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Chapter One

EXAMINE

YOURSELF

*J*esus is in the happiness business.

Sadly, not everyone really understands or believes that. In fact, many Christians aren't sure they really experience true happiness. The very first sermon ever recorded as having been preached by Jesus Christ begins with the constantly ringing theme of happiness, and its revolutionary truth hit the world like a devastating bomb exploding in the minds of those who heard it.

The truth of the Sermon on the Mount exploded in the minds of the original hearers because many of them were reluctant to have their standing before God evaluated by Jesus' strict standards. Such reluctance is present also among many professing Christians of our day. There is now an atmosphere of "easy believism" that allows people to experience an initial happiness in encountering the gospel, but not a deep, long-term joy derived from serious obedience to Christ's commands.

Our Lord recognized the potential problem of an

easy believism, as indicated in John 8:30–31: “As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.’” Jesus affirms that an easy believism is inadequate.

The concept of easy believism is contrary also to the message of the New Testament epistles regarding salvation and assurance. The life of a true believer is never portrayed as a soft, do-as-you-please existence. The believer is called to a life of obedience, in which faith is verified by conduct. A life of obedience should flow from a Christian’s basic relationship to Christ. The Lord’s Supper illustrates the depth of a genuine attachment to Jesus Christ.

The Lord’s Supper is the most wonderful, sacred, unique act of worship the blood-bought church of Jesus Christ can ever experience. It is a sacred memory of the Cross and a time of self-examination.

The bread speaks of the body of Christ and the cup of His blood, and they point to the cross where He was crucified.

More than that, it is a communion with the living Christ. Jesus says in Luke 22:19, “Do this,” so it is sacred as an act of obedience. I come to the Lord’s Table as often as I can, take the most common things, and in my heart they become symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Some Christians rarely or never come to the Lord’s Table, just as there are some who are never obedient in baptism. Sometimes they are just ignorant; they do not understand the importance of the Lord’s Table or of baptism. Sometimes Christians are just disobedient. They are

acting carnally. But it may be that people who have no desire for testimony in baptism or fellowship at the Lord's Table are not Christians at all. They may *think* they are, but they are not.

Do you know what's worse than never coming to the Lord's Table? Coming to His Table when you do not deserve to be there. To do that is to eat and drink unworthily and "be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord," according to 1 Corinthians 11:27. And verses 28–29 say, "A man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly."

It is a serious matter for a Christian to come to the Lord's Table when he has not repented of everything and does not desire righteousness and holiness above all. What is even more serious is to come to the Lord's Table and drink unworthily when you are not a Christian at all. Now do not quickly put this book down, telling me, yourself, and God that this does not apply to you because you have been a Christian for years. The Beatitudes call for a full self-examination. Such an approach Paul calls for in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith." Prove it, he's saying. If it were easy to point to an experience in the past to prove your salvation, why would Paul ask you to examine yourself? There must be something else here.

You might be saying, "Well, I *am* a Christian. I believe. I made a decision for Christ." A lot of people point to the past to verify their salvation, but did you know that the Bible never does that? It *never* points to the past. It always bases proof of real salvation on your life

now. Examine (test in KJV) is a present tense continuous action, “Be constantly examining yourselves.”

You say, “How do I examine myself and know if I’m really a Christian?” Look with me at Matthew 5. When Jesus arrived on the scene, the Jews had already decided what right living was all about. They had already built their own code, developed their own system of what it was to be holy. It was all external self-righteousness, and based on works.

A NEW STANDARD FOR LIVING: RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus shattered that when He said, “I want to give you a new standard for living, a new criteria by which you evaluate whether or not you’re redeemed.” He told them how a citizen of the kingdom really lives.

Do you want to prove yourself? Then let the Spirit of God compare your salvation to the facts of the Sermon on the Mount. Here is the standard, and the key to it all is one word: *righteousness*. Jesus was saying, “If you are a child of the King, the characteristic of your life will be righteousness.”

A woman once told me of a lady in her church who said she was a Christian, but who had been living with a man who was not her husband. Is she a Christian? It is certainly a fair question. First Corinthians 6 says that fornicators do not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because fornication is unrighteousness, and true conversion is characterized by righteousness. Christians can commit fornication, but when they do, they are not distinguishable from nonChristians. So it is legitimate to question the woman’s salvation.

The key verse to Christ’s whole sermon is in

Matthew 5:20 in which He says, “I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” They went to the Temple every day, they paid tithes, they fasted, they prayed. They were religious freaks!

Yet Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that, you will not enter My kingdom.” Righteousness is the issue. Righteousness sets us apart as converted. Righteousness simply means living right, living under God’s standards, by His definition. If we do not live this way, the genuineness of our salvation is open to suspicion—to others and to ourselves (usually in the form of insecurity).

Hebrews 12:14 haunts me when I meet people who claim to be Christians but whose lives do not agree: “Sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.” Second Timothy 2:19 says that the Lord knows them that are His. And who are they? Those that name the name of Christ and depart from iniquity.

Titus 1:16 says, “They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.” Profession means nothing without obedience, without righteousness, without holiness, without departing from iniquity.

Once, I actually heard a pastor preach, “Isn’t it wonderful that you can come to Jesus Christ and you don’t have to change anything on the inside or the outside?” Can that be true? Of course not. There had better be transformation. Of course we can come to Jesus just as we are, but if we come away from conversion just as we were, how can we call it conversion? Second Corinthians 5:17 sums it up well: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he

is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

Being righteous does not mean that we never sin. First John 1:9 says Christians are constantly confessing their sins. That certainly indicates that we do sin. But it is sin that we deal with sooner or later. We confess it, we turn from it, we repent of it, we despise it. We do not love it. “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). James puts it this way: “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

A HUNGER AND THIRST FOR WHAT IS RIGHT

There will be a whole new approach to life. We will have sin, yes, but when sin appears we will hate it as Paul did in Romans 7. We will hunger and thirst for that which is right. We will seek to obey; we will seek to love our brother and hate the evil system of the world. That’s the way it is, if true salvation exists.

You cannot prove that you are a Christian by waltzing down the same old path. Having made a decision, having walked an aisle, having gone into an inquiry room, or having read through a little book was never the biblical criterion for salvation. The biblical criterion for salvation is what your life is like right now. If it is not what it ought to be, either you are a Christian living in carnality, or you are not a Christian at all. Maybe only God and you really know which it is. Maybe only God really knows, because you might be deceived.

I say with an ache in my heart that I am sure there are

many people who are not Christians in the very church that I pastor. As we shall learn from the next eleven chapters, if a person does not come to Jesus Christ shattered to the very depths of his being and mourning over his sinfulness, with a hunger and thirst after righteousness more than anything else, there is a possibility that that person is not a Christian.

Those are the criteria our Lord gives. He said there will first be a proper entrance into the kingdom. That is where He begins the Sermon on the Mount.

A lot of people come to Jesus because they think He would like to get in on what they have. We encourage that when we say, “Wouldn’t it be great if big, famous so-and-so became a Christian? The Lord could really use. . .” God does not need that. What makes us think He needs someone’s ability in addition to His power? No. If you do not come to Jesus on His terms, you do not come at all. His terms are brokenness, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Citizens of the kingdom are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted, and reviled. You may have made a *decision* years ago that was not true salvation if it did not involve these things. Years later maybe you came back to the Lord broken over your sin. That’s the moment it became real; that’s the moment you entered the kingdom.

A TESTIMONY CONSISTENT WITH GODLY VIRTUES

If you are truly a Christian, not only will your *entrance* into the kingdom be on this condition, but your *present testimony* will also be consistent with these virtues. In Matthew 5:13 Christ calls us the salt of the earth and

in verse 14, the light of the world. If you are really a Christian, your testimony will be clearly, decisively distinguishable from the rest of the world.

You see, the world is like decaying meat, rotting. Salt is a preservative. That's why the Tribulation will be so horrible; when the church is gone, the salt is gone. We are the preserving agency in the midst of a decaying civilization. We are to be a light set on a hill, clearly distinguishable from the rest of the world.

What about our testimony? Is it evident to everybody around us that we are different? Or do we do what everybody else does? When we became Christians, did it change things about our lives?

Our Lord said that another thing that will characterize a child of the kingdom is obedience. We will long for the law of God (5:17–19). In fact, my sense of security is dependent on my commitment to obey. In disobedience I forfeit assurance.

Assurance is a gift of God, not enjoyed by a disobedient believer. Read what Peter says: "Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love" (2 Peter 1:5–7).

What is the purpose of such a virtuous life, such true spiritual character?

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks

these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble. (2 Peter 1:8–10)

The point is not that we are gaining salvation or even keeping salvation. Those great realities are bound up eternally with the sovereignty of God. Peter's point is that we may enjoy the sense of assurance, confidence, and security that should accompany our entrance into the kingdom.

Neglect obedience and forfeit assurance. So, my salvation, my testimony, and my enjoyment of security are dependent on the consistency of Beatitude character in my life.

In Romans 7 Paul longed to do the law of God, he hungered to do the law of God, he delighted in the law of God, he loved the law of God, even though sin was always tugging at him. Are you really saved? Did you come in mourning over your sin, broken over your evil heart? Are you clearly distinguishable from the rest of the world? Are you obeying God? Is the great hunger of your heart to do that which is His will?

If you have really been converted, you will think differently. You will have a different heart. In Ezekiel 36:26 the Lord said that when someone becomes redeemed, He takes out the stony heart—the heart of obstinance—and puts in a heart of flesh, a new heart. Jesus told the Jews that hating and lusting were as bad as murdering and committing adultery, which indicates that the heart is the issue (Matthew 5:21–32).

When someone says that he is a Christian but continues in adultery, fornication, homosexuality, or the practice of some other sin like that, I look to 1 Corinthians 6, which says that those kinds of people do not inherit the kingdom of heaven. They did not come to Christ on His terms; they came on their own, and that does not make it.

RIGHT WORDS, RIGHT WORSHIP, RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

Christ also said that if you are truly a child of the kingdom, you will have *right words* (Matthew 5:33). The mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart. Jesus was saying that if your heart is set to hunger after righteousness, it will result in obedience. Obedience means you are thinking right, and when you open your mouth, right words will come out. Then when you act, right deeds will be the result. You will not retaliate; you will be kind. If somebody asks you for one, you will give him two. Verse 43 says that you will love your neighbor, and later you will love even your enemy. You will love even tax collectors!

In verse 48 Jesus said that the whole idea is to be like God. Don't claim to be a Christian because five years ago you walked an aisle. Don't claim to be a Christian because you once signed a card. Don't try to tell God you're a Christian because you went into a prayer room and talked to a counselor. And don't even tell yourself you're a Christian because some counselor told you that you were, because, at that moment, he didn't know positively, either.

Assurance is the Holy Spirit's work. He grants it by the inward testimony (Romans 8) and by the outer

exhibit of works. Faith without works is dead, James says. Jesus put it this way in John 8:31, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.” He is saying you will be characterized by right thinking, obedience, right talking, and right doing.

Jesus also says a child of the kingdom will have *right worship*. When you worship God, it will be real (Matthew 6:1–18), not like the phonies who blow a trumpet, come pray, give, and fast to make a spectacle of their pietistic ways.

A true Christian will also have a *right relationship* with money and the world. He is not going to love money. Matthew 6:19 says that true kingdom people are not going to lay up for themselves treasures on earth and say they are servants of God when their lives are bent on getting money. The two are incompatible. Trying to be both a friend of the world and a friend of God will prove to be impossible. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you.

In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus said kingdom persons have a right relation to material things. They know God will take care of all that. Starting with verse 31, Jesus said, “Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things.”

The true child of the kingdom will have even a right relation to people. Chapter seven of Matthew says that he will not try to play pious when he has problems in his own life.

“Whew,” you say. You come broken and contrite and shattered over your sinfulness. He changes you immediately and gives you a new heart, and you are different.

You are salt, light, and on a hill. The world can see that you are distinct. Your life is characterized by a hunger for righteousness, which results in right thinking, right talking, right acting, right worship, and right relationships to money and things and the world. And so you say, “Whew! Who could ever live like that?!”

Good, I am glad you got to that point. Because you cannot live like that. No one can. *It is impossible*. Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell everything he had, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow Him. But the rich man loved his money more than he loved Jesus, so he took his wealth and walked away. The Jews believed the rich could enter more easily into the kingdom of God because rich men could buy more sacrifices, pay more offerings, and give more to the poor. So Jesus used the rich as the focus of His truth when He said, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:23–24).

Can a camel go through the eye of a needle? You say, “Well, He was referring to the Needle Gate” (supposedly a small gate of those days that was troublesome for camels to pass through). But He’s not! He’s saying exactly what He means: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved. “That’s impossible.” Exactly.

Verse 25 says, “When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished.” If He had been talking about some Needle Gate, they would not have been so astonished.

“Then who can be saved?” the disciples asked.

Jesus looked at them and said to them, in effect, “I think you have the message. With men this is impossible. With God all things are possible.”

Nobody, no time, could ever be saved by his own resources. Only with God is it possible. We do not have the resources on our own. We cannot do it. That is why we must be ready to cast ourselves on the mercy of God. The rich man wanted to climb on the religious bandwagon and bring his luggage of materialism with him, but he could not get on with such luggage. Instead of being a help, it was a curse.

The only way anybody ever enters the kingdom is when he realizes he can't, strips himself naked, and arrives back at Matthew 5:3 broken in spirit and mourning and hungering and thirsting for a righteousness he can never attain on his own.

Most people do not want to meet those conditions. They want to go to heaven their own way. They want to climb aboard with all their junk. They are going on a trip, usually with four bags: worldliness, sin, Satan, and self. They are saying, “Jesus, I want the happiness You're going to give me. I want to stay out of hell. Here I come!” But they drop none of their bags.

There's a road for them, by the way. Go back to Matthew 7:13. The disciples, along with the multitude, were by this time probably saying to themselves, “With these kinds of standards, who ever qualifies?” Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter through it.”

Why? You can go in there with all your baggage. It's a wide gate. Just take all the garbage you want. All your

works, your self-righteousness, your I'll-do-it-my-way, and your I-want-Jesus-but-I-want-the-other-stuff-too approach. Verse 14 says that narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life, "and there are few who find it."

Have you ever tried to take four suitcases through a turnstile? You've got to drop all the baggage in order to pass. You've got to come in bare-handed. The broad way that leads to destruction is not marked "To Hell." On the contrary, it's deceitfully marked "To Heaven." Many are getting on *this* Jesus road. It's broad, and they don't have to leave anything behind. They don't have to live any differently or think any differently. They don't have to do anything! All they have to do is say, "I made a decision," or "I was baptized," or "I walked an aisle," or "I went forward," or "I signed a card," or "When I was a child, my mother helped me." The only thing is, any such approach is the wrong road. It leads to destruction. The saddest part is that *many* are on this road, and they don't realize it is the wrong road.

It isn't that decisions or baptisms are bad. They can be good. But often, only the routine of those acts is performed. There then is no genuine conversion of the heart. The same "many" on the broad road are those who will hear from Jesus, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23; see also 25:41).

Some have made "decisions" but have never cut the cord with the world. They have never given up their evil lifestyles. They still think that that decision or that experience will settle it. They are on the broad road and will someday arrive outside heaven and find, as John Bunyan said, that there is an entrance to hell from the portals of

heaven. That way is easy, and there are a lot of people selling tickets to it.

Beware of false prophets. Jesus said,

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:21–23)

Don’t lull yourself to sleep. Beloved, examine yourselves whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. These are God’s conditions. Isaac Watts wrote:

How helpless, guilty nature lies,
Unconscious of its load,
The heart unchanged can never rise
To happiness and God.

The will perverse, the passions blind
In paths of ruin stray,
Reason debased can never find
The safe, the narrow way.

Can ought beneath the power divine
My stubborn will subdue?
'Tis Thine, Almighty Savior, Thine,
To form my heart anew.

Oh, change these wretched hearts of ours
And give them life divine,

Then shall our passions and our powers
Almighty Lord, be Thine.

To follow the broad road rather than the narrow is to be condemned, as illustrated in our Lord's picture of two religious houses. They both appeared to have the same structure, but their foundations were very different. One house stood, the other fell. Many on the broad road are building a religious house without Christ as the foundation rock. Their own works will prove to be sand. (See Matthew 7:24–27.)

TIME MAY BE SHORT: GOD'S PATIENCE

Time may be short. "How do you know?" you ask. Consider this exchange in John 12:32–34:

"And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. The crowd then answered Him, "We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever; and how can You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?"

They had heard that the Messiah would live.

So Jesus said to them, "For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light." These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them." (John 12:35–36)

What an illustration! He said you had better believe while you can believe. Then to illustrate that, He hid where they could not find Him, so that they might comprehend what it would mean not to have Him around.

In John 8 He spoke the same way at least three times. Start at verse 12: “Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.’”

Later He said, “I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come” (verse 21). This is the second invitation, a warning that if people do not accept the light while the light is available, there will come a day when the light is not available.

And Jesus warned a third time, “Therefore I said to you, that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (verse 24).

Jesus was always extending His love, but also He was always telling them that there was a limit. There comes a time when God runs out of patience with sin (Genesis 6:3).

In Isaiah 63 we find this end of patience contrasted with the mercy of God in verses 7–10. The prophet Isaiah said in verse 7, “I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which He has granted them according to His compassion, and according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses.” What a verse! It talks about the loving mercy of God.

“For He said, ‘Surely, they are My people, sons who will not deal falsely.’ So He became their Savior” (verse 8). What a picture of God! He was so kind, so gracious.

“In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old” (verse 9). Oh, what a loving Savior!

But verse 10 comes like a lightning bolt to shatter the peace of the scene: “But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.”

LEARNING ABOUT THE
STANDARDS OF TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

In the following chapters we shall look at the Beatitudes phrase by phrase. In some instances, many pages will be devoted to examining just one phrase. There is much practical and devotional truth that we can draw from these well-known verses, as many previous authors have done. But the main purpose for this book is not to be just another commentary on the Beatitudes. Rather, the book is a call for you to measure your life soberly and seriously against the standards of true righteousness set forth by the Beatitudes.

You might find yourself in essential conformity to the inner attitudes that Jesus outlines. In that case your assurance of salvation will be strengthened in a new way.

However, you might be surprised and caught short by the Beatitudes’ strong words. You might be shocked. You might even be crushed in your spirit by lack of assurance. If this does happen to some of you, it is my sincere hope that you will let the Holy Spirit speak to your hearts and draw you to genuine happiness. Genuine happiness can come only when you know that Christ’s stan-

dards of righteousness are the essential direction in which your life is pointed.

Many professed Christians are living in contradiction to their professions of faith. Some of these people are deceived and think they are saved when they are not. That is tragic. Their hearts and minds are hardened to the truth even though they have a “form of godliness.” None of us should neglect such biblical warnings as Galatians 6:3–8.

For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load. The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him. Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

God is patient. God is kind. God is good. God is gracious, merciful, and long-suffering. God is not willing that any should perish. But God’s mercy has its limits. If you have not committed your life to Christ and come into the kingdom on His terms, you had better do it while you can. Come to the light while the light is available. Come to the Son while He shines.