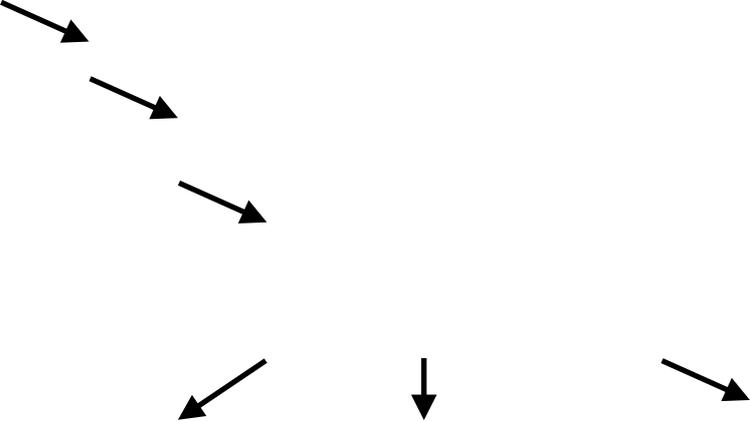


Small Group Leaders Notes

Matthew 5-7



Home Group Leaders Notes
Matthew 5:1-16

Context

- **The Old Testament** - In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses promised Israel that one day God would raise up another prophet like him who would be their teacher. As Jesus goes up on a mountain to teach the people Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is the new Moses who went up Mount Sinai to receive God's law.
- **Chapter 4-5** - In chapter 4 Jesus has been calling on people to repent and preaching the good news of the kingdom (4:17 and 4:23.) The sermon on the mount will show us what it looks like to repent and live our lives in the kingdom under Jesus' rule. Notice the repeated references to the kingdom of heaven in 5:3 and 5:10 and your father in heaven in 5:16. See also how the kingdom of heaven bookends the rest of the sermon (5:20 and 7:21.) Notice too who the initial hearers of the sermon on the mount are (5:1), they are those who are already Jesus' disciples. This is teaching that is first and foremost for disciples rather than enquirers.

Structure

- The passage naturally falls into two sections (v3-12 and v13-16) but these two sections are linked. If v3-12 show the blessings for disciples that come from living by the norms of the kingdom then v13-16 show the blessings for the world that come when we live by the norms of the kingdom. Similarly the good works of v16 will obviously include the beatitudes of v3-12.
- It is important to recognise that the beatitudes are not thrown together randomly. There is structure and order.
 - Notice how v3 and v10 both mention the kingdom of heaven. This bookend structure tells us that everything in v3-10 is about the kingdom of heaven. This helps us to understand what is meant by each of the different beatitudes.
 - It's also important to notice how there is a flow to the beatitudes. For example;

Those who recognise their spiritual poverty... (v3)

Will be those who mourn their sin... (v4)

And those who are conscious of their sin will be meek/humble towards God and others (v5)

And in humility they will then long to walk in righteousness (v6)

Righteousness will be seen in...

Showing Mercy (v7)

Making Peace (v9)

Being Persecuted (v10-12)

Tricky Bits

- **What does 'Blessed' mean?**

- You often hear people say that blessed = happy but that is overly simplistic. Happy is a subjective state that fluctuates but what Jesus is talking about here is objective. Jesus isn't talking about his disciples will feel, instead he is talking about what God thinks about them.
- Thinking that blessed=happy falls down in v4 being to be happy and to mourn are contradictory. In a similar way being persecuted isn't normally a cause of happiness but Jesus does say that it is a mark of being in his kingdom and therefore we are blessed even if we don't feel happy. The command to rejoice and be glad in v12 comes as we see our future reward rather than our present experience.
- ***Does v7 mean that we have to earn God's mercy by being merciful? Isn't that salvation by good works?***
 - We need to start by understanding mercy. "Mercy is a loving response prompted by the misery and helplessness" of someone else (Carson.) We are to show mercy to those who are miserable and helpless. If we don't see ourselves as spiritually helpless (v3) and if we don't mourn our spiritual state (v4) then we won't think we need mercy from God and we won't be inclined to show mercy towards others. Think of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14. The Pharisees doesn't think he needs mercy from God (v11-12) and so he is unmerciful in his contempt for the tax collector (v11.) In contrast the Tax Collector mourns his spiritual poverty and therefore meekly asks for and receives mercy and righteousness (v13-14.)
- ***What does it mean for Jesus' disciples to be the 'salt of the earth'?***
 - In the ancient world salt was primarily used as a preservative and that is the sense Jesus is referring to here. Jesus is therefore saying that as his disciples live out the beatitudes they will have a preserving impact on the world around them. "Christians have the effect of delaying moral and spiritual putrefaction. If their lives conform to the norms of verses 3-12, they cannot help but be an influence for good in society" (Carson.)
 - The next question is "how can salt lose it's saltiness?" Surely if salt is salt then it can't stop being salt? So what does Jesus mean? Whilst salt can't lose it's saltiness it can be adulterated and mixed with other things such as sand. This would then diminish it's saltiness and the impact for good. Jesus is therefore saying that the more Christians live like everyone else then the less impact for good they will have.
- ***"What does it mean for Christians to be the light of the world?"***
 - In John's gospel Jesus says that he is the light of the world so in what sense are his disciples the light of the world as well? By being Jesus disciples we are (notice the present tense) the light of the world. If we don't live distinctive lives shaped by King Jesus then it's as if we are putting our light under a bowl. Instead we are to our let people see that we are living our lives in obedience to King Jesus lives so that through our words and deeds they too might come to glorify God with us.

Big Idea

Living Jesus' way brings God's blessing to us and to the world.

Applications

- **Live counter-culturally for King Jesus** - Jesus is calling us to think and act differently from everyone else. So much of the Sermon on the Mount can be summed up by 6:8 'Do not be like them...' So in the beatitudes...
 - We are to be honest about our spiritual poverty instead of pretending we have more than we really do.
 - We're to mourn our sin and spiritual poverty rather than simply shrugging our shoulders.
 - We're to be humble and meek rather than pushy and proud.
 - We're to hunger and thirst for righteousness more than we hunger and thirst for material things.
 - We're to be merciful rather than holding grudges.
 - We're to strive for purity in a society when wickedness is often celebrated.
 - We're to be peacemakers rather than stirring up conflict.
 - We're to see persecution for Jesus as a blessing rather than a curse.

... Which of these do you find hardest? Which do you find the most counter-cultural?

- **Don't hide away** - Jesus emphasises that living a righteous life for him will bring persecution (v10-12) so it would only be natural for us to want to hide away and keep under the radar. Yet in v13-16 Jesus is clear that if we do that then we will cease to be a blessing to others. This is really quite counterintuitive but vitally important. Publicly living good lives for Jesus will bring persecution, but it will also bring blessing to society (v13) and will be a means that God uses to bring others to salvation (v14-16.)

... Would you prefer to just live for Jesus out of sight? Have there been times when living for Jesus has made life hard or uncomfortable for you? Do people see you living differently for Jesus? Do they know why you do what you do?

- **Recognise that we often fall short** - This will be one of the main applications all the way through the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus shows us how high his standards are and so we need to keep recognising how poor in spirit we are. Jesus begins the whole sermon by encouraging us to recognise our failings and to see that as we do that and mourn our sin and humbly seek forgiveness and righteousness we will enjoy God's blessing.

... Think about this last week. In what ways have you fallen short of the standards Jesus sets? Spend time confessing and mourning your sin and asking Jesus for mercy and forgiveness.

- **Depend on God to help us live the sort of lives he wants us to live** - The more we recognise our spiritual poverty the more we feel how much we need the help of the Holy Spirit to live like this.

... Where do you particularly need the Spirit's help? Spend time asking for his help.

Questions

Starter - “Blessed are the...” How would people normally finish that sentence?

There’s no right answer for this question it’s just designed to get the conversation started. Another way of asking the question might be ‘What kind of people do we aspire to be?’ ‘Who are the successful people?’ ‘Who do people look up to?’

1. Get the group to fill in the table and then discuss it.

Instead of getting everyone to look at every beatitude you could split the group into smaller groups/ pairs and ask each small group to look at 2 or 3 and then report back.

You can download and print off a blank copy of the table for your group from the website. There is also a filled in copy of the table to help you as the leader.

2. Focus on 2 or 3 of the beatitudes that you or the group think are particularly challenging.

A. Why do we find these particularly hard?

B. What it will mean for you to live like this in your day to day life?

For example what will it mean to be a peacemaker if you work in a fractious office?

What will it look like to be someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness? How do we do that?

What does meekness really look like?

3. How does this passage encourage us to live so distinctively for Jesus?

Here you will want to help people to think about the different promises in v3-12. You may need to think about whether we enjoy these promises fully now or whether we have to wait for Jesus’ second coming to fully enjoy these.

There is also a real encouragement to us in v13-16. Living so distinctively for Jesus doesn’t just bring God’s blessing for us but also for others. It would be good to talk about how Christians living good lives can be a blessing to the wider society. It would also be good to talk about how we ARE the light of the world and therefore we have a responsibility to let our good deeds shine before others so that they might come to join us in glorifying God as his children.

Don’t forget to spend time praying at the end about what you have discussed. Pray for one another to be living for Jesus in all the different ways that you have spoken about.

Small Group Leaders Notes

Matthew 5:21-26

Context

• **v17-20 Jesus came to fulfil the law and the prophets**

- V17-20 are difficult verses to understand as they deal with big topics including the relationship between Jesus and the law, the Christian and the law and the Old and New Testaments. We will preach a whole sermon on this passage in January so you do not need to deal with them in your Bible study. Nevertheless it is worth you having thought about what they mean before the study on 5:21-26.
- Jesus says that he has come to 'fulfil the law and the prophets' but what does he mean? Jesus fulfils the Old Testament (the law + the prophets = the Old Testament) in a several ways.
 - First, he fulfils it in the sense that what was predicted came to pass in him.
 - Second, he fulfilled the law in the sense that he fully kept the law. He lived the life that Israel were meant to live. He perfectly kept the law and in that sense fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law. By his death on the cross he offers us his perfect righteousness so that when God looks at us he sees Jesus' perfect record of law-keeping instead of our sin and failure.
 - Third, Jesus fulfils the law in the sense that he 'fills the law full.' In 5:21-48 Jesus takes different commands and shows us what the law really means. He fills full the commandment. Six times Jesus says something like, "You have heard that it was said... But I tell you..." He's not contradicting the law instead he is showing us the depth of the law. What Jesus is contradicting is the minimalist interpretations of the religious leaders. This is clear for 2 reasons. First Jesus says, 'You have heard that it was said' rather than 'It is written.' He's talking about people's interpretations of the law rather than what the law actually says. Second, in v43 he says, 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemies."' The Law didn't tell people to hate their enemies, that was the interpretation of the religious leaders who wanted to make the law as shallow and easy as possible. Jesus comes to 'fill full' the law by showing us the depth of the law's demands. As we will see in our study the 6th command not to murder is not just about the act of murder, it's also about the anger in our hearts that is the root of murder. This is the fullness of the command.

• **Remember the initial hearers are disciples not enquirers**

- With every part of the Sermon on the Mount we must remember that Jesus is talking to people who are already his disciples rather than those who want to become his disciples. Jesus is not telling us what we must do to become one of his disciples. He's telling us how to live once we have become his disciples by his grace.

"Disciples are those who have recognised their own spiritual bankruptcy before God and mourned over their sin. They are those who have received God's mercy and who hunger and thirst to be more like Jesus, living righteous and holy lives. Their aim is to live, clean, devoted lives, at peace with God and bringing his peace to others. However, the key point is that they are not doing all this legalistically: that is, they are not trusting that these characteristics will make them acceptable to God. Rather they are living obediently, out of gratitude to God and drawing on the readily available resources of his grace to live lives that are distinctively different - living at the heart of this law of life." (David Jackman.)

Structure

- Each of the six parts of 5:21-48 follows the same basic structure;
 - Jesus introduces each new unit by saying ***'You have heard that it was said...'*** v21, v27, v31, v33, v38, v43
 - This is then followed by Jesus' filling full the law which begins with the words, ***'But I tell you...'*** v22, v28, v32, v34, v39, v44.
 - In our passage Jesus then provides 2 worked examples of what this means in practice in v23-24 and v25-26.

Tricky Bits

- ***"Didn't Jesus get angry?"***
 - Someone might read this and point to Matthew 21:12 where Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out the traders and money-changers. 'Surely Jesus broke his own commandment?' Similarly they could point to Matthew 23:17 where Jesus calls the teachers of the law and the pharisees 'blind fools'. 'Again, isn't Jesus saying one thing but actually doing another?' Or someone might say, 'How can God tell us not to be angry when he is angry at sin?'
 - In each of those cases Jesus' anger is a righteous anger at sin and injustice. In a world of sin, false teaching, injustice and exploitation there is such a thing as righteous anger. Jesus is not talking about righteous anger when he tells us not to get angry in v22. The examples that he gives in v23-26 show that the anger that Jesus has in mind is the anger that comes from personal relationships. Too often we burn with anger at what other people have done to us rather than how they have treated God or other people.
- ***"What does 'Raca' mean?"***
 - This seems to have been an insult aimed at someone's intelligence. In that sense we could paraphrase it as 'anyone who insults someone's intelligence is answerable to the court.'

Big Idea

Jesus shows that the command 'do not murder' goes deeper than our actions to the anger in our hearts.

Applications

- ***Realise how serious our anger is before God.***
 - Like the Pharisees we can be tempted to read the 6th command and think that because we haven't murdered someone we have kept the command. Jesus shows us that the full meaning of the command extends to the anger in our hearts. In that way this command finds us all out. We may not have killed someone but in our hearts we have all hated someone enough to wish them harm. *'Anger and insults are ugly symptoms of a desire to get rid of somebody who stands in our way'* (Stott.) *'Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer,'* (1 John 3:15.)
 - We must not fall into the trap of thinking that anger only matters when we act upon it. What happens in our hearts matters to God. He is not just concerned with external righteousness but a righteousness that flows from our hearts.

... Are you holding onto anger and bitterness that you need to confess?

- **Take immediate action to mend broken relationships**

- In both of the examples (v23-26) the application is that the person should take immediate action to put things right. In the first example the scene is the temple and the person is to leave their gift right there in front of the altar to go and put things right. Jesus is saying that if we're not reconciled to others then our religion is just a sham.
- Notice that it is the other person who has the problem. In other words Jesus is saying, it's not just enough to control your own temple, we must also not arouse the anger of others.
- How about this for a modern equivalent, *"If you are in church, in the middle of a service of worship, and you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave church at once and put it right. Do not wait till the service has ended."* (Stott)
- In a church the size of BEC it can be easy to let bad relationships and hurts fester. We can grumble and moan either to others or just to ourselves. We can sit somewhere different on Sunday so we don't have to speak to them. We can join another home group or even more to another church. Jesus is telling us to put things right now. Remember 5:9? We show that we're children of God by being peacemakers.
- Reconciliation can take a long time and it can be costly (v25-26) but then it cost God infinitely more to reconcile us to himself. In response to his costly reconciliation he calls us to heal relationships even if that is costly.

... Is there a relationship that you need to fix? What can you do about it today?

... Is there someone who has something against you? What will you do to begin the healing process?

Questions

Starter - We all get angry or annoyed at times. What sort of people and situations get you angry?

The danger with a study like this is that we all pretend that this isn't a problem for us... when it is! Right from the start we need to set an honest tone. The aim of this question is not to celebrate or glorify sin, we just want to set the tone for honest application. You might like to ask people to turn to the person next to them to talk about this question. Make sure you have thought for yourself. Perhaps it's a particular person at work. Maybe it's when you are driving in the car. Maybe queue jumpers make you angry. Be as honest and practical as you can be, this will help the rest of the group.

1. Have a look at v21-22. 'You shall not murder' is the 6th command. How deep does Jesus say that this command goes?

Deeper than we'd like. We're happy for God to say do not murder, but we start to get uncomfortable when Jesus shows us that includes anger and insulting people. It is worth recognising that our instinct, like the Pharisees, is to limit the law so that we are ok.

- What does this teach us about God and his standards? How do his standards compare to ours?

We need to see that God's standards are perfect! They are far higher than ours! This might cause some people to express how hopeless it is because "none of us are perfect!" If the conversation heads in that direction then it is a wonderful chance to remind people of the gospel. None of us measure up to God's standard, we're all poor in Spirit, but as we mourn this, and humbly come to Jesus to be made righteous we find forgiveness, life and a place in his kingdom. Make sure that people see that the law isn't the way into the kingdom but it is the way that Jesus expects us to live once we're in the kingdom.

At this point someone might raise the question of righteous anger. 'Surely Jesus isn't saying all anger is bad?' Hopefully the Tricky Bits should help you to steer the group through this important question without getting sidetracked.

2. In v23-24 who is angry?

It's important to notice the subtly. In this case we are not the ones who are angry, instead it is someone else who is angry with us. We are not just responsible for our own anger, we also must take action when someone else is angry with us.

- Can you think of a contemporary equivalent to this scenario?

See John Stott's example quoted above.

3. Looking at v23-26 how are we to respond when someone has a problem with us?

Though the scenarios are slightly different the basic point is the same - we are to act immediately.

- Why do we find it hard to respond like this?

There are many different reasons. We might not want to make things awkward. We might be worried that it will only make things worse. We might be too proud. We might feel that it wasn't our fault or that it is not our job to make the first move. None of these change what Jesus is saying, we are to take action now.

- Can you think of how Jesus practiced what he was preaching here?

The gospel is all about Jesus taking the costly initiative to put the relationship between us and God right. We broke the relationship, ours was the debt, by rights we should be the ones to make amends, but Jesus took the initiative.

• How will Jesus and the gospel help us to respond to people who make us angry?

When we remember how merciful, kind and forgiving God has been to us then his mercy should begin to change our hearts.

Small Group Leaders Notes

Matthew 5:38-48

Context

- ***Old Testament Background and Legalistic Use***

- In each section Jesus is taking people back to the Old Testament Law and engaging with the interpretation that was given.
- “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’ comes from Exodus 21, Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19. It was designed restrict and limit punishment so that violence didn’t escalate. If someone cut off my brother’s hand I was not to respond by cutting off his head! The other important thing to bear in mind was that it was given to govern the law courts, it was not meant to encourage personal revenge. Yet by Jesus’ day this principle was being used to allow personal revenge. Jesus shows that this is not how the law is meant to be taken.
- ‘Love your neighbour’ was a clear command in God’s law (Leviticus 19:18). By Jesus’ day this has been legalistically twisted so that ‘neighbour’ was very specific. It was therefore seen as right to hate your enemies. Again Jesus will show the true depth of the command means loving everyone even our enemies. See the parable of the Good Samaritan for the same principle.

- ***Jesus is fulfilling the commands***

- In 5:17 Jesus told us that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. That is exactly what Jesus is doing in this section from 5:21-48. He fulfils these commands by keeping them perfectly as seen in not taking revenge on his persecutors but instead praying for them (see Matthew 25:57-68, Luke 23:34, and 1 Peter 2:21-25.) Jesus also fulfils the law by ‘filling full the commands’ and showing us how deep they go. He shows us that we must not legalistically reduce them to superficial commands but seek to keep them fully.

- ***‘Be perfect’***

- 5:48 is the conclusion and summary not just of 5:38-48 but of the whole section that began back in 5:17. In 5:20 Jesus has told us that the righteousness of his disciples is to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees. He has been showing us what this deep surpassing righteousness should look like in 5:21-47. Now in 5:48 he brings the section to conclusion by urging us to live up to our Heavenly Father’s standards of righteousness.

Structure

- Our passage naturally breaks into two sections (v38-42 and v43-47). v48 acts as the conclusion for the whole unit. Each section follows the same basic structure;
 - 1st Jesus lays out the received teaching by using the phrase ‘You have heard that it was said...’ - v38 and v43.
 - 2nd Jesus then gives his fulfilment of the command by using the phrase ‘But I tell you...’ v39 and v44.
 - 3rd Jesus then gives examples to show the depth of the command. ‘If...’ - v39-42 and v46-47.

Tricky Bits

- ***How far are we to take the command ‘Do not resist an evil person’?***
 - Some have taken this command to argue for Christian pacifism saying that Christians should never fight in wars. Others have used a similar line of thinking to say that Christians should not be part of the police. I do not think it would be wise to let the discussion go down these lines because I do not think that Jesus is addressing these sorts of questions. The context of v38-42 show that this is about individuals not taking revenge. Christians are not to retaliate. We’re not to take the law into our own hands. God has ordained the state to punish wrongdoing (Romans 13:1-7). Matthew 5:39 is not about the state but about the individual Christian.
- ***Does giving to the one who asks you mean that we should never use discretion when giving? Must we give to every cause?***
 - Should Christians give to every charity that cold calls them or stops them in the street. Should we give to every homeless person regardless of what they will spend the money on? Should we give to everyone who asks even if the money we give will be spent on the drugs that will ruin their life? Again there will be different opinions on this and we must be careful not to miss what Jesus is teaching. In these verses Jesus is countering a legalistic approach to life. When it comes to our giving he is challenging us not to have a ‘tight-fisted, penny-pinching attitude” (Carson.) Instead of demanding our rights, Jesus’ people are to be those who lay down their rights just as Christ laid down his rights and gave generously for us. In applying this passage we must avoid the legalistic mindset that wants to constantly draw boundary lines. Jesus is wanting to transform the attitude of our hearts not just reshape our boundary lines.
- ***What was the background to ‘going the extra mile’?***
 - In those days a Roman soldier could legally commandeer a civilian to help him, e.g. to carry his luggage. Jesus’ people are to be those who go willingly and are even to go further than we are asked or compelled too. We are to accept the inconvenience joyfully rather than grudgingly. Again we must avoid a legalistic approach to going the extra mile. It would completely miss the point to say, “I’ll go 2 miles but not an inch further.” Jesus wants to change us from being people who say, ‘How far must I go...’ to ‘How far can I go...’ Again this reflects the love and example of the Christ!
- ***How can we be perfect?***
 - There is a real danger that this final verse could sink us. If we approach the Sermon on the Mount as what we need to do to be a Christian then we will despair because Jesus’ standards are impossibly high. In many ways that’s the point! If we think that we can be good enough to earn a place in his kingdom then Jesus is showing us throughout this sermon that we will never be good enough because God’s standard is perfection. He wants us to realise that we cannot measure up to his standard and come to him, mourning our spiritual poverty and seeking the righteousness that only he can give us (5:3-6.) This teaching then is not how to become God’s children but how to live as his children. Notice that God is described as our Heavenly Father. That is not conditional on whether we achieve perfection. It rests entirely on the perfection of Jesus given to us by faith at the cross. Jesus is showing us that as God’s children we are now to strive for perfection and righteousness in thanks to him. The fact that we are to aim for perfection means that we will always have room for improvement. No matter what progress we have made there will always be room for improvement.

We're to compare ourselves to our Heavenly Father, not to our brothers and sisters around us. That will keep us humble and keep us aiming for improvement.

Big Idea

Don't retaliate but instead respond with undeserved love and kindness just as Jesus and your Heavenly Father showed you

Applications

- **Dwell on the selfless love of Christ and the Father for you**
 - These commands are not random. They flow from who God is and what he has done for us so spend time giving thanks for the way that Jesus laid down his rights and did not retaliate for our sake. Rejoice that Jesus practiced what he preached and he did it for our sake! It is in response to him that we are to seek to obey Jesus' commands.
 - Similarly we are to dwell on the common grace of God who lovingly provides for everyone even his enemies. As his children we are to imitate his love and kindness.
- **Don't hold tightly to your rights**
 - 'Know your rights' 'stand up for your rights' 'make sure you get what you deserve' 'don't let them walk all over you' 'don't be a push over' 'don't be a door mat' 'don't be taken for a ride.' Do these sound familiar? Aren't these how we are normally taught to behave. We prize (even idolise) our rights and our status and yet at the heart of the gospel is the Lord Jesus laying down his rights for our sake even though we had wronged him as his enemies. "...the way of the cross, not notions of "right and wrong," is the Christian's principle of conduct." (Carson.) He laid aside his rights at great cost to himself and he calls us to imitate him rather than the culture around us.
- **Don't take revenge even if people deserve it**
 - How tempting it is to retaliate when we have been wronged. How tempting to give them what they deserve. How tempting it is to bear a grudge and look for a way to pay them back. Yet as those who have been lavishly forgiven Jesus calls us not to retaliate but instead to respond with love. Augustine said that "Many have learned to turn the other cheek, but do not know how to live him by whom they were struck."
- **Love, serve and pray for those who are against you**
 - It's not enough for us to passively not retaliate. Jesus is calling us to actively love those who don't love us.
 - John Stott is worth quoting at length;

Our enemy is seeking our harm; we must seek his good. For this is how God has treated us. It is 'while we were enemies' that Christ died for us to reconcile us to God. If he gave himself for his enemies, we must give ourselves for ours.

Words can also express our love, however, both words addressed to our enemies themselves and words addressed to God on their behalf. 'Bless those who curse you.' If they call down disaster and catastrophe upon our heads, expressing in words their wish for our downfall, we must retaliate by calling down heaven's blessing upon them, declaring in words that we wish them nothing but good. Finally, we direct our words to God. Both evangelists record this command of Jesus: 'Pray for those who persecute (or abuse) you.'

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer captures why praying for our enemies is such a powerful thing when he says;

'Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.' Moreover, if intercessory prayer is an expression of what love we have, it is a means to increase our love as well. It is impossible to pray for someone without loving him, and impossible to go on praying for him without discovering that our love for him grows and matures. We must not, therefore, wait before praying for an enemy until we feel some love for him in our heart. We must begin to pray for him before we are conscious of loving him, and we shall find our love break first into bud, then into blossom.'

- **Keep aiming for perfection**

- No matter our progress in loving our enemies there is always room for improvement. Jesus doesn't want us to look around at other people and think, 'Well I'm doing better than them so I don't need to bother...' Instead he wants us to look to our Heavenly Father and aim to be perfect as he is perfect. He's the standard and so there's always reason to be humble and there's always room for improvement.

Questions

Starter - How are we normally tempted to respond when someone wrongs us?

You could create one or more scenarios to help people think about this. Think of a scenario where they are insulted, or their rights are infringed or they are harmed in some way...

For example, 'You are driving along when someone cuts you up and nearly causes a crash. How do you feel? How are you tempted to respond?'

Or 'You are watching TV when someone ridicules Christians believing in God?' How do you feel about that person? How do you respond?'

v38-42

1. What is the principle behind 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth?'

The principle behind the command was one of proportional response. The law made room for retribution but it was to be measured and appropriate. It was to be decided upon and administered by the law courts not the individual.

2. How does Jesus deepen and fill out this command?

Jesus shows us that when it comes to personal wrongs we are not to retaliate. We are to lay aside our rights and be prepared to be wronged. You could go through each of the examples in v39-42 and tease out the particular emphasis in each one.

3. Why do we find this teaching so hard?

You may have spoken about this in the starter. It's important to recognise that this goes against our natural human inclination and the way that society encourages us to behave. We're told to stand up for ourselves, don't let them push you around etc. We need God's help if we are to live like this.

4. How did Jesus live out this teaching?

This is vital. Jesus doesn't just talk the talk, he walks the walk. You could go to Jesus' trial, his beatings, his crucifixion or a passage like 1 Peter 2 to help the group see not only that Jesus gives us an example but that he did this for us! We are the beneficiaries of his turning the other cheek and going the extra mile.

5. How will his example help us next time we are wronged?

Go back to an every day situation like being cut up on the road or when Christians are insulted in the media. Let's pray for one another to respond with the same grace and mercy that Christ has shown to us.

v43-48

6. How does God bless and love his enemies?

Here we're really just wanting people to focus on v45. Our love is to flow from his love. Help people to think about how God loved and blessed us even though we were his enemies.

7. What will it look like for you to love people who are against you?

- How will you pray for them?

Again it might be helpful to give people scenarios and examples to think through. For example how will we love and pray for an atheist colleague who quietly scoffs at our faith? Or how will we respond to those who disagree with us on sexuality, marriage, gender or abortion?

How should we pray for them and bless them? What will it look like for us to 'do more than others'? (v47.)

Small Group Leader Notes

Matthew 6:1-18

Context

- **The Beatitudes** - Although chapter 6 marks a new section in Jesus' sermon it is all one sermon. In the Beatitudes (5:1-12) Jesus was inviting us to decide whose blessing and approval we would seek. Would we seek the passing approval and blessing of people or would we choose the eternal approval and kingdom blessings of God. Now in 6:1-18 we are being asked whether we will seek the approval of people or God.
- **Be perfect (5:48)... Be Careful (6:1)** - There is another connection between chapters 5 and 6. Jesus summarised his teaching in 5:21-48 with the command 'Be perfect...' (5:48.) He then immediately moves on to issue another command 'Be careful...' (6:1.) What is the link between these two commands? *"It almost seems as if the greater the demand for holiness, the greater the opportunity for hypocrisy."* (Carson.)
- **Contrasting Communities** - In chapter 6 Jesus wishes to show his new community of disciples that they must live differently to other communities around them. In 6:1-18 the primary contrast is with religious hypocrites (v2, v5, v16.) Then in 6:19-34 the contrast is with the pagans (6:32, notice also 6:7.) Here again we find echoes of what has gone before in ch5. The church is the salt and light of the world (5:13-16, we are to be visibly distinctive in how we live. We are not to be like everyone else.

Structure

The Big Idea... (v1)

...Applied to Giving (v2-4)

Don't be like the hypocrites... (v2)

... Because they have already received their reward (v2)

But instead... (v3)

... So that your Heavenly Father will reward you (v4)

... Applied to Prayer (v5-15)

Don't be like the hypocrites... (v5)

... Because they have already received their reward (v2)

But instead... (v6)

Don't be like the pagans... (v7-8)

But instead... (v9-13)

... So that your Heavenly Father will forgive you
(v14-15)

... Applied to Fasting (v16-18)

Don't be like the hypocrites... (v16)

... Because they have already received their reward (v16)

But instead... (v17)

... So that your Heavenly Father will reward you (v18)

Laying out the structure like this helps to see the repetitive structure that Jesus is using. It also helps us to notice the points at which he deviates from the structure in the section on prayer;

- In v7 he tells us not to be like the pagans rather than the hypocrites - is this significant?
- He also gives much more detail on how we should pray (v9-13) than in any of the other sections (v3, v6, and v17.) Why do you think this is?
- This structure also helps us to notice that in v14-15 Jesus says that our Heavenly Father will forgive us if we do what he says. This is different from the other sections where Jesus promises that our Heavenly Father will reward us if we do what Jesus says (v4, v6, v18.) Again, why do you think this is? Does this help us to understand what Jesus means by reward? Should we equate our Heavenly Father's reward with his forgiveness?

Tricky Bits

- **What are these ‘rewards’?**
 - The idea of reward occurs several times in Matthew’s gospel (see 5:11-12.) We shouldn’t read this as something that we earn like a wage. Instead these rewards are “a freely given recompense, out of all proportion to the service (19:29; 25:21, 23)” (French.)
 - Try not to get bogged down in exactly what these mean. The important point to see is the contrast between the reward of the hypocrite who merely receives the applause of the crowd, versus the one who receives the reward of their Heavenly Father.
- ***Is Jesus saying that we should never pray in public?***
 - Here is one of those cases where we must read this passage in the context of the rest of the gospel and the rest of the New Testament. Jesus prayed publicly (e.g. John 11:41-42) and the early church met together to pray (e.g. Acts 1:14, 2:42, 4:24.) Jesus therefore cannot be forbidding all public prayer and prayer meetings. We need to read the verses carefully. Notice the motivation of the hypocrites in v5, “to be seen by others.” Jesus is therefore not forbidding public prayer in general but public prayer that is more concerned with impressing other people rather than bringing requests to God.
 - When Jesus tells us to go and pray privately he is not saying that this is the only place where we can pray. What he is saying is that our public prayer is to be a small and true reflection of our private prayer. Just look at Jesus’ prayer life to see this principle in action. He certainly did pray publicly but he spent much more time praying privately. Public prayer is to be an overflow of private prayer. This raises questions like, ‘Do you pray differently in public to private?’ ‘Do you only pray in public and not in private?’
- **What about the doxology at the end of the Lord’s Prayer?**
 - The NIV has the words, ‘for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.’ in a footnote. These words appear to have been added towards the end of the late second century. Whilst it is true that the kingdom, power and glory belong to our Heavenly Father it seems doubtful that Jesus actually taught that this should be part of this model prayer.
- **Do we have to earn our forgiveness?**
 - Is this some sort of tit-for-tat arrangement where God will only forgive me after I have forgiven you? Again we must not read this passage in isolation but instead read it in the context of the gospel and the rest of the New Testament. Jesus’ parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35 is worth reading at this point. In the parable the order of forgiveness is not what is emphasised. Jesus is not teaching that X must forgive Y before Z can forgive Y. Instead the parable and Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6 focuses on attitude. There is no forgiveness for the person who doesn’t forgive. Someone who is not prepared to forgive shows that they have not yet truly repented and received God’s forgiveness. See back to 5:7 for more on this.
- **What is fasting? How and when should we do it?**
 - In Jesus’ day there were prescribed days in the Jewish calendar when everyone would fast. These were associated with major feasts. People would also fast at times of great nation need such as when the autumn rain didn’t come. Individuals would also fast as signs of their deep repentance before God and at times of particular

prayer. Whilst Jesus clearly expected his followers to fast he also defended them for not fasting (9:14-17.)

- What Jesus is stressing in these verses is that if and when we fast we are to do so in such a way that others do not know that we are fasting. Tragically it what can start out as a humble act of devotion to God can become an act of pride in front of others. The principle that Jesus is teaching in this section applies beyond these three examples. For instance, when we choose how to dress for church, who are we doing it for? If we make a special effort is it to impress other people or is it out of reverence for God?

Big Idea - Jesus states the big idea in v1. This is the summary and headline application for the whole passage. Putting it in our own words we might say;

‘Do everything for your Heavenly Father’s approval not for other people’s approval.’

Applications

- **Be careful not to be a hypocrite**
 - This is the big application. All the other applications listed below are really different branches coming off this main trunk of application. This application is not limited to the three examples that Jesus gives. v1 makes it clear that it applies to all our righteous acts so it includes our church attendance, our singing, how we dress for church, how we preach and teach, how we serve coffee, how we lead Bible studies and how we contribute to Bible studies.
 - In what ways can we be in danger of being religious hypocrites? Are we in danger of play acting? Are we one thing in private and another thing in public? Do we do things for the approval of others?
- **Take the plank out your own eye first**
 - There is a real danger in a passage like this that we see all the ways that everyone else is being hypocritical but refuse to address our own hypocrisy. The principle of 7:1-5 apply here. Try to avoid giving examples of other people being hypocrites. If you are going to give examples it is best if they are examples of your own hypocrisy.
- **Give generously and secretly to please your Heavenly Father**
 - Our giving is to be done secretly so as to avoid the temptation of doing it to impress other people. Yet we are also to give generously to please God. You might find it helpful to quickly review 2 Corinthians 8-9 which lays out some further principles of giving.
 - The danger in talking about giving is that it can become an opportunity to show off about how much we give. Again it is important for you as the leader to lead the discussion in such a way as to help people avoid falling into this trap.
- **Cultivate a life of private prayer out of which public prayer can flow**

- The challenge here is to be consistent in our prayer life. You might want to spend time talking as a group about the things that you can do or use that people find helpful for praying on their own in private.
- **Let Jesus' model of prayer shape the kind of prayers that we pray**
 - It's worth comparing the prayers that you pray as a home group (and as individuals) with the shape of Jesus' model. How much time do we spend praying for physical needs compared to spiritual needs? How much time do we spend in confession and asking for forgiveness? How much of our prayers are taken up with God's glory rather than our circumstances?
- **Consider when it would be appropriate for you to fast for a period**
 - We want to avoid being legalistic about this but at the same time we should encourage people to consider when it would be appropriate to quietly and privately give themselves to a time of fasting and prayer.
 - Again we need to beware of encouraging people to try and impress others with their piety.

Questions

Starter - This passage is all about religious hypocrisy. Why do you think hypocrisy is so dangerous for churches?

This question is just trying to get the ball rolling in the right direction of thinking about the danger of hypocrisy.

1. According to Jesus why do hypocrites give, pray and fast? What is their motivation?

The key verses here are v1, v2, v5 and v16 - notice how in all of these the motivation is to be seen/honoured by others. They are not doing these things for God, they are doing them for themselves and their own reputation. They're taking things that should be marked by humility and turning into opportunities for self-exaltation.

- What is their reward?

They get people's approval, recognition and honour which is what they wanted... but that is all they get. Human recognition is fleeting so it is hardly much of a reward.

Having considered the hypocrites we now want to consider how we are to be different in each of these areas. You might not have time to think in depth about prayer, giving and fasting. You may need to be choose to focus on one or two so as to apply them thoroughly rather than superficially covering all of them.

As Jesus' followers what should motivate our giving?

In short - God's approval not other people's. You might want to draw in other passages on giving to expand on this. For example 2 Corinthians 8-9 show us that our giving is to be motivated by thankfulness to God.

- How should we give?

We should give privately rather than drawing attention to ourselves. We should also give generously, joyfully (again see 2 Corinthians 8-9) and sacrificially (2 Corinthians 8:2-3 and Luke 21:1-4.)

You could take the opportunity to talk about the ways that people give at BEC as some might not be aware of the opportunity to give at communion services, in the offering box each week or by standing order. If people would like to start a standing order they should speak to Charles Mitchell (Treasurer.)

2. How should we pray?

Again we're not to do it for people's approval. We're not to babble on in public but rather we are to pray simply and privately.

This might open up all sorts of conversations about church prayer meetings and private prayer. Jesus isn't saying that it's wrong to pray in public, but we're not to be hypocrites who only pray when other people are watching and who never pray in private.

- What sort of things should we pray for?

We don't have time to do an in-depth study of v9-13 (we will have spent more time on this in the sermon.) In your study try to help the group see the shape and the priorities in

Jesus' prayer. Notice the emphasis on God's glory and kingdom, our sin and temptation not just our physical needs.

- **Think about your recent times of prayer as a home group. How do they compare with the shape of Jesus' pray?**

You could jot down the things that you've prayed for to help you compare your priorities with Jesus'. Think about how you could pray for the same people and situations whilst praying for Jesus' priorities? For example instead of just praying for someone's difficult work situation you could pray that God would help them to hallow God's name at work and asking that he would keep them from being tempted to get angry.

3. When might it be right and appropriate to fast?

You might need to help the group to understand that fasting usually goes with times of particularly intense prayer.

- **How should we go about fasting?**

This question is here just to make remind us of the principle. If we fast it shouldn't be so that we are seen by others. If we fast others shouldn't be aware. This is something between us and God.

4. Can you think of other situations where we can be in danger of hypocrisy?

I think it is well worth making sure that you have time for this question as it might open up all sorts of possible areas of application. You might want to talk about serving at church, singing or even taking part in a Bible study.

Be careful that it doesn't turn into an opportunity to point out the speck of sawdust in other people's eyes.

- **How would the principles of this passage apply?**

For each situation you have thought of spend time thinking what it would like to 'practice our righteousness' before God and not other people? What would it look like to do this consistently?

Small Group Leaders Notes

Matthew 6:19-34

Context

- **Jesus' disciples are to be distinctive** - Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been teaching that to follow him means committing ourselves to live differently from everyone else (5:13-16, 5:21-48, 6:1-18). This theme of distinctiveness continues here as Jesus calls us to live lives where we treasure his kingdom more than the material things of this world and where we do not worry about daily provision but instead trust our Heavenly Father to provide.
- **Jesus' disciples are to be kingdom focused** - This theme is one that keeps coming through the sermon. The beatitudes are all kingdom focused (5:3-12) as is the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13.) Here in the second half of chapter 6 we are again being urged to be kingdom focused in what we treasure and prioritise.
- **Jesus' disciples are to be filled with light** - Verses 22 and 23 are not the easiest to understand (see the tricky bit below for some help.) What is noticeable is how Jesus has already used the theme of light back in 5:14-16. Jesus disciples are the light of the world and we are to display this light through our good deeds so that others join us in glorifying our Heavenly Father. Now in 6:22-23 the illustration shifts slightly. Disciples are to be those who are filled with light (v23.) This will obviously be good for the disciple but will inevitably also result in the kind of shining that Jesus commanded us to do in 5:14-16. In other words understanding and putting into practice 6:22-23 will be a big part of us also putting into practice 5:14-16.

Structure

- **Total Loyalty to the King (v19-24)**
 - Jesus uses 3 images to make the point;
 - **Treasure (v19-21)** - What we treasure will govern our lives. Our hearts and our lives are to be governed Jesus' kingdom rather than the normal material treasures of this world.
 - **Light (v22-23)** - Where we focus (our eye) will determine the rest of us. If our focus is good (i.e. on the kingdom) then this will mean that the whole of us is filled with good light rather than darkness. Again this is about our total loyalty and focus on the kingdom rather than the normal earthly treasures we pursue.
 - **Masters (v24)** - Again loyalty is at the heart of the illustration. When Jesus speaks of masters he doesn't just mean employers. In the original context he means slave masters. You can work for 2 employers but you can't have two masters.
- **Total Trust in the King (v25-34)**
 - Jesus shifts from treasuring riches to worrying about needs. Both are to be challenged and reshaped when we become disciples of King Jesus. In these verses Jesus use the form of argument 'If God cares for... then how much more will he care for you...' (see v26 and v29-30.) The key to combatting our worries is to focus on our Heavenly Father and how much he loves us!
 - **Summary verse - 'Do not worry...' (v25)**

- ... Don't worry about about food (v26-27)
- ... Don't worry about clothes (v28-30)
- Summary verses - 'Do not worry...' (v31-34) Notice the bookend structure that Jesus uses. This helps to make the big point clear to us. Notice too the parallel with 'do not store up...' in v19. For each negative command ('Do not...') there is a corresponding positive command (see v20 and v33.)

Tricky Bits

• **What are treasures in heaven?**

- In a sense we have encountered this question before when we thought about the blessings on the kingdom in 5:3-12 and the rewards of our Heavenly Father in 6:1-18.)
- Here is Don Carson on what Jesus means by treasures in heaven;

“The treasures in question are things which are the result of the divine approval and which will be lavished upon the disciples in the consummated kingdom. The treasures of the new heaven and the new earth are wonderful beyond our wildest expectation. Sometimes the pages of Scripture give us glimpses couched in glittering metaphor as the resources of language are called up to tell us of things still barely conceivable. At other times Scripture extrapolates the advance tastes we enjoy here, and pictures love undiluted, a way of life utterly sinless, integrity untarnished, work and responsibility without fatigue, deep emotions without tears, worship without restraint or disharmony or sham, and best of all the presence of God in an unqualified and unrestricted and personal way. Such treasures cannot be assailed by corrosion or theft.” (Carson.)

• **How is the eye is the lamp of the body?**

- It seems that the whole person is portrayed as a room of a house. The eye is the lamp/ window providing light for the room. If you've got a a bad/unhealthy lamp then the room will be full of darkness.
- What then does Jesus mean by healthy/unhealthy? In other translations the words are good/bad. The NIV footnote suggests that the words have the sense of generous/stingy. Alternatively the word can mean good in the sense of 'undivided loyalty.' I think that this fits the context best because this is exactly the point that Jesus is making in v19-21 and v24.
- The good/healthy eye therefore is the one that is fixed on God and his kingdom seeking to exclusively serve him and store up treasure in his kingdom. Such a person is then full of light, they see and live clearly and correctly. In contrast the person who is not focused on Jesus and his kingdom may think that they have light but actually they are living their lives in darkness. This is even more tragic when such a person thinks that they are living in the light/ living the way life is to be lived.

• **Is it always wrong to worry?**

- Anxiety is a huge issue for many of us today so we need to be careful how we handle these verses. We need to be aware of the pastoral situation of the people in our group to help them apply these verses to their situations.
- There is a sense in which it is right for believers to worry. In 2 Corinthians 11:28 Paul says, “I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” That word 'concern' is sometimes translated 'anxiety/worry.' Clearly in the context of 2 Corinthians 11 Paul's worry for the churches is a good concern. Similarly in

Philippians 2:20 Paul says that “I have no one else like [Timothy], who will show genuine concern (anxiety/worry) for your welfare.” In each case the worries are to do with other people and particularly their spiritual health. Such a concern is held up as a mark of godliness.

- In Matthew 6 Jesus is talking about a different set of worries. These worries are about ourselves not others, and about material needs rather than spiritual matters. Where we are worried about material needs we are to pray about them to God (Philippians 4:6) trusting that he is our Heavenly Father who cares for us (1 Peter 5:6-7.) Here then is the strategy that we need to overcome our worries and concerns. It is the same strategy that Jesus gives us in Matthew 6. Notice how Jesus combats our worries by challenging us to reflect on how much our Heavenly Father loves us (see v26 and v32.) We are to view our worries about our needs in light of how generous and loving our Heavenly Father is.

Big Idea Jesus wants our undivided loyalty and complete trust.

Applications

- **Are we really any different from everyone else?**
 - Jesus asks us some hard questions in this passage. What do we really treasure? Where is our loyalty? What are we working for? What are we chasing after? Can people see that we are part of Jesus’ kingdom? Are our treasures any different to everyone else’s? Who is your master? What would it look like for you to be devoted to Jesus? How would this change your attitude to earthly treasures?
- **Rejoice in the generosity and love of your Heavenly Father**
 - There are some very clear and hard hitting commands in this passage. It would be very easy to just hit people with these commands but this would probably leave people feeling beat up without effecting any real heart change. If we are to truly change what we treasure and entrust our worries to our Heavenly Father then our hearts need to be captivated by how generous and loving our Heavenly Father is and how wonderful and far superior his kingdom is. If your group gets nothing else from the study we want them to go away with a sense that their Heavenly Father loves them and will provide all that they need. We want people to leave with a sense that to prioritise Jesus’ kingdom over everything else is wise.

Questions

Starter - When you hear the phrase 'treasures on earth' what sort of things come to mind?

You could do this as a brainstorming exercise with a sheet of paper encouraging people to just shout out whatever comes to mind. The aim is just to get people thinking and talking.

1. Which of these treasures do you find most enticing?

Once we have a list of different things we then want to turn to think personally. There might be general agreement or different people might be more tempted by some than others. That's fine. We simply need to be honest in recognising that we are those who naturally store up treasures on earth. We mustn't approach a passage like this as if we are those who don't struggle in this area.

2. Think of someone who knows you well who is not a Christian. What would they say you treasure? Which master would they say you are serving? Why?

You could do this question instead of the previous question or you could ask both. The aim here is to help us reflect honestly on the things that we really do treasure. As Christians we would love to think that we're different from everyone else, but how different are we? We're trying to gently and lovingly help one another to see where our treasure and therefore where are hearts really are?

3. What reasons does Jesus give for being devoted to God?

Here we want to encourage the group to look at v19-24 and draw out what is so great about Jesus and his kingdom. What are the dangers of not being devoted to God as our master? What is so much better about treasure in heaven? What impact does this have on us?

4. What do you think it would look like for us to be truly devoted to Jesus? How would it change our day to day life?

Try and be as concrete and specific as possible here. How would it affect our shopping habits? Our budgeting? Our priorities on our time? Our dreams and aspirations for our children? Our careers? Our retirements?

5. What sort of things do we worry most about? Why?

Here our focus shifts to v25-34. People might be a bit slow to open up so you might need to be prepared to get the conversation going. As always try to be as honest and specific as possible. The group need to see you leading in openness and honesty.

6. How will this passage help us to combat these worries?

Here we want to help one another focus on the loving goodness and care of our Heavenly Father. Spend time reflecting on how much he loves us. How has he demonstrated his love? How valuable are we to God? This is probably the key part of the whole study so make sure you don't rush it.

7. What will it look like to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness in these situations?

In some ways this is quite similar to question 4. This time take some of the worries that people have expressed and begin to think about what it seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness will look like in these worrying situations. In particular what will it look like to seek first his righteousness? What does righteousness and godliness look like here?

Small Group Leaders Notes

Matthew 7:1-6

Context

- **Hypocrisy** - Hypocrisy was a key theme in chapter 6 (6:2, 6:5, 6:16) and we find it again here in chapter 7 (7:5.) In chapter 6 Jesus was warning us against religious hypocrisy. Now in chapter 7 Jesus warns us against being hypocrites in our relationships.

Structure

- These six verses break down into 3 sub-sections;
 - **v1-2 - 'Don't be Judgmental'**
 - Notice the careful structure in these verses. First comes the principle "Do not judge." Then comes the consequence "...or you too will be judged." Then in v2 comes the reason "For in the same way..."
 - **v3-5 - 'Don't be Hypocritical'**
 - Notice in v3-4 how Jesus uses questions and a clearly absurd scenario to make a very serious and powerful point. You would never be more concerned about a speck/splinter in someone else's eye if you had a plank of wood in your own eye. Of course you would deal with the plank in your own eye first before then helping them with the speck.
 - As you lead the study don't flatten the tone that Jesus is using here.
 - **v6 - "Don't be 'Undiscerning'"**
 - We will say more about this verse under 'Tricky Bits' below. For now just notice that Jesus uses two parallel pictures of throwing sacred/holy things to dogs and pearls to dogs. Jesus isn't saying two different things he's making the same point. This is clear from the second sentence where there is just one outcome.

Tricky Bits

- **"Is Jesus forbidding all judgement?"**
 - Is Jesus forbidding his disciples to be discerning? Are Christians never allowed to make any judgments? Are we not allowed to say that Hitler and Stalin did truly evil things? Is that what Jesus is forbidding here? The immediate context of the rest of chapter 7 shows that this cannot be what Jesus is saying. In 7:6, 7:15 and 7:20 Jesus is clearly teaching that his disciples are to be discerning and make judgments.
 - This helps us to see that what Jesus is teaching in v1-2 is that we are not to have a judgmental spirit. We are not to be those who are quick to pass judgment, always automatically condemning. Jesus is urging us to be generous where possible and not quick to judge recognising the grace that God has shown us.
- **"Who will judge us?" (v1-2)**
 - There are two possibilities. Jesus could be saying that other people around us will be more judgmental of us if we are judgmental ourselves. That is very often the case. The other option (and in my opinion the more likely) is that this refers to God judging

us. This fits with the wider context of the Sermon on the Mount (see 5:7, 6:12, 6:13-14.)

- This then raises the question that we have dealt with several times of whether we are then saved from judgment by our works? As we have said previously that is not what Jesus' teaching. Instead he is consistently making the point that a judgmental attitude shows that we have not really received God's grace. One of the marks of those who are thankful for God's grace to them is that they no longer have a judgmental spirit towards others because they are so aware of how much they deserve God's mercy.
- **“What is the relationship between v1-5 and v6?”**
 - At first v6 might seem to float on it's own neither connected to v1-5 or v7-12. I think that it is connected to v1-5 by the theme of judgment. In v1-5 Jesus has taught us to not to have a judgmental spirit. The danger with this is that we become wishy-washy and never making a call between what is clearly right and wrong. That is why in v6 Jesus now tells us that whilst being non-judgmental we are not to be undiscerning.
 - Jesus is warning us not to be indiscriminating *“especially in our choice of people to whom we present the wonderful riches of the gospel”* (Carson.)
 - Remember that dogs in a 1st century Jewish context are not cuddly pets. They are rabid scavenging beasts. Similarly pigs were unclean animals like wild boars rather than cuddly cartoon characters. Both dogs and pigs could do real harm.
 - Jesus is telling his disciples;

“... not to share the richest parts of spiritual truth with persons who are persistently vicious, irresponsible, and unappreciative. Just as the pearls were unappreciated by the savage animals, but only enraged them and made them dangerous, so also many of the riches of God's revelation are unappreciated by many people. And, painful as it is to see it, these rich truths may only serve to enrage them.”

- We might be quite uncomfortable with this but we find this principle in the rest of the New Testament. When Jesus sends out the twelve in ch10 he tells them *“If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.”* Similarly when Jesus speaks about certain Pharisees he says, *“Leave them; they are blind guides”* (15:14.) We find Paul using the same principle in Acts 18:5.
- Jesus is teaching that we are to be discerning in who we share the gospel with and when we do this. We are not to be judgmental but we are to exercise sensible judgment and discernment.
- We need to recognise the balance of these 6 verses. Jesus spends 5 verses telling us not to be judgmental and only one verses telling us to be discerning. There's a balance here that we should pay attention to.

Big Idea - Don't be judgmental but do be discerning

Applications

- ***Beware having a judgmental spirit***
 - Are you quick to disapprove? Do you instinctively look for faults in others? We might think that such attitudes are 'just the way I am?' but Jesus says such attitudes are sinful and need repenting of. So often it is those who are 'theologically sharp' who

can be so harsh and judgmental. Yes we are to be discerning but we are not to let that be an excuse for being judgmental.

- ***Let God's grace shape your attitude to others***

- Throughout the Sermon on the Mount we must remember that our behaviour is to reflect the grace and mercy of God to us.

- ***Make dealing with your sin the priority***

- It can be so easy to focus on the sin of others whilst ignoring or being blind to our own sin. Jesus is clear that our priority is to deal with our own sin first. We might condemn bankers for their greed but what about our own greed? We might condemn actors for their high profile sexual sins but what about the sexual sin in our own hearts? We lambast politicians for their lack of honesty but what about our own half-truths?

- ***Help others with their sin***

- Notice the word 'first' in v5, it is really important. Jesus doesn't say that we are just to deal with the plank in our own eye and then leave the speck in the other person's eye. We are to deal with the plank in our own eye so that we can then 'see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.' We are to deal with our own sin so that we can then help others. We are to avoid the apparently pious thought that says, 'Because I'm such a sinner I could never say anything about someone else's sin.' It is actually those who are aware of their own sinfulness and are seeking to deal with it who are best placed to help others with their own sin however big or small it may be. The person who has removed the plank from their own eye will not only see clearer but also be more compassionate as they help someone with a speck or a plank in their own eye.

- ***Be discerning about who to share the gospel with and when and how to do it***

- Where someone just wants to mock and argue we need to be discerning. According to Jesus sharing the gospel with such people only makes things worse.

Questions

In the questions that follow I have focused mainly on v1-5. If you have time you could consider some of the applications that flow from v6. For example you could discuss when it is wise to share the gospel and when it might not be so wise?

Starter - Think of the sorts of stories that have been in the news in recent weeks and months. Which sins are we often quick to denounce?

Which sins are we blind to? Which sins do we often turn a blind eye to?

As always the starter is here to get people thinking. We are often quick to denounce 'public' sins such as the sexual sins of celebrities, the greed of bankers and the lies of politicians. Yet we can easily be blind to our own sins.

With these questions we're trying to explore what are the specs in other people's eyes and what are the planks in our own eyes.

1. Have a go at summarising the main thrust of v1-5?

You could do this in 2s and 3s. The passage isn't very long and there is one main theme so it would be good to get people digging into the text for themselves. Encourage people to try and write a summary sentence in their own words. What's the big idea? Have a go at doing this yourself before the study?

2. In v1-2 Jesus tells us not to judge but in v6 he tells us to be discerning. Where is the line between wise discernment and a sinful judgmental attitude?

In this question we're trying to understand exactly what Jesus means by 'judging others'. We need to make sure we help people avoid the two extremes. On the one hand we need to see that a harsh judgmental spirit is not appropriate for Christians. On the other hand we need to see that it is not 'Christian' to never condemn sin. Not judging is not an excuse for never showing any discernment. God has given us minds to make decisions.

3. V3-5 tell us that we are to deal with our own sin first. Why are we to do this? (Why will this make us better able to help?)

There are a couple of right answers to this question. First and foremost we are to deal with our own sin first so as not to be hypocrites! But there is more that we need to see. You can help people by drawing their attention to the word 'first' and the phrase 'then you will...' We are to remove the plank from our own eye so that we can then be in a better place to help others. We are not to just remove the plank from our own eye and then leave the spec in our friend's eye. We are to deal with both but our priority is our own sin.

See the application section for why we will be better placed to help others with their sins having dealt with our own.

4. What holds us back from helping others with the specks in their eyes?

Immediately some in our group will be feeling uncomfortable at the idea of getting involved with other people's sin. They will be thinking 'it's not my place to do that' or 'what right have I, as a sinner, to say anything about their sin.' Others will be thinking, 'I've got

enough problems of my own to deal with so how can I help someone else with theirs?' Others might be thinking, 'I don't know people well enough to be of any help?'

It will be good to recognise the reasons why we often don't really get involved personally in one another's lives and helping one another with our sin. Yet these excuses must not allow us to ignore what Jesus is saying. The clear implication of what Jesus is saying is that we will help one another to remove the spec from each other's eyes. This leads us on to the next important question...

5. How can we become better at helping one another to deal with our sin?

This is a vital question. We can't leave our discussion on the previous question. We must talk practically about how we can actually help one another. Firstly we need to be those who are growing more and more aware of our own sin and getting into the habit of ruthlessly dealing with whatever planks or specks there may be in our eyes. Second we need to actually get to know people and open up with one another. That's what home groups are for. We will not necessarily be open about our struggles with everyone in the church but home groups should be a safe place to be honest about our struggles so that we can help and pray for one another. You won't like me for saying this but it starts with us as leaders. If our groups see us being open and honest about our sin then it will help them to have the confidence to follow. We need to lead on this. So where have you been judgmental recently? Where do you struggle with a judgmental spirit? Could you share this with your group and ask for their prayers and help? Helping one another could be as simple as praying for one another's sin not just our material or physical circumstances? It could also involve ringing or texting during the week to ask how particular situations have gone? What other practical things could we do to help? Think of several before the study.