

## MATTHEW 5-7: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT SLOWLY

For most Christians, the Sermon on the Mount is the Holy of Holies, the purest repository of Christ's teaching, the fountain-head of kingdom instruction. Every word, every phrase is precisely calibrated to achieve maximum impact in its position in the text. Much of it has become embedded in the common speech and expression of languages worldwide. It has been analysed, glossed, commentated upon and ransacked for every possible shade of meaning and application. What further contribution could be made to this feast of spiritual nourishment? Well, I want to tuck in myself. I want my ear to be woken morning by morning, to hear like one being taught (Isa 50:4). I want an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary, principally for myself but also for those who may find these sayings almost too familiar.

Whether or not Matthew the tax-collector, whose discipleship of Jesus is recorded as beginning a couple of chapters after the end of the Sermon, was actually present on this occasion, is for the scholars to argue over, as is the question of how far the Gospel is written by Matthew himself. There is also the well-known discontinuity between the small circle of disciples who are listening at the start, and the crowds who are apparently present at the end. So maybe there isn't much point in asking if the Beatitudes, for instance, were intended only for committed followers of Christ, or at what point Jesus starts addressing the general multitude. The Sermon is for everyone, committed and uncommitted alike; it is a challenge to the whole of humanity. In the manner of a historical novelist, therefore, I have imagined that Matthew was indeed personally present at some of the original Sermon on the Mount; but the important thing is that we too should be there from the very start.

*5:1-2 <sup>1</sup> Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them. He said:*

The many and the few

[5:1-2] You wouldn't believe the crowds. They just keep on coming. There are Syrians who've been healed of all kinds of horrible afflictions, there are Galileans, there are Greek-speaking folk from the Ten Towns, as well as a good number of Judeans, including people who've travelled up from Jerusalem. Jesus watches them gathering, filling the fields and lanes, spilling over onto the beach, in their hundreds and then in their thousands. Then he deliberately turns his back on them, strides up the hillside and is soon lost to view among the hummocks and gullies.

The little band of disciples (at this stage Simon, Andrew, James and John and a few others) can't let him go and scramble up after him. When they finally catch up, he has found a secret little hollow, well away from the main hill tracks, where he can speak to them confidentially and quietly, without straining his voice or the wind carrying away some vital words. It is as though he's saying, 'The crowds can wait – it's you I want to initiate into the ways of the kingdom.'

In the end the bolder spirits caught up and the secret was out; but it wasn't until the inner circle had heard most of his discourse that the eavesdroppers got too numerous, and then he had to come out into full view and speak to them all, with his disciples faithfully repeating his phrases to those nearest them, and so on down the hill until everyone had heard it. This way, it took most of the day.

And (says Matthew) I was there myself, drawn despite myself by the reputation of this man as an interesting teacher. It would lead to my own response to his call a few weeks later, and eventually to my compilation of his teaching and life story in the Gospel. Even now, distinct as the memory is, I can't be sure whether I've included some teaching from other times in his ministry. We've been through all the material, ceaselessly sifting, matching memorised sayings with what some folk wrote down at the time or subsequently; but with the Holy Spirit helping, nudging, reminding us, we're pretty confident that we've been able to preserve the main gist of what Jesus said. And as I often remark to my more sceptical friends, if he didn't say such-and-such a sentence, then please take me to the person who did, because they'd be as great a teacher as the Lord himself!

So off we go. Here we are, here you are, sitting around Jesus, listening, thinking, wondering, doubting, longing. Our attitudes are often so, so wrong. If we're going to belong to this kingdom, we've got a few changes coming! Just listen....

5:3 <sup>3</sup> *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Spiritual beggars

[5:3] Poverty isn't bad news; it's the best news anyone could have. But there are different kinds of poverty. You might be quite rich in material things, or be blessed with a wealth of talent, lineage and so on, and yet still be counted poor in heavenly terms because of your pride and self-approval. In particular, you need to cultivate an attitude of detachment from this life's goods and possessions. Attachment to wealth of any kind (money, birth, talent) kills the soul. Rich people don't feel they need God, thank you very much! True poverty of spirit, on the other hand, looks to God to provide what you need, because if he doesn't supply it, who else is going to? And God our Father honours such humble dependence. He loves to see spiritual beggars queuing at the gates of heaven. He flings open the doors of the kingdom and says, 'Welcome! Come in and take whatever you need or have always wanted. It's all yours. Enjoy!'

5:4 <sup>4</sup> *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

Not on your own

[5:4] Life is hard, and often totally unfair. We have such high hopes, and such bitter disappointments. People who mean everything to us are taken away and we feel utterly bereft and drained of joy. Sometimes what happens to us is our own fault, and we seem utter failures, condemned by God and mankind. There's good news for you too (Jesus says)! I'm walking alongside you, sharing your pain, feeling your grief. Don't look to the world for comfort; don't turn to short-term palliatives which will only increase your misery. What has happened to you doesn't mean God has stopped loving you; you are as precious to him as you ever were. Just let your grief take its course, walk for a while to its beat, sing to its broken tune. Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes in the morning. You are not on your own.

5:5 <sup>5</sup> *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

Wonderful inheritance

[5:5] There's good news, too, for those who get trampled on and have their homes and possessions trashed, as though they didn't count as human beings. Your names may not be on any earthly roll of honour, but I can tell you, God has got you down for a most wonderful inheritance. Stand amid the broken rubble of your life and gaze as far as the eye of faith can see: it's all going to be yours! The Psalmist tells us that those who are proud of their worldly achievements are going to come away with precisely nothing, whereas those who've been robbed of all personal dignity are going to succeed to empires beyond their wildest dreams. The kingdom of heaven is utterly unlike earthly societies, and that's because it has a King who hasn't a scrap of personal pride or self-regard. So when they walk all over you, don't try to take revenge; leave that to God to sort out and trust his justice to prevail

5:6 <sup>6</sup> *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

Longing for goodness

[5:6] 'But I've been waiting so long for justice to be done, I'm literally starving to death for it!' Yes, I know, and it's desperately hard. But once again, there's good news for you. Our God loves goodness and truth, and he too longs for right to come out on top. In the new world he's planning, there's going to be a superabundance of righteousness. I'm not just telling you to hang in there waiting for some kind of long-distant utopia; I'm showing you the God we all have to deal with right now. He loathes the lies and injustices that victimise the disadvantaged, even more than you hate them. But if you want a revolution, let it begin in your own hearts and lives. If you long for goodness upon earth, set up its kingdom where you are. Grow an orchard of Spirit-fruit within you where you can wander at will and sample all the delicious qualities God wants to grow in you. Run rivers of living water through your parched souls. Feast on his delights every day .

5:7 <sup>7</sup> *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

Gratitude spilling over

[5:7] But just suppose there's someone who's done you a personal injustice: what's the kingdom way of dealing with them? Do you take it out on them, or do you give them another chance? And how many chances do you give them? Think back to the way God has dealt with you, that's all. Hasn't he had to forgive you countless times? Do you take all that mercy for granted – or are you genuinely grateful? And if you are, do you let your gratitude spill over into your treatment of those other people who cause you grief? Or do you still operate an inflexible rule of payback? That isn't the way of your heavenly Father, and it mustn't be your way either.

5:8 <sup>8</sup> *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

#### Transparency

[5:8] You may think that's hard, but try this one. The best news of all is that you're made to see God face to face, you were created to look into his radiance and satisfy your soul with his loveliness. That's been your destiny from the beginning. But first you've got to get your heart right. Are you clean through and through, transparently honest, single-hearted in your desire for him? The sad thing about fallen human beings is that they've set up a row of little idols on their shelf, maybe wealth, or power, or some person's captivating beauty, or even the idea of being 'good enough to get to heaven' by their own rightness. And they get twisted into the ugly shape of their idol. You say, 'Who then can claim to be pure in the sight of God? What hope is there for any of us?' Salvation can only begin when you ask that question from the bottom of your heart and out of the depths of your despair.

5:9 <sup>9</sup> *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

#### Reconcilers

[5:9] And I want you to be good news for the family, friends and neighbourhood God has given you. You'll know a deep satisfaction if he can use you to calm people down rather than stirring up their animosities. This world desperately needs people who can heal fractured relationships, reduce simmering tensions and bring about friendship between injured parties. Our heavenly Father is like this, and all his children should be too. How wonderful if when people see you doing reconciling and mediating work, they instinctively say (or think), 'Thank you, dear God, for sending these men and women to spread your peace among us.' It's not easy work: you've got to stand as firm as oaks when winds of passion are blowing all around you; and if you offer to be a bridge over the divide, you risk being trampled on from both ends. But it's all worth it, especially when you hear God's voice saying, 'What you did was after my own Son's heart.'

5:10-12 <sup>10</sup> *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* <sup>11</sup> *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.* <sup>12</sup> *Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

#### Discouraged by opposition?

[5:10] Well, suppose you really do suffer because you've stood up for what's right, and have tried to bring the goodness of God into the human situation? Is that a sign that God isn't pleased with you? Absolutely not! It's the normal lot of those who belong to the kingdom of God and want to see it coming upon earth. They're going to experience fierce opposition, sometimes from those very people who claim to be kingdom members themselves. Some of the deepest scars are those you will receive at the house of your friends.

[5:11] Just let me explain why you shouldn't be discouraged by general unpopularity. On the surface, yes, it's painful when other people take it out on you for being Christ's followers, when they blame you for the evils in the world, or even make life physically unpleasant for you, never letting you have a moment's peace and cooking up all sorts of malicious accusations against you. That's never nice; but deep down you needn't be disturbed in the slightest. For one thing, none of what they say is actually true (at least, I hope it isn't!); and for another, it has arisen because of your allegiance to me, your Lord and Master. You're walking into the storm with me at your side. [5:12] You can have a settled and steady optimism despite everything; in fact even in the darkest dungeon you can feel a surprising exhilaration. Why? Because one day all this is going to be over, and

your heavenly Father has promised that he will never forget what you've been through for him. Every teardrop is going to be repaid with abundant consolation. Yes, he does let his people experience very deep suffering and deprivation, and you only have to look at what happened to saintly servants of God like Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many others to realise that you're not the only ones to be the laughing-stocks and whipping-boys of the world. Just hang in there, that's all; wait and see what happens, because God is good.

5:13 <sup>13</sup> *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

#### Role in society

[5:13] Yes, and he wants to do the world good – through you. Just as salt keeps meat from going off, and adds taste and character to ordinary food, so your role in society is to make life better for others around you. So it's important to keep yourselves being continually refreshed by God's love. The point about salt is that once it has lost its distinctive tang, it goes all dull and featureless, and all you can do with it is to tread it down into your garden path where it might at least keep the weeds at bay.

Look at it like this: salt makes a person thirsty, right? So if you sprinkle some of it on the barren earth, it might make the soil thirsty for life-giving rain. People you touch are thirsty for heaven, even if they don't know it; so if your lives show Christ-character, it could make some folk long to know more of God's truth and love. Wonderful stuff, salt! But it's not for rubbing into people's wounds.

5:14-16 <sup>14</sup> *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

#### Positive contribution

[5:14] You may feel that you're just a smoky, guttering candle tucked away in a corner where no-one can see you. Actually, if I've set your spirit alight with my lifegiving flame, you won't remain hidden for long. Ever been on a long journey with the day fading into dusk, and had the relief of seeing your home town glittering on its hilltop with hundreds of welcoming lights in its windows? That's what I want my church to be like. [5:15] It doesn't make sense to light an oil-lamp and then stuff it under an earthenware bowl, when you ought to be setting it on a tall metal stand so that it can provide light for everyone in the room. [5:16] Once my disciples get their act together, and start making a positive contribution to whatever society they find themselves in, people who are living just for this world may start putting two and two together and thinking, well, maybe there is something to this God business after all. The point is, you're not there to draw attention to your own goodness (if you have any); the idea is that all the glory should go to your heavenly Father.

5:17-20 <sup>17</sup> *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

#### True intentions of Scripture

[5:17] It's all too easy to misunderstand what I've come here to do. Some people seem to think that my mission is to tear the Law of Moses and the prophetic writings into tiny shreds and to consign them to the bonfire. That couldn't be more mistaken. The Scriptures have a timeless validity, and my job as Son of Man is not to rubbish them but to bring out their true significance. [5:18] They are the word of God for this world, and they will remain so to the end of human history. I'm not like some careless scribe who misses out a phrase here and a letter there, or who changes the wording to fit in with what he thinks it ought to say. Like any

important legal or constitutional document, it has been put together for a precise purpose, which is the salvation of mankind. I've come to carry out the true intentions of Scripture and to make sure that its meaning is realised at the deepest level.

#### Inward set of the heart

[5:19] You've probably come across so-called teachers who go something like this: 'Of course, we today know better than the primitive people then, and we've progressed beyond those former misconceptions.' So did God get it wrong, and does he need our trained theological scholars to tell us how to get it right? Remember how I said that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the humble of heart who know their spiritual inadequacy? It doesn't belong to those who strut around claiming that their modern reinterpretations are more valid than Moses or Isaiah. True kingdom teachers are those who go to the heart of things and apply God's eternal principles firstly to their own lives and then to those of their fellow-disciples. [5:20] This may shock you; but what I'm trying to get you to see is God's highway of holiness isn't found in abstruse and complicated treatises, nor is it found in keeping hundreds of rules constructed by human tradition without any thought for their practicability. Yes, I'm talking about the legal experts and the Pharisees. They concentrate merely upon externals; whereas the goodness that God requires if you are to live eternally in his presence is on an altogether different and deeper level, not the level of the outward appearance but the inward set of the heart and its fundamental attitudes.

5:21-22 <sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

#### Verbal assassination

[5:21] You see, we've trivialised the Law by applying it only to the surface of things. Let me give you a few examples. Take the law against murder, that is, one individual deliberately taking another's life for personal reasons. This has been prohibited since ancient times, for instance in the story of Cain and Abel. We've all had it dinned into us that if we kill someone in a fit of temper, we've broken God's law and we are going to have to answer to God for it at the Last Judgment. OK, you say with a sigh of relief, I haven't murdered anyone, so I'm clear on that one. [5:22] Not so fast! Have you never lost your cool with someone? Have you never flown into an irrational rage with a fellow-human being (I'm not talking about righteous anger here, but personal pique)? What about sarcasm, when you've tried to make someone look really small? What about verbal bullying, or telling someone that they're such an idiot that they don't deserve to live? In God's eyes that's equivalent to stabbing them to the heart, because the violence you're using against them is only a degree or so different from the violence used by an actual murderer. If there was a High Court of Verbal Assassination, you'd be up before it in a flash. I'm telling you in all seriousness, your eternal destiny is going to be settled according to the word of God, which cuts right through externals and deals with a person's attitudes, motives, all the secret places where our true character is revealed. You may scoff at the idea of hellfire, but one day you could be confronted with the effect your words have had on other people, as you find their destructive power echoing through eternity and rebounding on you.

5:23-24 <sup>23</sup> "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

#### Priority of peace-making

[5:23-24] I talked about being a peace-maker just now. Are you one yourself? For instance, if something has come up between you and someone else, and they are convinced (whether justifiably or not) that it is partly your fault, maybe something you said or did or didn't do, then you've got to take the initiative in sorting it out. It's so urgent, in fact, that even if you're engaged in the holiest exercise you can think of, like walking up to the great altar of sacrifice in the Temple to offer your prize lamb to God, and your conscience suddenly gets to work on you (conscience is very inconvenient sometimes), you've got to tether that bleating lamb to the horns

of the altar and go and make it up with the offended party. What, in the middle of a sacred act of personal dedication? Yes – it's that important. True religion is more than sacramental performance; what God loves to see happening is people sitting down together as friends, forgiving and receiving forgiveness. Then your acts of religious piety will really mean something.

5:25-26 <sup>25</sup> *“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.*

#### Law on two levels

[5:25-26] Our heavenly Father offers us two ways of operating: mercy or justice. The way of mercy might involve you tearing up your self-righteous pride and admit you're in the wrong. It's like walking down to the market and suddenly your next-door neighbour straddles the pavement and says he's taking you to court for what appears to you to be an utterly trivial reason. He's clearly got steamed up over something but hang it if you know what it is. So what do you do? If you're sensible, you don't let things escalate. You take out your cheque book and write him out a sum you can both agree on. You won't have that spare cash to spend on a treat for the family, but it's worth it compared to the alternative. What might have happened if you chose the way of justice, insisting that the authorities decide which of you is in the right and who's in the wrong, is that you get passed from court to court on what was originally a minor technical issue, until the final appeal judge decides to send you to jail unless you pay a massive fine.

What I'm trying to get across is that law operates on two levels: there's the 'law of justice' level, where principle reigns supreme and personal relationships are irrelevant; and there's the far deeper and crucial 'law of mercy' level, where love takes over and sets you free from the need to stand on your rights and justify yourself the whole time. Try it and see!

5:27-30 <sup>27</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.*

#### Don't even think about it

[5:27-28] Now another example: the well-known commandment against adultery, that is, having sex when either or both of you are married to someone else. Again, you might be able to claim quite truly that you haven't actually got as far as doing that. (If you have, you might like a word with me afterwards.) Well, technically you are in the clear with the Law of Moses. But the Divine word I am bringing you goes far deeper. There are probably a whole host of external factors that stand in the way of your sleeping with a woman you fancy (I'm talking to men now, but it's exactly the same whatever the gender pairing) – for instance, lack of opportunity, social convention, the jealous partner and so on. But if you could, you would. And if it's started there in your will, then as far as God is concerned you've already done the deed.

You don't like that, do you? But at the end of the Ten Commandments there's a sting in the tail: 'You shall not even think about it'. You might have kept the seventh commandment, but have you kept the tenth? 'You are not to set your desire on possessing your neighbour's wife.' That's the word that's going to rise up against you at the end of time.

#### Final accounting

[5:29-30] You have a choice, and I'm going to describe it in the starkest possible terms. If you think I'm joking, then you've missed the point. Let's suppose you see a desirable person at a party and you make meaningful eye-contact with them. That single action with one of your eyes has such serious implications that in order to prevent it ever happening again you should personally pluck out the offending member and throw it on the compost heap. Or you're walking along with someone you really like and your little finger curls round theirs

just for a brief second. Too late! Go back home, get the kitchen cleaver and chop off your whole hand, then turn it into animal feed.

Now obviously I don't want a whole lot of one-eyed or one-handed disciples – you are going to need your eyes for looking compassionately on the world, your hands for performing acts of generosity and mercy. So I'm putting a choice in front of each one of you. This life here and now will last you for seventy or eighty years if you're lucky. But there's another life coming which will last you for ever. On the scale of eternity, what's the loss of an eye or a limb compared to the death of your whole being on the great rubbish-tip where the fire never goes out? How seriously are you taking my teaching? Do you think there's no final accounting? How else can I get through to you?

5:31-32 <sup>31</sup> *"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'* <sup>32</sup> *But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

#### Permanence of the marriage-bond

[5:30] While we're on relationships, I'd better say a word about the permanent sanctity of the marriage bond. You'll find in the law of Moses an apparent let-out clause – if you have to divorce your wife, don't just tell her to get lost, but go through the official process of getting a written certificate from a lawyer, so that she's free to contract another marriage. Well, you say, one's got to be realistic, people are like that, divorce is a fact of life. But what does God think about it? As far as unfaithfulness goes, he hates it with every fibre of his being. Unfaithfulness is an acid that eats away at the heart of a marriage until nothing is left. But divorce for any other reason is out of the question. You simply can't dissolve a union that God has ordained since creation began. That is tantamount to telling your wife to go off and commit adultery. Or, if you go and marry someone else, to committing adultery yourself. See where the law of God really seeks to operate? Right at the heart of things, in the wellsprings of the imagination and the will. You may think God's being unreasonable, but isn't it your own logic that needs examining?

I'm deliberately bringing you up against God's word here (as always) to make you see how far you have twisted it to suit your own preconceptions. If your reaction is to shrug your shoulders and say 'So what?', then this same word will be your judge. If on the other hand you can only cry out to God for mercy and help, then a way of salvation lies open. It may cost you an arm and a leg, but it's less expensive than the alternative.

5:33-37 <sup>33</sup> *"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'* <sup>34</sup> *But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; <sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. <sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

#### Words matter

[5:33] Here's another tough one. What about the old commandment not to take the name of the Lord in vain? We had it dinned into us at our mothers' knee that once you have made a solemn oath or promise using the name of God, you are irrevocably bound to that vow, even if it gets you into dreadful trouble as it did Jephthah. Quite right, because words matter. [5:34] But by the same token, you can't provide yourselves with an escape route by not actually using the Lord's name. Some people say, 'I swear by heaven.' What, you call upon the very place where Almighty God reigns on high? Isn't that even worse? [5:35] All right then, you say, I'll swear by earth instead. But that's equally serious, because as the Scripture says, this world we live in is God's special delight, where he puts his feet up or enjoys an evening stroll. Well in that case I'll make my words sound suitably impressive by intoning the name of Jerusalem. Sorry, but that isn't just an item on a map; it's uniquely the city where a far greater king than David holds court, in fact, it's the headquarters of God's Messiah upon earth. [5:36] I know what, you retort, I'll make an oath like 'upon my life' or 'by the hairs on my head.' But your life isn't yours to dispose of as you choose; the number and colour of hairs on your head are under God's loving care and control. [5:37] Don't you see? The language you use has power all right, I grant that, but not a power independent of the God to whom you owe every fibre of your being. Show your

trust in him by the simplicity of the words you utter. If you mean 'Yes,' then say 'Yes'; if you mean 'No,' then the single word 'No' will be enough.

#### Faith relationship

I'm deadly serious about this. You may think I'm using trivial examples, but there's a spiritual world out there, and the Garden of Eden was only yesterday. The genius of the evil will was to take a simple command of the Lord God and to spin round it a web of 'ifs' and 'buts' until the man and the woman were more concerned about definitions than about sheer plain obedience. It was the 'I'm going to decide the true meaning of God's word' that led the whole human race into a twisting maze of doubt and self-deception. Saying 'yes' to God and 'no' to temptation is the essence of the Divine-human faith relationship. It's the pathway to the second Eden.

5:38-42 <sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. <sup>41</sup> If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

#### Zero-level retaliation

[5:38] Let's look at another precept of Moses' law that people often quote to justify like-for-like retaliation: 'If you attack me and I lose my eye, then it's only fair for you to lose an eye as well; or if you knock my tooth out, then I can knock yours out'. The idea being presumably that getting your own back on someone should be limited to the level of damage they have inflicted on you. [5:39] But for disciples of mine, there should be no question of retaliation at all. I insist upon zero-level violence in all your relationships, even casual ones in day-to-day social interaction. Let's suppose someone loses their temper with you quite unjustifiably and slaps you across the face. Do you invoke the 'like-for-like' rule and hit him (or her) back? Absolute no-no. In fact, even while the right side of your face is stinging from the first blow, I would expect you to turn your head and offer the other side to slap as well. 'But that's giving malicious people *carte-blanche* permission to walk all over me!' I grant you there's a risk of that, but better to be on the receiving end of violence than to inflict it yourself, however apparently just your action might appear. Do you see what I'm getting at? Evil is restrained by processes of justice, yes, but it is only finally defeated by love, love that allows the enemy to do their worst then turns round and forgives them.

#### Jesus people are different

[5:40] Beware of 'standing upon principle.' Suppose you get into a legal dispute with a neighbour over a garment he lent you and you never returned. The principle of justice would require that you give him a cloak, say, of equivalent value. But you shouldn't stop there. You should be so concerned to restore amicable relations that you throw in a shirt for good measure. [5:41] Or suppose a member of the hated occupying forces comes up to you and exercises his right to commandeer any provincial to carry his baggage for him. Roman law says this is permitted up to the distance of exactly one mile, then you can drop the wretched thing and leave them to find someone else. Jesus people are expected to be different: OK, you tell your tormentor, I'm in practice, so as the Lord gives me strength I'll shoulder your pack for another mile, and if need be, another on top of that.

[5:42] Do you begin to see how the principle of tit-for-that, or equivalent response, is to be replaced by quite another principle, that of Divine generosity? If God simply gave us what we deserved, where would any of us be? Instead, he showers us with daily gifts we could never afford to pay for and could never expect to have earned. We can show the same extravagant openhandedness in our dealings with each other; we can shower largesse on the grubbiest and smelliest beggar; we can lend our precious possessions quite unstintingly whenever someone wants to borrow them, without insisting that they get returned by next Thursday. Hopeless, unpractical idealism? The only alternative is for my kingdom people to be as mean-spirited as the rest of humanity, in which case I'm wasting my breath telling you all this.

5:43-48 <sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> If you

*love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

#### Love unlimited

[5:43] There are no limits to love. Love leaves principles of fairness way behind. For instance, we were all brought up under the code that you should love your neighbour (meaning anyone you come across in everyday life) as much as you presumably love yourself, as long as they behave decently towards you; but once they start making your life a misery, the situation changes and you can hate them as much as you like. That sounds perfectly reasonable, but it's looking at the problem from the wrong end. [5:44] Nasty people need twice as much love as nice people! Suppose there's someone whose one aim in life seems to be to do you down and harass you verbally, physically and every other way they can think of. Well, instead of working out how to get rid of them, why not make them a special object of your prayer times?

[5:45] You say that's impossible; but do you remember what I said about being peacemakers? Yes, they are the true children of God, because that's what your heavenly Father is like. When he's working out how much sunshine and rain to pour down on the earth, he doesn't ration it strictly according to how good or bad anyone's been that week. If the weather has been particularly bad in your area, it isn't because God is angry with you. If the sun is shining where you are, it's not as if God has decided to be good to you for a change. He always was good! Having a Father in heaven means that you can model yourself on him, because you share the same family characteristic of sheer, unconditional generosity.

#### Going the whole way

[5:46] You're always thinking in terms of rewards and penalties. You think you can earn your Father's love by doing good to others – as long as they behave decently towards you. But that's the basic minimum – why, even complete crooks such as rapacious revenue officials operate on the principle of helping out their friends! (Matthew swears Jesus gave him a meaningful look at this point, which set him to thinking long and hard about his own deeply flawed lifestyle.) [5:47] Try watching people going up and down the street in your town or village: if they meet someone they like, they'll stop and chat, or at least give a friendly wave; but if someone they can't stand comes along, they'll set their face hard, avert their eyes or maybe even deliberately cross to the other side. This happens the world over – but let me remind you, you are salt and light for the earth, you're there to be different, you represent another world. [5:48] In that world people aren't loved on a selective basis, or put through a moral examination before they're accepted. They are loved unconditionally, by a heavenly Father who is prepared to go the whole way and lay himself totally on the line for all manner of crooks, pimps, prostitutes and layabouts – if only they would trust him to do what they can't ever do for themselves, and change them into his own wonderful image, how they were always supposed to be. He welcomes absolutely everybody into his kingdom; how then can you operate a preferential system where only your kind of people are admitted? And if you think I'm setting the bar impossibly high, maybe that's a sign that you need to reset your life-attitudes to the heartbeat of heaven rather than to the way of the world.

*6:1 <sup>1</sup> "Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

#### See yourself as you are

[6:1] At this point in his talk Jesus noticed that some specially religious people had joined the group, pretending not to be listening (they were there of course to check up on the riff-raff whom Jesus seemed to attract), though actually interested in spite of themselves. He desperately wanted to break down the walls of their pride and get them to look at themselves as they really were in the sight of God. So he continued....

There's only one kind of person who can't possibly receive the favours the King wants to shower upon them, and that's the self-appointed models strutting the spiritual catwalk. They are public advertisements for God, doing all the right things and making all the right noises, simply to show off how different they are from the general rabble of mankind. Follow their example and you're doomed. I'll show you what I mean.

6:2-4 <sup>2</sup> “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>3</sup> But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

### Generosity on display

[6:2] Giving money or practical help to relieve the need of others who are worse off than you is terribly important. Large parts of society depend upon charitable work and you should be part of that programme. You may indeed have been on the receiving end of someone else’s unselfish or even sacrificial giving, and now you find you can do a bit of the same thing in return. But you’re not to turn it into a stage where you can put your generosity on display. We all know people who can’t do good works without announcing it loud and clear to everyone they meet, whether it’s in the congregation on God’s special day, or out on the high street where everyone’s doing their shopping. It seems that their sole motivation isn’t to help the needy, but rather to score good marks for piety. And they succeed! They get the publicity they crave. Their name becomes associated with charitable work. And that’s it. The world is impressed – but God isn’t. Why are they doing all this? For themselves, that’s the long and the short of it. When the final roll of honour is read out in the courts of heaven, they won’t be on it. Their earthly memorials will have crumbled into dust. Eternity will proceed without them.

### God’s credit not yours

[6:3-4] So what about you, who only know one thing, and that’s a burning desire to follow me and do the kind of things I do? You want to build my kingdom with materials that are going to last. You want to work with apparently hopeless cases of need, because you know God is there and you are part of his resurrection scheme. But you couldn’t care less whether other people know what you personally are doing, or whether they remain in complete ignorance. In fact you may not have any idea yourself what effect you are having. It simply doesn’t matter, because your one ambition is to be used by your Father in whatever way he chooses. You may sometimes wish that more people knew about the kingdom work that is going on, then they might be less cynical about the spreading of love and hope around the world – but in the end it’s God’s credit you are working for, not your own. So I tell you this: nothing you do for him will be lost, because he sees it all. You may sow your precious seed in tears of despair, but you’ll come home waving your sheaves in exultation.

6:5-8 <sup>5</sup> “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. <sup>7</sup> And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

### Song and dance about prayer

[6:5] It’s just the same with prayer. Yes, I want you to pray as naturally as breathing. You can have set times when it’s the only thing on the agenda, or you can do it while you’re rushing round like a mad thing. But once again, please, please don’t make a song and dance about it like some people we can think of. Obviously prayer is part and parcel of the times when you come together for teaching and worship, but it’s not designed just so that you can be the focus of attention. And by all means pray in the supermarket or while crossing the road, but that doesn’t mean blocking the aisle or holding up the traffic while you intone sonorous thanksgivings to the God who made you the person you are. Oh yes, people will undoubtedly be struck by your sincerity, but that’s the long and the short of it. Heaven remains unimpressed.

[6:6] Listen, disciple of mine. You are a child of a Father who does most of his work without anyone noticing. He doesn’t attract a blaze of publicity – he just quietly gets on with running the universe, and he invites us to join in as we share his secret passion for justice and truth. Nobody else needs to know that your whole life is governed by prayer – but this Father of yours knows! If you can find a quiet place where nobody else is around (like the office or the kitchen before the working day starts) and spend a few minutes talking to him and listening for his will for you that day, you’ll find heaven is paying you full attention. Answers may not come just when and how you want them, but come they will.

## Personal communication

[6:7] The point is that you are in direct personal communication with the One who made you and loves you. Most people on this earth, who haven't had the centuries of training and experience our nation has been through, think prayer is a matter of ceaseless repetition or mindless mantras, and if you aim enough verbal ammunition at the object of your entreaties you'll get what you want. Remember Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel: they shouted and danced all day with absolutely no result, until Elijah made a simple request to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for him to show beyond doubt who was Israel's Lord, and the fire fell. [6:8] Who are you going to model your prayers on? It's a sobering thought that the heavenly Father you are praying to doesn't need informing about the situation you are in today; he knew what you needed before you even thought about asking him. When the archives of the history of prayer are finally opened for inspection, not a single dossier will be found where a genuine request was sent to the throne of mercy and grace, and no answer was given.

6:9-13 <sup>9</sup> "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup> your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Some manuscripts add) For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.'

## A kingdom prayer

[6:9] Well, I talked about model prayers, so I'd better give you one. Here's a kind of outline you could use individually or collectively. In fact it's a kingdom prayer for my worldwide church to offer wherever they meet.

'Father of us all, you're in heaven where you reign eternally, while we're in this world of time and space. We want to bring these two worlds together. We want your name to be loved and honoured, your radiant goodness and holiness to reach into all the dark places of the earth. [6:10] We want you to be King over our hearts and homes and societies, with your rule growing and extending over all nations. If only all people everywhere could align their lives with your wise and loving will for them, instead of seeking their own selfish desires and wandering off the good and right path! Yes, we long for heaven and earth to be brought together in a single, harmonious family, because you've created us to be like you and to share your presence for ever.

## Daily needs

[6:11] 'Meanwhile each of us needs you this and every day. We are completely dependent on you for being kept alive, for one thing. Thank you for the food you supply for us and our families, and please keep it coming.

[6:12] Then there's the question of our relationship with you and with others, which we never seem to get right for very long: please forgive us for messing up yet again, and for failing to come up to your example of love and generosity. While we're about it, if we are holding anything against someone else, help us to be prepared to drop it and let you deal with it, because it's trifling compared to the debts we have run up against you.

[6:13] 'One more thing: holiness. Our capacity for resisting the lure of sin is so fragile – we know we're here on earth to pass some kind of test, but please don't set the standard so high that we're bound to fail. Give us the moral strength to walk your way, not the way of the world or the flesh, and certainly not the way of the devil. And if we're already in so deep that we can't get out – help!'

If you don't think that's a very dignified way of finishing off your prayers, you could always tell the Father that the most important things in life for you are his kingdom coming on earth, his power bringing the new creation into being, and his glory being the centre of our universe, non-stop. That's how it's going to be one day; but your prayers will play a huge support role in the battle, believe me.

6:14-15 <sup>14</sup> For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

[6:14-15] This business of not holding anything against a fellow-human being – perhaps I could emphasise how absolutely vital it is, if you want to be sure that you are in the clear with your heavenly Father. Basically, when you ask to be forgiven something that's on your conscience, you are coming before the Judge of all the earth and admitting you deserve everything that's coming to you, but please could he let you off. And he does! So

are you going to refuse to do the same for someone who's offended you in some way? How can you possibly expect preferential treatment when you're not prepared to give it to anybody else? 'Well, this one's an exception. I can't possibly forgive them for what they've done.' In that case, you could find that your normally incredibly forgiving Father makes an exception of you. Worth thinking about.

6:16-18 <sup>16</sup> "When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Whole new world of blessing

[6:16] I know a lot of you haven't got enough food anyway, so it's not much use suggesting that going without the occasional meal might be a good discipline to practise. But again, something like fasting shouldn't become an opportunity for religious play-acting. Some people deliberately adopt a grim-faced intensity or even paint their cheeks to look pale and ghostlike, all so that the public can be in no doubt about their spiritual elevation above the ruck of mankind, denying the needs of the body and so on. And folk are impressed, sure enough! But God isn't, and when they arrive before him at the end of time, they'll find they've scored precisely zero in the heavenly ledgers. [6:17-18] The whole point of fasting is to draw closer to your loving heavenly Father, and to set aside the demands of your material self in order to concentrate fully on him, hearing his voice more clearly and aligning your will with his. This can be the most delightful and satisfying experience, so why not look the part, matching the lightness of your spirit with an external expression of joy, having a good hair-wash and generally brightening up your appearance? Then people will have no idea about how much self-denial you are practising. But the Master of the heart understands what's going on: he knows that resting in his presence is the best thing in the world, and you're not doing it to score points with anyone (least of all with him) – you just don't want to miss out on this incredible bonus. Ignore your earthly needs for a short while, and you'll find it isn't a sacrifice, it's a whole new world of blessing.

6:19-21 <sup>19</sup> "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Get rich, stay rich

[6:19] Most people assume that the greatest blessing they can have in this life is the steady accumulation of possessions, lands, money-bags, that kind of thing. Financial security becomes their god, and even God's goodness is measured in terms of the material resources he showers upon them. Don't believe a word of it. You open your wardrobe of fashion clothing and find moths have been at work on it. You wake in the night to hear the unmistakable chomping of death-watch beetle in your expensive rafters. You get up in the morning to discover a well-organised gang of thieves has tunnelled into your strongroom and made off with your precious art collection and silverware. Nothing is immune to the ravages of temporal depreciation, agents of decay or human perversity. [6:20] So what do you do if you want to get rich and stay rich? Here's my advice. Open an account with the bank of heaven. Sink all your funds in the treasure-house of eternity. Nothing gets moth-eaten there, there are no woodworm at work, burglars simply can't get in. What do I mean? Invest in the things of the Spirit. Plant orchards of character-fruit. Set up programmes for meeting people's real needs. Collect Christ-disciples. Send out fleets of prayer-ships and watch them come home laden with priceless blessings.

Heavenly passions

[6:21] There are eternal principles at work here. We're all collectors of one thing or another. The trouble is, we tend to worship what we collect, so it becomes our god, we become its slave, it engages all our thinking and longing. Now God our heavenly Father collects souls, so his passion is to win as many people for the kingdom as possible. If only we could get our true values from him! If you want to discover your heart-passion, ask yourself: what do I think about obsessively? What (or whom) do I always find time to follow? Some collect beautiful things, others surround themselves with beautiful people, still others amass symbols of power and prestige; it doesn't matter what is your little tin idol, there it is on its pedestal, and there you are on bended

knee before it. Set your heart free by practising heavenly passions. I can't share any better piece of advice than that.

6:22-23 <sup>22</sup> *"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. <sup>23</sup> But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!*

#### Spiritual blindness

[6:22] The health and safety of your whole being depends on your ability to see straight. In that sense you could call your eye the lamp that guides you along the path of life. In fact human beings are made to see God face to face, to look directly into his eyes and find their joy and fulfilment in doing his will. [6:23] But what if you allow your eye to gaze upon that which is not God's will and is opposed to his good and wholesome rule? What if you think you can see clearly and yet your inner vision is distorted? Then the lamp that should guide you along the way will be extinguished and you will stumble around in darkness and mortal danger. Not only will your life be at risk, but your moral and spiritual blindness will lead others into the same peril. Instead of spreading light and certainty all about you, you will generate increasing chaos and confusion. Be warned!

6:24 <sup>24</sup> *"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*

#### Double priority?

[6:24] This singlemindedness applies particularly to money. Some people think they can have it both ways. They can keep God number one in their lives and also make a priority of being comfortably off. There's no way anyone can have a double priority in their lives – it just doesn't work. It's like an employee working for two firms, or a slave belonging to two masters. Sooner or later they are bound to have conflicting demands laid upon them. Loyalties will clash. When Adam and Eve listened to the serpent rather than God in the Garden, they lost the appetite for God's will; in fact, they hid from him. Make riches your overriding aim in life, and you'll squeeze out true devotion to God. I've seen it happen time and again. On the other hand, make serving the Lord your one, non-negotiable priority, whatever the cost or benefit may be in material terms, and you'll find freedom and happiness.

6:25-26 <sup>25</sup> *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?*

#### Turn your worries over to God

[6:25] Let me emphasise this: the biggest enemy of happiness is worry. 'Where is my next meal coming from? How am I going to clothe my family and myself?' Oh, these are important questions, don't get me wrong; as most of you know all too well, they are constantly cropping up, in fact they are fundamental to human life. Even plutocrats lie awake at night ceaselessly turning over the details of the next dinner-party, or what they're going to wear to tomorrow's state occasion. So this is my message to rich and poor alike: turn your worries over to the God who loves you and cares for you. If he bothered to create you, body and soul, in the first place, do you think he's not responsible enough to supply your needs out of his infinite resources? [6:26] Take a moment off from contemplating the wretchedness of your material existence, and get a glimpse of that raven flying overhead – perhaps a remote descendant of the ravens that fed the prophet Elijah at a time of dire famine. Ask yourself: where does that bird get its food from? Does it plant cornfields or manage orchards or own a string of supermarkets? No – it's as carefree as the blue sky, because it depends utterly upon the One who is the Creator of us all, mankind and mammal, bird and fish alike, and who has stuffed this earth with many times the amount of sustenance we need to live on. Oh yes, the struggle for existence is tough, and human selfishness has made it doubly so, but the bottom line has never changed: trust the God who made you and knows your needs. You are even more valuable to him than eagles or woodpeckers – if he's your Father, is he going to feed them with mice and grubs while he leaves you to starve?

6:27-30 <sup>27</sup> Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?<sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. <sup>29</sup> Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Has he forgotten about you?

[6:27] Some people are professional worriers. They look in the mirror and reckon they are half an inch too short, so all they can think about for the next week is how they can grow at least six inches taller. Or it's their birthday, and they decide they are getting old too fast, so they try to delay the process by fantasising about being half as old as they really are. [6:28-29] Or they open their wardrobe, and count the number of suits of clothes they have, then spend every available minute planning how to multiply their collection. If only they could go out for a walk in the countryside, and stop for a moment to gaze at a single lily, or daisy, or chrysanthemum, breathing in its freshness and fragrance, tracing its delicate structure, admiring its infinite variations of colour and shape! Then reflect: even if I were as splendid as king Solomon, with a change of clothes for every hour of the day, and surrounded by beautiful ladies in dazzling outfits of silken damask, could I begin to match the simple glory of these God-created flowers? They aren't the product of fashion designers, they don't go on modelling courses to learn to sway naturally and gracefully, nor do they have personal counsellors to get them comfortable with their rate of growth or the tilt of their petals. They just are what God made them.

[6:30] Yet they're only in the field for a brief day of glory, because tomorrow the men will come with their scythes and reduce the meadow to stubble, and all these precious and lovely plants will be raked into heaps and carted off to be thrown on the bonfire. If their Maker can spend such thought and loving care over each single short-lived plant, yes, down to individual blades of grass, do you think he's forgotten about you and your family and all your many needs?

6:31-34 <sup>31</sup> So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. <sup>34</sup> Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Built to run on faith

[6:31] People are built to run on faith fuel. Their whole nature (mind, character, physique even) will only work properly if it's in harmony with God's will, trusting and resting upon the truth of his word. If it's dispersed in different directions, like a mountain stream overflowing its banks, it won't drive the water-wheel of human life. Every time you start worrying about where your next meal is coming from, or whether your water-supply has dried up, or what impression you're going to make (clothes, makeup etc) on the people you're going to meet, you replace the divine energy of faith with the worldly energy of material concern. [6:32] You've been brought up in God's family, trained to draw your daily strength from reliance on the Lord who is There, so why adopt the mindset of societies which haven't had this background and training? Do you really not trust your Father to be concerned with the details of your earthly existence? If you're naked and starving and without a roof over your head, do you think he doesn't know or care? Do you suppose that your urgent plea for help is the first inkling he's had of your situation? Is he so busy with his own affairs that he couldn't care less about yours?

Rearranging my anxieties

[6:33] Well, you say, maybe I should follow this to its logical conclusion. Maybe God's eternal affairs are more important than my daily needs. Right then, I'll rearrange my anxieties according to the pattern Jesus taught us, praying about the coming of his kingdom and the doing of his just and perfect will upon earth, before I get down to mentioning the fact that my family hasn't had anything to eat for days and my well's run dry. I'll try to see things from God's point of view not my own. I'll rely absolutely upon his promise that all my needs will be met, that every prayer will be answered one way or another, and that he will honour his royal signature on every page of his word. Then I'll wait with a light heart for the solutions to come flocking in.

[6:34] That's better. Tomorrow doesn't seem so bad after all. In fact, I can leave tomorrow to stew in its own juice. I can just concentrate on today (which may include laying intelligent plans for farther down the road), because God knows there's enough to do, there's a battle on, things don't always go just how I'd like them -- but there's no point in getting steamed up about whether God's likely to get his hands dirty on my behalf, because he's that kind of Father and he will. So I can leave all the worrying to him!

*7:1-5 <sup>1</sup> Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup> For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. <sup>3</sup> "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*

#### Taking the moral high ground

[7:1] What I'm basically saying is, don't try to play at being God. Leave the job of being God to God himself. Take the little matter of our attitude to the faults of others. We love taking the moral high ground and rubbishing other people's characters, don't we? Yet who are we to sit in judgement over our fellow human beings? How much of their actual situation do we understand? Be very careful, because if you get a reputation for writing other people off, they may start writing you off. [7:2] Worse still, when your case comes up before God, if you haven't shown mercy to someone else, you can hardly expect him to show much mercy to you. It's a universal rule, this. If you are mean and grudging towards your next-door neighbour, and are always bringing up little things they've supposedly done wrong, you'll find them acting exactly the same towards you; on the other hand, if you're open-handed and tolerant, they will be prepared to err on the side of generosity to you.

#### Clean up your own act

[7:3-4] Here's a really stupid scenario. Suppose you're working in the carpentry shop, and you notice that a colleague has got something in their eye, like a speck of sawdust. You go over and say, 'Let me help you see properly.' Yet all the time you've got a massive plank of wood jammed in your eye! How can you possibly draw attention to their trivial little problem, when you haven't done a thing about your own glaringly obvious defect? [7:5] It is totally inconsistent to lob accusations at someone else when you don't practise what you preach yourself -- you'll just become the laughing-stock of the whole town. 'Here comes Mr Know-it-all, Mr Holier-than-thou! He'll start lecturing you about spending your hard-earned cash on the wrong things, when everyone knows he regularly dips his hand into the till himself.' My advice is, clean up your own act first, then you might be in a position to start sorting out other people's moral compromises. In the end, it's what you are before God that counts. If anyone has a right to be judgemental, it's the One who is actually going to judge the whole world when our lives are over and done with. Until then, give people the benefit of the doubt, and keep your own nose clean.

*7:6 <sup>6</sup> "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.*

#### Priorities

[7:6] 'So are we meant to let people walk all over us?' If it's to preserve the peace, yes. We've got to learn to get on with each other on this tiny planet. But this doesn't mean chucking discretion to the winds. There are certain non-negotiables, and one of them is your attachment to the kingdom of God. That should be so holy and precious to you that nothing and nobody should be allowed to interfere with it. Would you throw your first-born child to a pack of wild dogs just to stop them baying? It would be like a woman taking out the priceless contents of her jewel-box and feeding them to a herd of hungry pigs. You are going to meet people whose one aim is to tear your faith to shreds: they are so reasonable to begin with that you feel you can share your deepest secrets with them, but in the end you will find your cherished insights in tatters, because they want to suck the soul out of you, and you will be lucky to survive. I've said it before and I'll say it again: keep first things first, then everything else will find its proper place.

7:7-8 <sup>7</sup>“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

#### Talking to a heavenly Father

[7:7] Don't trust your feelings. The life of faith consists of an obstinate determination to trust the promises of God. Take prayer, for example (actually, prayer is *the* engine that drives the life of faith). Experience will tell you that you don't always get what you pray for. God will seem elusive or downright impossible at times. What then is the bottom line of prayer? It's this: you are talking to your heavenly Father who loves you to bits and will do anything to bring you safely through the changes and chances of this mortal life to live eternally in his presence. Meanwhile there are things you need, answers you have to find, obstacles that must be surmounted. Life isn't meant to be a picnic, and this especially applies to disciples of mine who may have to go through all kinds of tribulations for the sake of the kingdom. Just keep on praying, that's all. Tell the great Giver what you'd like to happen. Cry to the great Finder about what you've lost. Batter on the door of the impossible, and the God of miracles will swing it open and ask you what you were so frustrated about.

#### Training school

[7:8] I'm not just talking about a few super-saints whose prayers seem to get answered more than others'. This is for everyone. It's the training school we all have to attend. Life seems so unfair, so riddling, so daunting, both for us and for those we care about. Yet there's a Providence in charge. Share everything with him. There will be no one who can say, 'I asked for this good thing to happen and it didn't.' No one will be able to accuse God of hiding his most precious treasures beyond their reach. We may reach heaven with our hearts sore and our knuckles bleeding, but we will look back and see doors standing open all along the line – because we never gave up trusting him to do what we couldn't ever have done for ourselves.

7:9-11 <sup>9</sup>“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

#### Parental sadism?

[7:9] I see you're still looking doubtful. Well, think of it like this. Some of you are mothers or fathers. Your little boy or girl sits down at the table expectantly; they're as hungry as ever and they know you've just been to the market and there's good, wholesome food waiting for them. So you come in from the kitchen and solemnly serve the family with – one chunk of stone each. 'But, Dad, Mum, is this some kind of joke? Where's the bread?' 'No bread today, folks. You'll have to make do with nature's food.' 'But not even animals eat rocks!' Wouldn't it be ludicrous? What parent would do that to their children?

[7:10] Even worse, let's suppose you've just been across the lake on a fishing expedition and the family are expecting a nice mullet for supper. There's a good smell from the kitchen. But what's that you've just dumped on everyone's plate? Is it an eel? No – ugh! – it's bits of roasted snake! 'Caught a couple of vipers on the way home,' says Dad proudly. 'Real treat for everyone.' I hope you're getting the point. No parent could possibly play that kind of trick on their children. They would have to be sadists or worse.

[7:11] Yet you seem to think that this heavenly Father I'm trying to teach you about is capable of playing similar tricks on his beloved human family. Oh, there are plenty of characters around who are quite capable of serving up nasty surprises, the arch-Serpent being one of them. But God is the total opposite. There is nothing evil about him whatsoever. There's a bit of snake-nature in everyone, sadly; but even con-men and crooks serve their families a decent breakfast and give them special birthday presents, whether or not they had to rob a bank to pay for them. Well, with God every day's your birthday; he'll shower you with wonderful presents even if you don't ask him, but especially if you do. And these aren't temporary bonanzas which sate your appetite but fade away after a few minutes or days – they're real solid joys that he makes part of you, Spirit-gifts of character and insight and ability and resourcefulness which will sustain you for years of service to an orphaned world.

7:12 <sup>12</sup> *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*

### Reaching a crossroads

[7:12] Do I hear you muttering, 'This kind of teaching is all very well as a distant ideal to aim at, but I haven't a hope of carrying it out in everyday practice'? I'm sorry, but it's only what Moses taught all those years ago and what the prophets have been teaching ever since. I'm not inventing a new Superlaw to replace the old one; I'm merely drawing out the true inner meaning of the original Law and showing how it's meant to transform the world by a single nation actually demonstrating that it works. That's why I called you 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world'.

The world is perishing in its own shortsighted selfishness. It doesn't realise, or won't accept, that the love that animates the Father-Creator is the heartbeat that sustains the universe. It should be quite a simple thing for us to love our neighbour as ourselves, because that's the way he designed us to live. It should be completely natural to ask, 'How can I act towards this or that person with the same forbearance and creative imagination I should like them to show to me?' What's so difficult about that? Isn't it just common decency?

And if you've found by experience that you can't carry out any of these simple requirements, let alone all three together, then at least you have discovered something that may lead to your salvation. You have found that pride in your own achievement, the credit you fondly thought you had notched up with the Lord God, is simply not an option. You have begun to see yourself for the loveless, self-centred creature you have somehow become, against your better inclinations. You've reached a crossroads, and you've got to go one way or the other.

7:13-14 <sup>13</sup> *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

### Choice of highways

[7:13] Let me be brutally realistic. There are two ways before you: the way of self, and the way of love. The first is the way of death, and the second is the way to life. The one is a false trail; the other is the true path. Let's suppose you're a traveller setting out on a long journey, and you're trying to get to a certain town where a dear and valued friend has invited you to stay. You stand in the square asking for directions. Most people shrug their shoulders and say, 'Just follow the crowds; sensible people leave by the main gate and take the great highway across the desert.' But some more thoughtful souls find out where you really want to go and tell you, 'There's a lesser-known gate out of the city which points in the direction you want to take. It's quite small and you can easily miss it; and the track is stony and constricted. There may be dangers. But it will get you there, depend upon it.'

Take the desert highway, and you'll run out of water and your bones will bleach in the sands before you realise you've gone in completely the wrong direction. Take the stony track, and you'll find help and sustenance enough as you travel slowly but surely towards your goal. The way of self-fulfilment seems the obvious road to select; after all, everybody else is going along it, and the majority can't be wrong. But the way of sacrificial love, hard though it may be at times, is the one to follow if you want to find the King. A few in every generation make the right choice – they may have to force their way against the tide of general opinion, but they've made the wise decision. The safest way of going about it, of making a choice on which your whole life depends in time and eternity, is to ask someone who has been that way themselves, or better still, who can go along with you as a totally reliable guide. Are you listening?

7:15-20 <sup>15</sup> *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup> By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*

### Pseudo-guides

[7:15] Oh yes, there'll be plenty of pseudo-guides who will come up to you and offer to show you the way (for a fee, probably). They will be plausible speakers who appear to be really decent folk and who claim to have first-hand knowledge of the best route to take. They may even be card-carrying members of the same flock as you, professing loyalty to the same shepherd. But all their apparent sincerity is a thin veneer for an internal ruthlessness which will stop at nothing to swallow your very soul. Innocent as a lamb on the outside, ravening as a wolf on the inside. [7:16] How do you distinguish these charlatans from the genuine article? Look at their lives. Examine their track record. It's only commonsense, if you want a nice juicy bunch of grapes, to go to a grapevine in bloom and select the best specimens. You'd be crazy to dive into a thorn hedge and hope to come up with anything but brambles and scratches for your pains. Similarly, if you yearned for a fig to keep you going through the morning's toil, the last place to find one would be a clump of thistles in the middle of the field. Use your brains. [7:17] You're only going to get good, healthy apples from a properly maintained and lovingly cultivated orchard. If a tree's got blight or is riddled with fungus, it's going to produce pocky, foul-tasting fruit that's no use to anyone. [7:18] Nature itself teaches you that rotten bushes can't produce sound fruit, neither (unless they've got infected somehow) do sound bushes produce rotten fruit. That's the way things work. [7:19] In fact, the sooner you can cut down any diseased tree or bush, and make a bonfire of it, the better. [7:20] Does this help with spotting self-proclaimed gurus who will only feed you with delusional nonsense? I don't mean that you should go around denouncing and burning heretics! I'm just repeating: look at their lives; examine their track record. They advertise courses like 'Six steps to Divine oneness' while their personal lives are a shambles and their former disciples have mostly gone off the rails. Glib catchwords are no substitute for solid truth. Don't be fooled!

*7:21-23 <sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"*

#### Winners and losers

[7:21] By now, what with all this talk about 'the kingdom of heaven' and 'your heavenly Father', you should have a pretty good idea of who you're dealing with. Who is it that sets out the terms of membership? Who decides who comes to the party? Some people think it's all a matter of sweet-talking, using the right formulas and so on, 'O Lord this' and 'O Lord that.' But they've got to get past me. They've got to show me that they have consistently followed the way of love mapped out by this incredible Father of mine, who (as I've said time and again) sees to the heart of the matter where human motives are concerned. [7:22] Come Prizegiving Day, and you'll find out who are the winners and who are the losers. There will be no lack of people, for instance, who will proudly declare, 'Lord God Almighty' – they know the right language to use – 'I've preached hundreds of sermons about you, I've taught seminars, I've made long speeches at conferences and here's my list of publications.' They see I'm not over-impressed, so they try again. 'Lord of heaven and earth, I've used your name to set distressed souls free from evil influences, I've counselled the addicted and the suicidal and I've generally made this twisted world a better place.' I still remain silent. 'O Lord Jesus, look at my track record of healings and striking demonstrations of power. I've achieved hundreds of amazing conversions and brought whole towns and cities to their knees.' All good and worthy things my disciples ought to be doing, but they're beside the point. I don't want people who are proud of their own performance; I want people who've humbly accepted my friendship. Who, as I said at the start, are spiritual down-and-outs, beggars at the gate of heaven.

#### What have I done for you?

[7:23] 'Let me ask you one simple question,' I say. 'Who are you? Do I know you?' I don't want a long list of your achievements; I'm not interested in how religious you've been, or what position you've held in the church, or how you've held the crowds spellbound with your oratory, or how many people you've won for the Lord. There's only one thing that matters, and it's this: What have I, your Lord and Master, done for you? Have you ever said "Thank you for coming into my life"? Have you ever begged me to give you the love for others that you can't find in yourself? Because if you aren't my friend, you're my enemy, and all you've performed 'for the cause of Christ' has been the devil's work in disguise. Knowing me is the way to life; anything else is irrelevant. You'd better stop your blustering and leave this moment. You're not coming to the party. You're not one of mine.

7:24-25 <sup>24</sup> *“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.*

### Building the kingdom

[7:24] I don't want talkers, I want listeners. And I don't just want listeners, I want practitioners. I want to gather round me a fellowship of heaven-builders who know what they're doing, because they've come to me for instructions. What I've been teaching you, all these little pictures and comparisons and precepts, form a blueprint for the character of my kingdom on earth. This is how the world is meant to be under my reign.

So here's a final story. It's about two expert builders. Both of them had been trained in the leading architectural schools and knew all the latest techniques. They were summoned by the King himself, who said, 'I want one of you to build my palace, but I don't know which one to select. Each of you seems as good as the other. So here's what we'll do. Both of you can carry out a test project. Build me a mansion that will survive whatever the climate can throw at it.'

So the first man got to work. He did a geological survey and selected a plateau of really sound rock. On that firm base he steadily constructed an impressive dwelling which was fit for purpose in every conceivable way. [7:25] Sure enough, the weather went through all its moods. It rained for days, weeks, months. The rivers rose and flooded their banks. Torrents of water, piles of debris, washed against the walls of the mansion and did their best to bring it toppling down. But to no avail. There it stood foursquare on its foundations, proudly resisting all nature's attacks, until the sun emerged through the rainclouds and order was finally restored. The King stood watching, and said nothing.

7:26-27 <sup>26</sup> *But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”*

### Two kinds of hearers

[7:26-27] It was now the turn of the other builder. 'Location, location!' he cried. 'The problem with that house was its exposed position.' So he selected a sheltered cove which had an wide apron of reclaimed soil at the landward end, and built a lovely dwelling with all the latest modern gadgets and equipment. After a perfect summer, the autumn came with its gales and storms and sea surges. The tides were higher than usual and steadily ate away at the base of the edifice. The earthy substructure of the house started to crumble. One terrible night a split developed in the seaward front and it only took a few minutes for the whole mansion to tilt and subside into the raging waters. The sound of the dramatic collapse could be heard even above the wild wailing of the storm. Next morning the King surveyed the ruins and made the obvious choice of builder.

You've been listening to me for the past few hours and it's time for us all to go home and get on with our daily lives. But there are going to be two kinds of hearers. One kind will be like the wise house-builder. They may not have understood everything that was said, but they will cling tenaciously to what they did understand and redesign their lives on the rocklike foundation of my kingdom teaching. This won't make them immune to the stresses and strains of human existence, but they'll get through in the end, because they've aligned themselves to the revealed will of my heavenly Father. They've shown their faith by their deeds.

### Spectacular collapse

The other kind may agree with most of my sayings in theory, but won't really do much about putting them into practice – either because they think it's too difficult, or because it would mean a whole change of attitude and they're not prepared for their current lifestyle to be reshaped. They are like the foolish house-builder: they may develop impressive careers and acquire a fine reputation with those whose opinion seems to matter; but when the pressures and crises of life really start getting to them, they won't have any secure foundation to rest upon. They may have had faith of a sort, but it hasn't resulted in any discernible change of practice. In a number of cases their ultimate collapse will be quite spectacular, though for some the denouement may have to wait until after their mortal lives are over, when they appear before the heavenly tribunal and their un wisdom becomes clear to all.

7:28-29 <sup>28</sup> When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Ultimate judge

[7:28] That was the story Jesus chose to end on. For a few minutes there was no movement in the huge crowd. A kind of awe had come over us, as though each person was grappling with the challenge Jesus had presented to us, collectively and individually. Above all, we had come face to face with the unmistakable claims of Jesus: he had performed the true function of a prophet, yes, which was to bring us into direct contact with the requirements of the One True God; but was he also warning us that he himself would be the ultimate judge of the rightness of our lives, the arbiter of our eternal destiny? Was obedience to the word of this Nazarene carpenter to be the single criterion of our status in the eyes of heaven?

[7:29] Eventually the multitude shifted, began to buzz distractedly, got unsteadily to its feet, then drifted away down the hillside in twos and threes. We had been present at the most extraordinary demonstration of authority; we had come up against the cutting edge of Divine wisdom, spoken with a passion and a certainty that put all other teaching we had ever heard in the shade. It wasn't the usual 'Rabbi X says this, while Rabbi Y says that.' It was more like, 'Whatever your tradition tells you, whatever the world may insist is the case, I'm telling you how it really is and always has been.' In his deft comparisons and memorable word pictures, but even more by his insistent reference to his heavenly Father, Jesus came over as someone who embodied God's truth like no one else we had ever heard.

So – what difference has it made to *you*? What kind of listener are you?

#### THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT SLOWLY: THINKING THROUGH MATTHEW 5-7 - REFERENCES

References are listed in biblical order. Underlined: direct quotation from or reference to an Old Testament passage. \*Asterisked: possible or probable allusion to an Old Testament passage. Other references may suggest links to biblical thinking elsewhere.

5:1-2 *Horrible afflictions* Mt 4:24. *From Jerusalem* Mt 4:25. *At this stage* Mt 4:18ff, Jn 1:43ff. *A few weeks later* Mt 9:9ff. *Reminding us* Jn 14:26.

5:3 *Best news anyone could have* \*Isa 61:1, Lk 4:18. *Kills the soul* I Tim 6:9. *Humble dependence* Jas 2:5. *Enjoy!* I Tim 6:17.

5:4 *Feeling your grief* \*Isa 61:2-3. *Joy comes in the morning* Ps 30:5.

5:5 *Psalmist tells us* Ps 37:11. *Precisely nothing* Lk 1:52. *Pride or self-regard* Mt 11:29, 21:5, Zech 9:9. *Justice to prevail* Lk 18:7-8.

5:6 *Right to come out on top* \*Isa 61:8. *Superabundance of righteousness* 2 Pet 3:13. *Orchard of Spirit-fruit* Gal 5:22-23. *Parched souls* Jn 7:37-39. *Delights every day* Ps 36:8.

5:7 *Another chance* Mt 18:21. *Countless times* Mt 18:33. *The way of your heavenly Father* Jas 2:13.

5:8 *Get your heart right* Jer 17:11. *Desire for him* Ps 24:3-4. *By their own rightness* Lk 18:5. *Pure in the sight of God* Prov 20:9. *From the bottom of your heart* Lk 18:13. *Depths of your despair* Ps 130:1-3.

5:9 *Stirring up their animosities* Jas 3:17-18. *Father is like this* Mt 5:48. *After my own Son's heart* 2 Cor 5:18, Eph 2:14-18.

5:10-12 *Coming upon earth* Acts 14:22. *House of your friends* Zech 13:6. *I hope it isn't* 1 Pet 4:15-16. *Lord and Master* Jn 15:20. *Been through for him* Isa 49:15, Heb 6:10. *Jeremiah and many others* Lk 11:51, Heb 11:32ff.

5:13 *Refreshed by God's love* Acts 3:20, Jude 21. *Weeds at bay* Dt 29:23. *Wonderful stuff, salt* 2 Ki 2:19-21, Col 4:5-6.

5:14-16 *Life-giving flame* Jn 8:12. *Find themselves in* Jer 29:7. *If you have any* Lk 11:13a.

5:17-20 *Spiritual inadequacy* Mt 5:3. *Thought for their practicability* Mt 23:2-4. *Fundamental attitudes* 1 Sam 16:7.

5:21-23 *Cain and Abel* Gen 4:1-6. *Broken God's law* Exod 20:13, Mt 5:17. *Cuts right through externals* Heb 4:12-13.

5:23-24 *Horns of the altar* Ps 118:27. *Forgiving and receiving forgiveness* Mt 6:14-15, Eph 4:32-5:2.

5:25-26 *Mercy or justice* Mt 9:13. *Law of mercy level* Jas 2:12-13.  
5:27-30 *Not even think about it* Exod 20:17, Rom 7:7. *No final accounting?* Job 31:11.  
5:31-32 *Sanctity of the marriage-bond* Mt 19:3-9. *Let-out clause* Mt 24:1. *Divorce is a fact of life* Mt 19:5. *Fibre of his being* Mal 2:13-16. *Mercy and help* Lk 18:13, Heb 4:16.  
5:33-37 *Name of the Lord in vain* Exod 20:7. *Jephthah* Judg 11:35. *Words matter* Eccl 5:2, 4, Mt 12:36-37. *As the Scripture says* Isa 66:1. *Evening stroll* Gen 3:8. *Dispose of as you choose* Jas 4:14.  
5:38-42 *Knock yours out* Exod 21:24, Lev 24:20. *Forgives them* 1 Pet 2:22-24. *Dealings with each other* Dt 15:7-8. *Wants to borrow them* Lk 6:34-35, Ps 37:26.  
5:43-48 *Your prayer times* Lk 23:34. *Peacemakers* Mt 5:45. *Way of the world* Rom 12:2.

6:1 *How different they are* Lk 16:15.  
6:2-4 *God's credit you are working for* Mt 5:16. *He sees it all* Heb 6:10. *Sheaves in exultation* Ps 126:5-6.  
6:5-8 *Made you the person you are* Lk 18:11. *Quiet place* Prov 8:34, Song 2:14. *Mount Carmel* 1 Ki 18:20-38. *No answer was given* Heb 4:16.  
6:9-13 *Way of the devil* Mt 26:41, Eph 2:1-3.  
6:14-15 *An exception of you* Mt 18:32-33.  
6:16-18 *Grim-faced intensity* Isa 58:5. *To score points* Zech 7:4.  
6:19-21 *Moths have been at work* Jas 5:2-3.  
6:22-23 *See God face to face* 1 Cor 13:12, 1 Jn 3:2, Rev 22:4. *Inner vision is distorted* Jn 9:41, Rom 2:19, Rev 3:17.  
6:24 *Hid from him* Gen 3:8. *Time and again* Mt 19:21, Lk 12:21. *Freedom and happiness* Lk 19:8-10, 12:32-33.  
6:25-26 *Cares for you* Ps 55:22, 1 Pet 5:7. *Infinite resources* 2 Cor 9:8. *Fed the prophet Elijah* 1 Ki 17:6.  
6:27-30 *Professional worriers* Lk 10:38-42.

7:1-5 *To sit in judgment* Rom 14:4.  
7:6 *Chucking discretion to the winds* Heb 12:14. *Find its proper place* Mt 6:33.  
7:7-8 *This is for everyone* Phil 4:6-7.  
7:9-11 *Makes part of you* Lk 11:13.  
7:12 *Light of the world* Mt 5:13-14. *Common decency* Mic 6:8.  
7:13-14 *Way to life* Dt 30:15-20.  
7:15-20 *Accepted my friendship* Jn 1:12. *At the start* Mt 5:3.  
7:21-23 *You're my enemy* Mt 12:30. *Knowing me* Jn 17:3.  
7:24-25 *I want listeners* Jas 1:19. *Practitioners* Jas 1:22.  
7:26-27 *By their deeds* Jas 2:26. *Clear to all* 2 Tim 3:9.  
7:28-29 *Ultimate judge* Phil 2:9-11. *Embodied God's truth* Jn 14:6.