

Be Ye Therefore Perfect

"Ye are my friends, IF ye do whatsoever I command you"—John 15:14

MATTHEW CHAPTERS FIVE to SEVEN

I HAVE been always strongly impressed that these 3 chapters are the living and vital heart of the Truth. If we are familiar with these teachings and sincerely trying to obey them at all times, we are on the way of life. **If we are not, we have no chance of life.**

These 3 chapters, commonly known as the "Sermon on the Mount," contain 40 commands. They are presented in various ways, but are all actually commands of Christ, to which he refers when he says (John 15:14)—

"Ye are my friends, IF ye do whatsoever I command you."

He sums it all up in his final words. If we hear and do, we build on rock, and will stand forever. If we hear and do not, we build on sand—our house will collapse and fall.

Let us consider some of these commands in order—

"Blessed are the poor in spirit"

Or, as a command—

"Be poor in spirit."

This is perhaps the most striking command of the whole address. The word "poor" here means the lowest degree of abject poverty and destitution. It means beggar.

"Spirit" is disposition. The "poor in spirit" are those who fully realize the true destitute status of perishing mortal man, as compared to glorious and eternal things. What is man?—dust, a vapour, a breath, a shadow, with an urgent, desperate, crying need for the help and strength of God.

Those who perceive this are blessed, happy; they have taken the first step toward immortality.

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"Blessed are they that mourn"

Or, more simply—

"Be mourners."

The blessing does not include ALL mourners, any more than the first does all poor. It is those who mourn in the right way for the right things; those who have deep fellow-feeling for others' sorrows—for the burden of the sorrow of this sad world; those who realistically face the facts of life—

"It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting;

"For that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart" (Eccl. 7:2).

It does not conflict with the command to "Always rejoice!" Paul said (2 Cor. 6:10) that he was "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich."

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"Be meek" (5:5).

Meek means yielding, gentle, mild, patient, calm and soothing; not aggressive or self-assertive or bossy; cheerfully putting up with wrong and present disadvantages for the sake of eternal good.

Meek people are self-controlled people and they have great power for good influence. It is a training in controlling the flesh. It is the attitude that can best help others.

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"Hunger and thirst after righteousness" (5:6).

Hunger and thirst—the basic, most essential needs and desires. The blessing is for those whose whole hearts' desire is not for personal gain or advantage or pleasure, but for righteousness and holiness and godliness—in themselves and through-out the earth.

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"Be merciful"(5:7).

In Nazareth Revisited, bro. Roberts strongly emphasizes the necessity of keeping all these teachings in balance. We may tend to over-emphasize those that naturally appeal to us, and give others insufficient weight.

An adamant, forceful stand for righteousness is essential, but equally so is mercy and compassion and patience and understanding. We are fighting sin—the common enemy. We are not fighting people. People we are trying to win and save.

We naturally tend to be very critical of the errors of others, and very compassionate to our own. Let us reverse the process. It is much more healthy and productive and scriptural.

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"Be pure in heart" (5:8).

The saddest aspect of the perverted morality of these last dark days of human ignorance is that corruption and vulgarity are being glorified as reality and honesty, and deeper bondage to the flesh is heralded as emancipation and freedom. Decency and purity are condemned as prudery and hypocrisy.

Truly the world is full of hypocrisy, as the new generation of rebels says, but the problem is not solved but worsened by destroying the good things that the world is hypocritical about.

More than ever it is essential that we, as Christ's brethren, realize and emphasize that purity and cleanliness of heart and deed and word and thought are as vital and important and desirable and timely as ever.

The Bible—God's Word—is the ONLY standard of right and wrong, purity and impurity, cleanliness and filthiness, wisdom and folly. Without this standard, man steadily degenerates to the beast, though he glorifies his corruption with high sounding words.

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"Be peacemakers" (5:9).

Peace can only be built on one foundation: **"First pure; then peaceable"**—

"The work of **righteousness** shall be peace" (Isa. 32:17).

"There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked."

But the emphasis here is on the desire and effort for peace and harmony and reconciliation: the basic bent of the mind—developed through meditation on God's Word—to seek to harmonize conflicts, to reconcile estrangements, to remove barriers of misunderstanding and enmity. To accomplish these things, there must be complete renunciation of self and personal desire.

Christ, in perfect self-sacrifice, made peace by the blood of the cross, reconciling and uniting Jew and Gentile in one New Man in himself.

He is the great example of bringing reconciliation to others by personal holiness in himself. He reconciled men to each other, and mankind to God.

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"Rejoice and be exceeding glad when you are privileged to suffer for righteousness' sake, for great is your reward in heaven."

Suffering is not to be rejoiced in for its own sake, or from self-pity. That, though common, is fleshly perversion. It is to be healthily and intelligently rejoiced in as a necessary means to a glorious end—as an assurance and evidence that God is working in us and through us to accomplish His divine purpose.

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"Be ye the salt of the earth."

Our responsibility in all we do or say is to be an element of purity and soundness in an increasingly corrupt and degenerating world.

We are to be the element that keeps God from destroying the whole, as in the Flood, or Sodom and Gomorrah.

But if the salt has lost its freshness and tangy saltiness, what good is it? This is our zeal and dedication and fervent activity for good toward all, without which we are nothing.

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"Be ye the light of the world."

A high commission indeed! Similar to the salt, but a different aspect. The salt is the preserving influence, the inner striving and prayer, the life of godliness and purity.

The light is the manifestation, the guidance, the enlightenment, the beacon pointing the way in the darkness of human night.

Let your light shine that men may glorify God. Our lives and testimonies must be a manifestation to lost and groping mankind of the reality and desirability and beauty of holiness.

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"Think not that I am come to destroy the Law" (5:17).

The Law of Moses demanded perfect holiness. The Law drew a sharp line between clean and unclean. The Law, said Paul, was "holy, just and good."

The common idea is that Christ came to lower the requirements, so that man could get life with less effort and less inconvenience—to sweep away all the flesh-crucifying rules under a big, blind, blurred blanket of tolerance and indulgence, falsely described as "love."

Nothing could be further from the Truth—

"Whoso shall break one of the least of these commandments shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven" (5:19).

"Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of heaven" (5:20).

In the eyes of the people, the Scribes and Pharisees were the very pinnacle of righteousness, but it was a superficial and external fulfilling of the Law. Jesus is about to expound a deeper, infinitely more searching and piercing law. He is going to bring out the real spirit of the Mosaic Law, showing how much further it goes with its commands into the innermost heart of man.

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"But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother (without a cause) shall be in danger of the judgment" (5:22).

The Law says, "Thou shalt not kill." I say, in expounding the Spirit of the Law, that **thou shalt not be angry at anyone**, for anger is simply murder locked up in the heart.

"Without a cause" is not in the best manuscripts. The RV & Diaglott and all modern versions omit it. It destroys the whole force of the command. The command is not—

"Thou shalt not be angry without a cause."

But—

"Thou shalt not be angry—Period."

Anger is the prerogative of God, and we are not God.

In man, anger is loss of control, loss of perspective, a victory for the mind of the flesh. We can accomplish nothing good when we are angry. We lose all influence for good. Anger is infantile immaturity—

"The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."

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**"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee;
"Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."**

If you are aware that your brother has anything against you; is in any way estranged or upset (regardless of whether it is justified or not); the command of Christ is, "BE RECONCILED."

Jesus does not discuss where the fault may lie. That is unimportant. The important part is—Seek reconciliation, continually, always. Not just go through the motions once or twice, like a technical Pharisee. He says— BE reconciled: keep at it: never give up the effort.

If these commands were obeyed, there could be no ecclesial problems. If they are NOT obeyed, says Christ, we are just building all of our life-long efforts on the sand of the flesh.

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"If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out" (5:29-30).

In all these commands, we must get at the deep principles that underlie them. They are all far deeper and more broadly applicable than the specific form in which they are worded. But this does not lessen their power, but enforces it.

Christ here is clearly using the right eye and right hand to emphasize the extreme urgency of putting away ANYTHING, however precious to us, that might hinder us in the race for life.

This principle, faithfully carried out, would eliminate many, many things from our encumbered lives, and release much time and money and energy for the work of the Lord. Are we building on rock or sand?

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"Swear not at all. Let your communication be Yea, yea and Nay, nay" (5:34-37).

Various reasons are given. One is the complete helplessness of weak, mortal man to control anything or make any certain determination for the future. But the deepest reason:

"For whatsoever is more than this—a simple affirmative—cometh of evil."

Speech is a very important aspect of godliness. Control of the tongue is essential to pleasing God. We must learn that EVERY word we utter is important and related to our salvation—

"For every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof at the judgment."

What a terrible volume of condemnation we are building up for ourselves with our idle and often malicious chatter!

If we hope for life, every word must be carefully checked and weighed.

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"Resist not evil" (5:39).

This goes very, very deep. Of all the commands this is perhaps the most directly contrary to both the reactions and the wisdom of the flesh.

Why not resist evil? Why not rather fight evil with every possible means available?

First, because it is so commanded. We must obey rather than question. But still we must question to the extent of trying to get the fullest value and purpose of the command.

The present world is built on violence. All governments were established by violence. If we resort to any force, or even **threat** of force, we are identifying ourselves with the violent world, the "Kingdom of men."

We are making their violence our tool and ally. The threat of naked violence lies behind all the world's "legal" processes, and gives them power.

We are called out to be separate—harmless sheep in the midst of a world of wolves.

The fact that this command to resist not evil is directly opposed to the strongest and most vicious motion of the flesh is one big, obvious reason for the command. The whole purpose of our present probation is to overcome the flesh and train the Spirit.

But there is a deeper and more constructive and positive reason. It is given in v. 45—

"That ye may be the children of your Father, for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good."

WHY does God send His rain on the just and on the unjust? Because His present loving purpose is to call men to life, to call sinners to repentance. And to be His children, this must be OUR whole purpose of life. Everything must be subordinated to this, for the present.

There are 2 ways of life—the way of self-assertion and self-advantage; and the way of manifesting love and goodness toward all with a view to awakening love and goodness.

We cannot be half-and-half. We must make our choice between them. Christ is the perfect example of the way of love. He went through life completely unselfish, completely unresisting, and he has had more influence for good than all other men put together.

The non-resistant, Christlike life is the ONLY pattern of life, if we desire to do eternal good. Truly a time of judgment upon evil will come, and if we are worthy, we shall be used with Christ to carry out God's will at that time, and establish the universal triumph of righteousness, but our present duty is to try to win men to God by the Christlike way of good for evil.

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"If any sue thee at the law, and take thy coat, let him have thy cloke also" (5:40).

Not just resist not evil, but give to the evil more than they demand. Is it folly? Or is it the highest and most beautiful spiritual wisdom, so far above the mind of the flesh that the flesh cannot even comprehend it?

Do we—in deed, word and thought—obey this command to yield to the evil more than they take from us? Or are we still foolishly building on the sand of worldly thinking?

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"Give to him that asketh of thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away" (5:41).

Some day, perhaps very soon, we must face the man who gave us these commands, and who said he would measure our love for him by them.

We know in our heart whether we are being obedient to them, or whether we are allowing the mind of the flesh to water them down and explain them away, or ignore them altogether.

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"Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you; pray for them that persecute you" (5:44).

These are very wonderful, powerful words. Many have been won from evil to the way of life by a Christlike example. Infinitely many more, of course, have not, but they do not count. They are just part of the perishing background of the glorious divine plan.

God is drawing a precious few out of the innumerable multitudes of the ages unto Himself, and the magnet is this free, glorious, unmerited, spiritual love of which we are called to be a part.

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"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (5:48).

Does he really expect us to be perfect? What he expects— what he DEMANDS—is that we strain every effort in that direction. He requires no more than the very best we can do, but he will accept no less.

The command leaves us absolutely no excuse for relaxing our efforts at any point short of perfection. The great example that is set before us in this verse is GOD HIMSELF, and as those who aspire and claim to be His children, we must always strive to be like Him.

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"Take heed"—be very careful —"that ye do not your alms before men: let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth."

Some, in justification of parading their virtues, have tried to see a contradiction between this command and the one to—

"Let your light so shine that men may see your good works & glorify your Father."

But the wise will see no contradiction. The light must shine. We must manifest to men at every moment and in every contact the best example we can of the Christlike life.

But in the matter of doing individual good to others, every effort must be made at privacy and secrecy.

Why? The reason given is, "Otherwise ye have NO REWARD of your Father." Why not, if we are sincerely trying to do good to others, as commanded? Because (v. 2) such as do it openly have their reward already.

All who have studied the human heart—both their own and others—in the light of God's Word, will recognize that any avoidable publicity of good deeds has an element of self-glory which immediately makes it ugly and offensive to God.

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"When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and pray to thy Father in secret" (6:5).

The same with prayer. Personal prayer should be in utter privacy. The slightest trace of display or show is abomination.

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"When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

And public prayer especially should be simple, brief and unembellished. Mere repetition, he says, is vain and worldly. We must always remember with deep reverence that we are talking to God in reality and sincerity, and not giving a public performance to influence and impress others.

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"Forgive men their trespasses."

We must forgive—freely and fully, from the heart. This is absolutely essential to a Christlike character. Ill-feeling and resentment and taking offence and unforgivingness and fleshly sourness make divine beauty of character utterly impossible.

And we must forgive EVERYTHING—whether forgiveness is sought or not. It is very self-gratifying to graciously forgive when forgiveness is asked in repentant humility. There's little virtue in forgiving under those conditions. But Christ prayed for forgiveness for those who were in the act of putting him to a cruel death, and Stephen did the same.

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"Moreover, when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast.

"Verily I say unto you, They have their reward" (6:16).

Fasting comes under the same instruction of privacy, and this principle is all-inclusive. Any self-denial or sacrifice for the sake of service to Christ must be secret to have any value in God's sight.

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"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, for where your treasure is there will your heart be also" (6:19-23).

This is perhaps the most comprehensive and searching of the commands, as it deals with the whole direction and motive and purpose of life.

"Treasure on earth" is ANYTHING related to the present, passing, mortal life.

The natural way is to accumulate treasure of many different kinds. This is so universally taken for granted as the wise and profitable thing to do that to question it is heresy, and to violate it is considered the height of stupidity.

Christ completely cuts the foundation out from under the whole natural pattern of life.

Vs. 21-23 are an explanation of the importance of single-mindedness, as related to where our treasure in life is. The natural desire is to want treasure both in heaven AND on earth— to seek both salvation and present advantage. But Jesus says—

"If thine eye be single, thy body shall be full of light.

"But if thine eye be evil, or double, thy whole body shall be full of darkness."

Single-mindedness is the only true enlightenment and peace. We must decide whether we want heavenly things or earthly things: we cannot have both—

"A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. Let not that man think he shall receive ANYTHING of the Lord" (Jam. 1: 7-8).

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The next command is even more specifically to the point—

"No man can serve two masters . . . ye cannot serve God and mammon" (6:24).

"Mammon" simply means riches, wealth, present gain, worldly things. We can be of no use or desirability to God unless we are entirely devoted to HIM to the exclusion of everything else.

Everything else—ALL natural things—must be very secondary and very unimportant to us, in order to please God. Therefore—

"Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, what ye shall drink, or what ye shall put on.

"For all these things the Gentiles—the people of the world—seek" (6:25-32).

God wants us to be very different from the world, with our minds on very different things.

It does not mean we need net work to provide these things. Paul is the best example of what Jesus means here. Paul laboured diligently to provide for necessary things, not only for himself but for others also; and he commanded that if a man refused work, he should not be given food.

But these daily things had no interest or importance to him except as basic necessities that had to be taken care of. And in his utter devotion to the work of God he says he was often hungry, thirsty, ill-clothed and sleepless.

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"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness."

This must be the center of all our interest and desire. This is the pure and single eye, the body full of joy and light.

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"Take therefore no thought for the morrow" (6:34).

We know that reasonable plans must be made, especially where other people's welfare and convenience are concerned. We find Paul planning where he will go and whom he will meet. But he manifests no concern about providing for his own future support or welfare. The basic principles are clear, and the more firmly we lay hold of them, the closer we are to life—

The future is entirely in God's hands.

He has guaranteed to take care of His children.

Today alone is our concern.

We must, today, use what He has given us in His work, having faith in Him to provide for the future. He guarantees care in the future ONLY if we properly use today.

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"Judge not, that ye be not judged" (7:1).

Probably no command is more often broken than this. Much of our conversation is judgment, criticism or condemnation of others.

This is an evil condition, and displeasing to God. We must truly judge circumstances and conditions where our own conduct is affected, or where fellowship is involved; but unless it is necessary for us to judge others in order to know what we ourselves should do, we should very carefully refrain from forming any judgment of another, and especially we should not express judgment.

This is a very important first principle of the Truth. The warning is—

"With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged" (7:2).

Therefore it is always wisdom to judge with mercy and kindness and compassion and fellow-feeling, wherever we must judge at all.

When we indulge in the flesh-satisfying practice of judging and criticising others, we are not only directly disobedient to this command—we are also manifesting that we do not have the mind and spirit of Christ, and therefore are none of his.

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"Give not that which is holy unto dogs" (7:6).

This seems to be a counter-balance to the command not to judge. It parallels another command elsewhere—

"Be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."

We are not being harmless, but very harmful and fleshy, when we talk about the faults of others.

But though we must view all with love and compassion and sympathy, still we must use care in exposing the things of God to the unholy and profane.

I believe the reference is more to the inner aspects of the Truth, the intimate aspects of association and fellowship, rather than to preaching the Truth. Paul's injunction to "Lay hands suddenly on no man" would be parallel.

This is a fitting and balancing warning in conjunction with the command to judge with compassion, lest out of misguided love we make the mistake of being too lenient in guarding the purity of the Truth. The Truth and the fellowship of the Spirit are holy and sacred and must be jealously guarded from the worldly and profane.

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"Ask, and it SHALL be given you" (7:7).

This is certainly the most glorious of the commands. Let us note well that it is a COMMAND. We must believe it, and we must ask.

We can never hide behind a plea of weakness or inability to obey, for here we are commanded to ask for whatever strength and wisdom we need, and God guarantees it (Mark 11:24)—

"What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, BELIEVE that ye receive them, and ye SHALL have them."

With that guarantee of success, there can be no excuse for failure.

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"All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets" (7:12).

The "Golden Rule"—best known and perhaps least obeyed command of all. It has a pleasing, soothing sound, and many pay it zealous lip-service, but how rarely it is practised!

Note that Jesus says this command is "all the Law and the Prophets"—this is the whole spirit of the Old Testament, as well as the New.

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"Enter ye in at the strait (that is, narrow) gate, for few there be that find it " (7:13).

The Golden Rule has summed up the spirit of all the previous commands, of all the Word of God. Now comes the urgent exhortation to FOLLOW this heavenly way of wisdom, joy and life that he has outlined, though the vast majority are going the opposite way.

The information that few will ever find the way of life, though terribly saddening, is a tremendous revelation and emancipation.

It completely frees us from what would otherwise be the almost insurmountable barrier of finding ourselves going in the opposite direction from all the learned and powerful—

"Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes"

(Matt. 11:25).

The Scriptures teach us that the majority, and especially the wise and powerful, have ALWAYS been wrong concerning the real facts of life and eternity—blind guides of the blind, leading their pitiful victims only to the grave.

And thus the final command and urgent warning—

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

"Ye shall know them by their fruits" (7:15-20).

Here is a place where we **must** judge—not in condemnation, but in self-protective discernment—care concerning being misled into association with such as have all the appearances of zealous, harmless, hard-working sheep.

How are we to judge? —"**By their fruits.**"

Now, many apparent "fruits" we may find the sheep and wolves have in common—

"Have we not prophesied in thy Name?

"And in thy Name done many wonderful works?"

We must search deeper to discern the wolves. We would perhaps prefer not to face this issue, but to leave all judging to Christ. But here is the last and crowning command—"**Beware of false prophets.**"

It must be very urgent to be put as the closing warning. It would not be faithful to ignore it. It must be a real danger.

We must endeavour, whatever the present cost in friendship and association, to faithfully keep that which has been entrusted to us, and which previous generations of faithful brethren have preserved and defended. Where false teaching is tolerated, there can be no true fellowship, though many may themselves not follow the falsehood.

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Jesus closes with the 2 builders; one on Rock, one on Sand. The builders on the Rock are those very few who hear these wonderful teachings of Christ and faithfully OBEY them, even to the end.

—G.V.G.