

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
“The Constitution of the Kingdom of God”
Matthew 5-7
July 3, 2016

There is a danger... a temptation, you might call it... that threatens the very soul of the church. It's a temptation we've often fallen into throughout our 2,000 year history. But for us in this part of the world, it grows especially strong this time of the year.

This temptation isn't one of those clear choices where there is an obvious fork in the road and you know you should go left but turning right just looks so appealing. No, it's a much more subtle kind of temptation. One that you don't even realize you're succumbing to... even after you're well down that road... which is part of what makes it so dangerous. It's also the reason we must vigilantly guard our hearts and minds.

The danger is this: **The confusing and blending of our allegiances so that our gratitude, becomes idol worship. (repeat)**

...which is exactly what happens any time patriotism makes it's way into our worship. Gratitude becomes idol worship... and we don't even realize it's happening in us... but it is.

You don't have to look back to far to see just how deadly it can be... to see what it can do to us. It wasn't that long ago that all of Christian Europe broke out in war against one another, believing they had God on their side... because their faith identity and their national identity were in competition with one another. They were blended into one. It's the reason the mainline church in Germany was silent during the holocaust and supported the national war efforts.

There is this subtle but deadly sickness that takes root when our Christian identity blends with our national identity... and it's happening all the time. The Kingdom of America, the dream of America is confused with the Kingdom of God, the dream of God for the world.

This ailment is so prevalent today, it's so commonplace, so ***expected even*** by everyday American Christian, that it has to be named, and especially on this weekend when flags are being waved in sanctuaries during worship on this day.

Now, I imagine that by saying this, I've got some of your defense up. Some are feeling guarded, maybe even angry by what I'm saying. So, let me just be a bit more clear about where I'm coming from.

I am deeply grateful for so many aspects of our American heritage.

I am deeply grateful for so many people who had the courage to stand up and demand liberty and freedom and justice for ***all*** ... and who have worked for that and defended that.

But my allegiance, my commitment, my deepest identity doesn't reside in my national identity. It is in my identity in Christ. You see, the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to proclaim and embody and invite us into is not the same as the Kingdom of American.

God and country are not the same.

Despite how much we try to blend them together,

God and country are not the same and should not be confused!

And so, my invitation to you, my challenge to you today and this weekend as we celebrate and give thanks for our country... is to pay attention to your heart and watch your allegiances.

To help you do that I want to read to you the constitution of the Kingdom of God... the Sermon on the Mount. It's recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7. And in order to hear it in a fresh way, I'm going to be reading this from the Message version of the bible.

Matthew 5

You're Blessed

¹⁻² When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you.

Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.

"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

"Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable.

You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

Salt and Light

¹³"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!

Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Completing God's Law

¹⁷⁻¹⁸"Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures— either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama.

God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working.

¹⁹⁻²⁰"Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. *But take it seriously*, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom.

Murder

²¹⁻²²"You're familiar with the command to the ancients, '**Do not murder.**' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder.

Carelessly call a brother '**idiot!**' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell '**stupid!**' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

²³⁻²⁴"This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

²⁵⁻²⁶"Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you're likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won't get out without a stiff fine.

Adultery and Divorce

²⁷⁻²⁸"You know the next commandment pretty well, too: '**Don't go to bed with another's spouse.**' But don't think you've preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

²⁹⁻³⁰"Let's not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here's what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile.

And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

³¹⁻³²"Remember the Scripture that says, **'Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights'**? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are **'legal.'**

Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you're responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you're automatically an adulterer yourself. You can't use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

Empty Promises

³³⁻³⁷"And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, **'I'll pray for you,'** and never doing it, or saying, **'God be with you,'** and not meaning it.

You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. ***In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true.*** Just say **'yes'** and **'no.'** When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.

Love Your Enemies

³⁸⁻⁴²"Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: **'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.'** Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: **'Don't hit back at all.'**

If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, gift-wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

⁴³⁻⁴⁷"You're familiar with the old written law, **'Love your friend,'** and its unwritten companion, **'Hate your enemy.'** I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.

When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves.

This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

⁴⁸"In a word, what I'm saying is, **Grow up.** You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

Matthew 6

The World Is Not a Stage

¹ "Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding.

²⁻⁴"When you do something for someone else, don't call attention to yourself. You've seen them in action, I'm sure—'**play actors**' I call them— treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds.

They get applause, true, but that's all they get. When you help someone out, don't think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.

Pray with Simplicity

⁵"And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat?

⁶"Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

⁷⁻¹³"The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God.

Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what's best— as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You're in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You're ablaze in beauty!
Yes. Yes. Yes.

¹⁴⁻¹⁵"In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸"When you practice some appetite-denying discipline to better concentrate on God, don't make a production out of it. It might turn you into a small-time celebrity but it won't make you a saint.

If you 'go into training' inwardly, act normal outwardly. Shampoo and comb your hair, brush your teeth, wash your face. God doesn't require attention-getting devices. He won't overlook what you are doing; he'll reward you well.

A Life of God-Worship

¹⁹⁻²¹"Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, *is the place* you will most want to be, and end up being.

²²⁻²³"Your eyes are windows into your body. If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a dank cellar. If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have!

²⁴"You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both.

²⁵⁻²⁶"If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion.

There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds.

²⁷⁻²⁹"Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference?

Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them.

³⁰⁻³³"If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think he'll attend to you,

take pride in you,
do his best for you?

What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*.

People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works.

Steep your life in God-reality,

God-initiative, God-provisions.

Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

³⁴"Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

Matthew 7

A Simple Guide for Behavior

¹⁻⁵"Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults— unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That *critical spirit* has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own.

Do you have the nerve to say, '**Let me wash your face for you,**' when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.

⁶"Don't be flip with the sacred.

Banter and silliness give no honor to God.

Don't reduce holy mysteries to slogans. In trying to be relevant, you're only being cute and inviting sacrilege.

⁷⁻¹¹"Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate?

As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?

¹²"Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get.

Being and Doing

¹³⁻¹⁴"Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do.

The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

¹⁵⁻²⁰"Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character.

Who preachers **are** is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook. These diseased trees with their bad apples are going to be chopped down and burned.

²¹⁻²³"Knowing the correct password—saying 'Master, Master,' for instance— isn't going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience—doing what my Father wills.

I can see it now—at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, **'Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.'**

And do you know what I am going to say? **'You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don't impress me one bit. You're out of here.'**

²⁴⁻²⁵"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on.

If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.

²⁶⁻²⁷"But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards."

²⁸⁻²⁹When Jesus concluded his address, the crowd burst into applause. They had never heard teaching like this. It was apparent that he was living everything he was saying—quite a contrast to their religion teachers! This was the best teaching they had ever heard.

The Word of the Lord for God's people.
Thanks be to God.

Silent Reflection:

"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

~Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.