



KINGDOM VALUES

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Personal Devotional

Before you sit down with each weekly reflection, read the passage of Scripture at the top. Keep your Bible open to refer to it often. Allow yourself the time and space for Jesus to teach you, personally, what it means to follow hard after Him. On a separate day, spend time following through with each application exercise.



INTRODUCTION

Reflection

Psalms 86:11

**Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth;
unite my heart to fear your name.**

Just about everything Jesus speaks about in Matthew 5-7 is counter-intuitive. We talk about the kingdom of God being literally upside down in comparison with our daily or earthly kingdom. We are people who are accustomed to figuring things out on our own; seeking God's wisdom and direction is a discipline always and because our natural tendency is to listen to our own heads and hearts, trusting our own understanding. Jesus didn't force people to listen to his teaching. He simply made Himself available, and positioned Himself so that His disciples could come away from the crowds and get alone with Him.

As David prays in Psalm 86, we need to ask God to unite our heart. We are constantly fighting the division of our hearts — whose voice is louder in our ear? Our own, or God's? Whose wisdom do we actually rely on? Whose honor do we tend to seek — our own or God's? Whose agenda rules our lives? Is my time my own — or God's? Do I trust that God has my best interests at heart? If our hearts aren't fully committed to God, the teachings contained in the Sermon on the Mount will remain head knowledge. If we let Him, the Spirit in us will transform our hearts. If we ask, willingly, wanting to walk in His truth, He will unify the conflicting desires at war in us to be in harmony with God's desires.

Fearing His name simply means that we revere and respect everything about God, that He is the center of our existence, not us. One of the most amazing things about finding our hearts united with God, is that we then find ourselves united with His people. Jesus prayed that we would come to know this oneness with Himself and the Father, and He prayed that we could learn this oneness, and unity with each other as well (John 17:20-21). We are meant to be living in courageous, loving community. That's the motivation behind providing material to read together, discuss, and live out God's truth such as Jesus gives

in this Sermon. David was called a man after God's own heart, but he knew himself well enough to understand he needed God's help with his heart. All of us think we know ourselves best — we certainly know our failings and faults. The truth we can discover is that Jesus is truly greater than our hearts; He knows how we are formed, and still He chooses us for His own.



WEEK 1: SEPTEMBER 11–17

Reflection

Read: Matthew 5:3-12

The Sermon on the Mount, as told by Matthew, is placed at the outset of Jesus' public ministry. In the years leading up to the launch of his public ministry, did Jesus visit Matthew's booth to pay taxes, developing a friendship and a knowing understanding?

Jesus answers the Pharisees' criticism at that dinner with a quote from Hosea, which is a clue that Matthew wanted his Jewish friends to understand that Jesus was the Promised One, the Messiah.

The Beatitudes, as the opening lines in Matthew 5 are called, describe the character of those who belong in God's Kingdom. They are so packed with meaning that taking one Beatitude a day to simply chew on proves to be a fruitful and challenging exercise. Those who are 'blessed' are the men and women who share God's heart for both Him and His people, as demonstrated in their actions and their attitudes. These qualities, in short, describe Christ Himself, and we are to emulate Him. Jesus leads off the list of values with that of a spiritual beggar.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." The word for 'poor' Matthew uses literally means to cower, to crouch, like one of the lowest of the low. A beggar is completely unable to help himself, putting himself at the mercy of those more fortunate. For Jesus to use that metaphor is meant to be interruptive, to get our attention. It's the exact opposite of getting our act together before we can approach God. Being poor in spirit is to be bankrupt spiritually, which would fly in the face of the achievements of the spiritual elite, like the Pharisees who commanded respect everywhere they went. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who come to God empty-handed, aware of their utter neediness and helplessness, and painfully aware of how far short they fall of God's standard. Coming to Jesus from a place of desperate need is commended by Him.

Starting with our position as lowly beggars, Jesus goes on to describe qualities that follow from that: mourning our fallenness, our inability to get this life right. This mourning is not only grief from loss of many kinds but rather the grief of repentance. Repentance which brings godly sorrow is a blessing because we receive God's true comfort when we turn fully to him to help us. Once we understand what we're truly made of, there are no more secrets with God. We have nothing left to hide, and that is where He meets us. Jesus commends meekness, or gentleness, as it is sometimes translated, because it is a quality that demonstrates a true understanding of who we are. Meek people know their utter need for God. We often think of meekness as weakness, but the word actually means holding the middle ground between two extremes: intense anger without reason, and the total lack of anger. It makes sense that Jesus would give the earth to people such as that. Understanding meekness as controlled strength would be useful for anyone dealing with many different people. When was the last time you found yourself controlling your anger when all you really wanted to do was let it rip?

Hungering and thirsting for God, showing mercy and compassion, exhibiting a purity of spirit, a sincerity of heart for God, seeking peace - all these values are to be evident in the citizens of God's Kingdom. Those who are of one mind towards God, honest and without guile, or pretense, are the ones who naturally seek to create peace among men. God calls them sons and daughters because they reflect His character. These states of blessing mark a believer because they are the fruit of God's influence and involvement in our lives. If we're honest, actually living like this on a daily basis is impossible in our own strength. Even as we grow in our understanding of just how much we need Christ, we still celebrate our self-sufficiency.

Jesus cites tough things like mourning, pain and even persecution as times of blessing because these lead to a realization and trust that all God's influence in our life is good, as He is good. By citing the reality of persecution and hostility as marks of a follower, Jesus is reminding us that being different comes with a cost. Followers of Jesus mourn different things than the world mourns. They value humility over arrogance and understand that the first will be last and the last first. In short, what the world rejects, God often honors. As He works these character qualities in us, we not only bring honor to His Name, but we are welcomed into the honor of His Kingdom.

As you ponder these blessings, what have you experienced personally that demonstrates God's good influence in your life? What do you think you might be missing?

**For further encouragement and study: Isaiah 30:15, 43:25, 44:21-23 and Acts 3:19-20*

Application

Write out a plan for the following and pray over them.

- Where do you need to be more humble? How will you attempt to do this?
- Do you know anyone in mourning? How will you attempt to comfort them?
- Is there anyone you are at odds with? What do they have against you? How will you make peace?



WEEK 2: SEPTEMBER 18–24

Reflection

Read: Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

Salt in our day has been transformed in a myriad of ways from the time of Jesus. Today you can find so many ways to 'improve' on God's creation of pure salt, but, interestingly, 'pure salt' is anything but one simple substance. Sodium chloride, which makes up salt, is a compound. Real salt is complete with roughly 60 trace minerals, giving it a rather pinkish color with flecks that look like dirt. It has not been chemically bleached to a lovely white color, nor received additives.

It is intriguing to ponder this salt as the example for Jesus' metaphor. Salt as found in nature is complex, beautiful, useful, and brings out the best flavors of the foods it's used in. Christians are complex, beautiful in all their differing gifts and personalities, useful to the Master, bringing the healthy influence of rightness and justice to a world reeling from the effects of sin and decay. It is Christians who founded organizations like the Red Cross and the ASPCA, among others. Before those organizations were founded, no one had been looking out for animals, or planning ahead for disasters in any sort of systematic, broadly effective way. Jesus wants His followers to make a difference in the world wherever they find themselves. Salt was a precious commodity in ancient time and was being used as currency. Salt symbolized covenant relationships for these ancient people. One Middle Eastern said that "There is bread and salt between us" signified that the relationship had been confirmed by the sharing of a meal. That kind of relationship was characterized as enduring and loyal. Salt has to be added to something to be useful and to make an impact. Followers of Christ are to add that beneficial, unmistakable impact with their very presence. The believer brings his or her influence into any setting, adding the distinct flavor and presence of Christ.

The story of International Justice Mission, and IJM's unwavering determination to fight injustice and violence against the poor, and in particular those trapped in slavery of many forms, has resulted in entire countries putting evil perpetrators behind bars. Former slaves are being given a new lease on life, a chance to heal, and grow, and live in safety. IJM's influence is literally changing the flavor of the areas they serve, bringing light into entire regions of darkness. Why would Jesus warn about something like salt losing its flavor? What sorts of things dilute a Christian's influence, or diminish his 'flavor'? Well, certainly the difficulty and persecution Jesus warns His followers about can be hugely discouraging, fear-inducing, and destructive. We can add all sorts of things to the gospel, inadvertently diluting, or even changing the message, as we try to make it more palatable when Jesus asks tough questions, or insists on the full commitment of His followers. (Mark 10:17-31)

Jesus follows this reference to salt with a reference to light. We are to be the light of the world. It's the nature of light to chase away darkness. But hiding that light, masking it, keeping it under wraps (or a basket) is exactly what we do when we hesitate to share something God has taught us for fear of how it might be received. We can be so fired up for God on Sunday and let fear or insecurity stop us from going forward with something on Monday morning when obstacles slam into our day. Light can be too bright, blinding those that are near it. We aren't meant to share our light like that, but rather allow ourselves to be placed where we might benefit those near it. Salt just being salty; light just doing its job - that's our place as follower of Jesus.

There is no mistaking the authenticity of a fully committed believer, one who understands that his/her own source of strength (saltiness) and grace (light) is Jesus. He equates light with good works which cause people to praise God. Our life in Christ is meant to attract others to Him, not ourselves. When we can bring authenticity, truth and integrity (salt, light) into any situation or relationship or issue, we can know God's spirit is working in our hearts. The flavor, the influence, of that kind of person is unmistakable. Take a few moments to think of situations where you can bring your good influence. What are the circumstances? What will it require of you? What or where is the greatest challenge you've found for retaining your own 'saltiness?' In other words, what tends to draw your heart away from God, or dilute your focus? What does Christian authenticity look like? What does it take to develop 'authenticity'?

**For further encouragement and study: Read Deuteronomy 30, 1 John 1:5-10*

Application

God has fashioned you into a unique masterpiece for his purposes. You are gifted with your own saltiness and hue of light. List the gifts God has blessed you with on one side and then how you might apply them as salt/light in people's lives on the other. Afterwards, pray God would lead you to fulfilling your God given purpose as his unique creation among his cherished people.

Your Gifts

Applied



WEEK 3: SEPTEMBER 25–OCTOBER 1

Reflection

Read: Matthew 5:17-26

*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...*

The scribes and Pharisees watered down commandments, narrowing definitions to suit their purposes, and created an untenable weight of legalistic restrictions, distancing people from God and the spirit of the Law. It is to this that Jesus speaks when he says, ‘You have heard that it was said...’ Jesus states plainly that the Law is perfect, and will stand until the heavens and earth are no longer (v 18). While the Pharisees perceived that Jesus continually violated the Law, Jesus makes it clear that he completely adheres to, believes, obeys, and teaches the Law. Jesus is after the heart of obedience, not any outward signs of fastidious righteousness. Only by uniting our hearts with Jesus will we be able to adhere to any standard of Christian conduct. He illustrates this ‘spirit of the law’ with reference to the commandment against murder (Exodus 20:13). The word means to literally dash to pieces. Murder is defined as killing with deliberate, malicious intent, often inspired by intense anger.

He is drawing attention to where sin starts - in our hearts and minds. Insults and name-calling are the seeds of wishing someone were literally dead to us. Our anger can flare so quickly when we are inconvenienced, frustrated, cut off in traffic, foiled in travel plans, or prevented from accomplishing something simple by another person’s (perceived) incompetence. So Jesus forbids His followers from murder, condemning the hatred and contempt that can lead to murderous thoughts, if not action, but He goes still further, instructing us to work towards assuaging others’ anger and contempt and hatred.

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (v 24-25) Notice that this is a brother who has something against us, not us having something against someone else. This refers to close family, friends, fellow

church members, or small group members. It doesn't matter whether they are wrong in their belief; if we know someone is holding something against us, Jesus is saying it's on us to put it right to the best of our ability.

Jesus has progressed from the commandment against a terrible act such as murder, to prohibition against the attitude leading to such things, to the instruction for us to attempt reconciliation with anyone who is offended or thinks we've wronged them. We are supposed to seek to prevent and dissuade murderous, angry, contemptuous attitudes and thoughts even in our enemies. The strength of Jesus' words here comes into sharp relief as we witness the swift and devastating effects of hatred spilling over into violence, so prevalent in our news today. We know hatred is abhorrent. What does it look like to exhibit love in the face of that?

The bottom line is that Jesus' instructions for us exceed our capacity to obey. This is the One who said that those who are 'poor in spirit' belong in the Kingdom of God. We are powerless to fulfill the spirit of the Law as Jesus intends. This is why He came, to give His life as our ransom, for all that we cannot pay. (Matthew 20:28) His life imparts abundant grace to us so we can, in part, begin to understand and seek to obey the spirit of His commands. Forsaking rage and anger, leaving vengeance to God, emptying oneself of the right to be right — this is being poor in spirit, obeying the commandments. But we can also experience Christ's peace and comfort in our limitation. We demonstrate the life of God in us when we truly hunger and thirst for righteousness: when we want to live in right standing with God, we can know from Jesus' words that we shall be fully satisfied. Facing down discomfort, fear and intimidation, even loss, we can seek reconciliation with our friends and our enemies because Jesus has said that we will know His love as we trust Him, bearing fruit for good purpose. (John 15:5) Accepting His grace, uniting ourselves with His purposes for us, this is living in the impossible Kingdom.

How have you seen others, or yourself, 'water down' God's commandments, particularly as it relates here to murder, anger, contempt, or the refusal to reconcile a difficult relationship? What is the most difficult thing for you, personally, to accept in Jesus' teaching in this passage? What is one thing you'd like to do differently based on your understanding of Matt 5:17-26?

**For further encouragement and study: Romans 12,
Proverbs 14:11-19, 22, 29-30; 15:1*

Application

Without Christ, we are hopeless. With Him we are able to fulfill all of his commands. Rather, He fulfills them through us. This is only possible if we slow down and make space for Him. Commit to one or more of the following today:

- Intentionally drive in the slow lane. Intentionally choose the longest line at the store. Intentionally sit longer at your meal. Intentionally chew your food. Intentionally take a longer shower. Relish the time. Be in the presence of God — What rises to the surface of your mind? What does this tell you about yourself?
- Take shorter appointments. No back-to-back appointments without a break. Take deep breaths before you pick up the phone.
- Read slowly. Read for transformation rather than information. When a word stands out, let it sit, stop and do not read anymore. Rest in what you have read.



WEEK 4: OCTOBER 2–8

Reflection

Read: Matthew 5:27-37

*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’
But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with
lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart...*

Once again, as he did with the prohibition against murder from the sixth commandment, Jesus discusses the seventh commandment by getting at the heart of the issue. Today our society is more sexually confused than ever. College campuses and those who live on them have become a moral universe unto themselves, but they simply reflect our society at large. We hear the following: “You wouldn’t drive a car without a test drive, right, so why would you ever marry someone you’ve not lived/slept with?” “Sex before marriage isn’t that big a deal, especially since we’re totally committed to one another.” “We’re married in the sight of God.” “Where in the Bible does it specifically say you can’t have sex before marriage?” “Same-sex marriage can be holy, because two people who truly love and are devoted to one another should be allowed to marry.” The intent here is not to enter into a debate on how confused our society has become about gender and sex and marriage relationships. Rather, it is to demonstrate how consistently we can ‘adjust’ or tweak God’s standards to suit our purposes.

All our justifications for thinking Jesus was too strict have some element of cost-benefit analysis to them. When we use Scripture, often taken out of context, to justify our actions or thoughts, we are selfishly seeking a conclusive cost-benefit analysis, essentially putting ourselves above God’s commandment. Jesus addresses this commandment against adultery and lust because it is such an integral part of who we are as humans. (1 Corinthians 6:18) God designed us as sexual creatures. He designed sex to be a beautiful, wonderful, binding and powerful act of love and commitment between a man and a woman. Because it is so powerful and so intensely personal, when twisted or abused or diminished in importance, it can have devastating consequences.

When Eve fell to the serpent's temptation in the Garden, the very first thing that happened was that she listened to a lie. "Did God actually say...?" (Genesis 3:1) Shame and evil had not been part of Eve's experience yet, but she still gave him her attention. When Eve answered the serpent, she got God's commandment mostly right, but not quite. Perhaps Eve was dazzled by the serpent's beauty, or his smooth speech, certainly by his attention — regardless, she thought about what she was hearing, and the more she thought about it, the more she got comfortable with that lie. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband..." Eve first listened to a lie, then thought about that lie, then got comfortable as she gazed at it, until she acted on the lie.

Any temptation we encounter appeals to this natural selfishness in us, the nagging suspicion that God might be holding out on us or not giving us something good that we deserve. God, through Jesus' words, is claiming sovereignty over our sexuality because he knows our pride can be our downfall. Sin take us far deeper, for far longer, than we ever anticipate. This exclusive loyalty that is God's design for marriage: leaving father and mother and cleaving to each other, being united until death, becoming one flesh — is all good because He is good. That exclusive loyalty is how Paul described Christ and His church! (Gal 5:31-32) But we can be drawn away into confusion when we listen to voices that contradict or twist Scripture out of context. And usually we assume just looking at someone lustfully or looking at something on the internet won't get a real hold on us, particularly if we consider ourselves Christians.

But that is just Jesus' point. When it comes to sexual sin, we can't even look in that direction because it is simply stronger than we are. Intimacy of body and intimacy of soul go together. God gives us the seventh commandment because He doesn't want us to get hurt, or maimed, or have our souls devastated by sin. When we avoid speaking half-truths, exaggerations, justifications and excuses, we discipline ourselves to simply have integrity in our speech. "...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart..." (Matthew 15:18) When Jesus discusses the purpose of marriage and the commandments surrounding it, He wants to highlight the importance of honesty in relationships. Honesty before God — honoring the spirit of the commandment, as well as honesty with each other, requires us to let God be sovereign over our relationships.

Our words are tremendously powerful. So letting our yes be simply yes, and our no, mean simply no, requires a humility of spirit born of understanding how easily we can lie. We need God's help in keeping us internally and externally truthful. If we are allowing God to work those values into us, we

may end up in some difficult conversations, both with friends, co-workers, spouses or family. In practical terms, do you struggle to be liked by most people? Do you use the truth like a weapon, ignoring another's feelings in the face of important facts? Are you prone to accusation? Jesus was always truthful, and mindful of how he delivered it. He was never unkind. Avoiding telling someone a hard truth can be the very opposite of loving, but Jesus uses truth as a weapon for our good. Words can speak life, or they can steal, kill and destroy. (Proverbs 18:21) Avoiding oaths, letting our words be simple, straightforward, understanding their power: that is letting our yes be yes and our no be no.

Where in your life do you find it hardest to be truthful? Some places to reflect on might be relationships, money issues, time commitments. Why, in your opinion, is Jesus so dramatic discussing sexual sin? What is the hardest thing about dealing with others' differing definitions about marriage and divorce, the legal definitions of marriage today, and gender issues? Why is this such a tricky place for us as followers of Jesus to be loving, yet truthful? Describe a scenario where you have had to speak the truth in love. What were the risks? What was the outcome?

**For further reflection and encouragement: 1 Corinthians 6-7, John 14:23-27, Ephesians 5*

Application

Take a moment and write down the times and places where you are tempted to let your eyes wander and lust in your heart (sexually or otherwise). Next take time to think through realistic counter-measures to these circumstances or relationships. Paul said “make no provision for the flesh” — so write down how you can do exactly that. Then pray God will strengthen you in your pursuit of holiness.

Places/People/Times

Plan



WEEK 5: OCTOBER 9–15

Reflection

Read: Matthew 5:38-48

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil...

After giving the ten Commandments in Exodus 20, Moses went on with instructions that were meant to be used by the new young nation for judging civil disputes in Exodus 21-22. (“But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye... Exodus 21:24) It was a system put in place to provide just restitution and avoid retaliation and vengeful recompense for damages amongst the tribes. Apparently there was a tendency to pay back with more fury than necessary as a general rule, so the Mosaic law was the first attempt at fairness and balance in settling matters of loss of property. By the time of the Pharisees and scribes, these laws had morphed from dealing with personal damage and property disputes to being applied in personal relationships. This was expressly forbidden amongst the many laws governing relationships in Leviticus 18-20. “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Leviticus 19:11-18

Once again, the Pharisees were taking laws that were meant to provide for just recompense and expanding it for their own purposes of justifying revenge. Jesus immediately gets at the heart of the law: embrace love and nonretaliation toward those who have wronged you. Treat others as you want to be treated; love others as you love yourself. Jesus’ statement comes in the context of submitting ourselves to God and drawing near to him. The admonishment to not resist one who is evil is rather to illustrate the character of one who entrusts himself to God, with more thought to the good of the one who might be harming him, than to himself. Jesus uses the next four specific examples, of getting backhanded across the face, sued for personal loss, the forced march (a reference to the occupying forces who could do that kind of thing to an ordinary citizen) and being generous to those who beg money from us, to illustrate just how far this principle of non-retaliation should go. We are to avoid revenge so thoroughly as to let the one who would do us harm do it double. The question is why? Why would we allow ourselves to be treated so wrongly (being a doormat comes to

mind)? Perhaps the only answer in the face of such an impossible command is because that's how Jesus did it. He completely entrusted Himself to God to the point of enduring beatings and scourging and crucifixion.

Put in that context, letting someone take our coat, or beg money seems tame in comparison. Paul calls it becoming a living sacrifice, not conforming to the patterns of the world, but overcoming evil with good (Romans 12). Why? — for the glory of God. If you think about a person, a physical enemy you're currently dealing with (it all changes when it gets personal), it's important not only to face how they're making you feel, but how much of your energy they are consuming. People who verbally abuse, ridicule, gossip and seek to hurt us can really set us back on our heels emotionally. Sometimes the pride that rises up in us or the comparisons we make elevating ourselves above that person to protect ourselves can be just as damaging for us as their words or actions. Praying over the situation, and specifically for that enemy, takes the power away from both as we tap into God's power to fight on our behalf. We need to talk to God, but we also need support and accountability in a healthy community of believers who are safe.

Loving our enemies and praying for them goes against every natural inclination we possess, particularly if we, or someone we love, has been terribly wronged. Jesus tells us the reason is so we can imitate God, who provides rain and sun on both the evil and the good people. Does it mean evil will not be dealt with? Of course not. In Jesus' admonishments to us to be 'sons of God', he's saying we are to be like Him, looking more to the interests of others, even our enemies, than ourselves. (Phil 2:3-8) Praying for our enemies doesn't mean we cannot hate the evil they perpetrate. Praying for justice to be done and for the evil person to repent simply acknowledges that God is the One who will judge, not us. As a matter of fact, a large part of resisting evil and working against it has to involve prayer, and it is prayer that empowers us, and frees us from an evil person's hold on our mind or emotions. Hating what they might be about is to trust God's wrath if such repentance does not come, and we can leave it to God to design their final defeat and removal. Entrusting ourselves to God, and practicing forgiveness, we remember that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:21-23). Having a personal understanding of how completely God has forgiven us our sins, our own evil tendencies, and perhaps how far He had to come to rescue us is helpful here. 'Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.' (James 5:16) Truly seeking to know God more deeply, hungering after true righteousness and right standing with God can't help but become evident to those around us. It's often hard to seek the good

of those who are our friends on a regular basis, much less our enemies. But this is how the Kingdom operates. Forsaking our need for vindication, to explain and defend ourselves, to justify our actions, to the point where we refuse to retaliate and even go the extra mile to love our enemies... this is impossible without the life of Christ in us. This is the life Jesus calls us to: we are to be perfect, as he is perfect. "...apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5b)

What is most disturbing about allowing someone to treat us badly without retaliating? Explain the concept of the view that Christians can be a doormat. Is this what Jesus is advocating in His followers? Why or why not? Think of someone you regard as an enemy; how is God calling you to 'love' them? At the end of this section, Jesus tells us to be 'perfect' as God is perfect. The word means to be complete, fully developed, lacking in any deficiencies or shortcomings, fully measuring up to a standard. If we acknowledge the truth that we will never be sinless, what do you sense you need to do differently based on this passage?

**For further encouragement: John 15, James 1:2-7, 2 Timothy 1:8-12, Psalm 25*

Application

Jesus' commands on conflict and love for our persecutors fall in line with His preposterous vision for His people to live set-apart lives — lives that call attention and demand true respect because of their marvelous selflessness. There are three directives under the love/pray for your enemies command. Can you think of a relationship (business or otherwise) in your life where you did NOT abide by these? Will you write a letter, make a call, or even pay a visit to apologize to this person(s)?

“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.”

“And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.”

“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”



WEEK 6: OCTOBER 16–22

Reflection

Read: Matthew 6:1-18

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others...when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.

Prayer and Fasting\Kingdom Disciplines

At first glance, we could misunderstand Jesus' admonition about public prayer. He is not saying there should be no public prayer but only that we check our motives for it. Feeling proud to be asked to pray is not exactly wrong; it can be an affirmation that people trust you and what you'll say. But if when you're asked to pray, you are excited about how others will think of you, and you sense your natural pride kicking in, you might have a problem. Among other things, your focus might be on the wrong person.

Jesus warned against the hypocrisy he'd seen because it can be so misleading and destructive in the body of believers. When someone prays who knows how to put great thoughts and phrases together, we can think that our paltry prayers don't get past the ceiling. Thus He warns not to babble on (v 7), piling up "empty phrases." Just like being aware of why we give to the needy and checking our motives to see whose need we're actually meeting, we need to be aware of why we are praying.

Jesus didn't always pray in secret, but He allowed His disciples to hear Him and learn from Him. He is always nudging us to be simple and direct, straightforward and authentic in how we pray. It's normal to want to be well thought of; the critical thing is how important that need is for us in public prayer. Where is our focus when we pray? Is it on God, on his attributes, his power — or on ourselves? Prayer that Jesus is calling us to is meant to be personal, "Our Father," acknowledges God's authority and sovereignty, but also his loving desire to be involved in the little details of our lives.

"Give us this day..." When we pray as Jesus taught the disciples, we acknowledge where God is - "in heaven," and because God's ways are not like

our ways, we pledge allegiance to his rule and his way of doing things. “Your kingdom come, your will be done...” Prayer that doesn’t do all the talking, but rather listens for God’s voice through his Word, becomes its own reward.

Perhaps the most important thing for us to pay attention to in this section about prayer comes in verses 14-15. Extending forgiveness to those who have wronged us is not optional. Jesus is basically saying God can’t honor our prayers if we won’t do this. God cannot reward our requests when we refuse to make a clean slate before him. We can acknowledge our need for his help in forgiving someone and how we need his mercy and forgiveness on a daily basis ourselves. The constant practice of a forgiving and generous attitude to one another frees us to communicate well not only with each other but with God, to come to him with a blank piece of paper rather than a shopping list.

Jesus reminds us that our Father knows our needs better than we do before we even ask. “Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.” (Isaiah 65:24)

Jesus’ instructions about fasting are further examples of His generosity and prayer. Our motives are a driving force for us. If we are fasting to be noticed, our discipline is worthless. This can be difficult because if we are fasting, we may be put in a position of explaining why we aren’t eating when everyone is getting sandwiches at the office, or you’re responsible for providing dinner for the family. We can’t fast in order to get God to answer our prayers; that would be manipulation. Understanding why we might feel called to fast or why we are participating in fasting with a group, requires us to be prepared to give an honest, humble answer. Prayer that seeks God, generous giving for others’ benefit, and fasting to discipline ourselves share the common denominators of humility and wisdom. Hypocritical prayers, self-righteous, showy giving or making a big deal about how miserable we are when we’re fasting share the common denominator of pride. One is meant to be in secret, the other is meant to be seen. The great news is that God is greater than our hearts and is faithful to guide us as we grow in maturity through any of these ‘righteous practices.’ (see 1 John 3:16-20)

**For further encouragement and study: Isaiah 55:6-11, 58:5-11, Jeremiah 31:33-34*

Application

Take time to pray through the Lord's prayer, while really letting each line weigh on you. See Jesus' words in this passage highlight the importance of your connection with your heavenly father. God is God, mighty and inconceivable, but has also revealed himself as our Father in heaven. He sees us. He hears us and He rewards our deeds as his faithful children.

Take a moment to write out your perspective of God as your heavenly Father...

- How do you see Him?
- What is He like?
- What is He proud of in your life?
- What does He hope for you?

Then, pray again through the Lord's Prayer. This time, pray with the perspective of your heavenly Father in mind.



WEEK 7: OCTOBER 23–29

Reflection

Read: Matthew 6:19-24

...lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (v. 20-21)

Kingdom Ambition

How we define ‘treasure’ is the key to understanding Jesus’ admonition here. What is most precious to you? How do you define wealth? The dictionary defines treasure as “money, jewels, precious metals that are stored up or hoarded” or “something or someone of great worth or value, a person esteemed as rare or precious” or “a collection of precious things.” In the first half of this chapter, Matthew has been describing Jesus’ concern with a believer’s private life. Now Jesus is moving on to our public lives: how we do business in the world and what and where do our interests lie. The definition of that interest tells us much about our hearts and where our true loyalties lie. We can make any number of statements about what we believe and ascribe to in our faith, but it is our practice that speaks volumes. Our actions demonstrate our beliefs.

What does it mean to store up treasure in heaven? Perhaps talking about its opposite, storing up treasure on earth is helpful here. The things that moth and rust destroy are our material possessions — things like clothing that gets moth-eaten, or houses and furniture and cars that decay. Things that cannot be destroyed then must be of different substance — intangibles like contentment, security, faith. Both of these classes of things — the material and the intangible — have value; Jesus is drawing the line on their lasting value. He is instructing us to be ambitious for things that will not wear out, that have eternal value — that will be ‘treasure in heaven.’

We suffer loss when our possessions are stolen or destroyed. Jesus is emphasizing that intangible wealth cannot be lost, or destroyed. These are completely safe with Him. Simply put, if our treasure is our life with Christ, we won’t be ruled by the lack or the abundance of our possessions. Anyone who has had to close a parent’s home, move out of a dorm room, or downsize living arrangements knows what it is to be consumed by stuff, at least temporarily.

Whether we store it, sell it, donate it, or burn it, we still have to deal with a lot of stuff. Jesus wants us to be free of being ruled by our stuff. Everything hinges on how we regard our possessions, our wealth.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.” (v 22-23) The word Jesus uses for “bad” is *poneros* and it denotes evil in a moral or spiritual sense; it can mean “to be stingy”. It’s as though Jesus is saying that if you tend to see people or things from a standpoint of selfish greed (wickedness) or mistrust, then that is what your body and your heart will be full of. The anxiety of such a dark outlook literally takes a person over.

In Galatians 5:16-26 Paul draws a contrast between the sinful nature and what it tends to be full of (immorality, impurity, debauchery, selfish ambition, among other things) — and the life of the Spirit (being full of things like joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). These two lives are opposites — they are literally in conflict with each other. When Jesus speaks of our inability to serve two masters, this is what He is referring to. Money in itself is not a bad or evil thing, but serving money is.

When Jesus talks about having eyes that are good — halos — meaning whole, or healthy, simple, generous — then we will have an outlook that is healthy, generous, and probably simple. Serving God is the safest way to deal with our wealth and possessions. If we regard everything we have as coming from God and not truly ours in the first place, it is much easier to let go because we know there is no limit to God’s generous provision for us. (See 1 Tim 6:17-19) Paul tells Timothy that good works, generosity and sharing whatever wealth we have is what it means to store up treasure in heaven. Our treasure can consist of things like wisdom, spiritual maturity, compassion, abilities and God-given talents. Sharing ourselves is certainly an intangible wealth that counts as treasure in heaven. These are sources of wealth Jesus works into our lives for the express purpose of serving Him by serving others — publicly, in our businesses, in our families, on our campuses, in our schools and in our worship. Being preoccupied with the joy of God in our hearts, as Solomon put it, sounds like a truly freeing, abundant way to live — and the very definition of Kingdom Ambition.

What is most deceptive about money, earnings, and how it can become too important to us? The burden of providing for a family, or your own tuition expenses, or leaving something for your children is a very real concern for most of us. How do we trust God in those very things, yet balance our work ethic in

a healthy way? If we're honest, we all have fears related to the loss of wealth in one form or another. How or what have you learned from Jesus' teaching that helps you face down those fears?

**For further encouragement and study: Matthew 13:18-23, Luke 12:16-21, Matthew 19:21-30*

Application

Here God is referred to as Master. Our service to God is brought to the forefront and positioned against the world's idols, chiefly money. God owns all things, He blesses us with material blessings but also innumerable other categories of blessings too! Blessings in relationships and in our emotional, spiritual, physical lives — God is Master of it all.

List the areas of your life that have been dominated by service to money. On the opposite column describe what those areas would look like if they were dominated by God.

Money

God



WEEK 8: OCTOBER 30–NOVEMBER 5

Reflection

Read: Matthew 6:25-34

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on... which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?

Kingdom Peace

God knows the world, knows our needs, knows the measure of our days, so this instruction about anxiety gets to the heart of why we might be worriers. If we are worried about how to provide for ourselves — food, clothing, shelter, health — we might want to examine where we are actually placing our trust. Jesus wants to get at our motives and our heart again. We are supposed to do our part, working for wages to provide for ourselves, our families and communities; that is common sense. What Jesus is warning against is worrying that we won't have enough. And that comes from a place of wondering if God will come through for us; He might not give us everything we want. We can fall into believing that God might be holding out on us for not giving to us as we'd like to be given which reveals a lack of trust that He is good or that His interests towards us might not align with our interests. Our wants can hijack our faith, leading us down the path of self-reliance, and catering to our own plan, rather than trusting in God's guidance and provision.

Jesus gives us a solution to worry: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (v 33). If we seek God first — taking seriously the impact we can have in the world, forsaking emotions that are destructive, living generously, living prayerfully — we find a security and peace that is to be found nowhere else. Paul repeatedly makes reference to this “peace that passes understanding.” (Philippians 4:4-7) He goes on in that passage with what we are to set our minds on: “whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise... (Philippians 4:8)

All of us know what it is to worry about a problem we don't see how to deal with or a relationship we don't know how to manage. But focusing our minds

on God truly does transform us. It is the most blessed of lives, trusting in the Father who knows our frame, and the details of our daily lives. He is the living God, omnipresent, omniscient, but this trusting-in-God life takes practice — daily practice. It doesn't come naturally to pray through our days, but we can learn. It doesn't come naturally to acknowledge that whatever we have is a gift from God, but we can remind ourselves. In the face of opposition and struggles, where do you go for counsel, for encouragement? The psalmist would turn us back to God's word: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, not stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does he prospers" (Psalms 1:1-3).

Reading, studying and praying God's word and taking real enjoyment and encouragement from it is the key to peace in our soul. God reveals Himself through His word. As we let that word work on us and in us, we come to know Jesus personally. We notice His provision for us. We sense His presence guiding us, arranging situations we couldn't have managed on our own. We simply cannot truly trust someone we don't know. But seeking Him first and allowing Him to order our days puts us in a place of safety and rest rather than anxious gathering, and greater and greater trust in God develops! We will have worries and troubles in our days, but we have a Friend to bring them to, and He has overcome the world. (John 16:33)

What can you identify as one thing that is guaranteed to cause you anxiety and worry?

Is there anything, any practice that you hadn't thought of before as you listen to Jesus' teaching?

What is one thing you'd like to do differently as you look at how you spend your time, or money?

**For further encouragement and study: John 14, Proverbs 16:1-9*

Application

Set aside 15 minutes to pray a centering prayer in the presence of Jesus. A time to intentionally stop and rest - not 'do.'

1. Get comfortable.
2. Choose a simple word or phrase from the Gospels that captures God's love for you (i.e love, grace, it is finished, peace, whole, washed, resurrected)
3. Drop the worries and concerns from your mind. Let them fall away. Instead, repeat this word or phrase to help center you on the presence of God in your very moment.
4. Spend time resting in God's presence...wait patiently there. Ask Him to speak to you and give you his peace.
5. If you have longer than 15 minutes, take it.
6. Take a few notes about your time with God.



WEEK 9: NOVEMBER 6–12

Reflection

Read: Matthew 7:1-20

*“Judge not...Do not give to dogs what is holy...
ask...seek...knock...enter by the narrow gate...
beware of false prophets...recognize them by their fruits.”*

Kingdom Attitude

We are made to live and work and grow together in community. Because Jesus was always going to the outermost circle of those around him, speaking to them, teaching them, drawing them closer, we need to learn how to operate in a similar fashion. Jesus had His core group, the twelve apostles, but He turned no one away who wanted to listen and learn.

The instruction to ‘judge not’ is not that we aren’t to assess and discern; we’ve been given a brain and the ability to use critical thinking. The warning is more against our tendency to be judgmental — to play God, deciding who is right and worthy and who is not. When we meet someone who has made a mess of their life and in our hearts we put them down as a failure with no thought to our own potential to have made the same sorts of blunders, or we are being judgmental. Jesus is exhorting us to be generous with our brothers and sisters in the faith, not setting ourselves up as superior, but rather as a fellow sojourner, subject to failure and weakness ourselves.

If we are seeking to help another in faith (getting the speck out of their eye), while minimizing our shortcomings and trusting our own righteousness (having a plank in our eye), then we may be hypocritical in our actions. We all have a tendency to judge others more harshly than we’d judge ourselves. We see the faults in others that we cannot always recognize in ourselves, but if we humbly acknowledge our own spiritual neediness, forsaking playing “junior Holy Spirit” in someone’s life, we might actually have something to offer another.

The shocking reference to “dogs” and “pigs” when Jesus is obviously talking about people is one we need to handle carefully. Jesus came to give His life as a ransom for many, but He also knew exactly what men carried around in their

hearts. “... But Jesus ... did not entrust himself to them for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:23-25).

We need to recognize who or what we are dealing with, being wise with our words, our actions, and our boundaries. Jesus is not telling us we shouldn't be sharing the gospel; He's telling us to beware of those who, like wild animals, behave with base motives or instincts. “Dogs” as referred to here aren't well-behaved, and “pigs” were unclean, filthy animals to the Jews. We need to recognize that some listeners may have worldliness and self at their center, rendering them incapable of responding fruitfully. It is a stern warning, calling for prayerful discernment and good boundaries.

Seeking conjures the picture of physically going, and knocking at the door is more emphatic yet. We can trust a good Father to give us good answers. James, the Lord's brother, in his candor and directness puts it this way, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:5-8).

Have you ever wondered what it must have been like for James to realize that his older brother actually was who he claimed to be? We each need enough self-awareness to entertain the possibility that we might be mistaken about a person, or a situation, that we've passed judgment on, particularly when emotions are running high.

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (v 12). By summing this up as the entire Mosaic Law and God's Word through the Prophets, Jesus is telling us this is the attitude necessary for anyone who would live in God's Kingdom. It's not easy, as He goes on to describe the narrow gate and the hard way that leads to life. Few of us do this without God's help and the Holy Spirit living inside us. We know how we want others to treat us, but humbling ourselves to treat others as we'd like to be treated doesn't always come naturally.

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Romans 12:3). To have sober judgment is to be self-controlled with good self-awareness. We are not allowed to judge each other's faith. We are not allowed to assess one

another's standing in the Kingdom. Rather, with humility and grace, as we would want to receive it, we extend grace and understanding to those with whom we are in community. Sometimes the very toughest place to do that is at home with those who know us best. Jesus doesn't want pretenders in His Church. "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness ..." (2 Peter 1:3 NIV).

If Jesus has already given us what we need to display Kingdom attitudes, we can all gently and with kindness help each other gather and utilize those gifts, display them in the world, and bring glory to God in the process.

Have you ever been the object of someone's judgmental attitude? How did you respond?

Who, or what kind of person could you ask, 'What's it like to live with me?'

What is one safeguard from this passage we can use to help us with healthy boundaries in difficult relationships?

**For encouragement and further study: 1 Peter 5:5b-11, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1*

Application

Jesus' message is clear. First take a long look in the mirror, then worry about helping your brother or sister overcome sinful obstacles. Take 10 minutes and pray for God to open your eyes to the blind spots and 'logs' you have stuck in your own eyes. After praying, make a list of the areas that God revealed to you.

When able, go to a person who knows you and whom you trust to tell you the truth. Share your list with them and ask them to, lovingly, affirm or deny your list - while adding to it if necessary.

Continue to pray through your new list for the next several weeks, asking God to help you grow and overcome by the power of his Spirit.

Blind Spots:



WEEK 10: NOVEMBER 13–19

Reflection

Read: Matthew 7:21-29

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

Kingdom Commitment

Imagine you are the leader in the following true story:

You signed up for the annual Serve the City day. Hoping to serve with your small group, your friends, you find that somehow you’ve been separated from them and placed in a completely different venue than you had anticipated or wanted. Now you’re in charge of a group of people you’ve never met, going to a home with vague instruction about the homeowner needing help with yardwork. (And why did I sign up for this, you think, as you drive off fighting down a little disappointment, maybe frustration. You don’t even have the equipment to do the task you’ve been assigned.)

When you arrive, the fear is evident in the homeowner’s eyes, her body language is telling you she is totally unprepared and uncomfortable with this invasion. As you speak with her, trying to discover what it is she’d like help with, you discover she’s been railroaded into being a ‘project’ — she’s terribly fearful that her tangled mess of a yard will be devastated by our presence and desire to clean it up. But she knows her neighbors are frustrated with the appearance of her house. In talking to her, you discover she’s been battling cancer for over seven years; she writes poetry; she’s a single mom with a teenage son who spends all his time on his computer games. Her house is messy, dark, rather slovenly. Most of her plants lie in a confused mess on her back deck which is rotting, and the front of the house is completely overgrown with untrimmed vines, weeds, and the occasional sad flowering bush here and there, gifts from former friends she met in the cancer treatment room — living things that might remind her of them after they’ve passed. All your ideas about

doing this project with efficiency and skill evaporate. You speak to the team, you coax her to come out and meet everyone, describe the plants, what she might like along the non-visible walk covered in weeds. Everyone realizes she views her yard with love and tenderness where you had only seen an eyesore fifteen minutes ago. But doing the work the way she'd like is turning this half-day project into an entire day. The amazing thing that happens is she begins to smile — she had no idea how pretty it would be to have flowers along the walk to her door, to be able to see the stepping stones in a serpentine pattern bring order and beauty to her little postage stamp of a yard. But you know your morning team leaves after lunch, so what then?

The afternoon crew is completely different, a little weary, ready to knock out this project and move on. You've not met them, only been told they will meet you at the address. Power equipment arrives. You try to get as many instructions out as possible but people are seeing what needs to be done and getting after it with efficiency, checking in to tell you they know how to help. The homeowner has hidden herself inside, terrified of so many new people who don't seem to see her or her precious plants — and you discover at the end of the afternoon that an entire area of wildflowers has been weed-whacked to the ground. You didn't even know anyone went to the backyard. You had only asked people to gather the household junk and debris discarded in the woods and bring it to the street. Several cars and pick-ups pull out. The teams are hugging each other for a job well-done. "Let's do this again!" "So glad to help!" "Doesn't it look nice now?" As you walk to the front door to say good-bye, your lady has tears streaming down her face. She shows you what happened, the areas she asked you not to touch, the precious flowering bushes that have somehow completely vanished. You leave knowing the sting of having disappointed her, determined to set it right somehow, realizing you've just witnessed how helping can actually hurt someone. But the biggest sting is that you know you were supposed to be representing Christ, and it didn't feel loving; for her, it felt like a takeover.

Taking the time to simply be with someone can be inefficient and time-consuming; it can feel frustrating and seem to be without merit. But in Jesus' economy, the value we place on the invisible ones, taking the time to hear a lonely, ill lady's heart, is priceless, and it is a distinguishing mark of a resident of the Kingdom of God. The afternoon team certainly had no intention of doing harm. They only wanted to do a good work and to be productive and have something to show for their day of serving. But that day evidenced a vital truth.

Heart obedience is unmistakable. Doing good works is evidence of faith, no question, as James reminds us: "...the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing" (James 1:25). Heart obedience focuses on the person of Christ, the fact that He is Savior. But serving one another humbly and in a loving manner is critical (Galatians 5:17). Serving that way is only possible when the foundation of our lives centers on Christ. Our foundations are hidden. We can look terribly spiritual and respectful, even productive. But Jesus knows our hearts, and He demands complete commitment to Him. He knows it is the only safe and sure way for us to avoid eternal destruction. He demands a total, unreserved commitment, a united heart. And He promises beauty and wisdom and light. How can we not respond to such an offer?

**For further encouragement and study: John 15: 7-17, Revelation 22:12-17*

As we come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, what is one thing you will take away from your study?

Application

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them...”

Take a review through the last 10 weeks. Which Kingdom Values do you feel you need to focus on the most?

Jesus said these words so that we might be built up by them and bear fruit for the Kingdom. Pray that God would press down deep into your heart the values of His eternal kingdom. Think about how you will focus (or refocus) on these key areas of your life over the next many months. Put a game plan together to keep them on the forefront of your mind. Consider getting a friend or mentor to become a soundboard for your journey, someone who can encourage and press you on.

The challenge is set. The stakes are high. The reward is the Kingdom, now and forevermore!



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