



NOITULOVER

ON THE MOUNTAIN
WITH JESUS

A 40 DAY DEVOTIONAL STUDY
OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

C CONTENTS

CREDIT TO THE SOURCES

This devotion quotes many great preachers and Bible scholars. When quoted, their surname is provided in brackets after a quote made by the individual.

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WEEK 1



THE MOUNTAIN MESSAGE

MATTHEW 5 v 1, 2

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2 and he began to teach them.

Welcome to the mountain. Get ready to drink in heaven's air. Eat up heaven's word – we're sitting at the feet of Jesus. We're listening to Jesus' so-called Sermon on the Mount, or as we call it, the Mountain Message. Its history's most far-reaching, impactful and quoted sermon of all time! And it's about to impact your life.

WELCOME TO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT.

- ◆ This is found in Matthew 5-7. It is a sample of Jesus' teaching. It's the first, longest and most famous of 5 full messages in Matthew's Gospel.
- ◆ It was preached on a single occasion (as 7:28 makes clear). However, it might well be a summary of teaching that was given over the course of several days. We do not need to think it was a single 'sermon' (Eaton).
- ◆ **Where was it preached?** 'Though Matthew doesn't pinpoint where, the traditional site of this sermon is above Tabgha, near Capernaum, on a ridge of hills northwest of the town, with a magnificent view of the Sea of Galilee. A twentieth-century church marks this site today, although down the hill in Tabgha there are remains of a small Byzantine chapel (from the 4th century) commemorating the sermon' (Wilson).

SOME PEOPLE WRONGLY THINK THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT...

- ◇ **...should be used as a law for all of society.** But, again, this is not a message to society in general, but rather to the church. Jesus is calling the church of disciples to be a radical counter-culture.
- ◇ **...is a long list of rules that Christians should live by.** The problem with this is that it takes some of the teaching in an overly literal and legalistic way, when the better way to understand it is to discern the **spirit** of Jesus' teachings. This point will make sense later. Jesus' teaching is more about how the kingdom of God transforms us from the inside out, than it is a set of rules that we should try abide by.
- ◇ **...is impossible to live by, so we shouldn't even try.** They think 'the purpose of this sermon was to describe a moral standard so impossibly high that it is relevant only for a future millennial kingdom' (Wilson). Although no one will ever get to the point where he or she can say, 'I keep the Sermon on the Mount', we are intended to start climbing this holy mountain, even if we only reach the top in heaven' (Eaton).
- ◇ **...is meant to make non-Christians feel guilty, so they realize they need a Saviour.** In other words, its high standards for life are considered a tool to convict non-Christians in evangelism. But this is not the case. It's a message primarily but not exclusively directed at disciples (v1). It's for Christians who want to make progress in their

discipleship. Though there are 'crowds' (v1) that listen in, it is clear that Jesus is focusing his message on this occasion on his disciples. 'Disciples were those who had made a commitment to Jesus as the Messiah; the 'crowds' on the other hand were those who were curious and often astounded by his teaching and ministry (see 7:28-29) yet for the most part remained neutral and uncommitted' (Wilson). 'The disciples are the audience proper, but the others are included. After all, Jesus was not monastic in spirit, and he did not have two doctrines - one for the many and another for the few - like Buddha. His highest teaching was meant for the millions' (Bruce).

WHAT IS THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT THEN?

- ◆ 'Jesus expounds the reality of discipleship lived in the presence and power of the kingdom of God, but within the everyday world. These teachings, rightly understood, form a challenging but practical ethic that Jesus expects his followers to live by in this present age' (Wilson). 'This great message tells us how we will live when Jesus is our Lord' (Guzik).
- ◆ He is coaching his disciples in what it takes to be a truly godly person; someone who can serve him fruitfully. This is a teaching for Christians and churches. It is Jesus calling us to be truly transformed by his grace. It is Jesus training us to become the kind of people who will truly be salt and light in this world; a powerful counter-culture. It's extremely challenging, and will often drive us to our knees in repentance and humility. But, as we draw on the resources of salvation and the Spirit, we will see that our lives can reflect Jesus' teachings. Certainly, Jesus expects nothing less than our whole-hearted study of his words, and our total co-operation in allowing his teaching to transform us.
- ◆ 'It is clear that the Sermon on the Mount had a significant impact on the early church. The early Christians of the second century for example make constant reference to it in their writings and their lives display the glory of radical disciples' (Guzik).
- ◆ 'It is a description of the kind of life that ought to be lived by those who have come under the power of the Lord Jesus Christ' (Eaton).



PONDER

Do you relate to any of the 4 misuses of the Sermon on the Mount?



PRACTICE

Every day, make a commitment to read, understand and respond to what Jesus has to say, by going through this devotional study 5 times a week, for the next 8 weeks.



PRAY

Jesus, I take my seat at your feet. Speak to me in the coming days and weeks. I place myself under your power and leadership. Transform me with your words.

MATTHEW 5 v 3 - 10

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

A DISCIPLE OF JESUS IS SOMEONE WHO LIVES IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

- ◆ Verses 3-10 consist of what has been called 'The Beatitudes'. They are eight descriptions of the life of a disciple. 'Jesus gives us eight foundation-stones. May we mark well each one of them, and learn wisdom!' (Ryle) The first (v3) and the last (v10) share the same phrase: 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. A disciple of Jesus is someone learning to live in the kingdom of heaven, and reflect the qualities of its king, Jesus himself. Jesus main invitation to people was to receive his kingdom and to learn to live in it (4:17).

What is this kingdom Christ is talking about? Answer: the kingdom exists wherever Christ's wisdom, leadership and the empowering grace is known. Since Christ's first coming, his kingdom has been progressively advancing in this world wherever people have actively trusted in Christ. Now his wisdom, leadership, power and grace are known by some, and only in part. But one day it will be known by all and in full.

A DISCIPLE OF JESUS IS SOMEONE WHO PURSUES THE LIFE THAT GOD BLESSES.

- ◇ Jesus repeatedly uses the word 'blessed'. 'The last word of the Old Testament is 'curse'. How appropriate that the opening sermon of our Lord's ministry starts with the word 'blessed' (Spurgeon). Life in his kingdom is a blessed life.
- ◇ What does it mean to be 'blessed'? 1) It means something similar to 'lucky', 'enviable', 'fortunate', 'privileged' or 'happy'. 2) It refers to the deep, lasting kind of happiness, not the short-lived, circumstance-dependent kind. 3) A person who is blessed can joyfully praise God and trust that God's way is best. It means to be someone on whom God pours out his favour and approval. In this sense, the word 'blessed' means something like, 'congratulated'. It's as though God is congratulating us for the place in which we find ourselves. 4) It also means to live with the promise of great future blessing (when Christ returns), although much of that future joy can already be experienced now.
- ◇ Every culture has its own version of what a blessed life looks like. In Western culture, blessed are the rich. Blessed are the good-looking, the healthy, those who have no worries or problems, the clever. Blessed are those who are well connected, the

optimistic, those who have found lasting romantic love, lottery winners and the famous. Jesus' description of what a truly blessed life looks like is quite surprising, and far less superficial than the typical list that is generated by our culture. 'Let us learn how entirely contrary the principles of Christ are to the principles of the world. It is vain to deny it. They are almost diametrically opposed. The very character which the Lord Jesus praises, the world despises. The very pride, and thoughtlessness, and high tempers, and worldliness, and selfishness, and lack of love, all of which abound everywhere, the Lord Jesus condemns' (Ryle).

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT (V3).

- ◆ **What does it mean to be poor in spirit (v3)?** 'The poor in spirit are those who recognize they are in need of God's help' (Wilson). It doesn't mean 'to lack courage, but rather to acknowledge one's spiritual bankruptcy and one's need to depend on God alone' (Carson). 'The true disciple knows he possesses nothing in himself to commend him to God or give him spiritual power. He is humble' (Eaton). Consider the opposite to this promise: 'Cursed are the self-reliant' (Jer 17:5).
- ◆ 'This beatitude is **first**, because this is where we **start** with God. A ladder, if it is to be of any use, must have its first step near the ground, or feeble climbers will never be able to mount. Not what I have, but what I have not, is the first point of contact, between my soul and God' (Spurgeon). This humility and dependence on God is not only the initial but the continuing posture in the life of a believer. We must humbly discern how much we need God's grace and help to live life as he intends us to live it. The Christian life is impossible without a daily dependence on God's grace.
- ◆ **Q: How are the poor in spirit blessed?** A: Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'The kingdom of heaven is not given on the basis of race, earned merits, the military zeal and prowess of Zealots, or the wealth of a Zacchaeus. It is given to the poor, the despised publicans, the prostitutes, those who are so 'poor' they know they can offer nothing and do not try. They cry for mercy and they alone are heard' (Carson). 'The poor in spirit are lifted from the dunghill, and set not among hired servants in the field, but among princes in the kingdom. 'Poor in spirit' – the words sound as if they described the owners of nothing, and yet they describe the inheritors of all things. Happy poverty! Millionaires in spirit sink into insignificance, while to the poor in spirit remains a boundless, endless, faultless kingdom, which renders them blessed in the esteem of him who is God over all, blessed for ever' (Spurgeon).

POUNDER In what ways may self-reliance be a curse?

PRACTICE Make a firm decision to pursue the life God blesses. Choose eternal joy over temporal happiness; God's congratulations over the applause of people.

PRAY God, I desperately need your help. In myself I cannot live the life you bless.



THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

MATTHEW 5 v 4 - 7

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN.

- ◆ Though the dominant emotion of the Christian life is joy (after all, the word 'blessed' means 'happy'), there will be times when we will rightly grieve over our own spiritual bankruptcy (v3), our sinful tendencies (see 1 Cor 5:2) and the sinfulness in the world around us (see Phil 3:18). The true disciple 'grieves over the slowness of the coming kingdom both in his own life and in the lives of others' (Eaton). This is not a command. We're not told to mourn. It simply tells us that as disciples in this world there will be times when we will mourn.
- ◆ **Q: How are those who mourn blessed? A: 'They will be comforted'.** Joy and comfort, not grief and mourning, are the last words that Christ speaks over us. 'Those who mourn over their sin and their sinful condition are promised comfort. God allows this grief into our lives as a path, not as a destination' (Guzik). God comforts us by giving us himself, the God of all comfort.

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK.

- ◇ **This means to avoid pride, aggression and defensiveness.**
 - 1) Instead of being proud, we humble ourselves and see ourselves as we really are.** We have neither an inflated nor a deflated view of ourselves.
 - 2) Instead of being aggressive, we treat people gently and with self-control.** The meek 'do not assert themselves over others in order to further their own agendas in their own strength' (Wilson). Meekness is, however, not weakness. It is 'strength under control, like a strong stallion trained to do the job, yielding to its rider, instead of running wild' (Guzik).
 - 3) Instead of defending ourselves, we trust God to look after our reputation and us.** We are secure in God. Like Moses (the humblest person of his time according to Num 12:3), rather than defending ourselves, we fall facedown to pray when attacked and criticized.
- ◇ **They will inherit the earth.** As we find our security and trust in God, rather than being proud, aggressive and defensive, God allows us to inherit the earth. Ultimately we will enjoy the new heavens and the new earth one day, but already now in this life there will be times when God provides for us and wonderfully compensates for all loss with the outworking of his plan and the provision of his presence.


BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS


- ◆ To hunger and thirst for anything is to passionately pursue it as one's highest priority.
 - 1) We pursue it in our own lives.** As we get to know God and discern his will for our lives and the world we live in, we begin to deeply crave that his will and transformation will come into our lives, freeing us from sin and unrighteousness. 'We see Christians hunger for many things: power, authority, success, comfort and happiness; but how many hunger and thirst for righteousness?' (Guzik) 'I have a fountain of sin within my heart, and bitter waters continually flow from it. Oh, that my nature could be changed, so that I, the lover of sin, could be made a lover of that which is good; that I, now full of evil, could become full of holiness!' (Spurgeon)
 - 2) We pursue it in society.** We yearn for justice in society, where the marginalized are included, the vulnerable are lifted up, the oppressed are freed and walls of division come down.
- ◆ **They will be satisfied.** As we give ourselves with total abandon to God's will, God's kingdom comes. There is a measure of satisfaction as we see the will of God being done in our lives to a degree, and in the situations around us, again, to a degree. But unrighteousness remains until that day when we are in the new heavens and the new earth, the home of true righteousness (2 Peter 3:13). Our full satisfaction comes in the future, but already now we taste and drink of it as God's will is progressively embraced. 'Jesus promised to **fill** the hungry; to fill them with as much as they could eat. This is a strange filling that both satisfies us and keeps us longing for more' (Guzik).

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL.

- ◇ Being merciful involves two ideas: 1) Compassion: we care for those who are in pain or who are lacking. 2) Forgiveness: we forgive those who wrong us, even being generous and kind to them.
- ◇ **They will be shown mercy.** We must remember that the disciples had already started to experience Jesus' mercy toward them. He had already lavished warmth, acceptance, healing and teaching upon them. Now he is saying that they are not only recipients of this mercy, but need to be conduits of it too. As we extend this mercy to others, we will experience even more of God's grace, mercy, kindness and forgiveness flowing towards us.

 **PONDER** Which of these four beatitudes is most relevant to you at this time?

 **PRACTICE** Based on your choice of beatitude, re-read what it means to be that. Think of one way you can apply that to your life in the next 24 hours.

 **PRAY** God help me today as I seek to be more ... God, I want to live the life you bless.

DAY 4

PURITY IN HEART AND PEACEMAKING



MATTHEW 5 v 8, 9

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART.

◆ This refers to three things:

1) Single-mindedness. It means to have a heart that pursues one thing only. In this case Jesus means to pursue God and God alone. 'It carries the idea of a single, undivided heart, utterly sincere and not divided in their devotion and commitment to God' (Guzik). As God goes to work in us, his grace causes us to want him, his righteousness, and his kingdom. Our lives are simplified by this single desire.

2) Motivational purity. It is possible to do or say the right things, but from a self-preserving or self-seeking motivation. We need a transformation of motives; a heart-level change. We need an 'inner moral purity as opposed to merely the image of purity' (Guzik). 'We are to be free from the tyranny of a divided self' (Stott). We are not looking for glory, comfort or pleasure.

3) Transparency. We need to become free from deceit, false motives and camouflage, an open book before God and man.

◆ **They will see God.** What a wonderful promise! One day we will experience what theologians call 'the beatific vision', when we shall in the brightness of day gaze upon the face of God (see Rev 22:4 and 1 John 3:2). But already now God wants us to see his face by faith, by spiritual discernment. Like Moses, we 'see him who is invisible' (Heb 11:27). We don't see him with our natural eyes, but with our spiritual eyes. Energized and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we delight in his God's presence and beautiful character. 'They shall enjoy greater intimacy with God than they could have imagined. The polluting sins of covetousness, oppression, lust, and deception have a definite **blinding** effect upon a person. The pure in heart person is freer to discern God's awesome character (Guzik).

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS.

◆ A peacemaker is someone who actively pursues authentic, not superficial, harmony with God and people. It refers to 'those who use all their influence to promote peace and charity on earth; in private and in public, at home and abroad' (Ryle).

◆ God is the driving force behind our peacemaking, because he is a peace-making God. Through Jesus Christ he has paid the price to make it possible for us to be reconciled with him (see Col 1:2) and then with each other (see Eph 2:15). 'It is the devil who is a troublemaker; it is God who loves reconciliation and who now through his children, as formerly through his only begotten Son, is bent on making peace' (Stott). That's why we need to seek reconciliation vertically (between us and God, and others and God)

and horizontally (between people and other people).

◆ **As for vertical reconciliation**, we accomplish this through believing and spreading the gospel, because God has entrusted to us the **ministry of reconciliation** (2 Cor 5:18). God has reconciled the world to himself through Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, a death that at once absorbed both the worst of humanity (we crucified him) and the righteous wrath of God against our hostility.

◆ **As for horizontal reconciliation**, 'we commonly think of this peacemaking work as being the job of one person who stands between two fighting parties. This may be one way this is fulfilled; but one can also end a conflict and be a peacemaker when they are party to a conflict; when they are the injured or the offending party' (Guzik). Once we are at peace with God, we are to seek to live in peace with others, as far as it depends on us (Rom 12:18).

◆ Peacemaking will require that we care; that we're tactful; that we watch our tongues and that we're diplomatic. Peacemaking requires courage, because it does not tolerate the pseudo-peace where underlying tensions and conflicts go unaddressed. In those cases, being a peacemaker will entail being a peace-breaker. We may have to expose some painful issues to bring about real peace. Peacemaking will sometimes come at personal cost: 'the peacemaker sometimes puts himself between the two, when they are very angry, and takes the blows from both sides, for he knows that so Jesus did, who took the blows from his Father and from us also, that so by suffering in our stead, peace might be made between God and man' (Spurgeon).

◆ **They will be called sons of God.** 'Peacemakers reflect the character of their heavenly Father' (Wilson). We will be perceived as God's sons and daughters as we portray God's peace-making character and intention in a conflict-filled world. Wonderfully, Jesus promises that as we give ourselves to being peacemakers, people will discern - perhaps not immediately - that we really are agents of the God of peace.



PONDER

Which of the 3 descriptions of purity in heart is most lacking in your life? Single-mindedness, motivational unity or transparency?



PRACTICE

In the next 24 hours, is there one way you can be an agent of vertical reconciliation between others and God? And one way you can be an agent of horizontal reconciliation?



PRAY

God, I want to more clearly see you. I want to be seen to reflect your character. Help me to become more pure in heart, and help me to be a peacemaker.



THE REWARDS ARE OUT OF THIS WORLD

MATTHEW 5 v 10 - 12

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED.

- ◆ The eighth beatitude 'deals not with what the disciple is in himself but with the way in which others react to him. We would expect that such a person as the one described in verses 3–9 would be highly respected. But in fact such people are often persecuted. But a blessing comes upon them even because of the persecution they experience' (Eaton).
- ◆ One would think that people everywhere would delight in the positive impact Christ makes on us – we become increasingly dependent on God's grace (v3), deeply concerned about sin in our lives and in the world (v4), less prone to pride, defensiveness and aggressiveness (v5), committed to the pursuit of God's will being done in our lives and the world (v6), extending grace, compassion and mercy to those who have wronged us, and to those in need (v7), given to living single-minded, transparent, integrity-filled lives (v8), and actively seeking authentic harmony everywhere (v9). Certainly some people will welcome these changes (as verse 16 will show), but here Jesus warns that many will react very badly.
- ◆ Some will openly insult us. Some will speak falsely about us, either with open accusation against us, or secretly behind our backs. And some will do far worse. Why is this? There are at least three reasons:
 - 1) **'Because of righteousness' (v10).** Some people will feel guilty when they are exposed to our righteousness and will angrily lash out at us in guilt.
 - 2) **Because of our association with Christ ('because of me' – v11).** Those who hate Christ will hate us also.
 - 3) **Because we are agents of change.** If we kept our righteousness to ourselves people would most likely tolerate us, but Jesus calls us to seek righteousness and justice (v6) and to be peacemakers (v9) – this prompts us to challenge people around us. And some people, maybe most, do not want to change.
- ◆ **'... in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you' (v12).** 'Throughout history, beginning with Cain's murder of Abel (Gen 4:8, 1 Jn 3:12), there have been those who oppose God's people' (Wilson).

A DISCIPLE OF JESUS IS SOMEONE WHO SEEKS REWARD FROM GOD.

- ◆ **'Great is your reward' (v12).** All Christians are equally accepted by God (on the basis of their faith in the blood of Jesus). However, not all Christians are equally rewarded. Our rewards are dependent, after all, on the degree to which we live out the beatitudes.
- ◆ **What are these rewards?** The first and eighth beatitude remind us that the reward is that we more fully possess and experience the blessings of God's kingdom. The second to seventh beatitudes speak of the blessings we experience partially in this life and fully in the next life: We will 'be comforted' (v4), 'inherit the earth' (v5), 'be satisfied' (v6), 'be shown mercy' (v7), 'see God' (v8) and will be 'called sons and daughters of God' (v9).
- ◆ Let us 'rejoice and be glad' (v12) – life in the kingdom is the most rewarding life there is! The word 'glad' is a 'strong word of Hellenistic coinage, from 'to leap much', signifying irrepressible demonstrative gladness. It is the joy of the Alpine climber standing on the top of the snow-clad mountain' (Bruce). Although a transformed life will cause us some setbacks and persecution (v10, 11), these troubles are nothing compared to the amazing rewards that we receive from God, now and forever.

TAKEN TOGETHER, THE 8 BEATITUDES PROVIDE A PATHWAY TOWARD MATURITY IN GOD'S KINGDOM.

- ◆ **Beatitudes 1-3:** The true disciple knows he possesses nothing in himself to commend him to God or give him spiritual power – he is humble ('poor in spirit'), grieves over the slowness of the coming kingdom both in his own life and in the lives of others (he 'mourns'), and has no concern to defend himself (he is 'meek').
- ◆ **Beatitude 4:** As a result he is very hungry to experience righteousness in his own life and everywhere else.
- ◆ **Beatitudes 5-7:** The result of his spiritual hunger is positive godliness of character: he is merciful to others, pure in heart and wishes to be a peacemaker in the world in which he lives.
- ◆ **Beatitude 8:** By this stage he is ready to deal with any pushback and difficulty he might experience on his path. Trials and persecution are one more chance to increase God's blessing in our lives, and our heavenly reward.



PONDER

Are you committed to this pathway? Have you noticed this 'pathway toward maturity' in your own life at all?



PRACTICE

In the next 24 hours, every time you experience some hardship on this pathway, choose to rejoice in prayer.



PRAY

God, though many rewards come from you in this life, thank you that the rewards are primarily out of this world.



WEEK **2**



SALT OF THE EARTH

MATTHEW 5 v 13

13 You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

THE CHURCH EXISTS TO SLOW DOWN OR ARREST SOCIETY'S DECAY.

- ◆ **'You are the salt of the earth'.** Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and to his disciples alone. The word 'you' is emphatic, so it's as though Jesus is saying, 'You – and you alone – are the salt of the earth.' By 'earth' he means all the people of the world, as well as all spheres of life and society.
- ◆ **Jesus speaks of how the church of disciples is to relate to the world.** In those days salt was used primarily as a preservative – to prevent decay. 'They are to be salt, having a preserving effect on the world, preventing the world from being as bad as it might be' (Eaton). Jesus implies that all the spheres of life and society are in the process of decay. Society is in a state of social, spiritual and moral decay. Yet Jesus tells this small group of disciples, who will grow into a very large group over the centuries, that their function is to slow down or arrest the decay in society. More positively, salt not only preserves, it adds flavour. The church releases some of the values of God's kingdom into society, infusing it with heavenly flavour. As a preserver and as a unique seasoning in society, the church is very precious in the role it plays in the world – 'in Jesus' day, salt was a valued commodity. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid with salt, giving rise to the phrase 'worth his salt' (Guzik).
- ◆ **Jesus calls us to be people of influence.** Although other passages in the Bible speak of the two God-ordained institutions of government and family (which serve as deterrents to decay), here Jesus is emphatic that it is the church that has the role of arresting moral, spiritual and social decay. Salt exists to be given away. Similarly, as Christians we have a God-given responsibility to live out our faith in the world. We exist to benefit, to bless and to serve society.
- ◆ **Evil prospers when good people say nothing, or do nothing.** The desperate need in the world is for Christians, who are experiencing the transforming grace of God in their lives, to become agents of transformation in the world. We are not called to be sweet - merely sugarcoating the evil of society. We're called to be salt – courageously, consistently and creatively bringing about change for good. Through our examples, our prayers, our action, our writings, our words, our conversations, our protests, our initiatives, our advocacy, and our creativity, we can resist that which is false, corrupt and unjust, and rather promote that which is 'true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy' (Phil 4:8). In so doing, we bring some of God's flavour into society.

- ◆ Obviously, the single most important and effective way to impact people and society for good is to lead people to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel. But once they know Christ, we must disciple them in the local church to show Christ to the world, to be salt.

THE CHURCH MUST MAKE CONTACT, AND YET MAINTAIN CONTRAST.

- ◆ **'But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.'** Salt only influences food when it 1) makes contact with food (is used to preserve and season food), and 2) maintains its contrast to the rest of the food. Let's look at these two thoughts separately:
- ◆ **As salt we need to make contact.** The life of a disciple of Jesus must be lived out in public. We are not to retreat into monasteries and endless church activities that seclude us from the world and society. After all, Jesus never came to take his disciples out of the world, but to take the world out of the disciples. Jesus puts great confidence in our ability to maintain distinctness even while we get involved in relationships with non-Christians, as well as penetrate and participate in all aspects of society – sport, arts, media, government, business, family, social justice initiatives, developmental agencies, the academy, property, health and more. If we fail to get involved, we fail to influence.
- ◆ **As salt we need to maintain a contrast.** What does Jesus mean by 'the salt losing its saltiness'? 'Most salt in the ancient world derived from salt marshes, rather than by evaporation of salt water, and therefore contained many impurities. The actual salt, being more soluble than the impurities, could be leached out, leaving a residue so dilute it was of little worth' (Carson). Jesus is referring to the possibility that disciples of Jesus can be impure by losing their distinctness from the world around them. Our capacity to influence for good is found not in our **conformity** to the world's values and beliefs, but in our **contrast** to many of the world's values and beliefs. We are to ensure that we are different, that we are a counter-culture, an outpost of Christ's heavenly kingdom wherever we find ourselves. If we compromise and conform to society we lose our capacity to influence it and our lives are wasted. Instead of influencing society for good, we get trampled into the ground, and our opportunity for significance is lost.



PONDER

How much contact are you making? How much contrast are you showing?



PRACTICE

In the next 24 hours, is there one thing you can do to make more contact, and one thing to show more contrast?



PRAY

God, help me to not lose my saltiness. Use whatever influence I have to bring your flavour into the world.



LIGHT OF THE WORLD



MATTHEW 5 v 14

14 You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

THE CHURCH EXISTS TO REVEAL WHO GOD REALLY IS TO THE WORLD.

- ◆ **'You are the light of the world.'** The word 'you' is emphatic. Jesus is saying, 'You – and you alone – are the light of the world' Elsewhere, Jesus says he is 'light of the world' and that as we trust in him we 'have the light' (John 8:12). But here Jesus stretches the idea further: not only do we **have** the light, but we **become** the light. Perhaps the best metaphor is the moon, which lights up the night sky. However, it is a reflective light, shining the light of another source - the Sun. We are the light of the world in a reflective sense.
- ◆ **What is this light?** It is the God-given revelation of who God really is, and how he has revealed himself supremely in Jesus Christ. We receive this light when we receive this revelation, and we transmit this light when we reveal it to others.
- ◆ **What is 'the world'?** It is parallel to 'the earth' (v13) and refers to all the people of the world, as well as all possible spheres of life and society. Jesus is saying that it's our job as the church to reveal to all people everywhere who God really is, and how he has revealed himself supremely in Jesus Christ. This 'light' will impact not only people, but also culture – all spheres of life and society).
- ◆ So many people are in the dark about who God really is, especially about his self-revelation in Jesus. People may be highly educated but spiritually clueless. As long as darkness prevails in the hearts of people and culture, life will be chaotic, disintegrated and warped. Even the best moral, social, governmental or educational interventions and policies will not ultimately be able to bring the needed light.

BOLDLY PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL

- ◆ **'A city on a hill cannot be hidden.'** Jesus has in mind the city of Jerusalem, which crested Mount Zion. Some cities exist in valleys and cannot be seen from a distance because they are hidden, while other cities are on hilltops and can be seen from far off. The church is a community that needs to position itself on the hilltop of openness and visibility, not in the valley of obscurity and invisibility.
- ◆ **'Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.'** 'The typical lamp in a Jewish home was fairly small and was placed on a stand to give maximum illumination' (Wilson). What's the point of putting a light under a bowl or bucket? Rather put it in a

visible place where it can have its effect on its surroundings. The church is a community that needs to position itself on the lamp-stand of bold visibility, rather than under the bowl of fearful secrecy.

- ◆ The world does not comprehend that God loves it so much that he gave his one and only Son Jesus to die for it so that it can be forgiven and transformed by grace. The world does not grasp what God is like. But we do. Holding onto our faith-convictions, we must openly declare them in the hope that people will believe the gospel. Then they too will know what God is really like, how he has revealed himself in Jesus, and how he has sought to save and transform the world through Jesus.

ACTIVELY AND VISIBLY DEMONSTRATE THE CHARACTER OF GOD IN THE WORLD.

- ◆ Jesus wants us to live in such a way that the world **'may see our good deeds and glorify (our) Father in heaven' (v16)**. It's not enough to proclaim the gospel about who God really is. In addition, we need to demonstrate who God really is. We need to live out the gospel, not just preach it. For example, we as the church need to demonstrate God's love for justice, his heart of humility, his compassion for the hurting, his longing for reconciliation, his passion for creativity and so much more.
- ◆ What if we succeed in both living and preaching the gospel? Jesus tells us that people will **'glorify your Father in heaven'**. Many will recognize that we really are God's people and this will draw people's attention to our Father in heaven. Many will be won over by the gospel, and will become worshippers of our Father, along with us.
- ◆ Listen to Spurgeon: 'Poor world, it is dark, and gropes in midnight, it cannot get light unless it receives it through us! To be the light of the world surrounds our lives with the most stupendous significance. Hear this, you ordinary men and women: you are the light of the world. If you burn dimly, dim is the world's light, and dense its darkness. Christ never contemplated the possibility of secret Christians whose virtues would never be displayed, pilgrims who would travel to heaven by night and never be seen by their fellow-pilgrims or anyone else.'



PONDER

How do you feel about 'the stupendous significance' Jesus surrounds your life with?



PRACTICE

In the next 24 hours, is there someone you can share your faith with? What light-shining 'good deed' is Jesus placing on your heart to do?



PRAY

God, guide me into the good deeds that will most effectively show people your character.



JESUS FULFILLS THE OLD TESTAMENT

MATTHEW 5 v 17

17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

AMAZINGLY, JESUS FULFILLS THE OLD TESTAMENT.

- ◆ Verses 17-20 explain how Jesus and the kingdom he brings with him to this world fulfill the ancient Law of Moses. (By the way, this is one key to interpreting the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.)
- ◆ 'The "Law" or "Torah" refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, while the "Prophets" includes the rest of the Old Testament, all of which was held to have been written by prophets' (Wilson). When Jesus said 'do not think' he was correcting a misunderstanding amongst some of his disciples. Probably, his teaching was so radical and different to previous teachings in the Old Testament that many began to believe that he questioned whether the Scriptures really were God's Word. But in this verse Jesus makes it clear that 'the Law or the Prophets' really are God's Word. He had not come to abolish the Old Testament in the sense of brushing them aside. He does not replace it as much as he is what it all points to. He completes and consummates it. All its lines converge in him.
- ◆ What does Jesus mean by 'fulfilling' the Old Testament Scriptures? This is a rich scriptural theme. As we reflect on the entire Old Testament we see that Jesus fulfills it in a multi-faceted way:

1) He fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. The book of Matthew is full of Old Testament prophecies that Jesus fulfills. For example, the Old Testament promised a coming Messiah-king who would be used by God to liberate the nation of Israel and save people of all nations, restoring the whole world to justice, peace, and right standing with God. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah-king.

2) He fulfills the people of the Old Testament. They serve as a foreshadowing picture of Jesus. For example, he is the true and better Adam in that he obeys God in the garden and as a result salvation, not sin, comes upon the human race. He is the true and better Joseph in that he stands at the right hand of the high king, extending mercy and provision to his betrayers – using his power to save us in loving reconciliation. He is the true and better Moses - standing as a mediator of a covenant, he goes up the 'mountain' in his ascension and as a result the Spirit comes down. He is the true and better Job – though innocent, he is tormented by Satan and suffering, but vindicated by God in the end. He is the true and better David – slaying his enemies, he sets up and advances his unmatched kingdom.

3) He fulfills the highest ethics of the Old Testament. Jesus fulfills the laws which only he perfectly obeyed, and the Wisdom Literature - which sets forth a behavioral pattern that only his life perfectly exemplified. 'To show that he never meant to cast

aside the law, our Lord Jesus has embodied all its commands in his own life. In his own person there was a nature which was perfectly conformed to the law of God' (Spurgeon). 'Jesus added nothing to the law except one thing that no man had ever added to the law: perfect obedience' (Guzik).

4) He fulfills the institutions and events of the Old Testament. He is the ultimate prophet, priest and king to whom all the great prophets, priests and kings of the Old Testament point. He is the Passover lamb. The sacrificial system points to his great sacrifice. He is the fulfilment of the weekly Sabbath, the New Moons, the year of Jubilee, the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement and so much more.

ALL THE SCRIPTURES – EVEN THE OLD TESTAMENT THAT PRECEDES HIS LIFE ON EARTH – POINT TO HIM.

- ◆ Jesus elsewhere said of the Old Testament that 'these are the Scriptures that testify to me' (John 5:39). Amazingly, long before Jesus came to this earth, God prophetically signposted details and dimensions of his coming and mission in the Old Testament Scriptures. 'One greater than the Old Testament, than Moses and the prophets, is here' (Bruce). This is all the more reason for us to place our trust in Jesus.
- ◆ If the Old Testament is the budding of God's revelation, Jesus is the flowering. The Old Covenant is to the New what promise is to fulfillment. Jesus has ushered in the new era of salvation in the long unfolding of God's plan of salvation, a plan that began in the Old Testament. All the promises of God are absorbed in Christ's life and being. He becomes the fulfillment of the Old Testament without destroying it.



PONDER

Do you think even Jesus' Sermon on the Mount might be a fulfillment of what Moses did 1300 years before, when he went up a mountain and gave God's people the law?



PRACTICE

Learn to read the Old Testament with Jesus in mind. When you encounter its prophecies, people, ethics, institutions and events, consider how these are fulfilled in Jesus.



PRAY

I praise you Jesus. If all the lines of the Old Testament converge in you, then surely all the lines of my life do too.

MATTHEW 5 v 18, 19

18 Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

THE OLD TESTAMENT, ALL OF IT, IS THE WORD OF GOD.

- ◆ Jesus has just affirmed that the entire Old Testament is the Word of God, and that it finds its fulfillment in him. Now he tells us more about the Old Testament: (Although he only says 'the Law' and not 'the Law or the Prophets' (v17), the whole Old Testament is implied).
- ◆ **1) The Old Testament in its entirety is God's Word**, including 'the smallest letter' and 'the least stroke of a pen'. Some translations put it as 'every jot and tittle' because the Greek literally speaks of the 'yod' (read 'jot') and the 'tittle'. The 'jot' refers to the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It looks like half a letter. The 'tittle' refers to 'to a tiny stroke or a part of a letter used to differentiate between Hebrew letters' (Wilson). In the Hebrew letter system, tittles are critical; for example, 'the difference between **bet** (ב) and **kaf** (כ), between **dalet** (ד) and **resh** (ר), and between **vav** (ו) and **zayin** (ז) is a tittle' (Guzik). This is the strongest endorsement Jesus can give to the inspiration of the entire Old Testament, even its smallest components. All of the Old Testament, 'not only its ideas, but also the words themselves, even the letters of the words, are important' (Guzik).
- ◆ **2) The Old Testament is binding on Jesus' disciples.** This is so 'until heaven and earth disappear' – until the end of the age. (Interestingly, unlike the Old Testament, Jesus' teachings 'will never pass away' (see Matt 24:35), but will extend beyond the end of the age.)
- ◆ **3) The Old Testament, however, must be understood in the light of Jesus.** Jesus has come to fulfill it (v17), or as Jesus puts it here, it will be 'accomplished'. It will be brought to finality. His death and resurrection and the coming of his kingdom, already now in part but fully at the end of this present age, all signal the Old Testament's completion and finality. The phrase 'until everything is accomplished' is probably best understood as 'until everything that points to Christ in the Old Testament comes into being' (Carson).

THE OLD TESTAMENT, PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD AND APPLIED, IS BINDING ON THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS.

- ◆ In verse 18, Jesus establishes that the entire Old Testament is God's Word and is binding on his disciples. In verse 19, he urges them to take the Old Testament very seriously, and to commend it as God's Word to others. We are not to set aside any part of it. We are to practice and teach it, even 'the least of these commands'.
- ◆ Does this mean that we must all become Jews, who literally obey all 613 commands in the law of Moses? These 613 laws are found in 2000 or so verses that were given to regulate the nation of Israel with regard to their behaviour, beliefs, rituals, holy days and more. Are these laws of Moses binding on the disciple of Jesus? The answer is no, for three reasons...
- ◆ **1) The Law of Moses was originally given to the nation of Israel, not to all nations.** This is important to realize, since people often misunderstand Jesus' words here to mean that he wants all people everywhere to come under the Law of Moses.
- ◆ **2) We are not under Moses, but under Jesus.** As we will see in the rest of Matthew's Gospel, especially in the immediate section of teaching to come (5:21-48), Jesus does not want his disciples from all nations to come under the authority of the law of Moses, but rather to come under his own teaching. As we will see, his own teachings include a specific interpretation of Moses' law. Jesus is the new Moses, one who is higher than Moses. Moses merely foreshadowed the coming of Christ; the true Moses. We are not under Moses, but under Christ. 'The entire OT is the expression of God's will, but is now to be taught according to Jesus' interpretation of its intent and meaning' (Wilson).
- ◆ **3) The early church did not take Jesus to mean this.** The council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and the book of Galatians make it clear that the law, literally taken, is neither the means of salvation nor the way of discipleship. Since Christ fulfills the Old Testament (v17), the early church read the Old Testament in the light of Christ and embraced Jesus' own interpretation of the Old Testament. Since Christ has already been crucified and resurrected, and his Spirit has already been poured out, we understand and apply the Old Testament in a new way.
- ◆ So the Old Testament is binding on Jesus' disciples, even non-Jewish disciples. But there is a very big disclaimer: **it needs to be understood and applied through the lens of Christ, who is the fulfillment of the Old Testament and whose teachings outstrip and supersede the Old Testament.**

PONDER Why do you think God chose to give us an Old Testament and not just a New Testament?

PRACTICE Go to the contents page of your Bible. Cast your eye over its first 39 books – the Old Testament.

PRAY God, thank you for each of these 39 books. I commit to never neglect them.



CHANGED FROM THE INSIDE OUT

MATTHEW 5 v 19, 20

19 Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

JESUS HONOURS THE DISCIPLE WHO HONOURS THE OLD TESTAMENT.

- ◆ Although all Christians are equally accepted and loved by God on the basis of Christ's death, not all Christians are equally rewarded and honoured. Verse 19 makes it clear that Christ honours some disciples more highly than others. One major criteria of evaluation Christ uses is our attitude and approach to the Old Testament. If we minimize the importance of the Old Testament, and encourage others to do the same, we receive very little honour. But if we seek to properly understand and apply the Old Testament, and teach others to do the same, we receive great honour from Christ.

BE TRANSFORMED AND YOU WILL RICHLY EXPERIENCE THE BLESSINGS OF THE KINGDOM.

- ◆ What does Jesus mean by 'enter the kingdom of heaven?' It is used many times in the New Testament, and in different ways. Most times it does not mean 'enter into heaven', as in 'receive salvation'. (Only in one place is it used that way – see John 3:3,5). In this case, Jesus is speaking to disciples who have already trusted him, who he has already affirmed as 'salt and light'. 'Enter the kingdom' here refers to **experiencing the blessings and power of the kingdom**. Jesus tells his disciples what is required of an already-believer to have a rich experience of the kingdom's power and blessings.

How do we receive a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees? In two ways:

- ◆ **1) Jesus transforms us from the inside out, not just in our outward behaviour.** The Pharisees and the teachers of the law focused on the 613 laws of Moses. These laws had to do almost completely with outward behaviour and not inward transformation or motive of heart. As a result, theirs was a righteousness-by-behaviour-modification. In the Gospels, we meet Pharisees who, though claiming to abide by these laws, lack a love for God, and a love and compassion for people. They're more concerned with their religious reputation. As a result, they are inconsistent and hypocritical. Elsewhere, Jesus calls them whitewashed tombs and urges them to cleanse the inside of their lives (Matt 23:26-27). Jesus does not call his disciples to obey more rules than the Pharisees did, but to a deep transformation of heart. In his kingdom, righteousness works from the inside out because it first produces changed hearts and new motivations (see Rom 6:17 and Gal 5:22-23 for example).

- ◆ **2) Jesus makes available a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness available in the Law of Moses.** The Pharisees did their best to reach the heights of what was available to them through the Law of Moses. But this could only take them so far. For example, only twice in the Law of Moses is there reference to the heart: the tenth commandment ('Do not covet'), and Leviticus 19:18 which calls people to love each other. (It is true that the book of Deuteronomy has more reference to the heart, but Deuteronomy is a re-presentation of the law given 40 years later). Eaton writes: 'The law was a step in the direction of holiness. It took into account the hardness of heart found in ancient Israel. But it was no more than a shadow of what God was soon to do through sending the Saviour, the King of righteousness, into the world. Even the more moral components of the Law of Moses are only a shadow of the righteousness of heart which Jesus would bring'.

- ◆ The transforming gift Jesus grants us that the Pharisees did not have is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works in our hearts, enabling us to deeply love God and each other. This supernatural heart-change can now evidence itself in a much deeper righteousness than the Pharisees ever evidenced. Interestingly, Romans 8:3-4 teaches that the Christian who seeks to intentionally live in the Spirit accidentally fulfills the Law of Moses anyway. The righteousness Jesus calls us to and offers includes, but also outclasses, the righteousness that the Law of Moses calls us to and offers.



PONDER

Do you want to experience the blessings of God's kingdom and power?



PRACTICE

Draw close to the Holy Spirit. Choose to live in his power – as you do this habitually, you will fulfill the Law of Moses accidentally.



PRAY

Holy Spirit, come fill me. I surrender my life to you and your will.



WEEK **3**

63 MATTHEW 5 v 20 - 22 | 5 v 27, 28 | 5 v 31-34 | 5 v 38, 39 | 5 v 43, 44

20 I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. 21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment'. 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment...

27 You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

31 It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. 33 You have heard that it was said to people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' 34 But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.

38 You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.


43 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...


INTRODUCING MATTHEW 5:21-48


- ◆ So far in the Message on the Mount, Jesus has described some attitudes of a disciple (v1-12), called them to be a salt-and-light-influence (v13-16), insisted that they prize the Old Testament and its commands – understood in the light of Jesus' fulfillment (v17-19), and embarked on a kind of righteousness under his Lordship that radically outstrips the righteousness available under the law of Moses (and commended by the Pharisees and scribes) (v20).
- ◆ Jesus now fully develops this final idea on righteousness (v20) in verses 21-48. He mentions six different life situations, which the law of Moses bears upon. In each case he shows how the righteousness he calls us to radically exceeds, outstrips and outclasses the righteousness Moses' laws demanded of us.
- ◆ Six times we read the same wording: 'You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you ...'. By repeating these words, Christ contrasts life under his Lordship with life under the law of Moses. **The way of Moses is the righteousness of the old order – a godliness that is guided by legislation. The way of Jesus is the righteousness of the new order – a godliness that springs from a transformed heart,** a heart impacted by the leadership and grace of Christ, a heart experiencing and evidencing his kingdom.
- ◆ **Only Jesus can empower this kind of righteousness in us.** We must remember that Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He does not call every person to live out these values. The teaching is directed solely at his disciples – those of us who are being transformed by his grace, wisdom and leadership. Each of the six sections deals with a different value of the kingdom-impacted heart. Moses' law is written on stone, but Christ's law (if you can call it that) is written on our hearts by the Spirit of God. Apart from Christ's indwelling presence we could never conceivably follow his teaching or reflect his character.

◆ **Jesus describes kingdom values, rather than new laws.** Jesus is not giving us a list of laws that need to be strictly adhered to. Rather he describes the way various kingdom attitudes and values work themselves out in our lives. We're not to make laws of these teachings, but rather, with the help of Jesus himself, we are to make sure that we deeply own, nurture and evidence the values and attitudes of Christ's teachings. To illustrate what I am saying, here is an overview of verses 21-48:

ETHICALLY CHALLENGING LIFE SITUATIONS	Moses' Old Order Righteousness – stated as laws	Christ's New Order Righteousness – stated as values
◆ How do you deal with one who irritates you or who takes offence at you?	◆ Murder is wrong (v21)	◆ People and relationships need to be cherished, protected and restored.
◆ How do you deal with sexual attraction outside of marriage?	◆ Adultery is wrong (v27).	◆ Sexual purity is to be fought for, starting with the use of your eyes.
◆ How do you deal with unhappiness in marriage?	◆ If you divorce, give a certificate (v31).	◆ Marriage is to be revered and your spouse is to be loved and protected.
◆ What do you do when you desperately want someone to believe something?	◆ Keep vows or oaths made to convince (v33).	◆ Speech should be honest, non-manipulative and non-defensive.
◆ How do you respond to someone who is hurting or taking from you?	◆ Those who wrong you should be justly punished (v38).	◆ People who hurt or take from you should be loved, not avenged.
◆ How do you respond to people who make your life very difficult?	◆ Love your friends — hate your enemies (v43).	◆ Love everyone, especially those who make your life difficult.

 **PONDER** Do you grasp the importance of reading these verses as kingdom-values rather than laws?

 **PRACTICE** Look at the chart. Which of these six life situations can you relate to right now? In the next 24 hours embrace Jesus' value to deal with it.

 **PRAY** Jesus, in the next few days in verses 21-47, write your kingdom-values onto my heart through your Spirit.

MATTHEW 5 v 21 - 24

21 You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. 23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

UNDER JESUS ELIMINATE ANGER, CONTEMPT AND INSULT IN THE WAY YOU RELATE TO PEOPLE.

- ◆ Jesus calls us to so much more in our relationships than merely avoiding murder. He calls us to avoid ungodly anger, contempt and verbal insults – the law of Moses has nothing to say about such things! Moses addresses the behaviour of murder; Jesus goes after the heart-attitude behind murder. Jesus is not saying that the sins of ungodly anger, contempt or verbal insults are as serious as murder. He rather deals with the roots of murder in the human heart.
- ◆ **Anger. 'Anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment.'** Jesus clearly refers to a sinful form of anger here. Though some passages tell us that not all anger is sin (e.g. Eph 4:26, Neh 5:6 and Matt 21:12-13), Jesus warns us against sinful anger. For example, sometimes we're frustrated with someone because they get in the way of what we want (Est 1:12). In this case our pride is wounded. Sometimes we feel we've been treated unjustly, but what really gets us incensed is the wounding of our pride. Sometimes it is an anger that is connected to jealousy – we're jealous of another person (see 1 Sam 18:8). The sinful kind of anger is usually associated with feelings of hatred, irritation, animosity, bitterness and offence. Jesus tells us that God will judge this kind of anger.
- ◆ **Contempt. 'Anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca' is answerable to the court.'** This court likely refers to God's council of judgment. The word 'Raca' was an Aramaic word that expressed contempt for someone. To say 'Raca' to someone is to say, 'You're worthless, you're beneath me'. It's like calling someone a 'nitwit, blockhead, numbskull, bonehead or brainless idiot' (Guzik). It expresses contempt, which is worse than anger. In anger you can still affirm a person's worth, whereas contempt is a denial of a person's worth.
- ◆ **Insult. 'Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.'** Words can be so destructive when coming from a bitterly angry or coldly contemptuous attitude.

- ◆ **What does it mean to be 'in danger of the fire of hell'?** The word 'hell' here refers to Gehenna, 'the place of burning' south of Jerusalem, where sewage and rubbish were burnt. Is Jesus threatening eternal judgment? Or is he saying that they will experience God's purifying punishment? The verse itself does not tell us, but Eaton reminds us that the overall theology of the New Testament, especially 1 Cor 3:15, makes it clear that Christians cannot lose their salvation and go to hell, but that they will be purified by punishment. Hell, in this instance, refers to God's purifying punishment.

UNDER JESUS CHERISH, PROTECT AND RESTORE RELATIONSHIPS.

- ◆ Jesus then gives two scenarios that flesh out his teaching about anger, contempt and insult: The first scenario (v23-24) tells us how to deal with someone close to you whom you have hurt or offended. Even more important than ritual faithfulness is doing all you can to reconcile with people who feel hurt or offended by you.
- ◆ The second scenario (v25-26) tells us how to deal with an adversary who is intent on our destruction. 'Settle matters quickly' with them, before things really get out of hand. Jesus' metaphor of being thrown into prison and not getting out till we pay our last penny illustrates the great cost of allowing damaged relationships to remain damaged.
- ◆ Jesus uses these two scenarios to advise us against anger, contempt and insult –relationships are to be greatly guarded against the violations of anger, contempt and insult, while damaged relationships need to be restored.
- ◆ Paul's counsel in Rom 12:18 makes the same point as Jesus: 'As far as it depends on you, try to live at peace with everyone.'



PONDER

Are you aware of sinful anger, contempt or verbal insult in your own life? (If you don't think so, ask people who know you well if they agree.)



PRACTICE

Is there a person with whom you need to reconcile? What can you do in the next 24 hours to move in that direction?



PRAY

God, help me – as far as it depends on myself – to live at peace with everyone.

MATTHEW 5 v 27 - 30

27 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

UNDER JESUS, PURSUE SEXUAL PURITY IN THOUGHT AND IN DEED.

- ◆ Being under Jesus leads us to a righteousness that outstrips being under Moses. For example, in another of the Ten Commands, Moses forbade adultery.
- ◆ Incidentally the law of Moses only forbade sleeping with married Israelite women. It did not forbid having a concubine or sleeping with a single woman, which goes to show how limited the law of Moses was in helping people become more godly.
- ◆ Jesus calls us to so much more than avoiding adultery. He calls us to sexual purity in our hearts and in our way of relating. When Jesus speaks of looking at a woman lustfully he doesn't mean that we can't observe and appreciate the beauty or appeal of an attractive person. He refers to looking at someone in such a way that it intentionally feeds sexual desire for the person.
- ◆ Jesus is not condemning **the temptation** to be sexually attracted to someone, but rather the act of indulging in the temptation until it becomes a sin. In the words of Luther, 'We can't stop a bird from flying over our heads, but we can stop it from nesting in our hair.' We may not be able to avoid temptations (such as noticing a sexually attractive person) but we can avoid sin (which in this case would be staring at the person). 'It is also important to distinguish between temptation to sin and sin itself. The look Jesus speaks of is not casual but persistent, the desire not involuntary or momentary, but cherished with longing. Jesus, though tempted in all ways (Heb 4:15), endured such temptations but did not yield to such sin. He was able to see women as other than objects for his gratification. Jesus was tempted in all points as we are, but desire was expelled by the mighty power of a pure love to which every woman was a daughter, a sister, or a betrothed: a sacred object of tender respect' (Bruce).
- ◆ 'Imagination is a God-given gift; but if it is fed dirt by the eye, it will be dirty. All sin, not the least sexual sin, begins with the imagination. Therefore what feeds the imagination is of maximum importance in the pursuit of kingdom righteousness' (Carson).
- ◆ Some commentators (such as Eaton and Carson) say that the better translation of the Greek 'pros to epithymesai auten' does not mean 'in order to lust after her' but 'in order to evoke lust in her' or 'in order to seduce her'. Carson translates Jesus as saying, 'to look at a women with a view to enticing her to lust'. If this translation is

correct, then Jesus is speaking not only of a person's lust after another, but their attempt to seduce that person. Long before the actual sin of physical adultery there is the sin of intended and hoped-for adultery. This applies to our general way of relating to people whom we find sexually attractive. We need to relate to them purely.

- ◆ Jesus **is not** saying that the act of adultery and adultery in the heart are the same thing. More than a few people have been deceived on this point and say, 'I've already committed adultery in my heart, so I may as well do it in practice.' The act of adultery is **far worse** than adultery in the heart. Some people only keep from adultery because they are afraid to get caught, and in their heart they commit adultery every day. It is good that they keep from the act of adultery, but it is bad that their heart is filled with adultery. Since Jesus considers adultery in the heart a sin, we know that what we **think about** and allow our heart to **rest on** is based on **choice**. Many believe they have no choice – and therefore no responsibility – for what they think about, but this contradicts the clear teaching of Jesus here' (Guzik).
- ◆ Jesus tells us to cut out our right eye or chop off our right hand if they cause us to sin. Obviously, he is not being literal here. Origen, one of the early church fathers, as a young man mutilated himself because he took Jesus literally. Jesus is in effect saying, 'Given your sexual vulnerabilities, take whatever radical action is needed to proactively avoid sexual sin in your life.' This may include such things as avoiding certain places, certain websites, certain literature, certain people or certain thoughts. It may include setting up accountability relationships or ending a relationship. Jesus doesn't give the details, but leaves it to us to work out. Whatever the cost of avoiding sexual sin, it's worth it!
- ◆ What does Jesus mean by our whole bodies being thrown into hell (v29)? Eaton argues that, in this passage, being thrown into hell refers to the compromised believer experiencing 'salvation through fire' (as Paul describes it in 1 Cor 3:15). This is where the punishing, purifying fire of God seriously deprives us of our reward. God has rewards for us in this life and in the next – and one way to lose these rewards, and to experience judgment instead, is to refuse to take the necessary pro-active action to avoid sexual sin. Rather experience the cost of avoiding sin than the fire of God's judgment.

POUNDER When it comes to sexual desire in your own life, at what point does it shift from mere temptation to sin?

PRACTICE In the next 24 hours, consider whatever practical actions you need to reduce sexual temptation and to avoid sexual sin. Is there someone who can hold you to account?

PRAY God, as I pursue sexual purity, I pray that in my way of relating to others, my desire be expelled by the mighty power of a pure love.

MATTHEW 5 v 31, 32

31 It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'

UNDER JESUS, PROTECT THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE.

- ◆ 'Divorce and remarriage were widely accepted and practiced in the first century world' (Wilson).
- ◆ In verse 31, Jesus summarizes the teaching of Deut 24:1-4, where Moses permitted men to divorce their wives provided that they gave them a certificate that would free them to remarry. 'But this permission of Deut 24:1 had become an instrument of cruelty against wives. It did nothing to restrain the unjust caprice of husbands; rather it opened a wider door to licence' (Bruce). The divorcing husband would think that since he had followed the law, his actions were acceptable. Jesus challenges this in verse 32.
- ◆ **Though Jesus' teaching here seems to be directed at the divorced wife and the man who re-marries her, a closer look at the text and the culture of that day reveal that Jesus is confronting the man who divorces the woman in the first place.** In that culture, the rejected ex-wife faced a devastating setback: she could go back to her family in shame, become a prostitute, or remarry. If she remarried, her new husband and all his family would most commonly perceive her as 'used goods'. In light of these cultural realities, some Bible scholars believe that Jesus' reference to her becoming adulterous is metaphoric, not literal. (The fact that he had just used the word 'adultery' metaphorically in his teaching on lust (v28) warrants this view.) Being divorced, she was culturally degraded as a person. And the man who married her, assuming she was able to remarry, was marrying someone who still had some kind of bond with her previous husband, making the new husband a third party. He wasn't literally committing adultery, but he was figuratively doing so. All this said, very likely Jesus is not (as it seems on first reading) warning the divorced woman to never remarry, but is rather alerting the husband who sought to divorce her about the profound damage he would do to his ex-wife. Further confirmation of this view is that there is neither a command nor a warning given to the woman, only a description of how a man who disposes of his wife 'causes' her to become adulterous. Although he speaks of the person being divorced (in this case the wife), he was in fact directing what he is saying to the one initiating the divorce (in this case the husband). 'Jesus places primary blame on the husband who has wrongly divorced his wife, by stating that he (the husband) causes her to commit adultery' (Wilson). In other words Jesus confronts the callousness and sin in the husband who wants to divorce her.

◆ **In these verses, Jesus teaches that divorce and remarriage are wrong, but he inserts an exception: sexual immorality.** In other words, a valid basis for divorce and remarriage is sexual unfaithfulness.

◆ **Q: Is sexual unfaithfulness the only valid basis for divorce?**

A: Bible scholars are divided. Some say yes, and they may be right. But others, like Eaton, say no. Eaton argues that Jesus throughout the Sermon on the Mount is not giving thorough legislation on the matter, but rather an over-arching, generalized view on the matter. That's why Paul mentions another possible reason for valid divorce (1 Cor 7:10-16). Eaton argues that if Paul can add another exception to the one Jesus added, then we cannot hold to the view that sexual unfaithfulness is the only basis for divorce. Perhaps there are other unmentioned reasons that validate the necessity of divorce not mentioned by Jesus or Paul. For example, what about a husband who is consistently physically abusive to his wife? Eaton's view is that divorce and remarriage are clearly not God's ideal, but that in some very rare cases are in fact the lesser of two evils.

◆ **Q: Must sexual unfaithfulness result in divorce?**

A: Ideally not! Sexual betrayal makes divorce permissible – but God's grace can still restore. Jesus' grace can enable us to forgive an unfaithful partner and restore a damaged relationship. Pastor-theologian, John Stott says that if ever anyone comes to him saying, 'I want to speak to you about the possibility of getting divorced,' he responds by saying, 'We can talk about divorce, but first we must talk about Christ's view of marriage and the power of the gospel to bring reconciliation'

◆ **A person steeped in Jesus' Message on the Mount is far less likely to get divorced in the first place.** Chrysostom, the early church father, said, 'He that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast out his wife?' For example, as we eliminate anger, contempt and insult from our lives (v21-22), and as we cherish, guard and restore relationships (v23-26), and as we pursue sexual purity (v27-30), we also set up our marriages to succeed – as a byproduct!

PONDER

Are there other ways that life under Jesus' leadership in the Sermon on the Mount can strengthen marriages?

PRACTICE

If you're single, partner with a friend, and offer to babysit for a married couple as you send them off on a date. If you're married, schedule a date with your spouse, and attend a marriage enrichment event, or read a good book on marriage.

PRAY

If you're single, thank God for the current season you're in, asking him to maximize it for his kingdom. If you're married, pray for your spouse. Better yet, pray with your spouse.

MATTHEW 5 v 33 - 37

33 Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37 All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

UNDER JESUS, HAVE INTEGRITY IN YOUR SPEECH.

- ◆ The law of Moses encouraged people to keep the oaths and vows they made to God (v33). 'An oath involved invoking God's name, or substitutes for it, to guarantee the truth of one's statements (Num 30:2)' (Wilson). People would eagerly take an oath to prove that they were telling the truth. But in Jesus' day, oath-taking had become almost ridiculous, with people swearing in varying degrees. For example, for the most serious claim, you would swear by God. But usually this was avoided. Mostly people would swear by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or even their own heads. People believed such oaths were of lesser significance than swearing by God. But Jesus condemns the entire sentiment behind lesser and greater oaths. He argues that everything (heaven, earth, Jerusalem and your head) is connected to God's authority and sovereignty anyway (v34-36). To swear by anything in creation is to indirectly swear by the Creator too.
- ◆ The point Jesus makes is that we should generally avoid taking oaths and swearing by anything (v34). But why should we avoid it? There are two reasons...

1) The first reason that Jesus discourages oath taking is that it reveals a double standard of truthfulness. Eaton writes, 'It is in effect saying, 'I am not always bothered about telling the truth but at this point I really am!' But if we insist that we are telling the truth now, then what is happening at other times? Jesus wants us to adopt a standard of truthfulness which becomes our style of talk at all times.' Jesus' instruction is not 'to be taken as a new law, but in the spirit of inculcating such a love of truth that so far as we are concerned there shall be no need of oaths' (Bruce). Our speech should be honest.

2) The second reason is that oath taking can sometimes be very manipulative. It is manipulative because it attempts to add undue weight to our fallible claim by calling in far greater powers to endorse it. It attempts to overwhelm a person to agree with or believe us. After all, is it not possible that what we are saying is not entirely true? Our speech should be non-manipulative.

Also implied in Jesus' teaching is that our speech should be non-defensive. By this I mean that the time that we are most likely to swear by oath is when we're being falsely accused. We might defensively respond by saying, 'I swear to God' (or 'on my

mother's life' or 'on the Bible') that I didn't do that.' But we must be non-defensive in how we answer. We simply say, 'Yes, I did that' or 'No, I didn't' and, if we're telling the truth, God will confirm it in his own time and manner. As Proverbs 12:3 puts it, 'Those who guard their lips guard their lives, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin'.

- ◆ Jesus then tells us, 'All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'' (v37). In his letter, James (5:12) paraphrases Jesus' teaching on the matter by writing, 'Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'.' Our speech should be straightforward.
- ◆ What does Jesus mean by 'anything beyond this comes from the evil one'? It means, firstly, that it is Satan-like to try manipulate with words, and to have double standards of truthfulness. Satan is 'the father of lies' (John 8:44). Satan never says what he means, and means what he says. But, as disciples of Jesus what we say should be what we mean, and what we mean should be what we say. Secondly, it suggests that the devil works destructively into lives and situations when we speak in a way that manipulates, exaggerates, deceives and is careless. (James 3:6-8 expands on this idea.)
- ◆ Does this mean that we can never swear by anything? The answer is no, since we must remember that Jesus is not giving us new legislation to live by. After all, even Jesus took an oath in a court of law (Matt 26:63-64) and Paul called on God as his witness (Gal 1:20). 'Some have taken this word of Jesus as more than an emphasis on truth-telling and honesty as an absolute prohibition of all oaths. This is misguided, because oaths are permitted under certain circumstances, as long as they are not abused and used as a cover for deception. The truly good person will never need to take an oath; the truth of his sayings and the reality of his promises need no such guarantee. But the fact that oaths are still sometimes necessary is the proof that all are susceptible to lying' (Guzik).

POUNDER Where does your speech most commonly fail? Is it honest, non-manipulative, non-defensive and straightforward?

PRACTICE In the next 24 hours, work on applying Jesus' teaching to your speech.

PRAY I praise you that you're a God who does not lie. You speak and then act accordingly. You promise and then fulfill' (Nu 23:19).



WEEK 4

MATTHEW 5 v 38 - 42

38 You have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'
39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.
40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

UNDER JESUS, RESPOND TO THOSE WHO WRONG YOU WITH LOVE - NOT RETALIATION.

- ◆ Moses' law gave the nation of Israel a guideline in matters of justice: 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' (Lev 24:20). It ensured that the penalty for crime was relative to the crime. This principle is still a good guideline for justice in courts of law today. But what about the personal arena? How do we personally respond when someone wrongs us? Does Moses' guideline for justice translate into the right for personal vengeance? No, says Jesus, life under his reign and grace will call for far more from us.
- ◆ 'Do not resist an evil person.' Jesus speaks to his disciples – not the courts of law. 'Jesus is not prohibiting the use of force by governments, police, or soldiers when combating evil. Rather, Jesus' focus here is on individual conduct' (Wilson). Romans 13:1-5 makes it clear that the state is given authority by God to implement justice. But Jesus says we are not permitted to take the law into our own hands. The implementation of justice belongs to the courts and to God on Judgment Day, but not to us. The word 'resist' here could also be translated as 'avenge' or 'retaliate'. Jesus means that, when someone personally wrongs us, we must not respond with hatred, bitterness, revenge or retaliation. This is radically counter-intuitive - which again reminds us of how desperately we need Jesus' transforming grace.
- ◆ Jesus then gives four brief illustrations to show how this principle of loving non-retaliation shapes our response to those who wrong us...

1) 'If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.' A slap to the cheek was a great insult in a culture of honour, as it still is today. If someone badly insults you, don't slap or insult them back. Don't respond in the same spirit. Rather, as a display of your deep security in God, and your love for the person, offer them your other cheek. This says to the person, 'Despite your painful insult, I am still secure in God, and I still love you, and I won't stop trusting God and loving you – no matter how much more you insult me.' In this way love overcomes evil. It is not an act of cowardice, but of strength.

2) 'And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.' When someone falsely accuses you, by God's grace, instead of being bitter towards them, continue to love the person. Even give them your coat if they need it. Again, love

overcomes evil.

3) 'If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.' In those days, a Roman soldier had the right to exploitatively make any person carry his baggage for a mile. But Jesus calls us to love the one who has exploited us – and to offer to carry their baggage another mile if they need our help. Again, love overcomes evil.

4) 'Give to the one who asks you.' No one likes to be accosted by demanding beggars. A common response is to retaliate by ignoring them and their demand. But Jesus urges us to love even the beggar who accosts us with their pleas.

- ◆ The common denominator in all four illustrations is that instead of retaliating, **the wronged person continues to love the wrongdoer.** In each case, good overcomes evil (Rom 12:21)
- ◆ Jesus does not give us four laws, but four illustrations of the principle of love that overcomes evil. Indeed, there may be times when the loving way to respond to a wrongdoer is to exercise self-defense (see Luke 12:11, 22:36-38), or confront or even press charges against someone (see Gal 2:11-14), or protest against being unjustly treated (see John 18:22-23), or to say no to a demand. The point is that we act in genuine love toward those who hurt us, accuse us, exploit us or put us out. They may deal with us in an aggressive, even hateful manner, but we respond in the opposite spirit – in one of genuine mercy and love. This is not weakness - in the words of Spurgeon, 'There will be times that God allows our enemies to be a hammer, and us to be the anvil.' In these times, we're not cowardly doormats, but resilient anvils of love.



PONDER

What would it take for you to love like this? What would God have to do in your life? What changes would you have to make personally?



PRACTICE

Write a list of anyone in the past or present who has treated you wrongly in any of these ways, or has made your life hard? What could you do to love that person?



PRAY

Jesus, give me the power and wisdom to overcome evil with good.



LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

MATTHEW 5 v 43 - 48

43 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

UNDER JESUS, LOVE THOSE WHO DON'T LOVE YOU.

- ◆ You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. Moses in his law said as much: Lev 19:18 instructed the Israelites to love their neighbor, but Deut 7:1-5 taught them to seek the destruction of their neighbouring tribes. This Law of Moses was only a temporary law that guided the newly forming nation of Israel in its survival. Jesus makes it clear that to be his disciple is to go way beyond the teachings of Moses by loving not hating our enemies. Life under Jesus outstrips life under the Law of Moses.
- ◆ Who are our enemies? They are those who cause us suffering, oppose us, block our way to achievement or fulfilment, who slander or criticize, or seek to get us into trouble, or are rude, vindictive, sarcastic, brutal or malicious, or who, in rivalry, want to take what is ours (Eaton).
- ◆ Most people, even the tax collectors and pagans (v46), are able to love those that love them. However, very few are naturally able to love those who hate or oppose them. Yet Jesus wants to transform our hearts so that we are able to love those who hate or oppose us. We are to genuinely love people who make our lives very difficult. We demonstrate this love to them in numerous ways. We desperately long that they would repent of their sin, and be reconciled to God. We show them compassion, kindness, gentleness and humility. We refuse to allow bitterness or insecurity to take root in our hearts. We do them good (see Luke 6:32-33).
- ◆ But how are we to find this capacity to love our enemies? Jesus tells us the secret. We go to the Father in prayer, and pray for them (v44). As we do this, the merciful and loving heart of God permeates into our hearts. It is not in ourselves, but in prayer for our enemies that we find the capacity to love them.
- ◆ 'What are you doing more than others?' We should regard it as no matter of virtue if we merely return the love that is given to us' (Guzik). Our call is to love all people, especially our enemies and those who are not our 'own people' (v47). In so doing, we demonstrate the character of our Father, who rains and shines down his goodness on the undeserving. We are privileged to be called sons and daughters of God because of the family likeness (v45). And God will reward us for representing him well to the world (v46).

UNDER JESUS, REVEL IN AND REFLECT GOD'S LOVING CHARACTER.

- ◆ The Father loves the whole world – both those who accept and those who reject his grace and love. Jesus illustrates this by pointing to the sun and the rain, which come to all people, regardless of their standing with God (v45).
- ◆ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. In these words, Jesus summarizes the teaching of the entire Sermon on the Mount. In it, Jesus calls us to increasingly conform to the character of our Father. We are to 'be perfect'. This means we need to seek out ever-increasing levels of godliness and personal transformation. To 'be perfect' does not mean to be faultlessly sinless (which we will never fully attain in this life – see 1 John 1:7-9). Rather, it means to be complete or to mature. It means to have all-round maturity, having every area of our life consistently and deeply (even if not faultlessly) pleasing to God.
- ◆ But how do we become perfectly and unconditionally loving like our Father? Not just by emulating God, but by basking in God's perfect, unconditional love **toward us**. After all, we have wronged God - yet his love for us has found a way to overcome our evil. The cross is the anvil that breaks the hammer of our evil. He has not treated us as we have deserved. It is as we receive and revel in God's love; that our lives are enabled to become a riverbed of his love to other undeserving people.



PONDER

With regard to loving people who are different or unkind to you, consider 'what are you doing more than others?' (v47)



PRACTICE

Pull out yesterday's list of the people who give you a hard time in life. Pray for them until God reveals his love for them to you.



PRAY

Thank you God for not treating me as my sins deserve. Make my life a riverbed of this kind of love.

MATTHEW 6 v 1

1 Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

In chapter 5 of Jesus message, he speaks of the beatitudes (5:3-12), the call to be salt and light (v13-16), the love of Scripture (v17-20), and how he transforms us from the inside out to be more authentically righteous and loving (v21-48). Now he speaks of how his disciples are to practice their acts of devotion. But in chapter 6 as he speaks of acts of devotion – here referred to as 'acts of righteousness' (v1) – he means the spiritual disciplines of giving (v2-4), prayer (v5-15) and fasting (v16-18).

YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN WILL SEE WHAT IS DONE IN SECRET AND REWARD YOU.

- ◆ Notice the following four parallel verses in this new section (v1-18): '... you will have no reward from your Father in heaven' (v1). 'Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you' (v4). '... your Father ... is unseen ... who sees what is done in secret, will reward you' (v6). '... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you' (v18). From these four segments, we learn four things about God:

1) God is your Father.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples. As such, he is not teaching the universal fatherhood of God, but rather God's fatherhood toward the disciples of Jesus. Elsewhere in the New Testament this makes sense in two ways: 1) God gives us new birth so that we become his children with his nature implanted within (John 1:12). 2) God adopts us as his children (Gal 4:4-7). What a privilege - we're both born again and adopted into our identity as God's child.

2) God is 'in heaven' and 'unseen'.

The Greek literally says that God is 'in the heavens'. In the mind of the Jewish person, the heavens referred to three possible things: the air immediately around one's body, the sky above, and the 'third heaven' (where Paul believed he was once 'caught up to' in a vision [2 Cor 12:2]). Dallas Willard argues that in this context it means the first. In this sense, God does not observe your life from a distant third heaven, or even from high up in the sky. He is right here, right now, in the very spiritual atmosphere that surrounds your body. Though unseen, God watches our lives **from close up**. Though he has his throne in heaven and is transcendent in glory, he is nevertheless also immanent and up close and personal.

3) God sees what is done in the secret motivations of our heart.

God looks not just at our external actions but to the secret motivations in our heart – which no one but he can access. 'We should ever remember that the eye of the Lord is upon us, and that he sees not only the act, but also every motive that led to it' (Guzik). God is not just interested in us doing the right things. He is also interested in us doing

the right things **for the right reasons** – in the secrecy of our hearts. Two motivations that he especially delights in are when we act based on a heartfelt love of God or love of people. Jesus addresses one faulty motivation in particular: the desire to impress people by seeking out public recognition. Mother Teresa picked up on this point when she said to her organization of nuns: 'It is not big actions that change the world. It is small actions done with big love that have the power to change the world.'

- ◆ **Q: How does this call to do things for God's glory, not our own, correlate with Jesus' earlier teaching that we should let our 'deeds shine before people' (5:16)?** A: The key emphasis is motivation. In the prior teaching we do good deeds so that people 'praise our Father in heaven' (v16). In the latter teaching he addresses the tendency to do good deeds because we're seeking acclaim or approval or adulation from people.

4) God rewards us when we please him.

When we, as God's children, do the right things for the right reasons, God rewards us. All of God's children are equally adopted, equally loved, and equally accepted because of our common faith in Jesus. But not all of his children are equally pleasing, and therefore equally rewarded by the Father. Over and above the gift of salvation, God wants to reward us for our faithfulness to him. If we are not faithful to him, we forfeit reward. But if we are faithful in both what we do, and the attitude with which we do it, we are promised that he will reward us. 'Public acts of obedience are valuable and honorable, but if they are done merely for the sake of public recognition, there will be no reward from God' (Wilson).

- ◆ **Q: How does he reward us?**

A: Partially in this life, and fully in the next. In this life, the reward is simply sensing God's pleasure toward you, perhaps discerning his whisper of affirmation and appreciation. It may be that he increases our joy, or entrusts to us more spiritual authority. Most of us are motivated by the thought of someone appreciating our efforts. The question is whether we will seek this sense of being appreciated primarily from God or people. Our reward hinges on the answer to that question. It's much better to live before the audience of One. It is not hard to please him – but first we must want to please him more than anyone else.

POUNDER Do you live for God's glory or for your own? Do you seek out God's praise, or the praise of others?

PRACTICE Bare your heart before God and ask him to make it, like King David's, 'a heart after God' (Acts 13:22).

PRAY Thank you God that I can call you Father. Thank you that I'm born again and adopted into your family.

 MATTHEW 6 v 2 - 5

2 So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 5 And when you pray ...

GIVE TO THE NEEDY, BUT DO SO BEFORE THE AUDIENCE OF ONE.

- ◆ One of the things that really undermine our spiritual progress as disciples is that we do the right things for the wrong reasons. In this case Jesus tells us to give to the needy not in order to impress people, but rather to please our Father who watches us. We are to live before the audience of One.
- ◆ We as disciples are to give to the needy. This speaks directly to the giving of things and money to the poor, but the broader principle is also time, treasure and talent that is invested in trying to relieve the suffering of the poor, and in trying to empower the poor in ways that increase their dignity rather than create a sense of dependency.
- ◆ Jesus called the Pharisees 'hypocrites'. Apparently, they gave to the needy (which was good) but did it for the wrong reasons (they wanted to be recognized by others as holy men of God; they were seeking to uphold a respectable reputation).
- ◆ Humorously, Jesus speaks of these hypocrites blowing their own trumpets (v2). Jesus is being metaphorical. What he means is that the person gives in such a way as to say, 'Hey, everyone! Look at my generosity!' There may have been a practice he had in mind too – 'It is likely Jesus had in mind the gifts given during feast times, which were signaled by the blast of a trumpet. These occasions afforded golden opportunities for ostentation' (Carson).
- ◆ The net effect of doing the right thing for human adulation is that they received 'their reward in full'. Since all they were interested in was being affirmed and honoured by each other, and this is what they got, they were fully rewarded. People honoured them; however God did not. 'Surely such fleeting human adulation precludes satisfaction of the deep longing of people's hearts to stand approved by their Father who sees in secret' (Wilson). We are not to be like them (v3)! Give by all means, but give for the love of people and God.
- ◆ **'Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.'** Give in a way that is not self-conscious, or self-advertising, or self-congratulatory. We give because we love God and we love people. Not because we want to prove to ourselves or to others how amazing we are. We're not fazed whether or not people know about our giving. We don't care too much about what people think of us, as we seek our joy **not** in people's praise, but rather in the act of loving others (in Acts 20:35 Jesus taught that 'it is

more blessed to give than to receive') and in God's commendation. Seeing people helped and sensing God's pleasure are the only reasons we are to give.

- ◆ 'If someone finds out that we have given something, do we automatically lose our reward? The issue is really a matter of **motive**. If we give for our own glory, it doesn't matter if no one finds out and we will still have no reward from God. But if we give for God's glory, it doesn't matter who finds out, because your reward will remain because you gave for the right motive' (Guzik).

COME TO THE FATHER IN PRAYER.

- ◆ **'And when you pray'**. In verse 5 Jesus mentions the second spiritual discipline: prayer. In the next few days we will look more extensively at the subject of prayer. But let's start with these 2 simple insights:

1) We're expected to pray. Jesus expected his disciples to pray. He does not say, 'If you pray' but, 'When you pray' (5). Jesus takes it for granted that we shall pray. It is the greatest aspect of the Christian life. Prayer is quite simple in its essence; it is simply talking to God'.

2) Jesus' example inspires prayer. For example, look at the prayer life of Jesus recorded in Matthew's Gospel alone. He spends 40 days in prayer and fasting (4:1-11). He thanks God for food (14:19, 26:26). He praises God for his grace (11:25-26). He goes to the mountainside to pray (14:23). He spends a few days in sustained prayer (17:1). He prays blessing over children (19:13). He exercises faith in prayer (21:21). He sings a prayer to God (26:30). Just before his death, he feels the need for prayer - wanting others to pray with him, and urging the disciples to pray for themselves (26:36-46). In fact he even prayed on the cross (27:46,50).



PONDER

What place, if any, does the spiritual discipline of giving to the needy have in your life?



PRACTICE

Document your plans for giving. Detail how much and how often you will give, any other guiding principles.



PRAY

God, help me to give for no other reason than bringing help to people, and pleasure to you.

MATTHEW 6 v 5 - 7

5 And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

DON'T PRAY LIKE THE PHARISEES.

- ◆ Jesus challenged the Pharisee's hypocritical motive: using a religious activity as a stage to impress others. The prayer of many Pharisees was, according to Jesus, marked by the desire to appear spiritual and respectable before people (v5). 'At the set time of prayer, pious Jews would stop what they were doing and pray, some discreetly, but others with pretentious display' (Wilson). 'Prayer was not normally practiced at the street corners, but...one who strictly observed the afternoon hour of prayer could deliberately time his movements to bring him to the most public place at the appropriate time' (Guzik).
- ◆ **In contrast to Pharisaical praying, our praying should be genuinely focused on God.** We are to pray, not because of our hunger for human approval, but for God (v6). Jesus tells us to 'go into our rooms, close the door, and pray to our Father'. He does not here condemn prayer meetings (the book of Acts reveals that prayer meetings were a major part of the early church's life), or forbid that we pray in front of people (he himself did this, see 14:19). Instead, he urges us to prioritize getting alone with God in order to seek and listen to him. 'Personal prayer requires privacy. Even when others are nearby we may shut them out of our minds' (Eaton). All Jesus' followers must make solitude (prioritising alone with God from time to time, or learning to shut out the distractions) a non-negotiable aspect of our relationship with God.

DON'T PRAY LIKE THE PAGANS.

- ◆ The prayers of pagans were an attempt to manipulate 'the gods'. They would use special incantations or lots of repetition in their attempt to get their deities to do what they wanted. 'The NIV correctly translates 'battaloege' as 'keep on babbling', which carries the sense of 'blah-blah-blah'' (Guzik). For example, in the book of Acts, Simon the Sorcerer seeks to get the formula for drawing the Spirit's power (8:18-23), and the seven sons of Sceva use the name of Jesus as a kind of magic power (19:13-16). Pagans commonly repeated the names of their gods or the same words over and over without thinking (see 1 Kings 18:26). Still today, many religions see prayer primarily as a way of manipulating from the 'universe' or their deity what they want. They are more interested in the blessings than the Blesser.

- ◆ **In contrast to pagan praying, our praying should be relational and trust-based.** 'The true God isn't impressed by the length or eloquence of our prayers, but the heart. Prayer requires more of the **heart** than of the **tongue**. The eloquence of prayer consists in the fervency of desire and the simplicity of faith' (Guzik). 'Jesus prohibits the mindless, mechanical repetition, not the earnest repetition that flows from the imploring heart (Mark 14:39, 2 Cor 12:8). The point is that 'the precise words are not very important. They do not have to be many and repetitive (6:7). They do not have to be beautiful. What is important is our knowledge of God's goodness and of his interest in us' (Eaton). 'Our prayers are measured by weight, and not by length. 'Many of the most prevailing prayers have been as short as they were strong' (Spurgeon). We should pray simply, with simple faith in a Father who loves us and knows us.

IF GOD ALREADY KNOWS WHAT WE NEED, WHY DO WE HAVE TO PRAY FOR IT?

- ◆ Jesus teaching that 'your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (v12) is encouraging but problematic. It presses the question, 'Then why do we have to ask for it?' Let me suggest three reasons:
 - 1) We need to pray because our Father likes it when we pray.** In the same way an earthly father likes his child to ask (and thank!) him for things, so our heavenly Father enjoys it when we express our dependence on and gratitude to him.
 - 2) We need to pray because we need the personal contact with God.**
 - 3) We need to pray because that is how God has ordained it, whether we understand it or not.** We need to accept the mystery factor in it all. Eaton writes, 'God has simply ordained that his blessings, which are already lined up for us, come piece at a time as we pray.'



PONDER

Have you ever prayed like a Pharisee? Or like a pagan?



PRACTICE

Find a place and time in the next 24 hours for praying a little bit more intensively than you usually do.



PRAY

God, help me to love the Blesser more than the blessings.



WEEK 5



OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

MATTHEW 6 v 9

9 This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven...

THERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS TO KEEP TOUCHING ON IN ANY HEALTHY PRAYER LIFE.

- ◆ **This, then, is how you should pray...** In contrast with ostentatious prayer (v5, of the Pharisees) or thoughtless prayer (v7, of the pagans), Jesus gives his disciples a model (v9b-13).
- ◆ Jesus gives his disciples what has been called 'the Lord's prayer'. It is not the prayer he himself prayed (John 17, rather, is just that). It is the prayer we are to pray. All disciples of Jesus should memorize it, which is easy to do. There are two ways we can use this prayer:
- ◆ **1) We can pray it word for word** (which is what Luke 11:2 suggests), giving thought to the words as we do – and not just repeating it mindlessly, which is something Jesus has just condemned in verse 7.
- ◆ **2) We can use it as a pattern that reminds us of some themes to keep returning to in our prayer life.** This is what is suggested by, 'this is how (not 'what') you should pray'. This is the approach I generally take, and it's a helpful prayer because it's easy - according to one's level of faith or personality - to gravitate to some themes and neglect others. This prayer helps us to keep covering the most important bases when making contact with our Father through prayer.

THE FIRST THING TO DO WHEN PRAYING IS TO REMIND OURSELVES OF TO WHOM WE ARE PRAYING.

- ◆ The opening line is, 'Our Father in heaven'. There are two things we should focus on in prayer: that he is Father, and that he is 'in heaven'.
- ◆ **1) He is 'our Father'.**
- ◆ 'Father' is Jesus' favourite term for addressing God. 'Father' (Greek is pater) would have been 'Abba' in Aramaic, the everyday language spoken by Jesus (see Mark 14:36, Rom 8:15). It was the word used by Jewish children for their earthly fathers. 'Father' appears on his lips some sixty-five times in the Synoptic Gospels, and over one hundred times in John. The Old Testament makes hardly any mention of God as Father – in total only 15 times (where God is the described as Father of the nation (see Deut 32:6), and as the Father of some of the great kings (see 2 Sam 7:14). Jesus' invitation for all of his followers to call God Father in prayer is something brand new, and profoundly striking. At the heart of Jesus' ministry he makes it possible for us to have intimate relational access to God as our Father; to be accepted as his loved children

- ◆ 'The idea of praying to God as "Our Father" conveys the authority, warmth, and intimacy of a loving father's care' (Wilson). We have the security and privilege of being called his loved sons and daughters. We have access to him. Because of the acceptance he has bestowed on us, we don't need to grovel in self-abasement before him. We can be assured that he is more eager to hear from us than we are to speak to him. We really matter to him. He enjoys our love for him; not that he needs to be loved, but rather that he wants to be loved.
- ◆ The fact that he is 'our' Father and not just 'my' Father reminds us that we are not alone in our relationship with him. All over the world, there are millions of people enjoying the same access to him through his Son. This is also the reason that we do not just pray on our own, but also in prayer meetings with others.
- ◆ Given Jesus' ministry, it's no surprise then that the rest of the New Testament also emphasizes the Fatherhood of God. For example, Paul's letters call God 'Father' over forty times: in blessings (1 Cor 1:3), doxologies (Rom 15:6), thanksgivings (1 Thes 1:2-3), prayers (Col 1:12), exhortations (Eph 5:20) and creeds (1 Cor 8:6).
- ◆ **2) He is 'in heaven'.**
- ◆ The Greek is 'in the heavens'. In the Jewish mind 'the heavens' consisted of three possible things: 1) the atmosphere immediately surrounding us; 2) the sky above; 3) and the realm where God has his throne. When we think of our Father in heaven, we can therefore think of him both as extremely close (the atmosphere around us), and extremely exalted (far above us, on his heavenly throne).
- ◆ The theological terms are 'immanence' (God is nearby and accessible) and 'transcendent' (God is exalted in authority and sovereignty, and is unimaginably great). Our Father is both close and great, both immanent and transcendent. When we pray we remind ourselves that this is the Father we approach! What a privilege.

PONDER

Are you comfortable calling God 'my Father'? How do you feel about him being as close to you as the air surrounding your body?

PRACTICE

Spend sometime praising God for the kind of Father he is, and for his greatness and closeness.

PRAY

It is such a privilege to be able to call "my Father"!

MATTHEW 6 v 9, 10

9 This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name 10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

- ◆ After the opening line ('Our Father in heaven') there are three clauses (in verses 9-10), which speak of the big things that really matter to God. Then there are three clauses (in verses 11-13) that speak of smaller things that really matter to us.
- ◆ Jesus teaches us that we should get in the habit of first speaking about the big things that really matter to God before speaking about the smaller things that matter to us. Why is this? It is because we tend to get caught up in ourselves, and forget that it is not ultimately about us, but rather it is about God. By focusing on the big things first, we gain the correct perspective on things. We're less panicky and self-absorbed in our prayers. So, what are the big things that really matter to God? There are three...

WE MUST PRAY FOR THREE BIG THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER TO GOD.

1) 'Hallowed be your name'.

- ◆ 'God's name' means 'God's reputation'. 'Hallowed' means: 'cherished, held as something special, prized, or praised'. God is a wonderful, holy God. But sadly, so few people realize this. So many belittle, ignore, marginalize, accuse or avoid him. His name is not hallowed. People have no idea how holy and wonderful God really is. God wants to be known for who he is. We should want people to know who God really is too.

2) 'Your kingdom come'

- ◆ God is a king who reigns with wisdom, authority and power. That his kingdom needs to come suggests that his kingdom is resisted. That is because we live in a world that is full of sin, brokenness and lack – "the whole world is under the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The devil has brought great damage to people and culture. And the devil has done this through the sinfulness, unbelief, misinformation and disobedience of humanity. Our desperate need is for God to break in and reveal his kingly authority, wisdom and power.
- ◆ Ultimately God's kingdom will undo all the works of the devil (1 John 3:8) and will displace every rebellious kingdom in humanity and culture (Rev 11:15). All pain and tears, tiredness and sickness, sin and depravity, spiritual-ignorance and malice, death and divorce, tragedy and tyranny will be done away with. And God's kingdom will be glorious – devoid of all these things. But already now, God's kingdom advances and 'comes' and undoes some of these things. Not completely, but in part. Not fully, but progressively. God's kingdom in our midst grows like a mustard tree - slowly but surely filling up the garden of the world (Matt 13:31-33). Already now, through the ministry of the Word and the Spirit we taste the powers of the coming age (Heb 6:5). This is what it means to see God's kingdom come.

3) 'Your will be done'.

- ◆ Tragically, fallen humanity has set itself up as God's rival and enemy. Instead of willingly embracing his wisdom, authority and leadership, we refuse it. This brings judgment and destruction into our lives and culture. God longs for us to freely and trustingly yield to him. He wants to do us good, and for us to do good ourselves. He has chosen to work in this world through willing human instruments. Part of what it means for God's will to be done is that God's kingdom overcomes everything that resists him, starting with the rebellion and distrust in our hearts.
- ◆ 'On earth as it is in heaven'. Heaven, the place of God's throne, is the place where God's kingdom is fully enjoyed, and God's will is totally embraced. God's plan is that in our small corner of the universe, in the human race and on planet earth, his kingdom would come, and his will be freely embraced. Ultimately this will happen in the future age, when 'the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God' (Rev 21:1-2). But we don't have to wait. Already now through our prayers, our faith, our obedience, and through Jesus, heaven is partly and progressively manifesting on earth.

WE CAN PRAY THESE THREE THEMES IN FOUR WAYS.

We can pray them as a prayer of...

- 1) Passion:** 'God, stir in me a passion for your name and your kingdom.'
- 2) Surrender:** 'God, not my will, but your will be done.'
- 3) Availability:** 'God, make my life a landing zone on earth for heaven to invade.'
- 4) Intercession.** We can pray God's fame, kingdom and will over a person, a ministry, a church, a situation, a nation etc. The whole world is in reach. 'We travel the world from our little home, not in the luxury of a jumbo jet, but on the wings of prayer' (Eaton).



PONDER

Which, if any, of these four methods of praying this part of the Lord's Prayer do you have a bias for?



PRACTICE

Spend a few minutes interceding for a person or a situation using this part of the Lord's Prayer.



PRAY

Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done.



GIVE US, FORGIVE US



MATTHEW 6 v 11, 12

11 Give us today our daily bread.

12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

BRING YOUR NEEDS TO YOUR FATHER IN PRAYER.

- ◆ We have worshiped God (v9a). We have prayed for the big things that really matter to God (v9b-10). Now we bring our needs to God.
- ◆ It is not a sign of spirituality to only pray about God’s kingdom and will, and not our needs. Psalm 35:27 says, ‘The LORD be exalted, who delights in the well-being of his servant’. This, I think, captures the flow of the Lord’s Prayer: the first three clauses have to do with the LORD being exalted, while the last three clauses have to do with us; the servants who seek to exalt him and advance his kingdom, being looked after by God. He delights in his kingdom advancing, yet he also delights in our wellbeing. In fact, the surest sign of his kingdom coming is the blessing and wholeness that come to mark his sons and daughters.

PRAY FOR GOD’S PROVISION.

- ◇ ‘Give us today our daily bread’. ‘Bread,’ says Martin Luther, ‘refers to everything necessary for the preservation of life - like good food, a healthy body, good weather, a house, a home, a wife, children, good government and peace.’ Although our Father is not stingy (Matt 15:37 reminds us that he sometimes enjoys giving us baskets full of leftovers), we are not to ask God to satisfy our greed but our needs. The word ‘give’ reminds us that even the food that we have paid for, with the money we have earned, with the skills we have developed, and the energy we have expended, is food that comes from him (see Deut 8:18).
- ◇ The word ‘daily’ means ‘for the coming day’. Prayed at night, it means for the next day. In the morning, it means for this day. We must express our dependency on him by praying for these provisions, starting with even our most basic needs. ‘In the morning you hear my voice. I lay my request before you and wait in expectation’ (Ps 5:3). ‘The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing’ (Ps 34:10).
- ◇ Let us not forget that we may be the agents through whom God answers other people’s prayers. After all, Jesus teaches us to give to the hungry (Matt 25:35).

PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS.

- ◆ ‘Forgive us our debts’. We are to pray for our relational wellbeing (both vertically with God, and horizontally with each other). To be in debt here means that we have let God and others down. In a sense we ‘owe’ them because of our failures (see Col 2:14).

- ◆ We need to separate the different ideas of God’s forgiveness and his justification. Justification is given once and forever (Rom 5:1,8, 8:1). In Christ, once and for all our standing with God has changed, and we are accepted by him, and are free from the possibility of eternal condemnation. Is that what Jesus is speaking about here – that we would be justified by God? No, Jesus is speaking to disciples who already have a relationship with God. Their justification is not at stake. **What is at stake is the daily enjoyment of intimacy with their Father.** Sin, and the guilt we feel, has a way of disrupting our relationship with God. Jesus is instructing us to simply own up to our sin, our letting God down, and to ask him to forgive and cleanse us from the guilt of it, so that we can enjoy intimacy with him again. After all, intimacy with the Father is as important to the soul as food is important for the body. We must regularly ‘come clean’ before God - freshly appealing to our Father’s mercy toward us.

EXTEND FORGIVENESS TO OTHERS IN PRAYER.

- ◇ ‘as we have also forgiven our debtors’. We should extend forgiveness to others. God cares about the health of our relationships with each other, within the community of faith. That is why we are also to freshly release grace and mercy to each other as we pray.
- ◇ Note that Jesus is not here teaching that our forgiveness toward others will earn us the Father’s forgiveness. Rather he teaches in this verse that the two are interconnected. As we receive the Father’s undeserved kindness and mercy, so we extend it to others. And as we extend God’s mercy to others, we freshly experience the Father’s compassion and grace toward us. Instead of making people pay for their wrongdoing toward us, we simply cancel the debt, and graciously give them another chance.



PONDER

What are your current needs? Is there anyone you need to forgive? Is there something you need to ‘come clean’ about with God?



PRACTICE

Based on your answers, spend some time praying about these three things to God.



PRAY

Give us, forgive us, as we forgive others.



MATTHEW 6 v 13 - 15

13 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'

14 'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.'

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION.

- ◆ **'And lead us not into temptation'**. The word 'temptation' refers to both temptations (i.e. being enticed to sin) and testing (i.e. experiencing great pressure and trials). We will be tempted (1 Cor 10:13), and we will be tested (James 1:2). There is no way around this. God tests us, but it is who Satan tempts us. God cannot tempt us, says James 1:13-14.
- ◆ What does it mean to pray, 'Lead us not into temptation and testing'? It seems to have two meanings: 1) Eaton says it means 'When I am tempted or tested, let me not be so overwhelmed that I fall "into" it. The word "into" is the main point. We will be tempted and tested, but with God's help, we can stop ourselves from falling "into" sin. By God's grace, we will remain standing strong.' 2) Willard argues that it means, 'Help me to avoid temptations and trials altogether'. In other words, it is a no confidence vote in our own ability to withstand temptations and trials. We should pray that God reduce our temptations and trials. Both interpretations have the same emphasis: the temptation to give up, or to lose faith, or to sin can be very great, and in ourselves we don't have what it takes. The point is that God's enabling grace is greatly needed. We need his grace to both overcome the temptation, and sometimes even avoid the temptation entirely.

DELIVER US FROM THE EVIL ONE.

- ◇ **'But deliver us from the evil one'**. This phrase is still part of the prayer that we would not fall into temptation. The words remind us that it is Satan, not God, who seeks to entice us to sin. He is very sly and powerful in his tactics to defeat us. Only Jesus has the inherent power to overcome him (see Matt 4:1-11, and 1 John 3:8). Although Satan is stronger than us, if we rely on God's grace we can overcome his attacks. 'Greater is he who lives in you (Jesus) than he who lives in the world (Satan)' (1 John 4:4).
- ◇ **When we pray for deliverance, what are we praying for exactly?** We are praying that God will 1) spare us from trials, 2) put a sudden end to some trials, or 3) help us to faithfully persevere through some trials. We trust God, our loving Father, to decide which trials to help us avoid, which trials to deliver us from, and which trials to deliver us through. On either count, he will prove himself faithful as the one who answers our prayers.

OUR EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS HINGES ON OUR READINESS TO EXTEND IT TO OTHERS.

- ◆ In verses 14-15, the sample prayer over, Jesus gives commentary on verse 12: 'forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors' (v12).
- ◆ **How do we understand God's forgiveness?** 1) There's eternal forgiveness. For this, you need to put your trust in Christ and in his work on the cross, and your sins will be forgiven – past, present and future. In that case, our sins are no longer counted against us (2 Cor 5:19) and we need not fear eternal condemnation (Rom 8:1). The theological term for this once-in-a-life-time, eternal forgiveness is 'justification'. We receive a new status in God's sight. 2) Then there's experiential forgiveness. Once we are 'in Christ' we need not fear the loss of acceptance or justification by God. Rather, we should fear is the loss of the experience of forgiveness. This is the second kind of forgiveness. It is not something that happens in heaven, but rather in our hearts. It is the Spirit witnessing to our hearts that all is well between God and us, and that we need not carry a guilty conscience for our past failures.
- ◆ **What do Jesus' followers need to do to keep on experiencing God's forgiveness in their hearts?** To start, we need to confess our sins to him and trust in the forgiving nature of God (1 John 1:9, Ps 103:3). But here Jesus teaches another key to freshly experiencing God's forgiveness in our hearts: we need to extend forgiveness to others. These verses can be paraphrased like this: 'If you, a disciple, forgive others, you will experience your Father's forgiveness toward you. But if you fail to forgive others, you will not be able to enjoy the experience of the Father's forgiveness towards you.'



PONDER

Do you understand the difference between eternal forgiveness (i.e. justification) and experiential forgiveness?



PRACTICE

Spend some time asking God to lead you not into temptation, and rather into deliverance.



PRAY

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.

MATTHEW 6 v 16, 18

16 When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

FAST WHEN APPROPRIATE, BUT DO SO FOR THE RIGHT REASONS.

- ◆ Jesus expected that his disciples would fast from time to time. His words, 'When you fast' (not 'if you fast') make that clear enough. But fasting should be done for the right reasons (i.e. the humble, prayerful pursuit of God and his will). Fasting for the wrong reasons – such as trying to impress people with how spiritual we are (v16) – is pointless. Unlike the Pharisees, who were known for boasting about their fasting (Luke 18:12), we should not try to draw attention to ourselves when fasting.

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT FASTING.

- ◆ Michael Eaton (in pages 134-140 of his book 'The Way that Leads to Life') looks at every reference to fasting in the Bible, and then summarizes his findings. Allow me to summarize his summary:

1) Although Jesus expects his disciples to fast from time to time, he does not make much of fasting. It was the later church of the second century that tended to add references to fasting into texts that were not in the original text (Mark 9:29 for example), and who over-emphasized fasting.

2) Fasting can be done for foolish reasons (see 1 Samuel 14:24-30 and Acts 23:12-22 for example). Fasting is worthless if other aspects of our lives are in defiance against God, and in lack of love toward others - especially the poor (Isaiah 58).

3) It certainly is appropriate to fast when we're in danger, in great distress, or in deep repentance (1 Samuel 7:6, Acts 9:9). It should be said that in these times we don't even desire to eat anyway. On the other hand there are times, like celebration moments or times when physical energy is greatly needed, that it is inappropriate to fast (1 Samuel 14:24-30, Matthew 9:14-15).

4) It is appropriate to fast when God's people are about to venture out into something new and are seeking God's guidance and help (Esther 4:15, Ezra 8:21-23, Acts 13:2-3, 14:23). This is the usually the reason that we have church-wide fasts.

5) The majority of references to fasting in the Bible are to fairly short fasts of a day to three (Isaiah 58:5, 2 Samuel 1:12, Nehemiah 1:4). But sometimes lengthier fasts, especially in times of distress, may be suitable (2 Samuel 12:16-23 [7 days], Daniel 10:2-3 [21 days]). The 40-day fast is very rare and requires supernatural help (Jesus, Moses and Elijah alone fasted this long, and only once in their lives).

6) There is such a thing as a partial fast (Daniel 10:2-3) where only some foods are eliminated.

7) Some people seem to be called to fast more than others (Luke 2:37, 7:33).

8) The leaders of God's people can sometimes call a fast (Nehemiah 9:1, Esther 4:15).

- ◆ Overall, fasting is to be done when appropriate, when the Spirit leads, and for the right reasons. The physical act of fasting itself is of no real value. It is the attitudes and activities associated with the fast (such as prayer, humility, extra time with God, greater dependence on God) that are especially valuable.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR FASTING:

- ◆ Decide beforehand which fast you will perform – whether a water-only fast, or a fruit-juice only fast, or (and these ones are considerably easier) a fruit and veggies fast, or a no-coffee fast etc., and then stick to it.
- ◆ If you're not eating at all, then refrain from physical exercise. If prolonged, the first day tends to be the most difficult. It usually gets easier as the days go on. Depending on your metabolism, fasting is either difficult or easy.
- ◆ Don't clutter your days with too much activity. Schedule time (perhaps even twice a day) to go to a quiet place to read the Word, to pray, and perhaps to journal anything you sense God saying. It's pointless to stop feasting on food, but then miss the opportunity to feast on God.
- ◆ Sometimes fasting can bring immediate positive effects, such as a greater sense of God's presence. But usually fasting is a very uncomfortable experience at the time, with positive spiritual effects coming after the time of fasting.
- ◆ Fasting is a wonderful opportunity to give focused prayer to certain things, so be clear on what it is you're praying about.
- ◆ Seriously consider joining in when the elders of a church call a fast.

POUNDER What experience have you had of fasting? When might you next fast?

PRACTICE Perhaps experiment with a 24 hour fast in the next week or two.

PRAY As awesome as the gift of food is, you're even better than it God.



WEEK **6**

MATTHEW 6 v 19 - 21

19 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

PURSUE AND INVEST YOUR LIFE IN THAT WHICH HAS ETERNAL VALUE.

- ◆ We're to pursue the beatitudes (5:3-12), be salt and light (v13-16), love the Old Testament (v17-20), seek an inside-out righteousness (v21-37) marked by radical love (v38-48), and learn to live before the audience of One (6:1-18). In this next part of his message Jesus calls his followers to choose their master - either God or wealth (v19-24), and to choose their outlook on life - either faith or worry (v25-34).
- ◆ In verses 19-21, Jesus speaks of two treasures – one in heaven, and one on earth. **What is meant by 'treasure'?** Our treasure is that which is of great value to us. It is what we'll instinctively pursue, protect, find our deepest joy in, base our identity upon, build our lives around, and in which we will find our security.
- ◆ **What is meant by 'store up earthly treasure'?** It means to greatly value temporal things – like money. But it can refer to more than loving money. It can refer to the pursuit of fleeting things like pleasure and fame, as well as more lasting, but nonetheless temporary, things like family, career and accomplishment.
- ◆ **What's wrong with storing up of earthly treasure for one's self?** It's not that these things are necessarily wrong in themselves. They're usually not. His point is that they don't last. Given enough time nature (moths), decay (rust) or ill-willed people (thieves) will threaten them. In other words, to center our lives on these things is to guarantee insecurity and anxiety when we have them, and devastation and despair when we lose them. And we cannot take them with us when we die. It's not wrong, however, to show any interest at all in these things. The key word is 'treasure' which means to try derive great or ultimate meaning and joy from these things – which is very unwise.
- ◆ **What does it mean to 'store up treasures in heaven' for one's self?** It means to place ultimate value on eternal things such as God himself, but also on his word, his work in the world, his kingdom, and his ways. 'People have a choice between activities that lead to greater earthly reward in the present (see v2, 5 and 16 for example) and those that store up greater future reward in heaven' (Wilson).
- ◆ **Why does Jesus commend the storing up of heavenly treasure?** When we build our lives upon eternal values, we build our lives upon that which is indestructible, enduring and invulnerable. 'We notice again Jesus' teaching about living for reward. We are to accumulate treasure in a heavenly bank! Of course, the treasure is not material, but

nevertheless the theme of reward is very emphatic' (Eaton). Although our salvation is received by simple faith, our reward (something over and above salvation) is received by persistent faithfulness.

- ◆ **What is meant by 'for where your treasure is, there you heart will be also'?** Whatever we place great value upon (i.e. treasure) will also captivate our hearts – and thereby dominate the focus and direction of our whole lives. 'There is spiritual danger in laying up treasures on earth. To make any earthly thing our treasure affects 'the heart' – the center of the personality. We shall lose something of our spiritual zeal' (Eaton).

INVEST YOUR MONEY IN GOD'S KINGDOM.

- ◇ Though 'treasure' can refer to anything we value, in these verses it refers primarily to money. Jesus encourages us to invest in heaven, rather than in earth.
- ◇ We cannot take our money with us to heaven, but we can send it on by investing it in things of eternal value. Jesus, the Chief Financial Officer of the Universe, encourages us to not ask how our investments are doing in 20 years, but rather in 20 million years. It's not only wrong to pursue earthly wealth as the major goal of our lives. It's plain stupid. Paul, in 1 Timothy 6, applies Jesus' teaching as follows to the wealthy people in Ephesus: 'Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. So doing, way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life'.
- ◇ 'The good that has been done for the kingdom of God through the use of our money lasts for eternity, and the work God does **in us** through faithful giving will last for eternity' (Guzik).

POUNDER What do you value most? What do you believe God is saying to you in today's reading?

PRACTICE Decide to store up treasures in heaven by giving to the cause of Christ. If you're not already doing so, create a plan to restructure your finances so you can.

PRAY God, don't let any earthly pursuit damage my heart by undermining my zeal for you.



TWO VISIONS, TWO MASTERS

MATTHEW 6 v 22 - 24

22 The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! 24 No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

FOCUS ON GOD AND HIS KINGDOM, NOT ON EARTHLY TREASURE.

- ◆ In verses 22-23, Jesus speaks of two visions; a heavenly and an earthly one. The key to understanding these verses is to remember the verse that precedes it (v21), which speaks of what our hearts focus on. Our heart is our spirit, our center and our will. Our heart has the ability to choose a point of focus. It 'treasures', or places value, on certain things and pursuits. In short, life organizes itself around the heart. In these verses, Jesus urges us once again to focus on the right things - the right ambitions. The eyes of our heart need the right focus.
- ◆ **'If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light'**. Our physical eyes bring light into our lives. If our eyes are healthy and good, we will be more in touch with the physical reality around us (this is what Jesus means by us being 'full of light'). **'But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness'**. If our eyes are not good, then we will be out of touch with the physical reality around us (this is what Jesus means by us being 'full of darkness').
- ◆ **'If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!' (v23)** 'The light within you' refers to 'the eyes of your heart'. Jesus connects good eyesight with good heart-sight. If the eyes of your heart are blind to the reality of God and his kingdom, your life will be full of darkness. Or said another way, if you focus on and are ambitious with regard to the wrong things, such as 'earthly treasure' (v19), then your life will be out of touch with spiritual reality. But if you focus on the right stuff, such as 'heavenly treasure' (v20), your life will be in touch with spiritual reality. There's the danger of losing sight of what's really important, of stumbling around in life, out of touch with the beauty and opportunities God has for us to enjoy and exploit.

FOCUSING ON GOD AND HIS KINGDOM LEADS TO GENEROSITY.

- ◇ Interestingly, the words 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' can also be translated 'generous' and 'stingy'. This picks up on the theme of treasure/money in the verses both before (v19-21) and after (v24). Jesus has in mind the materialism that draws the focus of our heart. Wealth is not in itself wrong - the question is whether we're more focused on what we can get than what we can give. Focusing on God's kingdom leads to generosity, whereas focusing on earthly treasure leads to tight-fistedness.

'Being generous brings light to our lives. We are happier and more content when we have God's heart of generosity. But if we are not generous, it is as if your whole body will be full of darkness. In other words, our selfish, miserly ways cast darkness over everything that we think or do. Often a materialistic, miserly, selfish Christian justifies their sin by saying, 'It's just one area of my life.' But even as the darkness of the eye affects everything in the body, so a wrong attitude towards material things brings darkness to our whole being' (Guzik).

SUBMIT YOUR LIFE TO GOD, NOT TO MONEY.

- ◆ **You cannot serve both God and money.** Jesus has spoken of two treasures (v19-21) and two visions (v22-23). Now he speaks of two masters (v24). Treasure speaks of what we value. Vision speaks of what we focus on. Masters speak of what we submit our lives to. The word 'master' refers not to an employer, but rather to a slave-owner who has total say over our lives. 'A disciple's loyalties cannot be divided - that is, one is either a slave to God or to money' (Wilson). 'Our hearts only have capacity for one dominant passion. God is served with a single-eyed devotion or he is not served at all' (Carson).
- ◆ 'Many people would **say** they love God, but their service of money shows that in fact they do not. How can we tell who or what we are serving? One way is by applying this principle: **you will sacrifice for your god.** If you will sacrifice for the sake of money, but will not sacrifice for the sake of Jesus, don't deceive yourself: money is your God' (Guzik).



PONDER

What is the dominant passion of your life. And, according to the principle of sacrifice, what is your god?



PRACTICE

Get a copy of your balance statement, and open up your diary. In the last 2 months, how much money and time have you spent on you and your family? And how much money and time have you invested in God's kingdom?



PRAY

God, I choose to focus on your kingdom as my vision, and to submit to you as my master.



DON'T WORRY



MATTHEW 6 v 25

25 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?

WE TEND TO BE ANXIOUS ABOUT THE FUTURE AND PREOCCUPIED WITH NOT-SO-IMPORTANT THINGS.

◆ Jesus says that we tend to worry about what we will eat and drink and what we will wear. What does Jesus mean by this? It seems that he means at least two things:

1) He means that we tend to worry about our future needs. We anxiously wonder if we, or perhaps our dependents, will be provided for in the days, weeks and months to come. We tend to imagine the worst-case scenarios and then, by the power of imagination, start to believe that this is a likely future. 'He begins with a basic command - "Do not worry about your life" (v25). It is a plain and straightforward command. So anxiety is sin. It is something forbidden by the Lord Jesus Christ' (Eaton).

2) He means that we tend to be preoccupied with not-so-important things. 'Food and drink' may refer to our longings for pleasure, satisfaction and the finer things in life. 'Clothing' can refer to our longing for attractiveness, a good image, staying in touch with the latest trends and fashion. It's not that these longings are wrong, but rather just that we tend to inflate their importance. We tend to 'run' after these things (v32).

Notice how he helps us to deal with both worry and pre-occupation with lesser things. After all, 'you can be as unfaithful to God through worry as well as through covetousness' (Bruce).

THE MAJOR CAUSE OF ANXIETY: PRE-OCCUPATION WITH LESSER THINGS.

◇ Jesus starts this section of teaching with the word 'therefore'. This word 'therefore' means that his command not to **worry relates directly to what has gone before it.** So, what has Jesus just said? He has called us to make a choice to pursue and invest our lives in treasure with eternal value (v19-21), to focus our hearts on God and on all that he values (v22-23), and to submit our lives to God rather than to money (v24-25). If we do just that then we need not worry about our lives. God himself will take care of us. 'If one makes the right choices (see v19-24) there is ('therefore') no reason that one should be anxious' (Wilson).

◇ However, if we fail to do what Jesus tells us to do in verses 19-25 **then worry and anxiety are inevitable.** This is because we are wasting our lives in the pursuit of the wrong stuff, focusing our hearts on the wrong things, and submitting our lives to unworthy masters. The wrong treasure, vision and master will always pay us back with insecurity and anxiety – as they are all temporary and unpredictable in nature. The main solution is focusing on and trusting in an unchanging God and kingdom.

WHY AND HOW WE MUST OVERCOME ANXIETY.

- ◆ We have a lot to look forward to in unpacking verses 25b to 34.
- ◆ In verses 25b-32a we discover five reasons not to be anxious. We will look at the first reason shortly. We notice that Jesus seeks to defeat our anxiety by reasoning with us. 'We may notice his "deliverance ministry" here! If his disciples are in danger of greed or anxiety, he does not offer to pray for them or cast out the "spirit of anxiety"! He reasons and argues with them and asks them to think' (Eaton).
- ◆ Then in verses 32b-34 we will discover four secrets to overcome anxiety.

THE 1ST REASON NOT TO BE ANXIOUS: AS GOD MADE US (A GREAT TASK), HE WILL SURELY SUSTAIN US (A SMALL TASK).

'Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? (v25b) 'Jesus presents "an argument from the greater to the lesser". If God gave us life (a great achievement), surely God will sustain that life (a much smaller matter). If God gave us a body (a great achievement), surely God will see that this body is cared for in one of his people (a much smaller matter)' (Eaton). .



PONDER

Do you worry about future needs? Do you tend to be preoccupied with things that create anxiety?



PRACTICE

Spend some time thanking God for the great achievements of his in your life. Start with the body and life he has given you.



PRAY

God, help me overcome worry in my life.

MATTHEW 6 v 26 - 32

26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? 28 And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you little-faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things ...

THE 2ND REASON NOT TO BE ANXIOUS: IF GOD CARES FOR THE BIRDS AND FLOWERS, HOW MUCH MORE WILL HE CARE FOR HIS CHILDREN?

- ◆ **Jesus advises that we become bird-watchers (v26).** They don't fret and worry about the future. They don't fear tomorrow's lack. Yet God makes sure they get food to eat. They live joyfully every day, because God looks after them. 'God is so sovereign over the universe that even the feeding of a songbird falls within his concern' (Carson). Yet, we're 'much more valuable' (v26) to him than birds.
- ◆ **Jesus then advises we become botanists (v28-30).** He refers to our need to be clothed not only for protection from the elements, but also in order to look good. Plants, doing nothing, are 'clothed' by God with the most beautiful flowers. 'Lovely lilies, how you rebuke our foolish nervousness' (Spurgeon).
- ◆ **To be clear, Jesus is not saying we should lazily make no effort to provide for ourselves.** 'The birds don't worry, but they do work. Birds don't just sit with open mouths, expecting God to fill them' (Guzik). Nor are we exempt from taking care of others, and from facing troubles from time to time. What Jesus is saying is that **we are not alone in the pursuit of our future wellbeing and survival**, as, if our heavenly Father provides and cares for the birds and flowers, how much will he provide and care for us, his sons and daughters? Plan by all means, but do so trustingly and non-anxiously.

THE 3RD REASON NOT TO BE ANXIOUS: IT'S POINTLESS BEING PREOCCUPIED WITH WHAT IS BEYOND YOUR CONTROL.

- ◇ **'Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?' (v27)** Fretting about the future is useless. This doesn't mean we shouldn't take precautionary measures with regards to our safety and health. It means that we recognize that there is much that is beyond our control (that is still thankfully in God's). Fretting about that will accomplish nothing. Instead we should trust our Father. This doesn't mean all will be easy, or that we live to the age of 90. He has not. He is sure to provide in his own time

THE 4TH REASON NOT TO BE ANXIOUS: ANXIETY ABOUT THE FUTURE IS EVIDENCE THAT YOU DON'T TRUST GOD TO LOOK AFTER YOU.

- ◆ Jesus said, 'will he not ... clothe you – you of little faith?' (v30) Jesus makes a simple promise to his disciples in this verse: God will provide for us. This promise runs throughout the Bible. For example, 'Do not fret ... trust in the Lord and do good, dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart... I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken, or their children begging for bread. They are always generous and lend freely, and their children will be blessed' (Ps 37:1, 3-5, 25-26).
- ◆ **We must learn to apply our faith.** If we fail to do so, then Jesus has a nickname for us: 'little-faith' (v30). 'Little-faith' or 'faith-ling' is a term Jesus made up that gently chides his disciples, not for the absence of their faith, but the non-application of their faith. 'Faith has to be applied! It is largely a matter of thinking hard and working out the logical implications of our salvation. He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not as with him – also freely! – give us all things? (Rom 8:32). If we enlarge our faith by a little bit of spiritual thinking we shall be set free from much, if not all, of our anxiety' (Eaton).

THE 5TH REASON NOT TO BE ANXIOUS: YOU'RE MEANT TO BE DIFFERENT TO THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW GOD.

- ◇ Jesus says pagans (a reference to people who don't know God) 'run after all these things' (v32). They are preoccupied with the preservation and prosperity of their physical lives. It's not wrong to show some interest in food, drink and clothing. Or to be interested in pleasure, satisfaction, life's finer things, personal attractiveness and fashion. But it is wrong to have a life that has these things anywhere near the center - that is - as our treasure, vision or master.
- ◇ **The disciples of Jesus should be different.** We are not far from God. We have God as our loving Father. Our preoccupation is not the things of this material world, but rather, the things of God. Our passion is not for our own glory, but for God's. We find our security in God, not things.

POUNDER Is there something you're anxious about? Which of these 5 reasons speaks most to this particular anxiety?

PRACTICE Find some birds, and some flowers, and do what Jesus said you should: watch and learn.

PRAY Jesus, I'm a faith-ling, but I want to grow in my faith. Help me apply it to this situation.



THE SECRET TO OVERCOMING ANXIETY

 MATTHEW 6 v 32 - 34

32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

THE 1ST SECRET TO OVERCOMING ANXIETY: TRUST THAT YOUR FATHER KNOWS AND CARES ABOUT YOU AND YOUR NEEDS.

- ◆ **'Your heavenly Father knows that you need (these things)'** (v32). Even a life that revolves around God still needs food, drink, clothing, shelter, protection and provision. Thankfully, our Father knows our needs. There may be times that it seems that God has forgotten about our needs, but he has not. He is sure to provide in his own time and in his own way.
- ◆ The Message paraphrases this verse like this: 'Don't be so preoccupied with getting that you make no space for the Father's giving'. When we focus on our Father rather than our needs, we move from anxiety to trust. We are not alone in this world. Our Father knows. Our Father cares. Our Father will guide us and provide for us.

THE 2ND SECRET TO OVERCOMING ANXIETY: HAVE A SINGULAR PASSION FOR GOD.

- ◆ People far from God 'run after ... things' (v32). We're meant to live for God, but when we lose focus on God, lesser things arise to take his place. But Jesus tells us to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. It's not that we are to have no interest in lesser things such as food and drink (i.e. pleasures, satisfaction, life's finer things) or clothing (i.e. personal attractiveness, concern about our image, trends and fashions). It's just that these things are so much less important than the main preoccupation of our lives: God's kingdom and righteousness.
- ◆ **We are to seek God's kingdom above all.** We are to focus our lives on the hallowing of his name, the coming of his kingdom and the doing of his will. 'The kingdom of God is his royal power at work in and through our lives. Seeking it involves desiring God's presence, desiring to please him so that we experience his approval. It involves taking the time and effort to advance his kingdom' (Eaton). To seek the Father's kingdom is synonymous with seeking Christ's kingdom – 'God's kingdom is Jesus Christ ruling over his people in total blessing and total demand' (Stott).
- ◆ **We are to also 'seek first ... his righteousness'.** This starts with the pursuit of Christ-like character. It is worked out in every area of life: home-life, work-life and civic-life. It is not just personal, but also societal (how we respond to poverty and injustice for example) and ecological (how we treat the earth and animal life).

THE 3RD SECRET TO OVERCOMING ANXIETY: BE ASSURED THAT AS YOU LIVE FOR WHAT GOD WANTS, HE WILL GIVE YOU WHAT YOU NEED.

'All these things will be given to you as well' (v33). If we seek God first then we can relax in the promise of provision. Though we don't know what the future holds, we live for the One who holds the future. As we get behind the things closest to God's heart, he promises to meet our material needs – usually in his own time (very often the eleventh hour), and in his own way (very often unexpected sources). 'Be concerned about God's great kingdom, and God will care for your little kingdom!' (Eaton).

THE 4TH SECRET TO OVERCOMING ANXIETY: BE ASSURED THAT AS YOU LIVE FOR WHAT GOD WANTS, HE WILL GIVE YOU WHAT YOU NEED.

- ◆ **'Do not worry about tomorrow.'** Jesus speaks of 'tomorrow' as if it were a person. 'Tomorrow', almost like an evil spirit, comes to our minds today and starts to afflict us with a list of possible problems. We can humbly make plans for tomorrow, but we cannot indulge anxious thoughts about tomorrow. Send tomorrow back to where it came from.
- ◆ **'Each day has enough trouble of its own.'** We are to live one day at a time. We must focus on this day. Every day will bring a new set of challenges. Along with every challenge that Jesus permits into our lives (after all, he is sovereign - even over our troubles), he also apportions a dose of empowering grace to deal with them. 'As your days are, so will your strength be' (Deut 33:25). God gives us no empowering grace for tomorrow. We should live attentive to God's help which arrives right here, right now. Worrying about tomorrow's problems doesn't save us from facing tomorrow's problems. It merely saps us of the strength to meet today's problems! The solution is to live in the present.



PONDER

Which of these four secrets do you most need to apply in your life?



PRACTICE

Over the next 24 hours, try to keep your mind in the present - attentive to the presence and help of God.



PRAY

God, I seek first your kingdom and righteousness.



WEEK 7



DO NOT JUDGE



MATTHEW 7 v 1, 2

1 Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

AN ATTITUDE OF CONDEMNATION WILL BACKFIRE.

- ◆ So far in his Message on the Mountain, Jesus has called us to his beatitudes (5:1-12); to be salt and light (v13-16), to honour the Scriptures (5:17-20), to pursue kingdom values in our everyday life (5:21-48), to live before the audience of One (6:1-8), to give ourselves to a pattern of prayer (6:8-18), to pursue a heavenly treasure, vision and master (6:19-24), and to not worry but rather to seek God's kingdom (6:25-34).
- ◆ Now in verses 1-6, Jesus speaks of how to facilitate change in other people. The Sermon on the Mount so far is all about the spiritual, moral and social transformation of people who surrender their lives to Jesus. But not only does this lead to a personal transformation, it also leads to a longing in our hearts to see a transformation in people around us. Sure, God is the one who ultimately changes us, but he also uses people in this process. God uses us to sharpen each other.
- ◆ However, the moment we seek to see others change, we move on to potentially dangerous ground, as Jesus makes clear in these verses: 'Do not judge' (v1). By this, Jesus does not mean that we mustn't be discerning and thoughtful. In fact the entire Sermon on the Mount is Jesus helping us to properly discern things. If someone teaches something that contradicts the gospel, we should discern that this is false teaching. If someone acts in a way that is not reflective of the character of Christ, we can call it what it is. What Jesus means by "judge" here is not 'discern' (see 1 Cor 5:3 and 1 John 4:1) but rather 'condemn'. In other words, Jesus targets the attitude with which we try to help each other. "There is a great difference between condemning and discerning. Discerning is to compare with the truth, or the standard. Condemning is to blame and criticize in a way that disempowers people from living the truth" (Willard). "Among those who seem to know nothing of the Bible, this is the verse that seems to be most popular. Yet most people who quote this verse don't understand what Jesus said. They seem to think (or hope) that Jesus commanded a universal acceptance of any lifestyle or teaching. Yet, just a little later in this same sermon (in verses 15-16), Jesus commanded us to know ourselves, and others by the fruit of their life, and some sort of assessment is necessary for that. The Christian is called to show unconditional love, but the Christian is not called to unconditional approval. We really can love people who do things that should not be approved of" (Guzik).

- ◆ "Or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." This can be taken in two ways. Firstly, if we condemn others, they tend to lash back at us with the very same judgment. 'Who are you to talk?' they may say. Trying to help someone in a condemning way tends to backfire. And secondly, if we condemn others, it gives God more reason to judge us. This verse puts it the other way round when compared with Jesus' teaching in the Lord's Prayer, where he said, 'Forgive us, as we forgive others.' In some ways, God treats us disciples like we treat others. The way we treat them (i.e. the 'measure we use') is the way God treats us (i.e. 'it will be measured to you'). 'Undue harshness and a judgmental attitude toward others will result in being treated in much the same.



PONDER

Have you ever tried to help someone, but with a condemning attitude? What happened?



PRACTICE

In the next 24 hours, be mindful of your attitude toward others. Is it more gracious or judgmental?



PRAY

God, help me to live in the present moment, giving my attention to what you're doing right now.

MATTHEW 7 v 3 - 6

3 Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye. 6 "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

WE'RE NOT READY TO HELP ANYONE UNTIL WE'VE DEALT WITH OUR OWN TENDENCY TO CONDEMN.

There seems to be two meanings to v1-5:

- ◆ **On the one hand Jesus speaks to that tendency in us to try to change others without first going to work on our own lives.** Jesus shows how we are generally far more tolerant to our own sin than we are to the sin of others' (Guzik). This metaphor reflects that old adage: 'If you want to see someone else change, first change yourself.' 'You hypocrite' (v5) – he calls us hypocrites. A hypocrite is someone who, like a theatre actor in Jesus' day, projects an image that is not reflective of whom we really are. Jesus challenges us not to pretend to be perfect or better than we really are. We need to be real about our own blind spots, weaknesses and sins. We need to open ourselves to God's transforming grace in our own lives first. Once we're experiencing God's transforming grace in our lives, only then can we become mediators of God's transforming grace in the lives of others.
- ◆ **On the other hand, he illustrates the same point he has just made in verses 1-2, where he spoke of the folly of trying to help people in a condemning, accusing, ungracious way.** Now he illustrates it. Having an ungracious, condemning attitude is like having a plank in one's eye. It makes it **impossible** for us to see the other person as they are. Jesus wants us to treat and help each other in a gracious way. Our eyes need to be grace-healed. Before God can use us to set people free from their sin or error (the speck in their eye), we first need to be set free from a tendency to condemn fallen people.

IT'S UNWISE TO TRY TO HELP SOMEONE FAR FROM GOD – IN AN UNHELPFUL WAY.

- ◆ Now for verse 6. It's important to understand this verse **in the context of the preceding verses.** If we treat it as a stand-alone proverb, it will be misunderstood. Taken in context however, it fits into the flow of Jesus' teaching on a particular theme. If it were a stand-alone saying it could be taken to mean: 'Don't share good things with people who lack the maturity or discernment to appreciate the good thing you're giving them.' This interpretation does indeed offer much wisdom, but in context of 7:1-5, this verse means something different.

- ◆ The larger theme of 7:1-6 is 'how not to try to help or change people'. Specifically these verses challenge us to resist trying to help others while possessing a condemning, judgmental attitude towards the very person we're trying to help. In verses 3-5, Jesus speaks of our attempt to try help **'a brother'** (i.e. a fellow disciple) while we're full of hypocrisy and judgment. Now, in verse 6, Jesus speaks about what happens when we try to help **an unbeliever to change while (given the context of the above verses) we are still full of hypocrisy and judgment ourselves.**
- ◆ Dogs and pigs were perceived by Jews to be unclean animals. That's why the mention of 'dogs' and 'pigs' was a common Jewish reference to **unbelievers.** It is probably that Jesus uses the term to refer to a person who is very far from God; a person who seems to lack any receptiveness to God. Jesus previously said that when we try to give help a fellow disciple in an unhelpful way, they will judge us in return (v1). But how much worse will it be if we try to help a person far from God (giving them the pearl of the gospel, for example [Matt 13:45-46]) when we ourselves have the wrong heart? More than merely judging us in return (as a fellow disciple will tend to) a hard-hearted unbeliever will likely trample our help or message underfoot. They will possibly turn on us in a far fiercer counter attack. **It's bad enough when we err in our dealings with believers, but it's so much worse when we err in our dealings with unbelievers, who may be less forgiving.**
- ◆ Jesus is not saying that we should withhold the gospel or help from people who are far from God. Not at all. His last instruction to his disciples is to take the gospel to the entire world (Matt 28:19), and every creature (Mark 16:15). Rather, he's saying that we should be very careful about the presence of hypocrisy and a condemning attitude, while we try to share the gospel with others. A message of grace needs to come through a grace-saturated messenger.

PONDER How might a judgmental attitude distort your way of seeing people?

PRACTICE In the next 24 hours, sms someone who knows you very well, and say something along these lines: 'I know this sounds weird, but God is speaking to me about blind spots in my life. Could you tell me what they might be? I'd be so grateful if you say it like it is.'

PRAY God, I pray that you use me to spread the fragrance of Christ – humble, gracious, warm and accessible – to people far from God.



ASK, SEEK, KNOCK



MATTHEW 7 v 7, 8

7 Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.

THERE'S NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR LOVE FOR GOD AND OTHERS.

- ◆ 7:7-12 are the last verses in the Sermon on the Mount with commands in them. Jesus covers two main themes: prayer (v7-11) and love (v12). But notice that both of these have already received major attention in the Sermon on the Mount. Why does Jesus repeat these themes? It is because there's nothing more important than your love for God (prayer) and others.

ASK THE FATHER WITH PERSEVERANCE AND CONFIDENCE.

- ◆ **Prayer has a lot of asking in it.** The word 'pray' means 'ask'. Although prayer includes things like worship, thanksgiving and confession, it has asking as the major part. We see this with the words 'ask', 'seek' and 'knock'. We have not because we ask not (James 4:2). "Ask" means that we should come to God in humility and awareness of need. 'Seek' connects one's prayer with pursuing the will of God. 'Knock' suggests perseverance' (Wilson).
- ◆ **You should pray more.** Prayer should be a dominant part of our lives. Jesus' encouragement that we pray echoes the teaching of the rest of the Bible: call to God and he will answer you (Jer 33:3). Always pray and do not give up (Luke 18:1). Pray constantly (1 Thes 5:17). Devote yourself to prayer (Col 4:2). Make your requests known (Phil 4:6). Pray at all times in the Spirit (Eph 6:18).
- ◆ **Prayer is war.** Martin Luther writes about the spiritual warfare that seems to resist our attempts to getting round to prayer: 'Getting ourselves to the point of praying often causes us distress and anguish. The devil sometimes snatches us from our prayer and makes us so dizzy that we do not even think of praying. By the time you begin praying you have already tortured yourself half to death. Satan is well aware of what prayer achieves and can do. That is why he creates so many obstacles and disturbances, to keep you from getting around to it.' This is why Jesus needs to encourage us to pray once again. Simply memorizing and repeating to ourselves these two verses (v7-8) can powerfully help us to withstand the spiritual resistance to getting round to prayer.
- ◆ **When the answer to prayer doesn't come immediately, intensify your praying.** 'Jesus instructs, "Ask ... seek ... knock." Are they three ways of saying the same thing? I do not think so. When one asks and no answer seems to come, one seeks. When one seeks, and still no answer comes, one gets more desperate and begins to knock on the door more urgently. There is progress here. This is Jesus' way of telling us to persevere if the answer does not come speedily' (Eaton). 'Many of our passionless prayers are not answered – it is as if we ask God to care about something we care

little or nothing about. God values persistence and passion in prayer because they show that we share his heart. It shows that we care about the things he cares about' (Guzik).

- ◆ **Jesus promises that your prayers will result in answers.** He gives no less than six promises in these two short verses. By using repetition, he hammers into us the fact that the Father waits for and responds to our prayers. He wants us to pray with great confidence. Our Father is a father who delights in hearing and responding to our heartfelt and faith-filled prayers.
- ◆ **Prayer really does change things.** 'God has simply ordained that his blessings, which are already lined up for us, come piece at a time as we pray' (Eaton). Instead of being paralyzed by the mystery of prayer, let us start to pray. If we fail to pray, we fail to enjoy all that God has for us. 'There is a wrong theology that presents God as having a great unblinking stare, who never in the smallest respect changes his mind about what he is going to do. But our requests really do make a difference in what God is and is not going to do' (Willard). 'His doors are meant to open: they were made on purpose for entrance. It would be of no use to knock at a wall, but you may wisely knock at a door, for it is arranged for opening' (Spurgeon).



PONDER

Which of these six points is most relevant to you at the moment?



PRACTICE

Memorize verses 7-8. Then hammer it deeper into your heart and mind in the next 24 hours by repeating it to yourself as many times as you can. Create some kind of reminder to keep doing so.



PRAY

Thank you for the blessings you have lined up for me, that come to me – a piece at a time - as I pray.

MATTHEW 7 v 9 - 11

9 Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, you know how to give good gifts to your children. How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

THE SECRET TO PRAYER IS TO BE CONVINCED OF THE GOODNESS OF YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.

- ◆ This is Jesus' second bit of humour in his Sermon (the first occurring just verses before [v3-5: the plank in the eye]). Imagine a boy asking his father for bread and fish, and to his surprise his father gives him a stone and a snake. What a shocking thought! Jesus insists it would never happen. Even though parents are evil, no parent in their right mind would do something that cruel to their child. The parental instinct causes a parent to bless and provide for their young with good gifts. How much more will our heavenly Father, who is perfectly good and wise, be committed to giving us good gifts!
- ◆ Notice that Jesus does not liken the Father's parenting to human parenting – **rather he contrasts it**. He says in effect: Take the very best human parenting, and then multiply it by infinity to discover God's parenting. Jesus' point is that the secret to prayer is to be convinced of the goodness of our heavenly Father.
- ◆ These verses provide one reason that God has ordained prayer as a means to our receiving his blessings. In the same way that a parent often waits to be asked by their child for some provision, and likes the feeling of being asked and of being able to provide, so our Father in heaven waits to be asked by us for certain blessings and provisions. He likes the feeling of being asked, and of being able to provide.
- ◆ These verses also help us understand why our prayers are not always answered. What if a child were to ask for a bad gift, such as a stone or a snake? Perhaps the child thinks this is what she needs. Obviously a good parent, committed to the wellbeing of their child, would not give what is asked. In the same way, we may ask the Father for something that we deem to be good for us, but that he in his superior wisdom deems to not be good for us ultimately. In this case the Father declines our request, or answers but does not give us precisely what we requested.

ASK THE FATHER FOR EVERY IMAGINABLE 'REDEMPTION GIFT' FOR YOURSELF AND OTHERS.

- ◆ What kinds of things are we meant to ask for? John Stott tells us that Jesus is urging us to ask for 'redemption gifts', not just 'creator gifts'.

◆ What are creator gifts? Whether we ask God or not, we will most likely experience God giving us many good natural gifts – as he does to all people everywhere. This includes oxygen, water, food, clothing, friendship, pleasures, opportunities to learn and grow and work, and so much more. Theologians commonly call these creator blessings 'common grace'. It's all that God gives to all his creatures, whether they realize he is the source or not. The fact that we're 'evil' but **still retain some goodness** (evidenced by generally being good to our kids) (v11) is evidence of this common grace. Also, earlier in his Message, Jesus speaks of how God causes the sun and the rain to fall upon both the righteous and the unrighteous (5:45). Yet, as followers of Jesus we are to acknowledge that God himself is the source of our 'daily bread' (6:11).

◆ What are redemption gifts? There is something over and above creator gifts that God wants to give – using Stott's language - 'redemption gifts', or in more common theological wording, 'special grace'. Redemption gifts, or special grace, come not so much from God as our creator, but from God as our Father. They come through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Though creator gifts tend to come to us whether we pray or not, Jesus says we should ask for redemption gifts. John Stott explains the difference: 'God's redemption gifts are different to his creator gifts. For example, God does not give salvation to all, but only to those who call on the name of the Lord and ask for it (Rom 10:13). The same applies to post-salvation blessings, the 'good things' that Jesus says the Father gives to his children. It is likely not material blessings referred to here, but spiritual blessings – daily forgiveness, deliverance from evil, peace, increase of faith, hope and love, in fact the work of the Holy Spirit as the comprehensive blessing of God. For these gifts we certainly must pray.' I would add to Stott's list of redemption gifts several more spiritual blessings we can pray for ourselves and others: a closer intimacy with Christ and the Father, a deeper experience of the Spirit's power, a greater manifestation of spiritual gifts in our ministry, opportunities to meaningfully serve and spiritually impact people, wisdom in decision-making, finances needed to underwrite kingdom ventures, protection from the enemy's attacks on us, our church and loved ones, and a greater boldness and effectiveness in sharing our faith with people. And there are many more such things we need to regularly ask God for.



PONDER

Which of these six points is most relevant to you at the moment?



PRACTICE

Memorize verses 7-8. Then hammer it deeper into your heart and mind in the next 24 hours by repeating it to yourself as many times as you can. Create some kind of reminder to keep doing so.



PRAY

Thank you for the blessings you have lined up for me, that come to me – a piece at a time - as I pray.



MATTHEW 7 v 12

12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

1. LOVE FOR EACH OTHER STARTS WITH LOVE FROM GOD.

- ◆ Jesus' last command in the Sermon on the Mount is a rule-of-thumb command, also called 'the golden rule'. In it we learn six things about love.
- ◆ The word 'so' can also be translated 'therefore'. It tells us that the golden rule connects to what has gone before it. But what does it connect to? It connects to at least two things: **1) It connects to the entire Sermon on the Mount so far (from 5:3 to 7:11).** In this sense it summarizes the whole Sermon on the Mount. It is also the main implication of the entire sermon. **2) It connects to the verse immediately preceding it, which speaks of how loving our Father is towards us. This is evidenced by his giving good gifts to us.** Jesus is in effect saying, 'In light of the fact that the Father loves you by giving you good gifts, now love each other by giving each other what is good.' In other words, our love for each other starts with a revelation of God's love toward us. 'We love [each other] because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19).

2. LOVE APPLIES TO EVERY SITUATION AND RELATIONSHIP.

We are to apply the golden rule 'in everything'. Love is the imperative that guides how we treat every person, all the time. There are a thousand and one diverse and often-complicated situations that can be dealt with best by simply applying this golden rule. We can apply it in every situation and relationship in our lives: husband-wife, parent-child, brother-sister and employer-employee relationships for example. We can apply it in our treatment of our best friend and a perfect stranger. We are to love all people, all the time.

3. LOVE IS PRO-ACTIVE.

The Golden Rule was not invented by Jesus; it is found in many forms, and in highly diverse settings. About AD 20, Rabbi Hillel, challenged by a Gentile to summarize the law in the short time the Gentile could stand on one leg, reportedly responded, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.' (Shabbath 3a). 'Jesus took this saying, and phrased the rule positively' (Carson). 'In so doing, Jesus makes the command much broader. It is the difference between not breaking traffic laws and doing something positive like helping a stranded motorist' (Guzik). Love is more than just restraining ourselves from hurting others. Love is pro-actively doing good to others.

4. LOVE INVOLVES A HEALTHY SELF-RESPECT AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE.

- ◇ Elsewhere Jesus taught, 'Love one another as you love yourselves' – a one-liner very similar in meaning to the golden rule. The love of self that Jesus speaks about is not a reference to vanity and selfishness, but rather a healthy self-respect and self-knowledge.
- ◇ Make a list of how you like to be treated. It might sound like this: 'I enjoy it when people treat me warmly and respectfully; listen to what I have to say; forgive my faults, even though they could really rub my nose in my failure if they wanted to; make eye contact with me; apologize when they put me out; make an effort to get to know me; and ask me questions about my life. I don't like it when people are harsh to me, or dismissive of my perspective.' See what you have just done? You now have a better idea about how to love others. We are to channel self-concern into other-concern. I should assume that the same treatment I appreciate from others is the type of treatment I should extend to them. Self-knowledge and a healthy sense of self-respect should lead us to be more loving to others.

LOVE IS THOUGHTFUL AND SENSITIVE.

It takes time to try to see things from the other person's perspective. We stop and imagine how we would feel if we were them. We put ourselves in their shoes. We factor in their unique personality, culture and background. This requires thoughtfulness and empathy.

LOVE IS OF SUPREME VALUE.

When Jesus says, 'this sums up the Law and the Prophets', he means, 'the subject of love is the main direction of the entire Old Testament.' The fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden led to the breakdown and loss of love in all human relationships. But God, through the sending of the Messiah, has been moving the human race towards the restoration of broken relationships and of love.



PONDER

Do you think it is possible to love everyone you interact with in this way?



PRACTICE

Make a list of how you prefer to be treated and, in the next 24 hours, resolve to treat the people you live and work with in that way.



PRAY

God, help me to be more thoughtful about and sensitive to others.



WEEK 8

MATTHEW 7 v 13, 14

13 Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

THE MESSAGE SO FAR (5:1-7:12).

Jesus has challenged us to be transformed internally (5:1-12), to profoundly influence and impact society (5:13-16), to obey the Scriptures (5:17-20), to reach high standards of relational harmony, sexual purity, covenant faithfulness, honest speech and unconditional love (5:21-48). He has called us to devote ourselves to spiritual practices such as giving, prayer and spiritual disciplines in a way that pleases him, as opposed to a way that merely impresses people (6:1-18). He has called us to radically orientate our lives around things of eternal value so that we are completely free from worry and materialism (6:19-34). He has urged us to help people – both believers and unbelievers – in a way that is truly helpful, where we are free from any tendency to condemn (7:1-6). And, once again, he has strongly impressed upon us the need to pray and to love (7:7-11).

THE REST OF THE MESSAGE (7:13-27).

Remarkably, there are no commands about how to live. Rather Jesus now impresses upon us the danger that we could fail to live out the Sermon on the Mount because: 1) it appears to be restrictive (v13-14); 2) false teachers take us off track (v15-23); and 3) plain foolishness might make us disregard it (v24-27). In other words, the rest of the Message urges us to respond to Jesus' call to radical living.

THE PATH OF RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP APPEARS RESTRICTIVE, BUT ACTUALLY IT LEADS TO ABUNDANT LIFE.

- ◆ These verses speak of two gates (a narrow and wide one), which connect to two roads (a narrow and broad one), which ultimately lead to two destinations (life or destruction). There are also two crowds, depending on which gate and road is chosen.
- ◆ This verse is commonly taken out of context. Jesus is speaking to those who **already believe in him - his disciples (5:1)**. He tells his disciples to enter the narrow gate, and to avoid the wide gate. When we forget this, we tend to misread it to mean that Christians go through the narrow gate, and non-Christians go through the wide gate. No, Jesus is urging **disciples** to choose the narrow gate rather than the wide.

- ◆ Once we put our faith in Christ we are wonderfully saved. But then we need to embrace the path of **discipleship**. Just because we are saved, and 'under God's grace' doesn't mean we will inevitably make the best life decisions. As saved disciples, we have a choice to make - one that needs to be made every day. This is the choice to enter the narrow gate of fully devoted discipleship to Jesus, and live a life that takes seriously Jesus' Message on the Mount.
- ◆ The call to radical living in the Message on the Mount is a consuming call. It calls for whole-hearted devotion to Jesus, and submission to his leadership and wisdom. It cuts across the so-called wisdom of our age. It cuts across the culture of comfort, ease and convenience that we find ourselves in.
- ◆ Sadly, many of us will opt for the way of half-hearted discipleship, which is apparently easier than whole-hearted devotion. For example, instead of praying, 'I willingly and joyfully surrender my dreams and plans if need be as I follow you' we pray, 'God, here are my plans and dreams: please bless them.' We take the easy way. It's a way that requires little focus, discipline, passion, courage and change.
- ◆ As narrow and apparently restrictive as Jesus' call to radical living is, it 'leads to life'. Eaton explains that this means that it leads to 'liveliness toward God, joy, energy in serving God, a sense of destiny, a knowledge that the future holds nothing but good'. Devastatingly, the apparently easy way of half-hearted or hard-hearted discipleship leads to 'destruction'. Eaton argues that this is not a reference to eternal damnation, but rather to such things as a life of regret, a life of wasted potential, a life that ultimately leads to pain and loss, a forfeiting of all that God wanted us to achieve and receive, and a loss of reward in this life and the next. It includes discipline and punishment for compromise. Much better to choose the narrow gate – it may seem restrictive, but actually it is the path of abundant blessing!

✎ PONDER Would you say that you're a 'narrow-gate' or a 'wide-gate' disciple of Jesus?

✎ PRACTICE Spend some time just letting God's Spirit apply these verses to your life. Maybe write down what thoughts come into your mind as you do this.

✎ PRAY Thank you God that the obedient life is the abundant life.

 MATTHEW 7 v 15 - 20

15 Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

WATCH OUT FOR FALSE PROPHETS.

- ◆ A Christ-follower is someone who, having put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, now gives themselves to his teachings and authority. He or she is someone who takes seriously the teachings and perspectives of the Sermon on the Mount. But the devil will conspire to get us off this path. One major way he does this is **by sending false teachers and prophets**, who will entice us to take the wide gate, not the narrow gate.
- ◆ False prophets and teachers come 'in sheep's clothing' – meaning that many Christians are deceived by appearances. Qualities like charm, warmth of personality, strength of conviction, apparent scholarship, powers, qualifications or popularity (as attractive as any of these are) do not make a person a **true** prophet or teacher. Today, we need to exercise discernment. Externals like the ones listed above don't mean anything.
- ◆ In reality, false teachers are 'ferocious wolves'. Although they may appear as harmless as a sheep (i.e. a fellow disciple), they aren't what they seem. They have the potential to inflict serious damage upon our faith, our relationship with Christ, the unity of our spiritual community, more vulnerable Christians, and our salt-and-light-influence in the world. In fact, the early centuries of the church are a case study in just how much damage can be done by false teachers and prophets who, appearing to be sent by God, in reality turned out to be sent by the devil.
- ◆ More now than ever before, the church is in danger of people who present teachings that seem attractive, and may even at first seem compatible with our faith. But upon closer inspection, their teachings and spiritual claims contradict the essence of our faith. These false prophets may come in the form of a long-standing member or a leader in the church, a popular author, a loved rock star who turns into a spiritual guide, the latest teaching to hit the Christian book-stores, the latest so-called Christian leader who moves powerfully in signs and wonders, a million-hit youtube video or podcast communicator, a talk show host or a friendly, intelligent and likeable person in a cult-church knocking on our door, and so much more. Appearances are deceiving. And lack of discernment leaves us vulnerable to being devoured.

YOU CAN TELL WHETHER A PERSON IS REALLY SENT BY GOD BY THE QUALITY OF THEIR LIFE AND THE CONTENT OF THEIR TEACHING.

- ◆ **Although false prophets may initially deceive us, eventually what they really are will become evident.** We will see it by their fruit (v16). From a distance a thorn bush with berries may appear to be a grapevine with grapes, yet soon enough we realize this isn't so. From a distance, the flowers on a thistle may appear to be figs, but upon closer inspection the error becomes clear (v16). In the same way the fruit reveals the kind of fruit tree, so the quality of a person's fruit tells us who that person really is.
- ◆ **The fruit of a person is the level of their godliness, and the content of their beliefs or teaching.** 'We should pay attention to the **manner of living** a teacher shows. Do they show righteousness, humility and faithfulness in the way they live? We should pay attention to the content of their teaching. Is it true fruit from God's Word, or is it man-centered, appealing to ears that want to be tickled?' (Guzik). Unlike Timothy who sought to spiritually lead people by paying careful attention to both the quality of his own life and the content of his teaching (see 1 Tim 4:16), false prophets will fail in these two regards. They may not be bad people through and through, but they will lack 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal 5:22-23). In their teaching, they will ignore or undermine the gospel, which centers on the person and work of Jesus. They will hold up alternative 'hopes' such as salvation by works, or the accumulation of wealth or the pursuit of self-fulfillment.
- ◆ **We are to exercise great discernment in evaluating the lives and doctrine of people who seek to spiritually influence our lives.** Twice Jesus tells us that we are to recognize who they really are – 'By their fruit you will recognize them' (v16, 20). We must walk right past the false prophet as they try to dissuade us from taking the narrow gate. Though they urge us to take the wide gate with the false promise that it leads to life, we are to ignore their claim entirely – and help others to do the same. They may have some success in influencing many people. Nevertheless, they are under God's judgment. They will 'be cut down and thrown into the fire' (v19). 'The only thing bad trees are good for is firewood - a striking metaphor of the future judgment for false prophets' (Wilson).



PONDER

Have you ever experienced the sway of a false teacher or prophet?



PRACTICE

In the next 24 hours, look for all the 'messages' coming through whatever media you are exposed to, that deflect you from the narrow gate of discipleship toward Jesus.



PRAY

God, help me to discern false prophets and teachers when I am exposed to them.

MATTHEW 7 v 21 - 23

21 Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

THESE VERSES DO NOT TEACH WHAT PEOPLE COMMONLY THINK THEY DO.

◆ We wrongly read it to mean that though we think we are saved, really we might not be – because we fail to do the will of God (v21), we never really knew Jesus (v23), and we were full of compromise (i.e. 'evildoers') (v23). **When we read it this way, we think Jesus is telling us to look for assurance of our salvation by evaluating our degree of godliness.** Although it's possible to think that we're saved, when we aren't, this text doesn't deal with this theme at all. Let me explain why. There are two great problems with that line of interpretation...

1) **Jesus is not speaking about disciples at all, but rather about false prophets.** The entire sermon has been addressed to the disciples. Jesus has been speaking to disciples directly, saying 'you' (e.g. 5:13-16) and talking in the imperative (e.g. 'enter the narrow gate' which means 'you must enter the narrow gate'). But in these verses he speaks about 'them' (v23) and not 'you'. Who is he referring to? **The context makes it clear: it's the false prophets (v15-20).** Jesus has not changed the subject matter: **He is merely continuing the important subject of false prophets.**

2) **The rest of Scripture reveals that assurance of salvation does not come by evaluating one's degree of godliness, but rather by evaluating one's object of faith.** It's true that we should ask ourselves whether we really are saved. And we should evaluate our works, to see if they are godly or ungodly. But Eaton reminds us that **it's a common heresy to try to detect one's salvation by looking at one's works.** For example, just think of the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14. He did just this and was wrong. He prayed, fasted, tithed, avoided sin and evil, and yet was not accepted by God! Compare him with the tax collector who, admitting his sinfulness, threw himself upon the mercy of God. He looked to God's mercy and not his own righteousness – and that's how he was accepted. Salvation is a matter of throwing ourselves upon Jesus' mercy. Of course salvation should then result in a progressively (but not perfectly) changed life. The problem is that if we look to our degree of godliness for assurance of salvation, then we will never know if we really are saved, because we all still struggle to overcome the pull of the sinful nature in some aspects of our lives. No, assurance comes not from looking to myself, but to Jesus – who lived the life I should have lived, and died the death I should have died.

◆ Sadly, if I misinterpret these verses I end up looking to the wrong place for assurance – to my record of deeds, not Jesus' record of deeds and sacrificial death. My faithfulness to Jesus is checkered, but his faithfulness to me is faultless.

FALSE PROPHETS WILL BE SENT TO A CHRIST-LESS ETERNITY.

Jesus is warning his disciples about the danger of being led astray by false prophets from the narrow road to Jesus and to faith in the gospel (v15-20). Now he tells us more about false prophets in these verses:

- ◆ **They may be spiritually fervent people.** This is seen in the repetition, 'Lord, Lord' (v21).
- ◆ **They may have a respect for Jesus, but they have not put their faith in him as their Lord and Saviour.** The word 'Lord' doesn't always mean 'God' but can also be taken to mean the equivalent of 'Sir' or 'Ruler'. This seems to be the use here. Just think of the popular 'New-Agey' false teachers who (mis)quote Jesus in their teachings.
- ◆ **They may have supernatural powers.** They may prophesy, drive out demons in Jesus' name and do miracles (v22). Matt 24:24, Acts 19:13 and 1 Cor 13:1-3 are more examples of false prophets operating in supernatural power. Admittedly, it is perplexing how false prophets move in such power. 'It is quite clear that a person does not need to have to be saved in order to speak for God. Balaam's donkey should be proof of that! God may use an unbeliever. The devil can produce imitations. And some people seem to have certain unusual powers as part of ordinary human nature. Certainly, one should not make great deductions about anyone's authenticity just because of any apparent powers he or she may have' (Eaton).
- ◆ **Despite their fervency, respect for Jesus and their powers, false prophets will experience Jesus' final judgment.** Ultimately they failed to know Jesus as he really is (v23) and therefore failed to experience his transforming grace (v21,23). They will be sent to a Christ-less eternity. 'Depart from me,' Jesus will say. The truth of their condition will be seen on that day.
- ◆ **Interestingly, Jesus himself is the Judge.** He claims to be the One before all false prophets and teachers will stand one day. Many people say that the Sermon on the Mount proves that Jesus was merely a moral teacher and not the Son of God, but they fail to see the many references (such as 5:17 and 7:21-23) that show he was so much more.

POUNDER Where do you find your assurance of salvation?

PRACTICE Again, in the next 24 hours, be on the look out for the false messages and false teachers who try to dissuade you from following Jesus whole-heartedly.

PRAY Thank you Jesus for your gift of salvation. I come as a sinner trusting in your mercy. I look to your perfect life, sacrificial death and bodily resurrection for my salvation.



THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

MATTHEW 7 v 24 - 27

24 Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. 26 But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

BUILD YOUR LIFE UPON ETERNAL VALUES; NOT TEMPORAL ONES.

- ◆ **We're building something with our lives.** Each of us spends our time, our money, our energy and our thoughts building a life for ourselves. We hope to achieve something with our lives. We hope that as our lives progress we become increasingly secure and stable. The question is, 'What foundation are we building upon?'
- ◆ **Everyone consciously or unconsciously builds their life upon some convictions about the world in which we live.** In Jesus' parable one man builds upon the foundation of sand, and the other the foundation of rock. Our ideas about reality impact the way we live and the way we build our lives. Some people build upon the sand of temporary values. They build their lives upon a central conviction such as: 'What matters most is money, or happiness, or my reputation, or success in my career; or my children, family, education, attractiveness, adventures, or the experience of pleasure.' That's building on sand. It's much better to build upon the rock of eternal values, where our central conviction is 'What matters most is my love for and my faith in Jesus Christ, and my whole-hearted, joyful obedience to him and his teachings'. We should stop and evaluate our foundations.
- ◆ **When storms are absent and circumstances are benevolent, the difference between a person building their life on temporal values (sand) and eternal values (rock) is not immediately obvious.** Both houses seem to stand. In fact the person building their life on the sand has an easier job. The person building on the rock of eternal values needs to give much thought and focus to their ways. The person building on the sand of temporal values may even build a more impressive house, outwardly at least, simply because they worry so little about what's below the surface, while the person building on the rock of eternal values is absorbed with unseen foundations.
- ◆ **But, eventually all is revealed when storms come.** The rains of adversity hit the roof. The winds of calamity blast against the walls. The floods erode the foundations. Then what we have built upon – sand or rock – becomes the most prominent dimension to our house. The house upon the sand will collapse, but the one upon the rock will endure. **There are the storms of life, but Jesus is likely also referring to the storm of Judgment Day.** That is the mother of all storms. We will stand before God and our whole lives - how we lived, and what

we built our lives upon - will be evaluated by God himself. The life built upon sand will come crashing down under God's disapproval. The house upon rock will stand – receiving God's commendation.

- ◆ **Is Jesus speaking to Christians or non-Christians here?** The answer is probably both. Although this Message (chapters 5-7) has been directed at disciples / Christians, there is reason to believe that, especially the end part, it is also directed at those who have yet to put their faith in Jesus. Throughout the sermon Jesus addressed 'you' (i.e. disciples 5:1). Then in 7:15-23 he spoke of 'them' (i.e. false prophets). Now he speaks to 'everyone' (v24). It seems that, although the message was primarily for his disciples, some crowds started to gather around the edges (7:28). Therefore, Jesus is probably addressing the disciples plus curious onlookers by this part of the message. In this case, the person building their house upon sand can refer both to someone who has not trusted in Jesus, as well as someone who has trusted in Jesus but nonetheless has not built their lives upon him and his eternal values.

PUT THE MESSAGE ON THE MOUNTAIN INTO PRACTICE.

- ◆ Both the man building his house on sand, and the one building his house on the rock have had exposure to Jesus' Message on the Mountain. Jesus says of both that they have heard these words of his (v24, 26), but only one puts them into practice.
 - 1) We need to actually retain Jesus' words.** If we hear and then simply forget his words, they will have no effect on us. For example, it's no good reading our Bible in the morning – hearing Jesus speak to us about our day – and then giving no thought to his words throughout the day.
 - 2) We need to actually put into practice his words.** They need to result in some kind of life change, even if it's a very small degree of change. It's one thing being informed by Jesus, but it's another thing to be transformed by him. Scarily, we sometimes feel moved by sermons or times of Bible reading, and then think that's all that matters - being moved. But feeling moved is not what matters. Actually **moving** is what matters. Feeling stirred is not enough. The stirring must translate into some kind of life change. Our thought patterns need to change. Our beliefs need to change. Our lifestyles need to change. Our habits need to change. It's not enough to hear Jesus' words. We need to apply them.



PONDER

What foundational convictions are you building your life upon?



PRACTICE

In the next 24 hours, what will you do to keep in your mind this simple teaching of Jesus? Is there a way of reminding yourself of it, so that you can reflect on it?



PRAY

God, I choose to build my life on rock, not sand. Please help me.

 **MATTHEW 7 v 28 - 8 v 1**

28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, **29** because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. **8:1** And when he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him.

JESUS AND HIS TEACHING ARE AMAZING.

- ◆ Why were the people amazed at Jesus' teaching? What drew people to him?
- ◆ **The content of his teaching is amazing.** It's a call to radical living. He taught on qualities to be congratulated (5:1-12), the call to courageous influence (5:13-16), love for the Scriptures (5:17-20), radical love (5:21-48), devotion before the audience of One (6:1-18), pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24), overcoming anxiety about the future and the preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-35), how **not** to try help each other change (7:1-6), encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12), and then he brought his Message to a close by urging us to respond to his call to radical living, with warnings included for if we fail to respond appropriately (7:13-29). What an amazing message!
- ◆ **The way the pictures and themes of his teaching connect with our everyday life is amazing.** He speaks of salt, light, pens, brothers, pennies, courts, prisons, fire, eyes, hands, knives, legal documents, thrones, footstools, hair, teeth, tunics, sun, rain, trumpets, religious buildings, doors, rooms, perfume, faces, moth, rust, thieves, treasure, masters, money, food, drink, clothing, birds, flowers, fields, specks, planks, dogs, pigs, fathers, gifts, bread, stones, fish, snakes, gates, roads, sheep, wolves, grapes, figs, trees, houses, sand, rock, storms, rains, winds, floods and more! And he speaks of such relevant life themes: blessing, persecution, hunger for what's right, significance, courage, obedience, the Scriptures, teaching others, conflict resolution, reconciliation, adultery, sexual purity, lust, divorce, remarriage, marital faithfulness, the use of speech, the tendencies to exaggerate and manipulate with words, integrity, revenge, responding to attack, forgiveness, motives for doing good deeds, the danger of pursuing a respectable reputation, prayer, submission, temptation, the devil, reward, appetite-denying disciplines, goals, priorities, money, materialism, anxiety about the future, satisfaction and pleasure, future security, fashion and image, passions of the heart, condemnation, self-amendment, hypocrisy, tact, faith, the golden rule, decision-making, false prophets and whole-life orientation.
- ◆ **The sheer authority and boldness with which he teaches is amazing.** Unlike the rabbis of Jesus' day, Jesus didn't quote other rabbis. They would tend to say 'Rabbi So-and-so said this'. But Jesus keeps on using the refrain, 'You have heard it said, but I tell you ...'. He was so direct, and so sure. He did not just share information gleaned from study, but revelation received from heaven. The Holy Spirit supernaturally empowered his preaching, giving boldness and wisdom to him as he spoke, as well as cutting listeners to the heart. People could feel this message was from heaven. Their main astonishment was at his manner: there was a certainty, a power, a weight about it, such as they had never seen' (Spurgeon).

- ◆ **The way Jesus seemed to embody the very teachings he brought is amazing.** Jesus literally practiced what he preached. In all the records we have of Jesus, not once do we see his lifestyle in anyway contradicting the radical living he speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount. He lived what he taught, and taught what he lived.
- ◆ **Most importantly, the way the sermon is about Jesus is amazing.** Although many people think that the Message shows that Jesus was merely a moral teacher, and not the unique Son of God, a closer look reveals that this is entirely incorrect. In fact Jesus calls us to trust and follow Jesus before it calls us to trust and follow his teachings. It is not just a call to radical living. It's a call to faith in a radical Saviour. Just think about it: He speaks confidently about what people need to see God (5:8). There is no doubt in him at all. He says there is blessing for those who are persecuted 'on account of' him (5:11). He says 'I have come to fulfill the Scriptures' (5:17). 'Come' from where? It means 'come into this world on a mission from heaven'. And he claims to be the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament. He tells people to live their lives by his commands (5:21-48). He claims to be the final judge of false prophets, deciding the eternal destiny of people (7:21-23). He tells us that the only way to live an indestructible life, and to remain standing at the great judgment is to base our lives on his teaching (7:24).
- ◆ A person who is first exposed to this Message should ask, 'Who does Jesus think he is?' C.S. Lewis comments well on this question in his book, *Mere Christianity*: 'I am trying to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else He would be the devil. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to do so.


PONDER

What has the most amazing part of this journey been? What changes, if any, have you noticed in your life?


PRACTICE

Decide when you will re-read this 40 day devotion again.


PRAY

Thank you that there's no pressure to be **amazing**. Rather, there is the privilege of being amazed. I'm amazed by you.