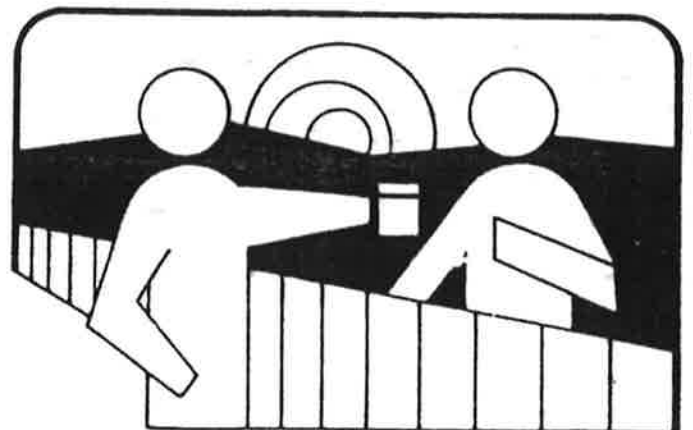
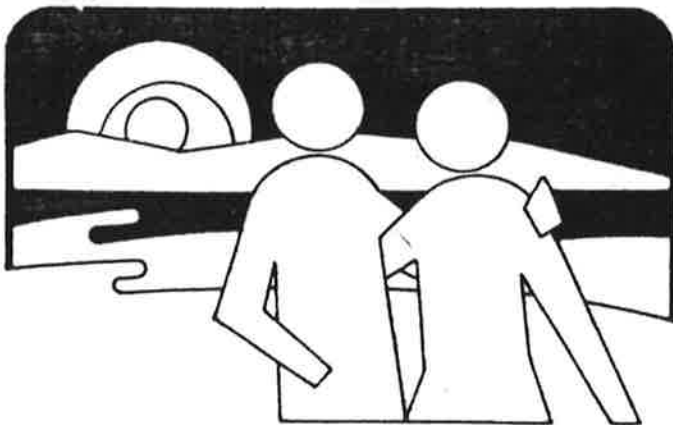
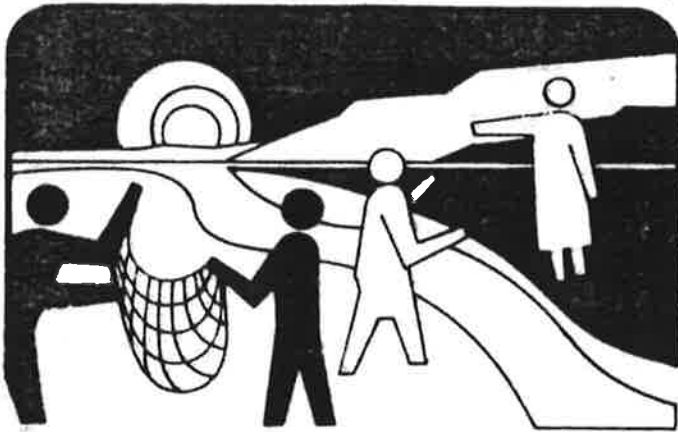


Exploring The Road Less Traveled

written by Ray Bystrom



EXPLORING THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29)

Introduction

In the New Testament, Jesus calls himself "the Way" (John 14:6) and Christians are called the followers of "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 24:13). Therefore, it is quite natural to think of the Christian life as a journey. It's a journey to a chosen destination described by Jesus when he said, "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly" (John 10:9). But in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it very clear that traveling with him meant walking the road less traveled (Matthew 7:13-14). He calls us to follow him but to follow him is to walk a narrow road, a road very few people are wise enough to walk.

Exploring the Road Less Traveled is an eight week inductive study of the Sermon on the Mount. It is designed as an exploration of the message of Jesus' great sermon (Matthew 5:1-7:29). His sermon is concerned with life lived under God. It deals with identity questions: Who are you? Whose are you? To what are you called? From what are you called? How can you be both free and responsible? What is true righteousness? How does motive determine piety as authentic or phony? What is the proper place of the material? By what tests do we ultimately stand or fail? What really matters?

It's important to hear the SM correctly. Are we just to take it as it is? A few have tried to take it literally, even to cutting off an offending hand. Probably nobody has really tried to take it all literally. Those who say, "The SM is all the Bible I need," must never have read it. Not one of us comes even close to conforming to the demands of the sermon: purity of the heart, turning the other cheek, giving away all we have to anyone asking, going the second mile, loving our enemies, and being perfect as God is perfect!

Perhaps the best approach is to hear the SM as both gift and demand, leaving us in an unresolved tension between being accepted as we are yet called to perfection. As someone once said, "God accepts as we are but he doesn't leave as we are." Salvation is God's gift, absolutely free. It is also absolute demand. It's like target practice for a soldier; the bull's eye is the only proper target, however much or often it is missed. The soldier dare not shoot for anything except perfection but is accepted though short of perfection. There is no contradiction between perfection as a goal and acceptance as we are. The SM can be read this way, and such a reading will be true to the SM and the tension it creates in normal daily life. So do not explain the SM away or water it down or pretend that we actually measure up to it. It is a call; not an accomplishment. But the call is an earnest call, not a game.

In preparing this guide I have drawn extensively from a series of sermons previously prepared for God's people at Killarney Park Church in 1985 for which I used many secondary sources. However, I owe my greatest debt to the insights of John R.W. Stott's Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (1978).

Small Group Schedule

Matthew 5:1-12

Week One (July 6)	A Christian's Character	Matthew 5:1-12
Week Two (July 13)	A Christian's Influence	Matthew 5:13-20
Week Three (July 20)	A Christian's Righteousness	Matthew 5:21-32
Week Four (July 27)	A Christian's Righteousness (cont.)	Matthew 5:33-48
Week Five (August 3)	A Christian's Prayer	Matthew 6:1-18
Week Six (August 10)	A Christian's Ambition	Matthew 6:19-34
Week Seven (August 17)	A Christian's Relationships	Matthew 7:1-12
Week Eight (August 24)	A Christian's Commitment	Matthew 7:13-29

How to Use this Guide

This eight week study guide has been designed for use in small home group discussion meetings, although it is easily adaptable for those of you who wish to use it for individual study and reflection. It is intended for men and women who want to grow and who are willing to give their small group high priority and are able to invest the time and energy required.

Commitment As you begin this eight week study of the Sermon on the Mount, ask yourself how serious you are about working with ideas and personal challenges in a group setting. Are you willing to venture sharing some of your feelings and experiences? Will you give priority to preparation, attendance and participation? It will be an exciting process, worth all the effort you put into it.

Preparation The material assumes that you will participate in eight group sessions. You will derive maximum benefit from your group experience if you are able to spend between 1 to 2 hours in advance preparation, reading the biblical text for the week and working your way through each question before the group meeting. The Leader's Guide, which is not an "answer book" but rather a "guide" to the meaning of the biblical text, is found at the end of the Study Guide. The more thoroughly you prepare the more benefit will come to you in the group sessions themselves.

Time From past experience I have found two-hour sessions to be most valuable and recommend that time frame, though I suspect that some groups may be forced to work within narrower time constrictions. But whatever time is agreed upon, will you commit yourself to regular and prompt attendance? Sessions should start and end on time and, as an act of courtesy, you should phone your group leader before the meeting if you will not be able to attend.

Reflection Time will normally be provided in the opening minutes to each group session to reflect on what has gone on in the time that has elapsed between sessions - to think about what you have learned or situations that have occurred that affect your ability to focus on the group's new agenda. You need to be sure you are "present" mentally and emotionally as well as physically in order to benefit from each group session.

Guidelines Each group needs clearly delineated norms that are agreed upon and kept visible at each group meeting. Your group experience will be richer, if you keep in mind several important guidelines: (a) Avoid merely theorizing or speaking abstractly about your philosophy of life or Christianity; instead, speak out of your personal experience with God ("This is how I've experienced that," or "This is how that works for me," for example). (b) Use "I" statements, rather than statements like "One finds that ..." or "You find that ...". Simply say, "I think ..." or "I find that ...". (c) Be specific; keep it brief but tell what, when and where when you relate an experience. (d) Allow your thoughts, feelings and reflections to flow. Don't edit yourself or sit in judgement on yourself. (e) Finally, it is imperative that everyone respect confidentiality in the group, so that nothing of a personal nature is reported outside the group.

Group Norms

1. Take responsibility for your own learning.
2. Be regular and on time.
3. Speak only for yourself. Use "I" messages.
4. Listen caringly when others speak.
5. Give everyone opportunity to participate.
6. Respect confidentiality; nothing personal goes outside the group.

Leadership The role of your group leader or leaders does not require that they be experts on the Bible, but that they facilitate the learning process in the group. Hopefully, they will enter as fully as possible into the process, sharing in the exercises with you as they are able. Their modeling from time to time, out of their own experience, should encourage your honesty and sharing of personal insights.

My Commitment

I will take time to prepare myself for each session.
I will take responsibility for what I need to learn.
I will avoid speaking in broad generalizations.
I will share my true feelings and concerns.
I will be succinct and to the point when I share.
I will respect confidentiality outside the group.

(Signed,)

The Sermon on the Mount is a summary description of the kind of person who has said "YES" to Christ's invitation to come and experience God's rule and reign. May God richly bless his people at Cedar Park Church as they explore together Christ's description of the road less traveled.

Grace & Peace,
Ray Bystrom
January '91

A Christian's Character

(Matthew 5:1-12)

The Sermon on the Mount begins by defining who are the members of the new Kingdom - the humble, the heavyhearted, the gentle, the righteous, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, the maligned. At a stroke Jesus sets these over against all the self-righteous people who regarded themselves as the cream of the godly society. We have but to recall the poor and outcast people to whom Jesus constantly ministered if we wish to see these descriptions fleshed out. They were, after all, the little stones which John the Baptist had said God could raise up into the true children of Abraham (Matthew 3:9).

1. What kind of people do we normally consider to be fortunate, happy or blessed?

2. Read Matthew 5:1-12. Compare our normal or typical description of the fortunate or happy with those whom Jesus lists as blessed (vv. 1-12).

3. To be "poor in spirit" (v. 3) is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty and bankruptcy before God. Why is this an indispensable condition for receiving the kingdom of God?

It's not easy for us to admit our spiritual poverty before God. Why is it so difficult?

4. Do the poor in spirit feel the need to mourn? If so, why?

5. How do you think those who mourn will be comforted (v. 4)?

6. The meek person in Scripture is generous in his estimate of others, slow to take offense, able to bear reproach, consistently acting above mere self-interest. How does a true estimate of ourselves (vv. 3-4) lead to meekness (v. 5)?

From the world's point of view, why is it surprising that the meek shall inherit the earth?

7. Has Jesus said anything so far (vv.3-5) that would prompt us to hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6)?

Read Isaiah 46:13; 51:5,6 & 8; 61:10. What does it mean to hunger and thirst for righteousness according to these verses?

8. Jesus says that those who show mercy will be shown mercy (v. 7). Why do you think our treatment of others will affect God's treatment of us?

9. The "pure in heart" seems to refer to freedom from falsehood in our relationships with God and others. Why is it so difficult to live this way?

Why would the promise of "seeing" God be reserved for the pure in heart?

10. What's so appropriate about calling "peacemakers" sons of God (v. 9)?

How is being a peacemaker different from settling for "peace at any price"?

11. Although we might make valiant efforts at peacemaking, what does Jesus say we will experience (v. 10-12)?

Why should this prompt us to rejoice?

12. The Beatitudes stand the world's notion of happiness on its head. Why does the world call miserable those whom Jesus calls blessed?
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13. C.S. Lewis was once criticized for not caring for the Sermon on the Mount. He replied, "As to 'caring for' the Sermon on the Mount, if 'caring for' here means 'liking' or 'enjoying', I suppose no one 'cares for' it. Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledge hammer? I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure."

How have the beatitudes challenged you to be different?

14. Concerning our response to the Beatitudes, imagine this scenario: Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and, gathering them around him, he taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, Blessed are the meek, ... Blessed are they that mourn, ... Blessed are the merciful, ... Blessed are they that thirst for justice, ... Blessed are you when you suffer, ... Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven."

Then Simon Peter said: "Are we supposed to know this?"
And Andrew said: "Do we have to write this down?"
And James said: "Will we have a test on this?"
And Phillip said: "I don't have any paper."
And Bartholomew said: "Do we have to turn this in?"
And John said: "The other disciples didn't have to learn this!"
And Matthew said: "May I go to the rest room?"
And Judas said: "What does this have to do with real life?"
And Jesus wept.

(Source unknown)

Prayer: "Lord I need to remember what it is to be blessed, fortunate and happy. It is not necessarily well off. Nor are being in mourning, being persecuted, or being maligned in themselves signs of well being. Instead, to be blessed is to be in Christ, to be in the Kingdom, regardless of the state of my external affairs. It is to be ours in faithfulness despite what happens to us in the world. Therefore, we can mourn and say, 'Yet how fortunate I am,' or we can be ill used and think, 'There is still room for happiness.' Let the truth of this insight sustain me through this day and the next. In the name of Jesus, who died for what he taught. Amen"

A Christian's Influence

(Matthew 5:13-16)

Who are you? Whose are you? What is your mission? Many people have a low self-image. Many reject themselves, seeing no worth in themselves. Many think they must earn the right to be. Jesus says, "YOU ARE the salt of the earth.... YOU ARE the light of the world." Jesus does not say, "You should become" or "you may become." Jesus assures people of their worth before he calls them to mission! He calls people to a new understanding of themselves. He calls them to accept God's affirmation as to who they really are. Decay and darkness do not represent who we really are; such are misdirections of our humanity. "Salt and light" model our true identity. This is who we are.

This puts it all in right perspective. You are! Be what you are! Being determines function. Salt behaves as it does because it is salt. Light shines because it is light. Salt and light "do their thing" simply because they are salt and light. Being has priority over saying and doing; but, if genuine, what a person is will be expressed in what that person says and does. You are salt, light, a city set on a hill. Be what you are! Live in open goodness to the service of people and the glory of God.

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1. Can you think of several ways in which Christians have had a positive influence on society?

2. Read Matthew 5:13-16. Jesus compares his followers to salt (v.13). What does this metaphor suggest about the Church's role in society? ... about the Christian's role in society?
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3. Has anything appeared in the news in recent days to indicate that society is rotting and decaying?
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4. Bernanos in his famous novel, The Diary of a Country Priest, said that it is significant that Jesus did not say, "You are the honey of the world, but rather, the salt of the earth." Do you agree? Is it our function to be the honeypot of the world, adding sweetness and sugar to the bitterness of life (OR) is it our function to be the salt of the earth, adding some bite and sting at the points where men and women have sore spots?

5. Recall the message that God gave to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon through the prophet Jeremiah: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Give some practical illustrations of how we function as salt where we live, work and play.

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6. What happens "if the salt loses its saltiness" (v.13)?

It has been shown scientifically that salt in itself never loses its saltiness or seasoning capacity. In Biblical days, however, there were no refineries so salt often got mixed in with impurities which rendered it useless. What causes Christians to "lose" their saltiness (v. 13)?

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7. Rebecca Manley Pippert wrote a book with the title Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the World. What does the title of her book suggest about the Christian's ability to be salt?

8. Jesus also compares the Christian to light (v.14-16) and mentions two sources of light. What is the function of light in his two illustrations?

9. How does the church's role as light complement its role as salt?

10. In what ways can we promote the spread of truth in the world?

11. Why might we be tempted to hide our light (v. 14-15)?

How does the world react to light? See John 3:19-21.

12. What does Jesus say is the result of people seeing our good deeds (v. 16)?

Salt is lost in the flavouring of food; we do not praise the salt but the taste of the food. Light is overlooked when it reveals the contents of a room; we do not praise the light but the items on display. What does all of this imply for the Christian? for the local church?

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13. Is there any significance to the order in which Jesus describes the Christian's relationship to the world - first, salt, and then, light?

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14. Do you see any relationship between the beatitudes and our role as salt and light in society?

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15. Os Guinness recently wrote, "We are not living in a great age of faith, such as the Reformation or the first Great Awakening. (Two points make our cultural situation very different) On the one hand, our society is at a turning point, principally because of the decreasing influence of faith on society. On the other hand, the church is at a turning point, principally because of the increasing influence of society on faith." Do you agree or disagree? Why?

In what ways are you already functioning as salt and light?

Is there a bowl or a basket you need to remove so that your light can shine more effectively?

Is there one thing you can do to have a stronger influence as salt and light?

Prayer: "Lord, being salt and light is a problem to me. I am so inclined to seek people's attention for myself. I want to have my flavour brought out and my qualities illuminated. Help me to discover the richness of life when it is dedicated to helping others to see you instead of me, so that they may praise your name instead of mine. Through Jesus, who always reminded us that what he did was through your presence and not his own power. Amen.

A Christian's Righteousness

(Matthew 5:17-32)

The scribes and the Pharisees set themselves apart from the rest of the population in terms of obedience to God's word. Indeed, the very word "Pharisee" probably means "separatist". They calculated that the Scriptures contain some 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they aspired to keep them all. The average man in Palestine in Jesus' day said to himself, "Ah, there is very little hope of my ever being as good as the scribes and the Pharisees. They are outstanding; they live exemplary lives."

But the scribes and Pharisees were far better at arithmetic than true obedience. Many of them were legalists who measured piety by compliance with such rules as those for Sabbath, fasting, kosher food, and ritual purification. Others among them were libertines who asserted their freedom from the law. They tried to make the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive.

In truth the Bible is negated by the legalism that reduces it to a set of rules and regulations and by the libertinism that wants all gift and no demand. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus rejects both fallacies; he offers a third option. The only way to honour the Bible is to seek its underlying intention and then incorporate its purpose into one's personal lifestyle. In other words, Jesus came to deepen not destroy the law's demands. In today's passage (5:17-32) he explains the true intentions of the sixth and seventh commandments (the prohibitions against murder and adultery) as well as God's intention for marriage. In each case Jesus shows or illustrates how Christian righteousness surpasses pharisaic righteousness.

1. Every family has its rules & regulations. As a kid which family rule did you just love breaking? Why?

2. Read Matthew 5:17-20. What do you think Jesus means when he says, "I have not come to abolish them, that is, the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them"?

3. The Pharisees were famous for their righteousness and meticulous attention to every detail of the Law. How in the world can our righteousness possibly surpass theirs (v. 20)?

4. Read Matthew 5:21-26. "We can think of Jesus fulfilling the Law in this way; Jesus treats the Law as if it were a great arc. He extends the line of the arc around to its fulfillment, the circle for which it was originally designed" (Earl Palmer). In verses 21-22, how does Jesus' illustration complete the circle?



5. Jesus gives a practical application of vv. 21-22 in vv. 23-26. What do these verses teach us about broken relationships?

If we offend someone, why is it so important that we go to him or her immediately?

6. Read Matthew 5:27-30. How does Jesus complete the circle of the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14)? In other words, what according to Jesus is the commandment's positive and greater purpose?

7. Is Jesus advocating that his disciples should literally maim their bodies in order to preserve fidelity in relationships? If he doesn't intend that we should follow such severe advice literally, then what does he intend?

8. Why do you think divorce is such a problem today? How has divorce touched your life?

9. Read Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9. In Jesus' day, Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was permitted only in extreme cases. Rabbi Hillel taught that it was permitted for any and every reason. Indeed, a man could divorce his wife if she burned his supper or if he found a prettier woman. How does this help us to understand the Pharisees' "test" question (19:3)?

10. Jesus points back to the first marriage in Genesis. What does it teach us about God's intention for marriage (19:4-6)?

11. The Pharisees refer to Moses' instructions about divorce as a "command" (19:7). What does Jesus' reply teach us about divorce (19:8)?

In what ways might divorce reveal the hardness of our hearts?

12. What similarities and differences are there between 19:9 and 5:31-32?

How do these verses stress the seriousness of divorce and how do they differ with today's view on marriage and divorce?

13. In Thornton Wilder's play, The Skin of our Teeth, the character Mrs. Antrobus says to her husband, "I didn't marry you because you were perfect ... I married you because you gave me a promise." She takes off her ring and looks at it. "That promise made up for your faults and the promise I made to you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage." Do you agree with Mrs. Antrobus? Why?

14. In each of the above illustrations (5:21-32), Jesus has preserved the worth and meaning of human personality and relationships. Neither anger, nor lust, nor divorce are permitted to destroy relationships with other people. How would your parents or children evaluate you on this passage? How could you grow in these areas of your life?

Prayer: Lord, I am an unworthy person, I have accepted the gift of your Kingdom without really considering what is an appropriate lifestyle for me as a child of the Kingdom. I am afraid I have obscured for others the true vision of life in the Kingdom. I have robbed myself of the joy of total commitment to your way. Now that I see this, help me to catch the real spirit of the Kingdom. Let me not live with the law as a requirement to be met but as a guideline to go beyond. Through Jesus, whose understanding of these things sustained him even in the horror of crucifixion. Amen.

A Christian's Righteousness

(Matthew 5:33-48)

In the previous study Jesus shows that a true relationship with God is linked with how we relate to other people. A person cannot shove another person aside on the way to the altar of God's presence. To despise another person as worthless is in essence to "murder" that person. Also, reducing another person to a mere sex object is a form of adultery. Thirdly, Jesus affirms the permanence of marriage as one way of honouring our marital partners.

The next three illustrations of a true righteousness are found in Matthew 5:33-48. This passage is considered by many to be the highest point of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' words are admired by some and despised by others. He calls us to tell the truth, to meet evil with good and to love our enemies. Nowhere is the challenge of the road less traveled more obvious. Nowhere is the uniqueness of the Christian way more evident. Nowhere is the need for the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) greater.

1. When you were a child did Mom or Dad ever make a promise to you which they did not keep? How did you feel?

2. Read Matthew 5:33-37. How might the use or abuse of oaths be connected with the subject of marriage & divorce?

3. It's clear from Matthew 23:16-22 that the Pharisees considered some oaths binding and some not. Why is Jesus opposed to making oaths (Matthew 5:34-37)?

4. Why should oaths be unnecessary for Jesus' followers? What should replace oaths or vows? Why?

Is it wrong for the Christian to take an oath in all situations? What about making an oath in a courtroom or making an oath of allegiance?

5. As a kid, what sort of fights did you get into? How would you describe yourself in those fights: Mike Tyson or "Chicken Little"? Who?

6. Read Matthew 5:38-42. Jesus' quotation, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth", comes from Exodus 21:23-25 (with parallels in Leviticus 24:19-20 and Deuteronomy 19:21). The OT law in question is the so-called "lex talionis." It was a law for the judges to employ in the context of a courtroom as is crystal clear by the wording of Exodus 21:22 & 22:8,9. It was not authorization for individuals to even the score; it gave no comfort to a private spirit of retaliation; it was not discharged by persons swept up in a personal vendetta. So how would this instruction to Israel's judges clarify the meaning of justice?

How would the "lex talionis" limit the extent of revenge?

7. The Pharisees took this principle of just retribution out of the law courts where it belonged and introduced it into personal relationships where it does not belong. They tried to use it to justify personal revenge; they asked how far may my personal retaliation extend without breaking the law? What might be the consequences of this kind of behaviour by the Pharisees?

8. Jesus seems to go beyond the law of retaliation by suggesting that we should be prepared to return good for evil: turn the other cheek, give more than is asked, go the second mile. Isn't this unrealistic & impractical? What is accomplished by turning the other cheek or going the second mile?

9. How do we reconcile Christ's call to nonretaliation with the responsibility of the state to punish the evil doer (Romans 13:1-5? That is, is Jesus' teaching of pacifism intended for individuals only? Nations also? Both? Would Jesus resist a Hitler? If so, how?

10. As a kid, who was your Public Enemy #1? Why? Today, who is toughest for you to love? Why?

11. Read Matthew 5:43-48. Verse 43 is an allusion to Leviticus 19:18 but it (verse 43) is a blatant perversion of the OT Scriptures because of what it adds and what it omits? What does it add and what does it omit?

12. Notice that the object of one's love in Leviticus 19:18 is one's neighbour whereas the object of one's love in Matthew 5:44 is one's enemies. What reasons does Jesus give for loving our enemies (44-48)? Why should I be neighbourly to someone who is unneighbourly to me?

13. Our Lord concludes this portion of the Sermon on the Mount with the words: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." How can we attain perfection like His? Is it even worthwhile to try?

Prayer: Lord, my mind has known the truths of these words for a long time, but I have forgotten them in my spirit. Rescue me, I pray, from the inadequacy of merely doing what is required, and give me the great joy of living honestly, generously, selflessly and lovingly, as you live. Through Jesus, who is perfect mercy. Amen.

A Christian's Prayer

(Matthew 6:1-18)

In the preceding passage (5:17-48), Jesus focuses his attention on moral righteousness; he says that true righteousness in the moral realm lies not in fulfilling the demands of the Law but in going beyond them. In the present passage, Jesus shifts his focus to "religious" righteousness; he warns against mere external religion - practicing our religion in order to be seen by others.

Therefore, when we give gifts to the poor & needy (6:1-4), we are to do it quietly so that one hand doesn't know what the other is doing. When we pray (6:5-6), we are to do it without ostentation - even in a small room with the door shut. When we fast (6:16-18), we are not to screw our faces up and try to look like martyrs in our faith; we are to put on happy faces and not let on to others that we are fasting at all.

A sharp line exists between Matthew 6:5-6 and 6:7-15. As part of the trilogy on almsgiving, prayer and fasting, vss. 5-6 deal only with the problem of overcoming the self-serving motive in prayer. At vs. 7 a new problem is introduced, the pagan or heathen misunderstanding of the purpose of prayer. The problem here is really a misunderstanding of God. The model prayer is a corrective in the sense that it illustrates the motives, concerns, and manner proper to prayer (6:9-15).

1. (a) Can you think of an occasion when you gave something to someone in secret? What did it feel like? (b) What were you taught & who taught you to pray when you were a child? (c) How long could you make it without your favourite flavour of ice cream?

2. Read Matthew 6:1, 2-4, 5-6 and 16-18. We will read 6:7-15 later. In Matthew 6:1 Jesus warns us not to do our "acts of righteousness before men to be seen by them." However, in Matthew 5:16 he said, "let your lights shine before men that they may see your good deeds...." Is Jesus contradicting himself? Explain.

3. Jesus illustrates the principle of Matthew 6:1 by focusing on three religious practices: giving to the poor (2-4), praying (5-6), and fasting (16-18). Jesus assumes Christians will give alms (6:2). But he instructs us to give to the poor (2-4) so that "our left hand does not know what our right is doing." What does he mean?

4. In 6:5 Jesus assumes Christians will pray. But he instructs to avoid the prayerstyle of the hypocrites in his day. What was wrong with the way the hypocrites prayed in Jesus' day? How is our praying to be different (6:6)?

5. In 6:16 Jesus assumes Christians will fast. Why and how should we fast (16-18)?

6. After each piece of instruction on giving, praying and fasting, Jesus concludes by saying, "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (6:4b, 6b, 18b). How does the reward the Father gives us differ from the reward we receive from men?

7. Now read Matthew 6:7-15. How does the pagan prayer problem of "babbling" differ from persistent prayer of the kind Jesus himself prayed (Matthew 26:44)?

How might we be playing manipulative prayer games with God today?

8. Since Jesus states that God already knows what we need, why should we pray?

9. What are the two natural divisions of the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13)? What is the focus of each section?

10. In the first section of the Lord's Prayer we are invited to pray to a God who combines fatherly love ("our Father") and heavenly power ("in heaven") and to express our concern for his glory in relation to his name, rule and will. But what does it mean to "hallow his name" (v. 9)?

In what sense is his kingdom still future (v. 10)?

11. In the second section of the Lord's Prayer, we are invited to pray for daily bread, for our forgiveness, and for deliverance from temptation. How is our Father's forgiveness related to our forgiving others (vv.12,14-15)?

13. If God cannot tempt us (James 1:13) and if trials are beneficial (James 1:2), then what is the meaning of Matthew 6:13?

14. Take time now to pray, individually or as a group, using the Lord's Prayer as your model.

Prayer: Lord, I am condemned by this brief prayer which Jesus told us to pray. To pray it, my whole life must be sincerely dedicated to you - must be in fact a prayer. When I pray, I am more wordy because I feel an awkwardness in our relationship - I have not been totally committed to your will in my life. Forgive me, as I hope I am at peace with all persons, and let me glorify your name through an authentic faith in the days to come. Amen.

A Christian's Ambition

(Matthew 6:19-34)

In this section of the SM Jesus teaches in the style of the Old Testament wisdom literature - a series of succinct sayings, images drawn from daily life, and short stories with a brief teaching conclusion. Although this unit is made up of many parts, one theme seems to tie it all together: freedom from materialism or possessions. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus gives urgent attention to what we should do with wealth, put it into the service of other people (Mark 10:21; Matthew 19:21), but here, in Matthew 6:19-34, Jesus is concerned with the problem that wealth poses for us. Wealth cannot sustain us in this life and we can't take it with us. Given the wrong place in our goals, values or priorities, wealth can destroy us. Jesus doesn't teach that the material is bad, for it is not. He does not imply that we have no material needs, for we do. The material has its place to be sure, but we perish with the perishable if we bury our hearts in it.

1. We all tend to be people who treasure what we honour and highly prize; we all have a "treasuring instinct." When you were a child, what did you treasure more than anything else?

2. Read Matthew 6:19-24. According to Jesus, why should we store up for ourselves treasures in heaven rather than treasures on earth (vv.19-21)? Do earthly treasures include insurance policies, investments, savings, and personal property?

How do we store up for ourselves treasures in heaven?

3. In biblical usage the "single eye" stands for generosity (Romans 12:8; II Corinthians 8:2; 9:11,13; James 1:5). The "evil eye" stands for stinginess (Matthew 20:15; Deuteronomy 15:9; Proverbs 23:6). Since the saying about the two eye conditions (verses 22 & 23) comes between Jesus' saying about storing up treasures (vv. 19-21) and serving either God or Money, what does the imagery about the eye mean? What is Jesus saying to us?

4. Why is it impossible to serve two masters - God and Money. Can't we serve God and wealth simultaneously like some people who hold two jobs and are able to meet the demands of both bosses?

5. Jesus begins the next section on worry or anxiety by saying, "Therefore I tell you." How will the choices we make in verses 19-24 affect our capacity to live worry-free lives?

6. Read Matthew 6:25-34. Jesus gives us a warning about our attitude toward material and physical needs. What exactly is Jesus encouraging us to avoid (vv. 25-30)?

7. Why is it foolish to worry about our physical and material needs (25-30)?

8. Jesus seems to be saying in 6:25-34 that if his disciples focus on him, if they make him the center of their existence, they will not want for food or drink or clothes. They'll fare better than the birds and look almost as good as the lilies. The trouble is, God does not seem to provide, at least, not always. Why are so many of his people starving and freezing to death each day?

Does Matthew 25:41-45 or Acts 4:34-35 provide any insights?

9. What questions or issues does this passage raise for you?

10. How has this passage challenged you to re-examine your goals, priorities and ambitions?

Prayer: Lord, help me to look hard into my own life and desires and recognize the dependencies I have surrendered. Are they my home? My family? My job? My education? They are all dear to me. But grant that I may love you so much that none of them stands between us, now or in the future. I am not a Saint Francis of Assisi, Lord. I need to learn to put my faith in you and go forward trustingly. Through Jesus, who gave up all from the very beginning and trusted you completely. Amen.

A Christian's Relationships

(Matthew 7:1-12)

When we become Christians, we become "members of God's family" (Ephesians 2:19; I Peter 4:17). God is "our Father" and our fellow Christians are "brothers and sisters" in Christ. At the same time, we must not forget our responsibility to "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 28:14; Zech. 14:17), that is, to all men. John R.W. Stott makes the helpful suggestion that Matthew 7:1-12 is about the network of relationships into which we are drawn as Christ's followers: our relationship with our brothers & sisters; our relationship with "dogs" and "pigs"; our relationship with our heavenly Father; and our relationship with all people.

1. What makes family relationships unique & special?

2. Read Matthew 7:1-5: Our relationship with "our brothers & sisters". Nathan judged David (2 Samuel 12), John the Baptist judged Herod Antipas (Mark 6:16-29), Paul judged Peter (Galatians 2:11-16), Peter judged Annanias (Acts 5:1-11), and Jesus himself judged the money-changers in the Temple courts (Mark 11:15-19). So, why does Jesus say, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged (7:1)?"

3. Jesus states a principle in Matthew 7:1 - "Do not judge." Then he provides two amplifications of it in 7:2 and 7:3-5. According to Jesus, why should we refrain from making unwarranted condemnations of others?

4. Some Christians, like the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, believe that Jesus is forbidding ALL judgement, even in the law courts. How would you respond to such a suggestion?

5. Under what circumstances should we offer to help remove a speck from another brother's eye (7:5)?

6. Read Matthew 7:6. Our relationship with "dogs" and "pigs". Jesus makes a startling statement when he speaks about "pigs" who trample the pearls beneath their feet and the "dogs" that turn and bite the hand that feeds them. What sort of people does Jesus mean by "dogs" and "pigs"?

7. Some Christians have used our text (7:6) as an argument against admitting unbelievers to the Lord's Supper. For example, a manual to Syrian Christians living around A.D. 100 says, "Let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptised in the name of the Lord. It was concerning this that the Lord said, 'Do not give dogs what is holy.'" How would you respond to this suggestion?

8. Read Matthew 7:7-11. Our relationship with our heavenly Father; The electronic church is winning millions of followers and millions of dollars by pointing to passages like this and telling people that faith need only ask to get. What does Jesus actually promise here (7:7-8)?

9. What is the guiding principle taught by Jesus in 7:9-11?

Can you think of one "good gift" that God the Father has bestowed on you?

10. Read Matthew 7:12. Our relationship with all people. Since the 16th century this saying has been called the "golden rule." It is found in negative form in several other sources. Confucius taught, "Do not do to anyone what you would not like others to do to you." Isocrates taught, "Whatever angers you when you suffer it at the hands of others, do not do it to others." Greek-speaking Judaism taught, "And what you hate, do not do to any one." Rabbi Hillel (about 20 B.C.) summarized the Law as follows: "Whatever is not pleasing to you do not do to anyone else." How does the golden rule (Matthew 7:12) go beyond these commands?

11. How does the golden rule sum up the Law and the prophets (7:12)?

12. Think of a relationship that is currently strained or perhaps even broken. How does this passage help to mend that relationship?

Prayer: Lord, I catch myself rejoicing that I am not so stiffnecked or hardhearted as the Pharisees, and I realize that it is a bad sign. If I loved my neighbour as myself, I would sympathize with their human frailty and pray for their salvation. Forgive me for defining my neighbour in such a way as to make my loving easier and grant that my understanding of the Christian faith may rest more solidly on genuine care for others. Through Jesus, whose love for you and his neighbour led him to a cross. Amen.

A Christian's Commitment

(Matthew 7:13-29)

The Sermon on the Mount began in 5:3-16 with the Beatitudes, a sort of introduction or prologue. Then in verses 5:17-20 Jesus states the theme or thesis of his sermon: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven" (5:20). From 5:21 to 7:11 of the Sermon on the Mount we have the body or main portion of the Sermon. Finally, in 7:12 Jesus employs the Golden Rule as a concise summary of all that he has said in the Sermon. Then the epilogue or conclusion of the Sermon is found in 7:13-27. with a trio of contrasts, the two roads, the two trees, and the two foundations. The three contrasts are an invitation to choose one of the two roads, one of the two trees, one of the two foundations. The epilogue is a call to decision and commitment.

1. We usually think of reading the Bible as beneficial. How might reading the Bible also be dangerous?

2. Read Matthew 7:13-14. Jesus speaks of two roads and two gates that lead to two different destinations - destruction or life. What do the small gate and the narrow road refer to?

3. In what sense is the road with Christ "narrow" and the gate "small"?

4. Why do many people dislike the idea that there is only one gate and one road that leads to life?

5. Read Matthew 7:15-23. Jesus warns us about false prophets and tells us how to identify them. Why is it significant that his warning comes right after his call to walk the road less traveled?

6. According to Jesus, why do people follow "false prophets" (7:15)?

7. Jesus tells us how we can detect false prophets: "By their fruit you will recognize them" (7:16). What kind of fruit does he have in mind?

How does the quality of the fruit reveal the quality of the tree?

8. It's something of a shock to hear Jesus say, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven" (7:21). How can this be, considering our Lord's gracious invitations like, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28), or "Him who comes to me I will not cast out" (John 6:37)? Why does Jesus condemn the people described in 7:21-23? Why is what they say and do ineffective and inauthentic?

9. Read Matthew 7:24-27. In what ways are the two houses similar and different?

10. Why do you suppose Jesus ends his now famous sermon with a parable about two houses? What is he trying to tell us?

11. What do the two builders in Jesus' parable have in common?

12. How do the storms of life reveal what was previously unseen about the two builders and their homes?

13. What is your response to each of the following quotes:

Jim Wallis recently wrote: "The great tragedy of modern evangelism is in calling many to believe but few to obedience."

Soren Kierkegaard once remarked: "It is so hard to believe because it is so hard to obey."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "Only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes."

14. Think of one teaching from the Sermon on the Mount that has challenged you most. How can you begin putting it into practice?

Prayer: Lord, I want the Kingdom to be a reality in my life. I don't want to be like those poor people who spent their lives on the wrong things. Help me to build well on these teachings without turning them into a new legalism. I know these words are to be obeyed now. Yet I recognize that my life does not measure up to the demands of Christ's sermon; but I submit to its claims as proper and right. Through Jesus, whose gift to us on the cross is the surest guarantee of the validity of everything he taught. Amen.

