

Summary Handout

“Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God”

Lesson

9

Summary

Matthew 6; Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount—He teaches the disciples the Lord's Prayer—They are commanded to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Matthew 7; Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount—He commands: Judge not; ask of God; beware of false prophets—He promises salvation to those who do the will of the Father.

Supplemental Holy Land and Jewish insights:

Giving: Judaism reflects a great history of instructions and traditions in giving charity and making offerings to assist the less fortunate. “The obligation to help the poor and the needy and to give them gifts is stated many times in the Bible and was considered by the rabbis of all ages to be one of the cardinal *mitzvot* of Judaism.” “In the Bible there are several laws . . . for the benefit of the poor. Among these are . . . the farmer could not pick up the ears of corn that had fallen during the harvest,

or go back for forgotten sheaves or reap into the corners of the field. Every third year the farmer was also required to put aside a special tithe for the needy. The institution of the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee was in order "that the poor of your people may eat" as well as to cancel debts. The Bible expects Israel to be aware of the needs of the poor and the stranger because Israel itself had experienced this situation in Egypt.” Other Jewish quotes include:

Middling, Mean and Too Generous: “To give a tenth of one's wealth to charity is considered to be a "middling" virtue, to give a 20th or less is to be "mean"; but the rabbis decided that one should not give more than a fifth lest he become impoverished himself and dependent on charity.”

With Honor: “The rabbis were especially concerned about the manner in which alms are to be dispensed. The prime consideration is that nothing be done that might shame the recipient. About one pious man it was related that if he met a man of good family who had become impoverished he would say, "I have heard that a legacy has been left to you in such a place; take this money in advance and pay me back later." When the man accepted it he then said to him, "It is a gift.”

Eight Grades of Giving: “Maimonides lists eight ways of giving *zedakah* which are progressively more virtuous: to give (1) but sadly; (2) less than is fitting, but in good humor; (3) only after having been asked to; (4) before being asked; (5) in such a manner that the donor does not know who the recipient is, (6) in such a manner that the recipient does not know who the donor is; and (7-8) in such a way that neither the donor nor the recipient knows the identity of the other. (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Like “Fast” Offerings: Collecting offerings in a Jewish community is similar to a Latter-day Saint custom of fast offerings. “In every town where there are Jews they must appoint '**charity wardens**,' men who are well-known and honest that they should collect money from the people every Sabbath eve and distribute it to the poor . . . special care was taken to ensure that there should not be even the slightest suspicion of dishonesty. The actual collection had to be made by at **least two wardens** who were not permitted to leave each other during the course of it. The distribution of the money was to be made by **at least three wardens** in whose hands lay the decision as to whom to give and how much. Besides money, food and clothing were also distributed.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Tithing: In modern times, the principle of tithing has been modified to reflect the charity and alms given. Many prefer the tithing amount to be ten percent. In the Islam religion, charity is one of the basic five pillars or tenants of faith (including, Allah is God, Praying to Allah five times daily, Fasting, Going to Mecca). The charitable contribution is generally considered to be two percent.

Prayer: To Moslems and Jews as well as to many Christians, the acts of prayer are accompanied by mannerisms that show the person is in the act of prayer. Various forms of singing (chanting), bobbing (moving), washing, covering heads, and women wearing aprons have been passed down through the ages.

Set Prayers: “In general, biblical prayer was spontaneous and personal; the more formal aspect of worship probably consisted of bringing sacrifices at set times and with a fixed ritual. It seems, however, that even during the period of the First Temple there were already some prayers whose wording was set and which were always recited on certain specific occasions. Some scholars, basing themselves on Psalms 55:18 and Daniel 6:11, believe that the practice of worshipping at least three times a day may be traced back to the biblical period.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Moving While Praying: The Hebrew word *Kavvanah* is the direction, intention or concentration of prayer. So that we can better understand the customs of others in their form of prayer and worship, the following quotation has been included. "Because the times of the services and even the words which were to be recited, were fixed, there was a danger that prayer would lose its vitality and become mere routine. In order to overcome this danger, the rabbis urged the worshiper to meditate before he began to worship, to think of "before Whom he was standing" in prayer, and to create a new prayer every time he worshiped . . . "service of the heart" . . . melodic chanting was used as a means of increasing *kavvanah* and worshipers were taught to sway as they prayed, thus throwing their entire body into the worship." (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Prayer Circle: When the Jews pray in a synagogue, they form a prayer circle (Minyan). It usually consists of at least ten participants. There is a tradition that if there are only nine persons, the prayer circle can be completed with an agreement that the presence of the Lord or the Spirit of the Lord is with them. Kneeling, a common form of prayer among Christians, is shunned by Jews, although scriptural references to kneeling do exist.

Fasting: As mentioned above, the practice of fasting is found in Islam. It is also a part of Jewish life, although fasting is never done on a Sabbath day because Sabbath is a day of joy and fasting (to many) is less than joyful! Yom Kippur (a High Day - hence, treated as a Sabbath) is the only exception. On that day, fasting begins an hour before the Sabbath and continues until an hour afterwards. "Fasting is an act of repentance or of supplication seeking divine forgiveness or the prevention of disaster. Public fasts also commemorate catastrophic events in Jewish history. On fast days one neither eats nor drinks . . . other prohibitions are washing, wearing leather shoes, using ointments or perfumes, and other physical pleasures. There are special prayers and the Torah is read in the synagogue. Yom Kippur and Tishah be-Av are observed from sunset to sunset. All other fasts are from sunrise to sunset." (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Monthly Fasting: In spite of a Biblical statement that fasting is only required once a year, Jews have many traditional fasting days and fasting reasons. It is the custom among the very religious to fast at the beginning of every month. The Talmudic teachings caution against excessive fasting. Young children are not required to fast nor are individuals whose health is precarious.

Who's Chosen? A few other comments may be of interest to Latter-day Saints who consider themselves chosen if they keep the commandments, both ritually and morally. "How odd of God, to choose the Jews." W.N. Ewer, who wrote this jingle, could not understand why Israel is God's Chosen People. Moses, in Deuteronomy 7:7--8, explains it thus: "The Lord did not set His love upon you because you were more in number than any people . . . but because the Lord loved you, and because He would keep the oath which He had sworn to your fathers." The rabbis insist that Israel was elected because it voluntarily accepted the Torah whereas other nations would not. Mercy and forgiveness, says the Talmud, are distinguishing characteristics of Abraham and his seed, and these characteristics motivated God to choose Israel as His people." "But God, as depicted by the rabbis, embodies a combination of justice and mercy, of strict judgment and lenient compassion. This combination of justice and mercy in God is represented by the two names of God --- Elohim and YHWH. The former stands for justice and the latter for mercy. Though they may seem contradictory, one actually complements the other and, when there is a conflict between the two, God usually favors mercy." (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Who Are the Gods? To Latter-day Saints, Elohim is God the Father (of Justice) and Jehovah (YHWH) is the Father of Mercy.

Who's Kingdom? As a closing comment on this lesson, let me add a personal perspective. In the days of the Savior, all believing members committed their time, talent, and even their lives to "the kingdom." I participated in an archaeological survey close to Jericho where we were discussing the odd nature of a beautiful synagogue floor of the first century. What was odd about it was the signature. Almost every ancient mosaic floor found in Israel has the signature of the donor with his family name and title. This one simply had an inscription that indicated that the "entire community" had done this work. I had the distinct feeling we were standing on the remains of a worship center used by early saints, "Former-day Saints," people who committed themselves to first building of the Kingdom of God.

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