

Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5-7

Growth Group Bible Studies

Study 1: Matthew 5:1-12 'Truly Blessed'

Big idea: The Beatitudes; God's Kingdom is for All People, Not Just the Religiously Inclined

Icebreaker

- Define #blessed

- How does our world understand blessings and how we receive them?

Observation

- Matthew 5:1 tells us that Jesus 'saw the crowds' and 'went up on a mountainside' and began to teach the disciples. What might Matthew be wanting to draw our attention to here?
 - The location (a mountainside) might bring to mind Moses being given the 10 Commandments on Mt. Sinai.
 - The audience might help us to understand that Jesus is teaching his followers here, not just a bunch of random people.

- Read through each of the Beatitudes. Which ones stand out to each member of the group? Do any of them strike you as a strange or intriguing?

- It might help to note that the first four refer to 'internal' characteristics, and the last four refer to 'relational' characteristics.

Interpretation:

(Note: this question could be done as an activity. Split your group up so that each person or pair takes on a verse or two and answers the two questions listed. Come back together after some time and work through them together sharing answers.)

- *'Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'*- How is it possible to be both poor in spirit and blessed at the same time? What does 'poor in spirit' mean?
- *'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted'*- How might you interpret this verse? What comfort is offered to those who mourn?
- *'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth'*- What does it mean to be meek? What does it mean to inherit the earth?
- *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled'* - What does it look like to hunger and thirst for righteousness? In what way will they be 'filled'? What might we be tempted in this world to hunger and thirst for instead?
- *'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy'*- What is mercy, and how is it different from grace? What mercy have we already received?
- *'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God'*- How can we be pure of heart? What does it mean to 'see' God?
- *'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called Sons of God'*- What is a peace maker? Why would this have been significant for the time? What would it look like today?
- *'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'* – Is the kingdom of heaven limited to those who are persecuted?
- *'Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account'*- Knowing that blessing can come from persecution, should we seek this treatment out?

Some general questions on these verses:

How would a community characterised by these things relate to the wider world?

In what ways might we differ from or appeal to others?

When do we receive these blessings? Is there any indication in the passage?

What does it reveal about God that he blesses these things?

Application:

- How might we be able to use these beatitudes to encourage one another?
 - How might they encourage those working in areas of justice? How might they encourage those trying to make peace?
- How would you redefine #blessed?
- In what area of your life do you think you might experience blessing, where previously it seemed like trouble?
- What conscious choices will you need to make in order to be characterised by these qualities? What things will you need to give up?
 - E.g. Someone working in a dog-eat-dog environment might need to rethink how they seek to advance in their workplace.
 - E.g. Someone who doesn't mourn because they prefer to focus on their own pleasure will need to give that up.

Study 2: Matthew 5:13-20 'True Fulfilment'

Big idea: Christ Is the Fulfilment of The Law, & This Is News Worth Sharing

Icebreaker

- What did your version of a 'good person' look like when you were growing up?

- What does the world see as a good person?

Read Matthew 5:13-20

- Jesus has just started teaching, beginning with the Beatitudes. Then he moves on to the section we're studying today. Why might this teaching come at this point in the sermon?

Salt and light 5:13-16

- How does Jesus describe his followers in verses 13-16?

- What might the metaphor of salt have meant to the people of the time?
 - Not everyone agrees on what the 'salt' reference might have meant but the most likely interpretation is that salt acted as both a flavour enhancer and a food preserver (before the days of fridges).

Study 3: Matthew 5:17-48 'Truly Perfect'

Big idea: Jesus is the perfect fulfilment of the law. Jesus' teaching challenges us to get to the heart of sin.

Leaders' notes

This section is all on one theme, and it's important that its sections should not be interpreted in isolation from each other. The theme is Jesus' fulfilment of the law, which is expressed by general statements (17-20) followed by a series of six examples contrasting Jesus' teaching with the accepted understanding of the Old Testament law (21-47) (Taken from: Carson *et al*, 1994)

These passages might also be helpful to answer some of the questions: Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 10:14. Divorce – see Matthew 19:3-12

Ice breaker

Have you ever been made to follow a rule or a law that you didn't understand the reasons for? Give an example.

Observation

Read through verses 21-48, noticing repeated words or phrases. What is being repeated in this passage?

One of the repeated phrases is 'you have heard that it was said' (v. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Where would the audience have heard these things before?

Read Exodus 20:1-17. How does Jesus' teaching on the Ten Commandments in Matthew compare to their original teaching in Exodus?

What is Jesus doing when he says 'but I say to you'? How is his teaching different from what they have heard said?

Jesus covers a lot of ground in this passage. How do all of the topics and sections fit together?

Hint: Think about how verses 17-20 (especially v. 20) provide the context for the following teaching.

Interpretation

General questions about the passage:

Looking at each of the sections in this passage, how does Jesus' teaching challenge his hearers' understanding of the Ten Commandments?

What does this reveal about Jesus' attitude towards sin?
For example, it might help to re-read one of the sections like verses 27-30. What attitude towards sin does he reveal there?

Questions about the various subsections:

Jesus gives some pretty extreme examples of how we are to respond to sin. (Cutting off hands, slapping of cheeks). Are we supposed to take these literally? What might Jesus be instructing here?

Hint: Jesus is challenging his listeners on the seriousness of sin, and getting to the root, or the heart of sin.

What would be an equivalent to an oath today?

Jesus says in verse 20 that only the righteous will enter the kingdom of heaven. And he has set a high bar for righteousness in verses 21-48. How then is it possible that he could say in Matthew 9:10-12 that the unrighteous (tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners) enter the kingdom of heaven?

Application

In this passage, Jesus highlights both the importance and the impossibility of following these commands. What comfort is there knowing that we constantly fall short of God's standards?

How does Jesus' life, death and resurrection make up for our failure to follow each of the commands given?

Take one aspect of his teaching here and discuss the ways in which Jesus did what we have failed to do, and how his death makes up for our failure. For example, Jesus teaches us that we must love our enemies. Yet we often fail even to love those close to us. But Jesus loved his enemies so much that he died for them. And because he died for us, his enemies, our failures to love our enemies are atoned for.

Another example: Jesus teaches against adultery here. In his own life, Jesus was offered the opportunity to compete with God for worship (see Matthew 4:10) but remained faithful to God.

What is your reaction to these teachings? Do you find these challenging or encouraging? Why?

When you think about other commands you find difficult to obey, how might Jesus' pointing us to the heart of the teaching here help you?

Depending on your group, you might decide to answer this question as a group, offer a time for reflection or to think about it privately

Suggestions for prayer

Praise God for Jesus' sacrifice and that although we constantly fall short, that we have been made perfect in Jesus

Pray for the things that each group member needs to repent of

Study 4: Matthew 6:1-8 'Truly Righteous'

Icebreaker

How do you like to pray?

Think of where, when, how long, to who and what you pray about.

Recap

(This section is optional. Do it if you feel like your group would benefit from a recap).

What has Jesus taught so far during his Sermon on the Mount?

Chapter 5:

- The Beatitudes - outlining who is really righteous in God's eyes
- How the righteous are called to live
(in terms of relationships, anger, adultery, truthfulness, revenge & love)

Chapter 6:

- Motives for giving to the needy

Observation

Take a look at the structure of v 1-8. Make a list of any repeated words, phrases or concepts. What value do these add to the passage?

Once your group has looked at these words and phrases, discuss what they have observed.

Here are some questions that might help you:

- *Where do you see Jesus comparing and contrasting between groups in this passage?*
- *What critiques do you see Jesus making of each group's prayer?*
- *How do the different comparisons and contrasts relate to one another?
(Note verse 1 seems to act as a summary of Jesus' teaching, which is then explained in further detail in regards to various groups).*

Who do you think Jesus speaks of when he mentions “hypocrites”? Why would they be called this?

Hint: See verse Matthew 23:1-7 - Warning Against Hypocrisy for a description of the scribes and Pharisees.

Note: It might help your group to know that in Jesus’ day, hypocrites were actors, who often wore masks, i.e. 2 face.

How do the pagans like to pray?

Why do you think Jesus makes a point to refer to giving and praying in the streets and the synagogues separately? How might the people in each context view the hypocrites giving/prayer?

*Hint: Streets - the rest of the community [irreligious / other religious]
Synagogues - the religious community*

Jesus tells us that we shouldn’t pray like the hypocrites. What reason does it give?

Does this mean we can’t pray in front of others?

Hint: think of the heart

Notes: Hypocrites - pray with the aim of others seeing

Pagans - praying long prayers with aim of being better heard

Why? Jesus is critiquing their motives for prayer

Where do we think the temptation to practice righteousness or spiritual practices in front of others comes from?

Can you think of a time in which praying in front of front of others would be appropriate and good to do? Do these align with Jesus' teaching in the passage?

What alternative ways to pray does Jesus provide? Think of where, when, and how long to pray.

What reason does Jesus provide as to us not needing vain repetitions of prayers?

Thinking about our own context, in what ways might we operate like the pagans and hypocrites? What are our forms of hypocrisy? How might we repent of those?

What does it mean that our father will see what is done in secret and will reward us? What is this reward that Jesus is speaking of? How does this compare with receiving our reward in full now? (See v. 5)

What might be the value of prayer, given that "your Father knows what you need before you ask him"?

How does praying to YOUR FATHER, WHO IS UNSEEN impact the way we approach prayer? How is this different from the faith of the Pharisees or the Gentiles?

How does our view of God play out in these struggles to give generously and pray with the correct motivations?

Hint: View of God as a perfect provider

Study 5: Matthew 6:9-15 The Lord's Prayer

Icebreaker

What has been your experience of prayer? (Hard, easy, confusing?)

Observation

How would you describe this prayer?

Hint: Some things your group might note are its relative brevity and straightforwardness, though there will be other characteristics to note as well!

Why do you think Jesus instructs us to pray like this?

Hint: Remember the preceding verses.

Do you think this is the only way that we should pray?

How many petitions does Jesus give? What do you notice about their order?

Interpretation

This section of the study is structured as a practical activity which aims to help the members of your group draw out the themes and principles of the Lord's prayer by breaking it down into sections.

It might be helpful to get the members of your group to break up into twos or threes and each tackle a certain segment, and then come back together to complete the table.

Given in the table is a guide of the types of answers that you should look for, but it is not exhaustive. Feel free to add and expand on the sections as you see fit. You might not want to answer every question listed – these are just a guide of some questions that might come up.

You might not want to do this as an activity, in which case you might prefer to just ask a question which draws out the themes for the group, and then ask some questions on each.

Section	Theme	What does this teach us about God or prayer	Questions
Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name	Praise and worship	A uniquely intimate relationship with God ('Father') is balanced with proper reverence ('hallowed')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is significant about praying 'Our Father?' - What does hallowed mean?
Your kingdom come,	God's Glory	Pray for the coming of God's kingdom more fully	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does 'Your Kingdom come' mean?
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven	God's will	We should pray for the spreading of God's kingdom and the doing of his will	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is helpful about grounding our prayers in God's will?
Give us today our daily bread	Provide for us	God provides for us	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does bread refer to? - Why has Jesus specified daily bread? (remember the manna in the wilderness of Exodus 16) - Do you think this is a spiritual or physical need?
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors	Forgive us		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is God's forgiveness of us dependant on our forgiving those who have wronged us? - Is there someone who you harbour resentment or bitterness towards? How do you think God views this?
And lead us not in temptation, but deliver us from the evil one	Deliver us		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is impossible for God to tempt us with evil. How else would you describe this verse? - What does 'deliver us from the evil one' mean?

The Bible also tells us that trials are good for us (James 1:2). How should we interpret verse 13 of the Lord's prayer in light of this? (James 1:13-15 might help)

In the Lord's prayer, the focus is all about God. How does this differ from the prayers of the Pharisees and the Gentile pagans?

Application

Why is it that we can start our prayers with "Our Father?" (Romans 8:15)

What danger is there in reciting prayers and not praying for other things or in other ways?

What does the Lord's prayer model to us as what we should focus on in our prayers?

How might this example or prayer help inform our prayers?

Suggestion for prayer

Pray the Lords' Prayer. Break it up into sections and add prayers which expand on the theme of each section.

Study 6: Matthew 6:19-24 'God & Money'

Some observations about the passage for leaders:

This passage is all about what attitude believers should have towards money/ possessions. It can be seen to break into 3 sections: vv. 19-21, vv. 22-3, and v. 24. Each section makes a comparison between two options, with one of the options clearly being presented as the better and necessary choice.

The first section, verses 19-21, compares two locations for placing our treasure, and argues for the superiority of the second: if our treasures are in heaven they are much more secure. The third section, verse 24, places before us a choice of two masters: God, or money. At first glance, verses 22-23 are hard to make sense of, but the fact that it is sandwiched between sections 1 and 3, and that it also makes a comparison between two options, helps us to see that Jesus is keeping to this theme of our attitudes towards money and possessions all the way through.

Throughout this study, you'll see 'notes for leaders'. This is information which is intended to help give you guidance where a question might be ambiguous, or provide background information which might be helpful if your group's discussion goes in that direction. It's not intended to be read out to the group, unless you think it would be helpful for them!

So far in chapter 6, Jesus has taught his disciples that when we do good, with the hope of pleasing God (rather than impressing people) we can anticipate God's reward. How might this context help us to understand verses 19-24?

Note for leaders: It might help to remember that verses 1, 2, 5, 16 of chapter 6 tell us the kind of reward we shouldn't seek, and that verses 4 and 18 - the last verse before our passage - tells us the reward we should seek.

When we get to our passage, we see that Jesus is instructing us to value this reward we get from our Father, above any other 'reward' we might get on earth. In a sense, this does three things: it reinforces Jesus' teaching from earlier in the chapter; it expands it, giving us further reasons to value reward from God over reward on earth; and it applies it to a particularly important issue – how we deal with money.

Verses 19-21

What reasons does Jesus give for not storing up treasures for ourselves on earth?

What threats to them does he outline?

Note for leaders: See Joel 1:4, 10-12 and Proverbs 23:4-5 for similar language.

Lots of things might threaten treasures (for example, something dramatic like a fire or a flood). What does Jesus' use of 'moth and vermin' add to the picture of the vulnerability of our treasures?

Note for leaders: Jesus might have picked moths as the first threat because their small size and fragility underscores how little it takes to destroy our treasures, hence how vulnerable they are. As Charles Quarles points out in his book 'Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church', a moth is 'a tiny creature that any little child could crush even with her smallest finger.' page 236.

See Job 4:18-19 for moths as an example of weakness.

What makes storing up treasures in heaven better?

What does it look like to store up treasures in heaven?

Note for leaders: To help answer this, have your group break into smaller groups and look up one or two of the following passages each

Matthew 5:11-12, 5:46,

Matthew 6:4, 6:18 and 10:41-42,

1 Timothy 6:18-19

It might also help to look at Matthew 19:29 and 25:14-30 for more on the heavenly reward. However, it's important to note that Jesus doesn't say exactly what this reward is – only that it is coming to those who lay up treasures in heaven.

What attitude or behaviour changes do we need to make so that we are not storing up treasures for ourselves on earth?

What further clarification might verse 21 make about what 'treasure' actually is?

Note for leaders: What this verse seems to indicate is that treasure is what is most valuable to you not what is most valuable per se. Or put another way, it is what you value most, not what is most valuable. The distinction is important because it highlights that the key determining factor is our hearts.

More information on 'hearts': for a Jewish audience, the heart was the centre of spiritual, moral, and emotional life. It was the foundation of thoughts, decisions and priorities.

See Matthew 5:28 and 15:18-19 for other places where Jesus teaches about our heart.

See Deut. 6:5 for why it is that our hearts should be devoted wholly and solely to God.

Verse 24

Charles Quarles (yes, that is his name) says of this verse: 'materialism is such a serious form of idolatry that it is absolutely incompatible with genuine discipleship.' Do you think he is correct?

Jesus is not so much comparing two masters, as presenting us with a choice between them. Why is it not possible to serve both?

When you think about your own life, can you point to the ways that you see that serving God requires you not to serve money, or vice versa?

Verses 22-23

What seems to be the connecting thread/theme between verses 19-21 and verse 24? How might that help us to understand verses 22-23?

These verses tend to be fairly confusing at first sight. Try to think imaginatively: how might an eye being healthy lead to health for the whole body?

How might this relate to the issue of our attitude and behaviour in regards to money and possessions?

Note for leaders: What follows is John Stott's interpretation of the passage (paraphrased, from p. 157 of The Message of the Sermon on the Mount).

Again, Jesus refers us to see the powerful impact of a small thing – this time an eye. When we see well, it enables us to do lots of other things well (cycling, writing, eating, etc.).¹ In that sense, when our eye is healthy, it leads to health in other parts of our life.

Eyes, like hearts, were understood by Jewish audiences to refer to our priorities. See for example Psalm 119:10, 19 for both heart and eye references.

When you note that Jesus is continuing his pattern of comparing two things, with one obviously to be preferred, you see that this chunk fits in with the other two – it seems to be pointing us to the matter of our priorities. If our priority in regards to money is skewed, it will skew a bunch of other things in our life.

Conversely, if we prioritise the kingdom of God (as Jesus will go on to tell us to do in Matthew 6:31-33), that will entail the right ordering of our other priorities too.

What is it about money and possessions that makes them such a powerful distraction/idol?

All the way through Jesus is presenting his disciples with two options for how they think/feel/behave in regards to money and possession, with one clearly being presented as the superior choice. Which one are you choosing?

If you asked someone who knew you well, which choice would they say you have made? If you don't have anyone who knows enough about the choices you're making in regards to money and possessions, how can you change that?

¹ Though, of course, lots of people with vision impairments manage incredibly well, it remains true that they have done so by making adjustments that a person without vision impairments does not have to make.

Study 7: Matthew 6:25-34 'True Peace'

In this passage Jesus forbids his audience from worry, reminding them that God will provide for their every need. He makes references to God's provision in nature (v26, v28), noting how much more He will provide for us, his children. Instead of worry, Jesus urges his audience to seek God's kingdom and righteousness (v33), claiming that when they do so all basic needs will be met. Importantly, there is a final reminder that life will not be trouble free, but instead that God will provide in times of hardship and difficulty.

Ice Breaker

- What are the things that you worry about most in your life?

Observation & Interpretation

Who is Jesus addressing in this passage?

What are the things that Jesus tells us not to worry about?

What references to nature does Jesus make? What would be the significance of these things to Jesus' original audience?

Who is Solomon (v29)? What is the purpose of Jesus mentioning him in this passage?

- It might be helpful to read 1 Kings 10:18-25 if your group is not familiar with the story of Solomon; to the original audience this reference would've required no explanation.

Why does Jesus command us not to worry?

Why has Jesus chosen to address the idea of peace and being free from worry, immediately after teaching on money/storing up treasures on earth?

What final reminder does Jesus give in verse 34? Is this contradictory to what Jesus has just taught? How might you interpret this in light of Jesus' teaching in verses 25-33?

What does Jesus command us to do instead of worry? What does this mean?

What reassurance does Jesus give if we if we "seek first his kingdom, and righteousness"? Have you seen this in your own life?

Jesus assures us that everything we need will be provided for. Why is it that we still worry?

- Lack of faith? Failing to believe God has the power to do all that he has promised? We forget the truth of the gospel? Previous instances where we felt we weren't provided for?
- It's worth noting that worry is different from medically diagnosed anxiety. Some people are anxious for reasons very different from their lack of trust in God's provision. The worry that Jesus is talking about is what comes from being torn by trying to pursue the wrong goals – our own security instead of the kingdom of God.
- Note also that Jesus recognises in verse 34b that our lives will involve trouble, and he doesn't suggest that trusting God eliminates the experience of trouble as a result.

Application

How should we go about living lives that are free from worry, yet still remain active in pursuing and maintaining our daily needs?

- *Freedom from worry should not imply laziness, but rather freedom from over-anxiousness – there still exists an expectation of diligence in pursuing the things that we need*
- *It might be helpful to point out here that Jesus is not instructing his listeners in thoughtlessness. In fact, he is encouraging them in thought when he points them to ‘consider’ how God looks after the birds and the flowers. ‘Secondly, he is also not forbidding forethought.’ In this passage Jesus is commending the birds, yet we know that birds make provisions for the future by building nests, laying and incubating eggs, and many species will migrate to warmer climates in winter months. ‘There is nothing here to stop Christians making plans for the future or taking sensible steps for their own security.’ What Jesus is forbidding isn’t thought or forethought, but rather anxious thought. (Stott, 162)*

What should our response be in light of the reassurance that Jesus provides us in this passage?

- 1 Peter 5:7
- Philippians 4:6-7

What are the worries in your life that you need to hand over to Jesus?

Pray

- Pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal where worry is most present in our lives
- Pray that we will be a group who seek first the kingdom
- Ask for forgiveness for the way in which we so easily fall back into worry

Supplementary Questions/ideas

Why does Jesus use the phrase, “is thrown into the fire”?

- John 15:6, Luke 12
- The passage isn't explicit as to why Jesus uses this language
- There could be heaven vs. hell connotations
- It could also be used to emphasise the concept of 'permanence' vs 'temporary'

For many followers of God in the world it appears that the basic needs of survival are not met, although in this passage we are reassured that as God's children, our every need will be provided for. The tension is clear – why does this disconnect exist? What should our response be in light of this?

- *Note: Pursuing righteousness includes sharing one's surplus with fellow Christians who lack the basic necessities of life, or the ability to acquire them. When God's people do this worldwide all these things (food, drink, clothing) will be given to them as well. This is not a promise that faithful believers will never starve to death, but that there need never be any poor among them. Only the disobedience of God's people makes it inevitable that at least a few poor believers remain. Deuteronomy 15:4-11 might be helpful to read here. (Carson, p1942)*

Study 8: Matthew 7:1-11 'True Judgement'

Commentators observe that it's quite difficult to know what connects each of these different verses. One of the best suggestions comes from John Stott, who sees Jesus extrapolating from the Christian's character, to how they employ godly character in community. So, it's possible to see Jesus instructing his disciples in their relationship towards three different groups: fellow Christians in vv. 1-5; unrepentant and hostile unbelievers in v.6; and God the Father in vv. 7-11.

Ice breaker

When have you jumped the gun and completely misread a situation?

Getting acquainted with the passage:

How would you describe the structure of this passage? How do each of the sections relate, or stand apart? Which groups of people can you observe Jesus speaking to between 1-11?

Verses 1-5

In verse 1, Jesus instructs his disciples not to judge. When you look at the rest of his teaching from verses 1-5, what does it look like he is prohibiting? How might verses 3-5 help us to understand what Jesus wants?

NOTE: It might help your group if you try and work out what the different options for how we interpret this passage are, and then assess which seems to be the most likely one that Jesus meant.

One option: we are not supposed to rebuke people at all or to acknowledge their sin as sin. This doesn't seem likely to be what Jesus meant, given that he has just spoken for two chapters about the importance and necessity of righteousness.

Another option: we are not supposed to have an attitude towards others that assumes that we are their judge, rather than God. We cannot take a stance towards them of moral superiority or of harsh criticism that takes delight in pointing out their faults. (Having a look at Romans 14:4, and 1 Cor 4:4 might help with this, as Paul reminds us that God is the one who judges us, not people).

What might be the problem with seeing a speck in your brother's eye, and not noticing the plank in your own? What attitude does that way of thinking (or looking) reveal? Why should we not hold that kind of attitude?

Note: Verse 5 helps us to see this more clearly – note that Jesus doesn't just say 'see your own plank' but also 'help your brother with his speck'. If we have a clear and humble sense of our own sin, we will be better positioned to humbly point out our brother's sin, and to help them with it, rather than condemn them for it.

'To sum up, the command to judge not is not a requirement to be blind, but rather a plea to be generous. Jesus does not tell us to cease to be men [sic] (by suspending our critical powers which help to distinguish us from animals) but to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges).' (Stott, 177)

Verse 6

What would the example of dogs and pigs have meant to Jesus' original audience?

Hint: Pigs were understood to be unclean, and it's likely that Jesus' audience will think of dogs as wild scavengers.

Matthew 13:45 describes the kingdom of God as a pearl of great value. If this is what Jesus is referring to when he tells us not to throw pearls to pigs, what might he be warning us not to do? Who might be the pigs and dogs that Jesus is referring to?

NOTE: It seems that Jesus is talking about not offering the grace of the kingdom of God to those who have demonstrably and firmly rejected it.

Does this mean we shouldn't share the gospel with people who don't know Jesus yet? Is there anything in this passage or the Gospel of Matthew more generally that would guide us either way?

In Matthew 10:5-15 Jesus sends out the disciples to share the gospel. This shows us two things: that Jesus wants the gospel to go out to people who haven't heard it before, and that if that gospel is rejected, the disciples should move on. See, for example, verse 14, where he instructs his disciples to leave those who do not accept the disciples (or, by implication, their message about Jesus – see also Matthew 10:40-42 for that connection).

Is this fair?

How might verse 6 relate to verses 1-5?

Hint: Jesus has instructed us not to be harsh critics who stand above other people. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't exercise any discernment at all.

Verses 7-11

How might verse 7-8 be misinterpreted?

Hint: We might imagine that we can ask for absolutely anything (a new Ferrari!) and that Jesus has promised that God will give it to us. Is that what is going on here?

From this passage how can we correct this misinterpretation?

What words would you use to describe the 'father' in this passage? How does our Father in heaven compare with him?

Why does Jesus want us to have this picture of God in mind? How might that influence our praying?

What encouragement do you find here when you think about your own prayers?

Application

How do we know the difference between judging someone and rebuking them? Is judging part of rebuking?

When is it ok to rebuke someone?

Is there a speck that you keep seeing in someone else? How have you dealt with that? Does their speck point to a plank of your own?

Study 9: Matthew 7:12-23 'Hard truth or Fruitful truth'

This passage continues to explore the nature of true discipleship. Jesus warns us that not all who claim to be followers of him are genuine. False prophets, in particular, are capable of wreaking huge destruction on the faith of others (v.15). True discipleship is marked by obedience to Jesus – and should be externally obvious in the fruits of our life (vv. 15-20), particularly in how we treat others (v. 12).

Verse 12

Think back. How does this verse relate to Jesus' earlier instructions?

This verse might summarise chapter 7 or even all of the Sermon on the Mount so far.

What does this verse tell us about how Christians should view the Old Testament law?

Does the principle expressed in verse 12 work in every context? Is it always good to do to others what we would want others to do for us?

Verses 13-14:

What distinguishes the narrow and broad gates? (What makes entering somewhere by a broad gate different from entering by a narrow one?)

Note for leaders: John Stott points out that you don't have to leave anything behind if you enter via a broad gate. That is, you don't have to make any sacrifices, or leave behind any sins or errors of belief. But a narrow gate demands that you leave something behind.

It might also be useful to note the similarities between this passage and Deuteronomy 30:15-20.

Where do the gates lead?

How does this passage fit with Revelation 7:9?

Note for leaders: It seems unlikely that Jesus is saying that the absolute number of those who will be saved is going to be small (hence Revelation 7:9, and also the missions he sends his disciples on to proclaim the gospel).

Hence also his instruction to 'enter through the narrow gate.' However, what he is saying here does suggest that not everyone will enter via this gate.

The instruction for his hearers is clear: we must choose which gate we will enter through. There is no alternative, no 'what's behind door three?' option.

How do you process challenging passages like this?

Verses 15-20

What can we learn from the 'fruit' a person produces?

Note: This links to the idea of true discipleship as something that springs from an inner commitment to knowing Jesus and honouring/obeying his commandments

What dangers and pitfalls does this passage seek to guard against?

What are the "false prophets" of our time, how do we recognise them, and how do we deal with them?

What good fruit do you see in people in this group?

Note for leaders: Be judicious if you ask this question. It would feel pretty terrible for only some people to be affirmed and others not. The point is to help people see the connection between the fruit and its source (faith in Jesus). If you don't think your group would benefit from it, don't ask it.

What does this passage tell us about the nature of true discipleship? Rewrite vv. 15-20 in your own words.

Verses 20-23

What is the difference between the two groups of people Jesus describes in verses 21 and 22-23? Isn't prophesying in Jesus' name, and in his name casting out demons, etc. a good thing to do?

Note for leaders: It might help your group to note that this probably flows on from the discussion about true and false prophets.

What does this passage indicate that Jesus wants from his followers?

Study 10: Matthew 7:24-29 'Truth to build a life on'

Note for leaders: This is the last passage (and hence last study) in the Sermon on the Mount. It stands in its own right, but it also concludes all of Jesus' in the Sermon on the Mount (note verse 28: 'When Jesus had finished saying these things...' and 8:1 which notes that Jesus 'came down from the mountain') by presenting the ultimate picture of what we should do with his teaching, and why. All along, Jesus has been presenting his disciples with choices to make. Here, he returns to that challenge, and presents us with the consequences for the way we respond to the choices he has laid before us. We should not just hear his words, but also put them into practice. If we do, our future is secure. If we do not, our future is certainly doomed.

Obviously, this is a confronting message. We will need to help people to wrestle with it being alert to the fact that it is confronting and people may need help processing that aspect of it. But we also should take care that we don't undermine what *should* be confronting about it.

One way to help people work through this passage might be to draw what Jesus is describing. Give each person a piece of paper and instruct them to draw a line down the middle. On one side, have them draw what is described in verses 24 and 25. On the other side, have them draw what is described in verses 26-27.

Ask them to reflect on:

What is the difference between the foundation that each person builds on?

What does the foundation symbolise?

What is the difference between the impact on the houses when storms come?

There are a couple of different ways that these verses might be understood. Have the group list as many as they can think of.

Then ask, what indications do we get from the passage, and the context, that will help us to understand what Jesus means?

Note for leaders: Be careful here to reiterate that we're not just picking the interpretation that we prefer but the interpretation that is best supported by the text. Here are two possible interpretations your group might have come up with -

1. The storms represent difficulties in life, and the house either crashing down, or standing against them, represent how Jesus' believers will be able to withstand difficulty in their own life.

There might be something to this, but I think another interpretation is better supported.

2. I think Jesus is talking about the judgment to come at the end of time. Here's why: Verse 24 starts with a 'therefore'. As we might have had drilled into us, whenever we see a 'therefore' we ought to ask 'what is the therefore there for?' In this case, it points us to the fact that verse 24 continues a line of thought from the previous section, in which Jesus points us to the judgment each of us will face.

Also, storms are a common way for Old Testament writers to talk about the coming judgment of God. See for example Jeremiah 23:19-20.

Isaiah 28:16-22 is especially helpful here, because it compares the protection provided by a 'rock' with the vulnerability caused by the coming flood.

Ezekiel 13:10-16 might have the closest allusions to our passage though.

If it's the case that Jesus is saying that if we hear and put his words into practice that determines how we are judged, does that mean that we're saved by our obedience?

Note for leaders: This is a natural question, and it's important to help people work through this. It might be helpful to look at a similar passage in James 1:22-25; 2:14-20. We can't hear that Jesus is saying that we merit our salvation – that wouldn't accord with the rest of the New Testament, or even Jesus' own teaching in the Lord's Prayer that we can ask God to forgive our sins. But it should point out something very important: that we demonstrate that we have truly heard the gospel's proclamation that Jesus is Lord and that the kingdom of God has been inaugurated when we live in line with that truth. If that truth has not changed how we live, it points to the fact that we have not truly heard it and believed it.

What distinguishes Jesus from other teachers?

Note for leaders: Jesus says 'everyone who hears these words of mine' not 'these words from God.' This is a significant elevation beyond the position an ordinary teacher might hold. That is, he expects that the eternal destiny of everyone depends on how they respond to him.

This is our final study in the Sermon on the Mount. What does reading this final section do to the way that you have engaged with the rest of it? Put more bluntly, have you sought to obey Jesus' words, or have you merely heard them?

What choices will you commit to making tonight, this week, and this month as a result of what you have heard from Jesus?

Note for leaders: It might help your group to read and reflect on this extended passage from John Stott's commentary ('The Message of the Sermon on the Mount' from the Bible Speaks Today series, 2000, pages 210 and 211) as it summarises the majority of the Sermon on the Mount:

'Thus the Sermon ends on the same note of radical choice of which we have been aware throughout. Jesus does not set before his followers a string of easy ethical rules, so much as a set of values and ideals which is entirely distinctive from the way of the world. He summons us to renounce the prevailing secular culture in favour of the Christian counter-culture. ... Our righteousness is to be deeper because it reaches even our hearts, and our love broader because it embraces even our enemies. In piety we are to avoid the ostentation of hypocrites and in prayer the verbosity of pagans. Instead, our giving, praying and fasting are to be real, with no compromise of Christian integrity. For our treasure we are to choose what endures through eternity, not what disintegrates on earth, and for our master God, not money or possessions. As for our ambition (what preoccupies our mind) this must not be our own material security, but the spread of God's rule and righteousness in the world.

Instead of conforming to this world – whether in the form of the religious Pharisees or of irreligious pagans – we are called by Jesus to imitate our heavenly Father. He is a peacemaker. And he loves even the ungrateful and selfish. So we must copy him, not men. ... And the overriding purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to present us with this alternative, and so to face us with the indispensable necessity of choice.

That is why the Sermon's conclusion is so appropriate, as Jesus sketches the two ways (narrow and broad) and the two buildings (on rock and sand). It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of the choice between the two, since one way leads to life while the other ends in destruction, and one building is secure while the other is overwhelmed with disaster. Far more momentous than the choice even of a life-work or of a life-partner is the choice about life itself. Which road are we going to travel? On which foundation are we going to build?'