name of Jesus.

Such teaching raised questions about Jesus' relationship to the Law. If Jesus taught with authority, then was the Law still authoritative? Did the words to Moses pass away with the coming of Jesus and the church, or were they still maintained? And what about for followers of Jesus; would the Law carry authority for them as well?

Three truths emerge from this passage. Jesus honored the Law and lived under its authority. Jesus calls Christians to a life lived in obedience to God and His Word. We cannot be right with God until we are right with our fellow human beings.



A CLOSER LOOK

Interpreting the Law

Throughout biblical history, the ability to read and write could open doors. In the Old Testament, an educated, elite group of scribes devoted themselves to copying, guarding, and interpreting God's Law. Scribes worked closely alongside priests. In a natural progression, the scribes' role of interpreting the Law eventually evolved into practicing law. They became lawyers. They wrote letters, drew up contracts, and tracked taxes. They were a respected part of society.

By the time of the New Testament, scribes had gained strong political power and were serving as judges in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court system. As teachers of the Law, the scribes—alongside their counterparts, the Pharisees—were often at odds with the spirit of the Law. Both the scribes and the Pharisees militantly interpreted the letter of the Law with utmost strictness and with the good intention of protecting the sacred text. But their interpretations often devolved into trivial controversies, like creating endless genealogies (Titus 3:9).

Jesus adjured in His Sermon on the Mount that the people's righteousness should be “better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20 NLT) in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.



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Matthew 5:17–26



LET'S LIVE IT

We can adopt these three guidelines as we seek to implement in our lives the lessons of this passage:

- *The principles of Scripture go deeper than the externals.* Christianity is not just about a change of behavior, though it is partly that. Following Christ will continually mature us throughout this life, ending with complete transformation and new life inside and out in the next life.
- *The potential of anger is greater than words.* It's difficult to quantify how badly our words can impact others. When we speak in anger, we can do a kind of lasting damage that leads to the death of joy, hope, and love in the lives of others.
- *The power of reconciliation is stronger than revenge.* When we humble ourselves in order to reconcile with someone who has been angry with us, we create an opportunity to bring renewal into the world.

Have you been relying on externals? Consider a few areas in your life where the image of goodness has outweighed the substance of goodness, and record them below.



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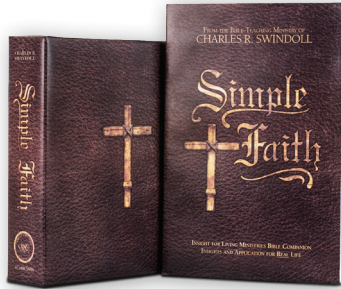
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Matthew 5:17–26



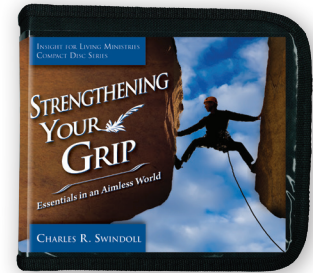
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MM04

SIMPLE FAITH

Simple Instructions on Serious Issues

Matthew 5:27–37



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There's no more telltale sign of a society's moral erosion than the breakdown of integrity. In domestic settings, this breakdown reveals itself most dramatically in marital infidelity. In the personal lives of individuals, it evidences itself most clearly in verbal dishonesty. When partners cheat on each other . . . when people lie to one another, a community's moral fiber weakens and quickly deteriorates.

Such things should not characterize those who claim to belong to Christ.

In His greatest of sermons, Jesus addressed both these issues. As He did, He went deeper than the letter of the Law. He made it clear that marriage requires absolute faithfulness, and personal relationships require absolute truthfulness.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Brief Reminder of the Sermon's Beginning

Jesus introduced His sermon by blessing those among His audience who exuded an approach to life consistent with what life would be like in the kingdom. Then Jesus exhorted His audience to make an impact in their communities by being salt and light. Finally, Jesus called the people to a deeper relationship with God—one that emphasized heart change and not just behavior modification.



Quotable

*We must replace
evil thoughts with
wholesome, healthy,
righteous thoughts.*

It's a choice.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Simple Instructions on Serious Issues

Matthew 5:27–37

2. A Clear Declaration of Two Timeless Absolutes (Matthew 5:27–37)

Marital fidelity and verbal honesty sit at the heart of what it means to follow Christ. But as Jesus made clear in the Sermon on the Mount, these are not just outward acts of obedience but inward attitudes of the heart.



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Divorce in First-Century Israel

When Jesus spoke to the Pharisees about divorce, He did so within a particular context that many Bible readers today do not know (Matthew 19:3–9). It helps, then, to understand the Jewish cultural positions on divorce as they related both to men and women, as well as to an inter-Pharisee debate involving the conditions for divorce. Insight on each of these positions brings much-needed clarity to Jesus' teaching on this contentious topic.

- Men in first-century Judaism were allowed to divorce for virtually any reason they wished. Furthermore, men alone could initiate and sign any official divorce certificate. The consequences for a man who divorced his wife varied depending on the reason. If the wife were at fault—such as in an adulterous relationship—she would forfeit her dowry to her husband and return to her parents in disgrace. On the other hand, if the man dismissed his wife simply because he no longer preferred her or because she prepared his meal poorly, the woman would have been allowed to take the dowry back with her. In addition, the man may have been required to make a large payment to his wife's family for sending her back under such dubious circumstances. This latter scenario kept divorce costly for the man, which served to lessen its occurrence.
- Women in the first century could not officially initiate divorce proceedings, nor could they serve their husbands with divorce papers. However, if a woman found herself in a difficult marital situation, she could approach the court and encourage them to act on her behalf and essentially persuade her husband to write a divorce certificate. The lack of rights for women helps contextualize

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Matthew 5:27–37

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Jesus' statement that divorce leads to adultery (Matthew 5:31–32). Most women in the first century could not support themselves financially; therefore, were a man in the first century to divorce his wife, she would have limited options for survival. Remarriage was a virtual necessity. But because a woman could not divorce a man for any reason, a divorced woman's remarriage would be counted as adultery in every case.

- The inter-Pharisee debate on divorce occurred between the Hillel and Shammai schools of thought. Both groups claimed Deuteronomy 24:1 as their key verse, but they each interpreted it differently. The Hillel school believed that divorce was permissible for any reason, interpreting "some indecency" (Deuteronomy 24:1) to mean any ill behavior. The Shammai school interpreted that same phrase as a reference only to adulterous behavior, thus limiting divorce significantly. In one important way, though, these groups were in unison: they were concerned about the conditions for divorce rather than the preservation of marriage.



LET'S LIVE IT

Personal commitment to the teachings of Jesus grounds His people in a way of life consistent with life in God's kingdom. From this passage, we divine two practical applications:

- *Marry for all of life, or do not marry for all your life.* The force of Jesus' teaching about marriage in the Sermon on the Mount is permanence. When we think about marriage, permanence should be our emphasis as well.
- *Say what you mean, and mean what you say.* Our words should always match our deeds. The ease with which we can deceive others (and ourselves) should encourage us to be vigilant in this area.

How can you strengthen your life in the area of verbal honesty?



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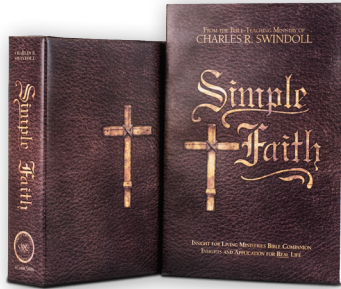
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Simple Instructions on Serious Issues

Matthew 5:27–37



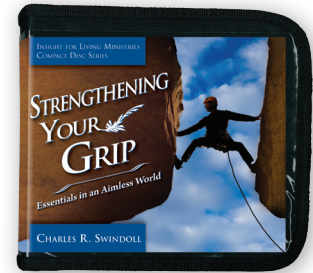
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MM05

SIMPLE FAITH

Simple Advice to the Selfish and Strong-Willed

Matthew 5:38–48



LET'S BEGIN HERE

What stubborn people we can be! Selfish to the core, we want our way, not someone else's . . . and certainly not God's. Shortsighted, we see the immediate and the obvious, not the ultimate and the hidden. Easily irritated and impatient, our first reaction when taken advantage of is to retaliate, to establish a defensive posture and not give anyone an inch. Those efforts only intensify when faced with an adversary. Then we aren't satisfied with simply standing our ground and being determined . . . getting even becomes our agenda.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offered revolutionary, even strange, advice for His people. Without pulling His punches, Jesus addressed the very best way to handle sensitive situations with those who threaten our personal rights. He offered countercultural counsel and dared us to obey. In place of retaliation, release . . . instead of hate, love . . . don't get even, pray.

It's with this counsel in Jesus' sermon that most people have their greatest struggles.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Our Dog-Eat-Dog Mentality

Many in our society live by some strange and damaging rules today.

- "I have my rights."
- "Do unto others before they do unto you."
- "Shoot first and ask questions later."
- "I don't get mad . . . I get even."

Perhaps no generation has ever lived where the words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount stand in greater contrast to our environment.



Quotable

*Release your right
to cling to comforts.*

*Nothing wrong
with having
comforts—just
don't cling to them.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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MM06

SIMPLE FAITH

Simple Advice to the Selfish and Strong-Willed

Matthew 5:38–48

2. Christ's Countercultural Counsel (Matthew 5:38–48)

Once again in this magnificent sermon, Jesus stood against the prevailing wisdom of His culture. But His words carry an impact far beyond the confines of first-century Israel. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount should continue to have a direct impact on our actions today. The Lord's words in Matthew 5:38–48 prompt us to ask: *How should we react in the face of insults, injuries, and enemies?* Jesus therefore encouraged His hearers to *release instead of resist, love instead of hate, and be perfect, not merely human.*

What did Jesus call His audience to release? He called us to give up our rights to being treated without insult (Matthew 5:39), to comfort (5:40), to setting our own personal schedules (5:41), and to own and keep our possessions (5:42). This teaching flies in the face of the values and aims of so much of our culture these days. Of course, this teaching offered a strong counter in Jesus' day as well.

Who, then, did Jesus call His audience to love? In short, everyone, including enemies (5:44). Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors does not imply agreement with the actions of those people. Rather, it suggests that no matter what a person does to us, he or she can expect the love of God to inform each of our actions.

How did Jesus call us to be perfect? The command to perfection is an issue of situating ourselves toward perfection. While we know we cannot achieve anything close to complete perfection, we can strive to be like the Father, modeling ourselves after His deeds and His character. Furthermore, Jesus revealed Himself that we might have an even clearer portrait of what godly living looks like.



A CLOSER LOOK

Being Perfect

Read Matthew 5:48. Jesus closed this section of His sermon with an exhortation: “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Anyone who heard Him speak that command then or who reads it today understands that true perfection will always remain out of reach this side of heaven. So what did Jesus mean when He called His followers to be perfect?

Jesus' command to perfection is an expectation that we situate ourselves *toward* perfection. While we know we cannot achieve anything close to complete perfection, we can strive to be like the Father, modeling ourselves after His deeds and His character as revealed in His Word. Furthermore, Jesus revealed Himself so we might have an even clearer portrait of what God's kind of living looks like.



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Simple Advice to the Selfish and Strong-Willed

Matthew 5:38–48



LET'S LIVE IT

We can bring the lessons of this passage to bear upon our lives in at least three ways:

- *With your family, release your rights!* Conflicts occur in families. That inevitable fact of life makes releasing our rights an all-important step in attaining continued unity among our closest relatives.
- *With your friends, look beyond the wrongs!* We sometimes have a tendency to highlight the wrongs in our friends' lives. Instead, focus on what those friends are doing right.
- *With your enemies, fulfill your role!* Those who've gone out of their way to become our enemies have the need of someone in their lives who will live well despite their antagonistic behavior.

Consider your family members. What rights do you need to release in order to foster unity among your relatives?



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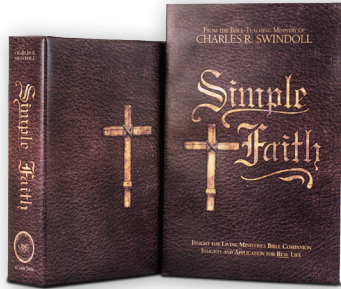
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Matthew 5:38–48



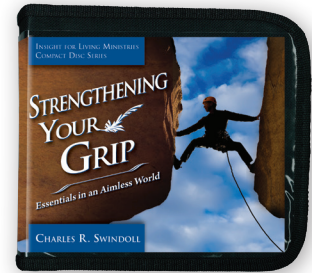
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MM06

SIMPLE FAITH

Beware! Religious Performance Now Showing
Matthew 6:1–8



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In many ways, our walks with God are something we shouldn't keep to ourselves. By sharing our faith, we not only spread the good news; we go on record as being Christians . . . and not ashamed of it.

On the other hand, it's possible to be so conscious of others watching us that we turn our spirituality into a public performance. When that occurs, we're "practicing . . . righteousness . . . to be noticed by them" rather than walking humbly with our God (Matthew 6:1).

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took on the hypocrites with both guns blazing! Drawing on common examples of showy righteousness, He instructed us on the importance of being people of quiet sincerity, seeking to glorify God rather than impress others.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Micah, the Prophet, Speaks

Micah, the sixth-century BC prophet, asked the people of his day what God required for worship. Rather than animals and other offerings for sacrifice, God desires that His people do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before Him. God is not looking for ostentatious public offerings but a quietly effective pursuit of God in every aspect of our lives.



Quotable

*Living faith
is a deep devotion
carried out in
secret only for the
glory of God.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

Beware! Religious Performance Now Showing

Matthew 6:1–8



A CLOSER LOOK

Micah Speaks

One of the most significant roles in all of history is the prophet. While generally unpopular, prophets have been vital to the human race, for the prophet worked to rouse people from their daily slumber, awakening them to lives of godly vitality. Jesus often functioned as a prophet, sometimes speaking discomfiting and unsettling words from God. In doing so, Jesus stood in a long line of prophets who had been speaking to God's people for hundreds of years.

Some seven hundred years before the arrival of Jesus, God's people heard from the prophet Micah. He prophesied to Judah in a time of good kings and bad and in a time when its neighbor to the north, Israel, was falling to the fearsome Assyrian army. Micah stood apart from a people devoted to serving their own pursuits. While the people of Judah took advantage of the less fortunate, stole from others, and worshiped idols of their own making, Micah warned them of coming judgment.

God had a case against Judah; the people had transgressed His Law severely. And yet in truly divine fashion, the Lord pointed them toward a way of escape. That way of escape did not involve outwardly pious actions such as bringing sacrifices to the altar; the people had long brought sacrifices, but their hearts had been wrong. Instead, God, through Micah, called the people to correction—rather than participating in exploitation, thievery, and prideful idolatry, they were “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with” God (Micah 6:8). Practicing these actions and attitudes would constitute a complete turnaround for Judah.

2. Jesus, Our Lord, Instructs (Matthew 6:1–8)

We need to beware of practicing our religious devotion before others in an effort to draw positive attention to ourselves. In particular, that means giving quietly and praying privately, lest we become known as self-absorbed hypocrites.

Jesus began His counsel on these two issues in a truly prophetic spirit—with a warning. The focus of the Sermon on the Mount to this point has been on holy living that extends from thoughts to deeds. However, the pursuit of living righteously carries a danger as well. For this danger, Jesus spoke a warning to His hearers: beware of practicing righteousness before others in order to be noticed by them (Matthew 6:1).

Living well is difficult enough. Doing so in a way that does not seek the attentions of others raises the bar even higher. Jesus employed the same word, *noticed*, when speaking of hypocritical Pharisees who lengthened the tassels on their robes or took the seat of honor at banquets in order to draw attention to themselves as holy people (23:5–6).



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SIMPLE FAITH

Beware! Religious Performance Now Showing

Matthew 6:1–8

The last clause in Matthew 6:1 points out the limitations of doing deeds to receive notice from other people—though we might receive rewards from people, we will receive no reward from the Father. When we act to be noticed by others, rather than act in order to honor the Father in heaven, any rewards we receive will *have* to come from others, for the Father does not honor deeds practiced with such duplicitous motives.



LET'S LIVE IT

What should Jesus' teaching on giving and prayer look like in our lives? Three points of application should help us focus our efforts:

- *When devotion becomes a performance, we lapse into hypocrisy.* Devotion to God highlights our humility as we express our need of Him.
- *When our giving lacks secrecy, we lose our reward.* God brings to the giver a deep sense of satisfaction. As He provides for us, so too can we provide for those who have needs. No accolade or attention beats that reward.
- *When our prayers are public demonstrations, we lack God's power.* God has chosen to work through us when we pray to Him truly, rather than when we pray so others might hear.

In what areas of your life do you sense the threat of religious performance or a lack of genuine commitment?



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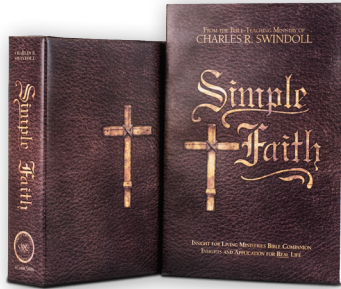
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Matthew 6:1–8



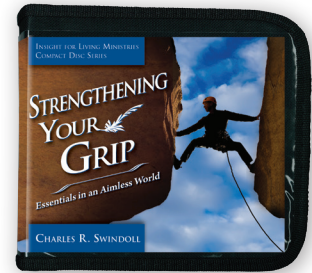
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MM07

SIMPLE FAITH

Prayer and Fasting Minus All the Pizzazz

Matthew 6:9–18



LET'S BEGIN HERE

It is not necessary to have lived in Jesus' day in order to understand His concerns. Our times include vivid illustrations of the very things that troubled our Lord. Religious performance. Theatrical displays. Showmanship. Competition. Hypocrisy. Piety on stage for the purpose of making a good impression . . . the whole nine yards.

How timely are the Master's words! What an indictment of the twenty-first century!

As we go deeper into His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' words turn our attention from all the circus-like pizzazz of performance to the simplicity of prayer and fasting, two disciplines all-too-rarely done His way for His glory. Let's seek out His counsel so we can carry out His instructions.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Brief Review: Some Thoughts on Giving and Praying

Jesus began this section on devotional practices with a general warning against performing religious deeds just to get noticed by others. When we feign righteousness, we remove opportunities for God to be praised in the public square and take for ourselves the credit He deserves. Furthermore, we miss the rewards that He has reserved for us.



Quotable

*Our hope rests
on the foundation
of the death and
resurrection of
Christ. It all builds
up from there.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

Prayer and Fasting Minus All the Pizzazz

Matthew 6:9–18

2. Further Instruction: More Thoughts on Praying and Fasting (Matthew 6:9–18)

As Jesus continued His thoughts on devotional practices, He offered a sample prayer that His followers could use as a pattern in their own prayers: begin by focusing on God, and only then focus on personal needs and confessions. Let's examine this prayer—known as the Lord's Prayer—and then turn our attention, as Jesus did in His sermon, to the religious practice of fasting.



A CLOSER LOOK

Don't Miss It!

When we study the Lord's Prayer, one of the most familiar passages in all of Scripture, we tend to miss certain details, to pass over bits of information because we've spoken or read or heard it so many times. This is often the case with the very beginning of the Lord's Prayer, which opens with the regularly ignored word *our*.

Our prompts us to see ourselves not as isolated individuals but as part of a people brought together to worship God. Speaking *our* at the beginning of a prayer drives us out of ourselves and reminds us that, as Christians, we are connected with others. Of course, prayer is, if nothing else, reaching out to connect with someone else—the Lord Himself. Therefore, when we say *Our Father*, we reach outside of ourselves, both to God and to the community of His followers.

This act, so simple, reminds us that we need others and that we can no longer rely on ourselves. Nor can we continue to hold on to that which divides us from our fellow believers. *Our* opens us to the ministry of the church—both to receive gifts and service from God and His people and to see our responsibility to give to and serve God and His people.



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SIMPLE FAITH

Prayer and Fasting Minus All the Pizzazz

Matthew 6:9–18



LET'S LIVE IT

Devotional practices are a significant part of the Christian life—they matter. But how do we start making them habits? How can we ensure we aren't engaging in them for the attention they might bring?

- First, *make the heavenly Father your main focus*. This means we need to actively avoid making people our main focus.
- Second, *make the secret place your primary platform*. Too many people only actively devote themselves to God in public. However, each of the devotional practices that Jesus addressed in the first half of Matthew 6—giving, prayer, and fasting—can best be practiced alone, in the quiet of our own knowledge that we are living in proper relationship to God.

Have you memorized the Lord's Prayer? If not, commit to memorizing it this week, beginning now.



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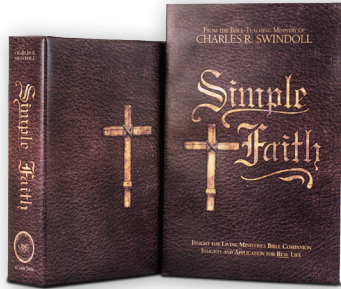
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Matthew 6:9–18



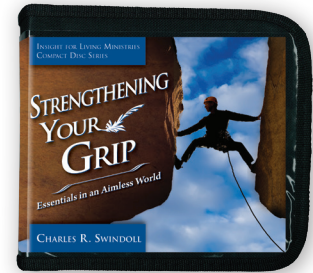
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MM08

SIMPLE FAITH

When Simple Faith Erodes

Matthew 6:19–24



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Divided loyalties are nothing new. It's not uncommon to find people who were formerly single-minded, committed to the core, with their full allegiance given to one major objective. But as time passed and one compromise led to others, they became distracted, leaving their loyalty diluted and divided.

Insightfully, Jesus did not leave this stone unturned as He spoke on the mount centuries ago. Realizing the beast of greed within all of us, He chose not to ignore it but to expose it and warn against its ravenous appetite.

Every genuine disciple of Jesus Christ must come to terms with the question: *Which master will I serve?*



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Tragedy of Settling for Less

Life presents us with constant choices. Day in, day out, we each have to choose how we will approach the circumstances before us. We can all recall the joy of making the right choice, as well as the pain of settling for less. This story of human success and frailty is written across the pages of Scripture.

2. The Reality of Being on Display

Hebrews 4:13 reminds us that “there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare.” We can never escape the sight of almighty God. Whether we make the lesser choice or the greater, whether we choose ourselves first or others first, God sees. Knowing we are under the caring, watchful eye of the source of all goodness should bring us comfort. But for many of us, the reality of our sin makes living under His sight more like a cage of conviction. We need to clarify for ourselves just whom we serve.



Quotable

*No home
suddenly fractures.
No church suddenly
splits. It's a slow
erosion based
on choices.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

When Simple Faith Erodes

Matthew 6:19–24

3. The Impossibility of Serving Two Masters

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke pointedly about the impossibility of serving two masters. Vacillating between good choices and bad, we often believe that we can have it both ways. But Jesus pointed out the lie in such thinking, calling out our flirtation with wickedness and directing us to true devotion.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Master Jesus

The Hebrew word for “master” or “lord” is *adon* or *adonai*.¹ While the Hebrew term was used commonly to connote household or political authority (Genesis 45:8), it was also frequently used as a name for God. Reverent Jews today still say *adonai* in place of YHWH, or Yahweh, which they consider too sacred to utter.

To call Jesus “Master” was not just a sign of respect but also an inspired nod to His deity. For example, Luke, in writing his gospel account, acknowledged this by using the term to describe Jesus’ divine authority over creation.

Between Luke 5 and 8, because of the word or touch of Jesus, fish gave themselves to be caught; the waves surrendered; people were healed of leprosy (5:13); the lame began to walk (5:24–25); a man’s withered hand was made whole (6:10); and a centurion’s servant was delivered from fatal illness (7:6–10). A mother’s son even rose from the dead (7:12–15)!

Jesus—the Master—is in control. He is as powerful today as He was when He walked the earth. He has dominion over the wind and waves of our lives. We can come to Him with our empty nets, our stormy journeys, our lives drenched with troubles, confident in His compassion and ability to save us.



SIMPLE FAITH

When Simple Faith Erodes

Matthew 6:19–24



LET'S LIVE IT

When it comes to choosing one master—and the proper one at that—we need insight in answering two questions: *What should I choose?* and *Whom should I serve?* We'll get neither right if we don't first decide to cling to the truth, no matter what.

- First, *by living in truth our options remain open.* Living in truth gives us the opportunity to choose well.
- Second, *by living in truth our focus stays clear.* When we live in truth, we can focus our attentions where they should be.

Think about your focus on the Lord—particularly in your decision-making. Do you have a habit of considering whether your choices will honor the Lord? At what times do you fail to take that question into account?

ENDNOTES

1. Zondervan's Pictorial Bible Dictionary, gen.ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 515.



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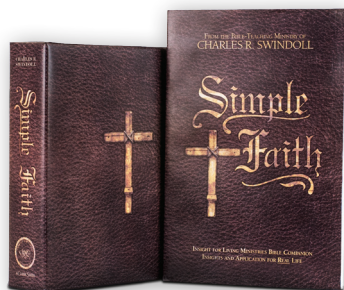
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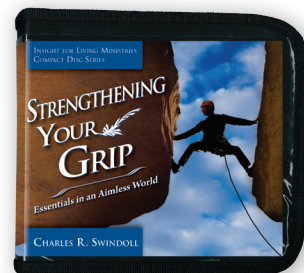
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MM09

SIMPLE FAITH

The Subtle Enemy of Simple Faith

Matthew 6:25–34



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Jesus' grand Sermon on the Mount remains timeless in its scope. No one would ever guess that His words were spoken more than nineteen hundred years ago! They drip with relevance and significance. His thoughts are so beautifully woven together that the sermon is a lasting masterpiece of logic, persuasion, and brevity.

The ten verses we'll examine in this lesson flow very naturally out of what our Lord had just finished saying. They represent such a complete unit that little is left to be added or amplified. And talk about an up-to-date subject!

No one can improve on Jesus' instruction on worry. If we would simply do as He says, our anxiety levels would reduce to zero and our joy would know new heights.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Brief Analysis of Worry

Thinking about worry in the abstract only gets us so far. Seeing it in action can help us understand its negative effects in our lives and the lives of others. One biblical example is particularly insightful—the story of Mary and Martha.



Quotable

*Worry is assuming
responsibility for
things that are
out of our control.
That's pretty
much everything.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

The Subtle Enemy of Simple Faith

Matthew 6:25–34



GETTING TO THE ROOT

What Is Worry?

We worry when we give undue care to a subject. *Merimnao*, the Greek word Jesus used in Matthew's gospel, carries the sense of a person living with a divided mind. This paints a powerful picture of our minds torn in two as we worry over whatever troubling circumstance has cropped up. A divided mind—one part focused on fixing some problem that's out of my control or getting God to take care of my problem in my way, the other part focused on trusting God to always act in my ultimate best interest—leads to apprehension and even flat out panic. Worry also involves the division of our attention between those things we can do and those things we cannot do—spending too much time thinking about the latter also leads to anxiety and panic. The Lord wants us to avoid such troubling division within ourselves, and instead rest our whole selves in Him through prayer and gratitude (Philippians 4:6–7).

2. The Lord's Answer to Worry

Jesus spent a significant portion of His Sermon on the Mount dealing directly with the issue of worry. In order to communicate His mind on the matter, He offered repeated commands, penetrating questions, clear illustrations, and strong conclusions.



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SIMPLE FAITH

The Subtle Enemy of Simple Faith

Matthew 6:25–34



LET'S LIVE IT

How can we find relief from worry and follow Jesus' teaching in this sermon? Two suggestions can help.

- *Priorities: start putting first things first.* Jesus advised that we seek His kingdom and righteousness first, before all other things in our lives.
- *Simplicity: stop living more than one day at a time.* Many of us have made a habit of borrowing tomorrow's troubles and adding them to today's. In moments of clarity, however, we know we have more than enough to deal with today.

How has anxiety touched your life? In what kinds of situations do you struggle with it?



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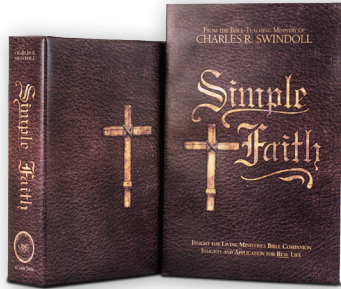
SIMPLE FAITH

The Subtle Enemy of Simple Faith

Matthew 6:25–34



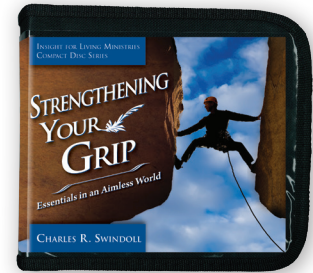
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MM10

SIMPLE FAITH

If You're Serious About Simple Faith, Stop This!

Matthew 7:1–5



LET'S BEGIN HERE

What's the best thing to wear while listening to the Sermon on the Mount? A pair of steel-toed boots! Could any body of truth be more convicting than Matthew 5, 6, and 7?

Without concern for how folks would react or what opinions they would form, our Lord declared His penetrating message for all to hear. His words cut like a sharp spade through rocky soil, leaving no stone unturned . . . and no listener untouched. Throughout history, the sermon has stood as a timeless, relevant rebuke. Today is no exception.

The first five verses of chapter 7, though succinct and simple, pose a reproof to us every time we are tempted to judge others. May these words reach us, touch us, and strike at our hearts to bring to an end our long-standing and unattractive transgression of judging.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Judging: An Unfair and Unattractive “Game”

Many Christians have grown so adept at judging others that they have well-defined rules by which they operate. These rules draw those judgmental Christians and the people around them into a destructive “game” that leads to heartache for everyone involved and weakens the body of Christ in the process.

2. Jesus' Timeless and Relevant Counsel

Despite the obvious problems with judging, Christians continue to practice it at alarming rates. This makes judgment one of the most difficult topics to address with God's people; its roots stretch deep, infiltrating the very foundations of our faith. Jesus, however, cuts at those roots with impressive force, issuing a command, offering an explanation, and concluding with a reproof.



Quotable

*Examine yourself
before examining
anyone else. Be
much more thorough
with your own
self-examination.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

If You're Serious About Simple Faith, Stop This!

Matthew 7:1–5

Jesus' simple, three-word command encapsulates the thrust of His teaching in this section of His sermon: "Do not judge" (Matthew 7:1). But what did the Lord mean by *judge*? He wasn't condemning making decisions in a courtroom. We can all appreciate the value of a disinterested third party who can help settle our disputes according to principles of fairness. Jesus also didn't suggest that we shouldn't discern between truth and error. Just a few verses down, Jesus warned His followers to beware of false prophets (7:15). In order to know which people to watch out for, we must first make judgments about the truth or error in their statements and actions. These kinds of judgments are necessary and good.



A CLOSER LOOK

Never Judge?

Jesus commanded us not to judge others and instead focus on our own shortcomings. But did He mean for us *never* to make judgements? Are we to simply look at the failings of our brothers and sisters and say, "Live and let live!"? Actually, no; Jesus wants us to help our fellow believers live well, but that help needs to happen in the right way.

The Lord laid out that process by offering a reproof in Matthew 7:5, telling His followers to first remove the logs from their own eyes and only then worry about the specks in the brothers' and sisters' eyes. In Galatians, the apostle Paul revealed that he understood the implications of this teaching in the Christian community: correction requires a proper spirit. And that spirit bears no resemblance to the critical, negative attitude associated with judgment. Instead, Paul exhorted believers to "restore" the sinner "in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

In other words, we correct another only when we've humbled our hearts by examining ourselves and removing the logs of sin from our own eyes. The Lord wants us to come alongside our brothers and sisters as healers rather than judges, helping them grow and mature in their faith, just as we seek the same for ourselves.



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If You're Serious About Simple Faith, Stop This!

Matthew 7:1–5



LET'S LIVE IT

Playing the addictive Game of Judgment can overtake our thoughts, shading them to such a great degree that we can no longer see what we're doing. How can we conquer this terrible habit? How can we control our minds and our tongues? How can we look at others in the way God wants us to?

- First, *examine yourself before ever examining anyone else*. This should occupy the bulk of the time you spend making judgments.
- Second, *confess your faults before confronting a brother or sister*. Allowing the other person to see your own weakness and struggle with the issue at hand or another sinful habit sweetens the medicine you're preparing to administer.
- Third, *understand his or her struggle, and be gentle in confronting*. If you have followed the first two steps, the third will come much more easily.
- Fourth, *remember the goal is restoration, not probation*. Every time we offer correction, the goal should always be to bring the individual back into peaceful fellowship with God and His people.

Make a spiritual examination of yourself. What logs reside in your own eye right now?



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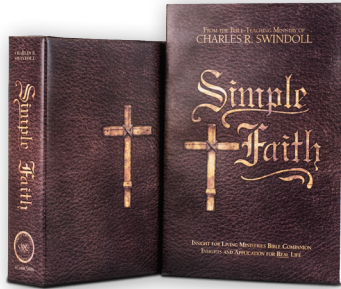
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Matthew 7:1–5



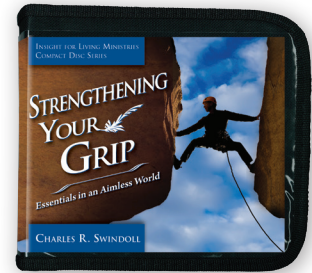
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MM11

SIMPLE FAITH

The Most Powerful of All Four-Letter Words

Matthew 7:6–12



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The Sermon on the Mount overflows with frequently quoted statements that have become familiar mottoes. Most are better known than Ben Franklin's wit and wisdom . . . and they're certainly more penetrating! Stop and consider several of them:

"Let your light shine."

"Every jot and tittle"

"An eye for an eye . . . a tooth for a tooth"

"Turn the other cheek."

"They have their reward."

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

"You cannot serve God and mammon."

"Oh ye of little faith"

"Do not judge lest you be judged."

In this lesson, we'll examine three other well-known, penetrating statements: "casting pearls before swine," "ask, seek, and knock," and a third that's known as the Golden Rule.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Impact of "a Word Fitly Spoken"

A well-timed word packs maximum impact . . . for good or bad. Other words, spoken at just the right (or wrong) moment, can offer soothing healing or deal unrecoverable blows. We can glean examples and insight on our words from both the Old and the New Testaments.



Quotable

*If there is
one place we
have the right
to be bold
before our God,
it is in prayer.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

The Most Powerful of All Four-Letter Words

Matthew 7:6–12

2. The Power of Jesus' Penetrating Principles

We have seen that Scripture is full of significant words. Jesus added to the total, yet He has the honor of being the only person to have ever delivered *only* words fitly spoken. He always spoke the right words at the right time. In this section of the sermon, His fitly spoken words dealt with three key pairs that help us understand the importance of communicating well.

- Pearls and Pigs (Matthew 7:6)
- Asking and Receiving (7:7–11)
- Others and Us (7:12)



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Mange and Filth in the Ancient World

Two of the Bible's most iconic images for insignificant, gratuitous appetites are dogs and pigs. These appear in a negative context virtually every time they receive mention. This might be surprising to us, especially in the case of dogs, which are generally seen as useful or friendly creatures today. However, in the ancient world, wild dogs roamed cities scavenging for food and sometimes lashing out violently at people and other animals. Furthermore, these dirty animals, with nowhere to go and no master to serve, made a nuisance of themselves by barking at all hours. By speaking of dogs in parallel with pigs—unclean animals according to Jewish Law—Jesus intensified His description of those who oppose truth and seek to hurt His followers, making it clearer . . . and more striking.



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SIMPLE FAITH

The Most Powerful of All Four-Letter Words

Matthew 7:6–12



LET'S LIVE IT

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:6–12 progresses from how we speak (or don't speak) to others to how we speak to God to how we "speak" with our lives. As humans, we understand the power of communication. As believers, we understand the gospel should be at the center of our lives, serving as the lens through which we see the world. We must share the gospel! However, we must also remember that we never speak with only our words. The greatest message we can communicate involves both our words and our deeds—it is *the message of Christlike character*. When we speak like Christ *and* live like Christ, we make the most positive difference we can make in this world. This is the message, the calling, God has for all who profess belief in Christ: be like Him.

In what areas does your character resemble Christ's?



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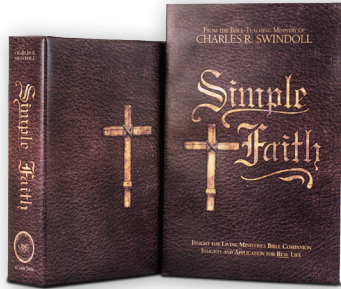
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The Most Powerful of All Four-Letter Words

Matthew 7:6–12



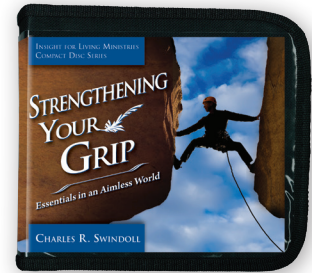
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MM12

SIMPLE FAITH

Simple yet Serious Warnings for Complicated Times

Matthew 7:13–23



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The closer Jesus drew to the conclusion of His magnificent Sermon on the Mount, the greater His intensity. By the time He got to the passage in this message, it was clear He was not mildly suggesting we simply resolve to try a little harder and do a little better. He pressed for absolute, radical transformation of our inner convictions and external lifestyles. He aimed for His followers to go far beyond the formal piety of superficial religion. Remember His words in Matthew 5:20? Our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees!

Such a lofty ideal calls for some terribly unpopular decisions, each of which has a more pleasant and appealing counterpoint that could be chosen instead. Interestingly, Jesus concluded His sermon with four sets of paired alternatives: two paths, two trees, two claims, and two foundations. In this message, we'll consider the first three choices.

Jesus' teaching may be unpopular, but it is essential.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Brief Review

Before we examine this portion of the sermon, let's recall the outline of Jesus' key points that we used in the first lesson. The sermon begins in Matthew 5 with this principle: *Out with hypocrisy!* In Matthew 6, Jesus implored: *Down with performance!* Early in Matthew 7, Jesus taught: *Up with tolerance!* In the last half of Matthew 7, Jesus emphasized: *On with commitment!*



Quotable

*Jesus called
for inner
transformation. He
cared little about
the surface. He
looked at the heart.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

Simple yet Serious Warnings for Complicated Times

Matthew 7:13–23

2. A Strong Reproof

Jesus spent the bulk of the Sermon on the Mount dealing with practical matters and common attitudes. As His comments neared an end, He drilled down to the most basic of truths, clearly defining good and bad for any who will follow Him.

We all make choices about the path we will take going forward in life. Jesus boiled down the choices to two: the broad path through the wide gate or the narrow path through the small gate. Will we follow the masses, those who “choose their own path” apart from God and strike out to do their own thing in their own way as they head toward the wide gate? Or will we take up with that smaller group, those who choose the small gate and devote their lives to serving others rather than themselves?

Even more important than realizing the small dimension of the gate and the narrow width of the way is understanding the identity of the gate and the way. The gospel of John identifies both: the gate and the way are Jesus, who identified Himself as *the door* or *gate* and *the way* (John 10:9; 14:6). Regarding both, Jesus used a definite article—*the*—to emphasize the singularity of the way forward. The few of Matthew 7:14 only move forward toward eternal life by going *through* Jesus. This means that the narrow path that Jesus spoke of lies in relationship—with God and, as a result, with His people, the body of Christ. The narrow way does not lie in isolation or in a lonely quest for some vague spirituality but in connection with God and in community with His people.



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Two Ways

In the first and early second centuries, the generation of Christians just after the apostles made regular appeals to people's wills by presenting Christianity as one of the “two ways.” Drawing from the pattern of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, these early Christians presented life in terms of choosing the way that leads to wickedness or the way that leads to righteousness. In the middle of the first century, the writer of the Didache, a document about Christian morality and worship, opened his work, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.”¹ Written in the first half of the second century, another early Christian document called the Epistle of Barnabas teaches that “there are two ways of teaching and power, one of light and one of darkness.”² These expressions highlight the truth Jesus taught in Matthew 7: there is no middle ground on the most basic questions of life. All believers must make hard choices to follow Jesus.



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Matthew 7:13–23



LET'S LIVE IT

So where are we in these teachings of Jesus? Are we on the path toward the wide gate or the narrow? Do we allow false teachers to tickle our ears, or do we listen only to the true? Do we follow Jesus only on the surface, or has His word penetrated our hearts and borne fruit in our lives? If we answer these questions contrary to Jesus' ideal, we must call into question our possession of eternal life.

Are you on the broad path with the masses? Or are you headed toward the small gate along the narrow path? What about your beliefs and deeds informs your answer?

ENDNOTES

1. *The Didache* 1.1. in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3d ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 345.
2. *The Epistle of Barnabas* 18.1 in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3d ed., ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 433.



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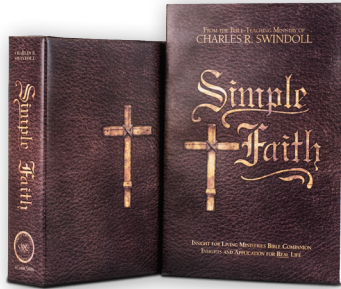
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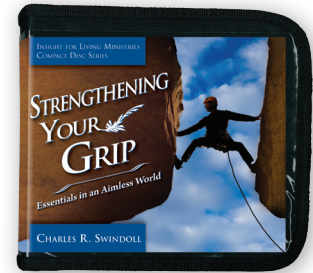
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MM13

SIMPLE FAITH

The Simple Secret of an Unsinkable Life

Matthew 7:24–29



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Storms and life go together. There is no place on earth where any of us can be free — completely free — of tension or pressure, trouble or pain. Escaping such is only a dream . . . a fantasy.

Our need, therefore, is not to think of ways to get away from the storms but to learn the secret of going through them. This brings us to the last words Jesus spoke in His immortal Sermon on the Mount. As He drew His remarks to a close, He used a vivid word picture of two houses built on opposite foundations. From this familiar illustration, we can learn the secret of an unsinkable life.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Stories That Stay with Us

Part of what makes stories so effective as teaching tools is their ability to stick with us. What exactly gives the best stories staying power? What is it about a good illustration that digs its teeth into our gray matter? Stories stick with us because *people and personalities give stories interest*. Stories stick with us because *stories present us with life situations that we can imagine or with which we can identify*. Stories stick with us because *stories offer lingering lessons that span the ages and from which we learn*.



Quotable

*If your foundation
is sure, no storm
will cause your
life to collapse.
You can't move an
immovable Rock.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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SIMPLE FAITH

The Simple Secret of an Unsinkable Life

Matthew 7:24–29

2. A Parable of Lasting Value

As Jesus concluded His magnificent sermon, He did as He so often did during His ministry — He told a story. And this story, though brief, had all the elements to make it memorable: unique personalities, identifiable situations, and lingering lessons.

The elements of Jesus' story at the end of Matthew 7 are simple and well-known. A wise man built his house on a strong foundation, and the home withstood the storms thrashing at its walls. In the meantime, a foolish man built his house on a foundation of sand, and his home succumbed to the storms thrashing at its walls. However, a close look at the story and at Jesus' commentary uncovers oft-overlooked but relevant truth for our lives.

Notice the identical elements between the two sides of this story. Both of the main characters in the story are builders. In fact, they are even building the same thing, a house. However, Jesus had more in mind here than giving advice on proper building codes. The houses and the builders' techniques are images of our lives and the approaches we take as we "build" them. As we embrace values and make decisions that have implications for eternity, which approach will we follow? Will we build on rock, or will we build on sand? Through imagery, these two builders represent the variety of human beings who approach life in vastly different ways.



A CLOSER LOOK

This Is the House That Jews Built

The standard dwelling in Israel usually included four rooms and a central, open courtyard (2 Samuel 17:18; Mark 2:1–4). The courtyard provided a place for family and friends to assemble, as well as an open-air spot for cooking. Stairs from the courtyard allowed access to the flat roof, usually made of wooden crossbeams that supported reeds and branches held together with mud. Scripture refers to these rooftops as places for sleeping (1 Samuel 9:25–26; 2 Samuel 11:2), religious devotion (Jeremiah 19:13; 32:29; Acts 10:9), and even escape from marital tension (Proverbs 21:9).

The Jews constructed their homes largely from bricks and stones (Leviticus 14:40, 42), which were whitewashed and decorated with sycamore, olive tree, and cedar woods (Leviticus 14:45; 1 Kings 7:2; Isaiah 9:10). In Capernaum, archeological discoveries reveal that the houses there were built from basalt rocks—stones remaining from ancient volcanic activity in the area. One home in particular has received special attention. Very strong archeological evidence, including several uncovered first-century artifacts like fishhooks and the home's structural layout, leads many to believe that this house was Simon Peter's (Mark 1:29–35; 2:1–4).¹ In the fifth century, Christians built a church over the structure.



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The Simple Secret of an Unsinkable Life

Matthew 7:24–29



LET'S LIVE IT

As you seek to make the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount a reality in your life, you need to recognize that you are a builder . . . and that the storm clouds are gathering in the distance, if they haven't already arrived. With these truths in mind, you should ask yourself two questions.

- First, *is your foundation absolutely solid?* This isn't a question about how often you attend church or how good an employee you've been or how high your ethical standards are in comparison to everyone else's. Are you completely committed to Jesus and His desire for your life?
- Second, *is the house you're building eternally reliable?* Take a look at the house you've been building. Is it strong? Will it hold when the storms come? Do you need to find stronger materials for the structure?

Which elements of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount are the most difficult for you to commit to? Why?

ENDNOTE

1. David E. Garland, "Mark," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 1, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 215–16.



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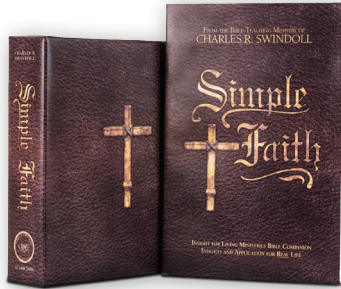
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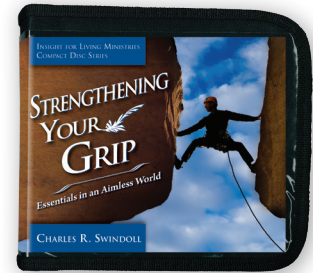
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