

*Matthew 7:7–14 (NRSV)*

<sup>7</sup> “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup> Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

<sup>12</sup> “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

<sup>13</sup> “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

*1 Peter 2:9–10 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God’s people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

*A person without purpose is adrift in a dark and ever-changing world.*

*A place we’d like to live*

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is an extended portrait of the kingdom of God, the place where God rules. It is neither pie-in-the-sky nor some impossible ideal. It is not other-worldly, it is this-worldly. This kingdom is not about escaping to some distant spiritual realm, it is about the physical realm you and I live in every day. And Jesus announced that God’s kingdom was arriving in his own ministry and vocation.

In God’s kingdom, there is no murder, there is not even any anger. In God’s kingdom, there is no adultery, not even any lust. In God’s kingdom, it is not the wealthy or the strong who get served first at meal-time, it is the poor and the weak. In God’s kingdom, there is no mourning, no revenge, no worry, not even any self-deception. Who wouldn’t like to live in such a place? Praise God, one day we shall.

In this sermon, Jesus teaches his disciples that they are to build *for* God’s kingdom as they await its final completion. They are to be beacons of light and carriers of love. They are not only to hear Jesus’ teachings (the easy part), they are to actually *do* it . . . and that is where the trouble begins.

*It’s not the teachings, but the teacher*

It is very tempting to think that we can divorce the teachings from the teacher, that the teachings are the keys to the kingdom. J. Budziszewski calls this “The Second Tablet Project.”<sup>1</sup> When Moses brings down the two tablets, the first speaks to our relationship with God (no other gods, for example) while the second tablet speaks to our relationships with others (no coveting, for example). Thus, the Second Tablet Project refers to the attempt by many in our world to live according to the second of the tablets while disregarding the first – trying to live by the teachings while ignoring the teacher.

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<sup>1</sup>His essay, “The Second Tablet Project,” is available on-line at *First Things* journal, [www.firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com), in the archive.

But, as Ellsworth Kalas, so aptly puts it, “the teachings did not prove the greatness of the teacher; Jesus proved the greatness of the teachings.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ disciples acknowledged that these teachings came with an authority greater even than Moses because of what they saw in Jesus, not what they heard in the teachings.

These teachings are not capable of transforming us, only Jesus transforms. Left to ourselves, we could never love our enemies. To the extent that we can do so at all is because the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) works within us. Jesus is more than our teacher. He is our Savior. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Trying to live out the teachings of Christ without the power of Christ is a project doomed to failure.

But by the grace of God, we are not on our own as we strive toward true kingdom living. God’s Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, works with us, transforming us into ever-truer disciples of Jesus – in all things.

*And so . . . we obey the one who transforms!*

This week’s study is fraught with peril, so please read carefully. Jesus’ teachings about obedience of God’s law, God’s instruction, are easily misunderstood by believers and non-believers alike.

Gallup and other groups often poll Americans about their religious beliefs. One consistent finding is that well over half of all Americans, a lot of whom have to be Christian, believe that if we do enough good things in our lifetime we can earn our way into heaven. But this is *not* the Christian proclamation.

Here goes: **there is nothing that you or I or anyone can do that will make God love us more or make God love us less.** We can’t pile up enough good deeds to earn our way into God’s presence nor can we commit enough horrible acts to place ourselves outside God’s redeeming love. God desires that we be in a loving relationship with him and we are put into this right relationship with God through Jesus’ death on the cross, when he took upon himself the sins of us all. How could God demonstrate his love for you any more than to give up his own son for you . . . long before your birth!

Yes, we can please God and we can displease God, but doesn’t mean God loves us more when we do as he asks or loves us less when we don’t. I know that is how I felt about my sons; it certainly can’t be less so for God.

All God asks of us is that we trust him, that we place our faith in Jesus Christ and what he accomplished for us all. There are many ways to say what I just said; but that is basically it. It is by God’s grace<sup>3</sup>, his amazing grace, his grace alone, that we are made right with God.

When the apostle Paul crisscrossed the eastern Mediterranean proclaiming this message of God’s grace, the reaction of many went something like this: “Wow! You mean that I’m made right with God by faith, not by what I do . . . alright! I’ve got faith, now let’s go party!!”

You may think I’m exaggerating, but I’m not. Some people even suggested to Paul that since grace overcomes sin, then we should sin more so that there can be more grace (Romans 6:1). Hardly. Of course obedience matters. Not because we can earn our way into God’s presence. Not because we like the comfort of having some rules to follow. Obedience matters because we seek to please the one who love us. Further, we desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ and trust that God knows, better than we, a way of life that reflects the kingdom of God. Like all apprentices, we desire to be like our master and teacher. We desire to be Christ-like. It is God who shows us how. It is God who shows

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<sup>2</sup>from Kalas’ reflections on the Sermon on the Mount in *The Grand Sweep*.

<sup>3</sup>To use a traditional definition, “grace” is “unmerited favor.” If you’ve earned or deserve it – it isn’t grace. 81% of Americans thinks the Bible says: “God helps those who help themselves.” It doesn’t. The whole point of grace is that God helps those who can’t help themselves – which is all humankind.

us the way to a deeply joyful life. It is God who shows us the way to a life that can be the light to the world. Obedience is the path to that life.

### *The two ways*

Today's passage from Matthew's gospel is in the closing portion to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has had much to say about what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Now, in verses 13 & 14 of chapter, Jesus calls upon an old Jewish tradition that contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked; i.e., those who follow God's instructions with those who do not. Jesus knows that the path of discipleship is not always an easy one. Taking up a cross never is. He knows that the world will be calling his disciples away from their master. We shouldn't read these verses as they too often are – as some ratio of the "saved" (the few) to the "unsaved" (the many). Jesus is not speaking to the crowds that have followed him around. He has retreated up the hillside and is speaking only to his disciples. Jesus knows how hard is the path that they have chosen; he hopes the disciples do and are ready for it.

Thus, Jesus is not talking about doctrinal correctness, he is talking about obedience, an obedience that flows out of our trust in God. It is the path of obedience that is narrow; too many pay lip service to Jesus' teachings. The entire Sermon on the Mount is like a "training session" for his disciples. Jesus reminds them that without obedience, his teachings become no more than an impossible ideal.

### *Solid Purpose*

After setting out the "two ways" in v. 13 & 14, Jesus talks about those who will try to pull his disciples off the path of righteousness – those wolves in sheep's clothing. He goes on to remind them that empty words, even words like "Lord, Lord" don't cut it. It is about the doing. We are to understand God's will and do it . . . just do it!

And what would God have us do? Peter brings that word loud and clear (1 Peter 2:9-10 above). To proclaim the mighty acts of our God, who called us out of the darkness and into the light. How do we do so? By ensuring that every word we utter and every action we take shows the love of God and others -- we are to be the light on the hill.

And what kind of people does it take to proclaim God's mighty acts . . . to handle this convergence of worldly power and holy purpose . . . to build *for* God's kingdom?

For starters, it takes solid souls capable of undertaking such a solid purpose. Only a few verses before today's passage, Peter tells the Christians that they are to rid themselves of all malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. Like babies at their mothers' breasts, these Christians are to drink the milk of God's kindness so that they might grow to maturity and wholeness, having received a foretaste of God's full mercy. Peter urges them to be like "living stones" built into a spiritual house, a house of strength that rests upon Jesus Christ, the cornerstone and foundation of this house. Peter writes, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . love one another deeply from the heart" (1:13,22). Later in the letter Peter writes, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies . . ." (4:10-11).

In much of his letter, Peter paints a picture of a people, God's people, who can do the work of the kingdom, who can "proclaim God's mighty acts." Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. Peter reminds us that we are to be agreeable, sympathetic, and humble. We are not to retaliate when wronged. When we live in this way, when we take care of those in need, when we boldly tell others the Good News . . . in all this, we are witnesses to God's grace and the saving power of the gospel.

### *Loving obedience*

The apostle John makes clear in his letter: “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:3-5).

And the cornerstone of those commands is this: to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. John makes it very plain. The Christians who love their fellow believers walk in the light of Christ. Those who don’t are still walking in the darkness. I’m sure that John would wonder how deeply committed a person is to Jesus if they are unable to love even their brothers and sisters in Christ.

May we be solid souls, one in Christ, in life, and in love.

## **Scott Engle’s Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

This week, Sep 13, we are beginning a new study: *Paul’s Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus*.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

This week, Sep 14, we are beginning a study of John’s Gospel

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

#### *About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

### **Scott’s Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

This week: We begin two weeks of preparation for the upcoming 9-month journey through the Bible in worship and in classes, titled *God-is*.

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel.** Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.