



But I say...

Five sessions for small groups
on the Sermon on the Mount

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“But I say...”

Five sessions for small groups on the Sermon on the Mount

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introduction

The Sermon

The sermon is found in Matthew chapters 5-7 and covers 107 verses. Not a particularly important number but possibly an interesting one. This is Jesus’ manifesto as to how life lived as part of the Kingdom of God should be. Much of it contrasts God’s values with those of the pagan world or hypocritical religious world.

The Context

God always communicates in a context. Throughout the Bible this context was a person or people in a particular place and culture. Think of Adam; Abraham; Moses; John the Baptist. Then ultimately the incarnation shows us God communicating to the world in the context of a person – Jesus. *“The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”* (John 1: 14).

The Challenge

Shall we let the words of Jesus speak to us again now as individuals and as leaders preparing to lead young people? There are three questions to apply when reading and understanding these passages:

- What does it say?
- What did it say to them?
- What does it say to us?

Jesus the Teacher

Jesus assumed that he had the right to teach the absolute truth (note that we don’t have the same right). By comparison the Scribes spoke by another’s authority. They would say, *“It is written”* or *“Thus said the Lord”*. Jesus spoke with his own authority starting with, *“I say”*.

In many cases Jesus challenges inherited traditions and replaces them with His authority.

“You have heard it said” (Some are *“It has been said”*): Matthew 5: 21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43.

What was quoted was not necessarily what God had originally said in the law but how people had interpreted it. Some of these interpretations may have made it easier and others harder to keep the law. We must take care not to do this today with our young people.

Jesus however concludes each with *“But I say”*: Matthew 5: 22, 28, 32, 34, 39 and 44.

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“But I say...”

The sessions

These five sessions are designed to achieve a few important things. Firstly they help your group to read the Bible and see what it actually says. As with Jesus and the first disciples we are helping young people not to believe what they have heard said but rather what Jesus in his authority as God actually said.

Second, these sessions will help young people to think. The main part of each session is a large number of questions for discussion. You will know your group the best and will know which questions to use. Do not either try to use them all or simply work through them in order. This won't work well. Some preparation is vital.

Third, each session has a very important “So what now?” section. Jesus wants the sermon to be understood and obeyed. Jesus wants us to be different - to be Holy. That means set apart and different from the non Christian world. This difference is in: Character; Righteousness and Love. This means our studies of God's word need to have an effect on the way we live our lives. Make sure there is always time for this time of application and prayer at the end.

These studies will help you and your young people to get into what living as part of the Kingdom of God means. Jesus told his disciples that he had come to bring life “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*” (John 10: 10). Make sure there is plenty of life in your session. A good suggestion is to always include food and fun. Consequently there is often a game suggested for the start of the session. You will get to know what games your group likes so you can always swap the one suggested for another more appropriate one.

The Pattern

Each session has these ingredients:

Aim/Background	Some information and explanation to leaders about the passage
Welcome	A fun way of getting the session going
Worship	A way of focussing on God in worship or prayer
Bible	The discussion and teaching points of the session
So what now?	Some time to reflect on what the passage means for us today



The writer

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session 1: Killing me softly



Aim/background

This passage is an example of Jesus comparing the way the Old Testament law had been interpreted incorrectly by the Pharisees and teachers of the law with what was its true meaning. This passage on murder links to the sixth Commandment. Is it good enough to simply not commit murder? Do the thoughts of anger and hatred matter? Does it matter what we think as long as we behave properly? In this passage Jesus talks in a very challenging way about anger and our relationships with other people.

Key Passage
Matthew 5: 21-26



Welcome

Food is always a good ingredient of any session with young people. You can decide for yourself what is the most appropriate. This could be sweets or chocolate. The very healthy among you may want to try fruit! See how that one goes.

Start your session with one of these activities.

1 Play wink murder

The minimum number of players for this game is 4 however it is best played with more than 6.

One person is chosen secretly as the murderer. This person then proceeds to ‘kill’ the others by simply and only by winking at them. Any other player who is winked at has 30 seconds to “die as loudly or quietly as they like”. All others are not allowed to wink. The aim of the murderer is to murder as many people as possible without being detected.

2 Play I love you but I just can’t smile

Every one sits in a circle. One person is chosen to start. They have to approach (without touching) others in the circle at random and ask, “Hey babe do you love me?” That person has to reply with a completely straight face, “I love you babe but I just can’t smile”. If they do crack a smile or laugh they take over as the questioner.

session 1: Killing me softly



Worship

This is what's going on Lord

Bring a selection of the day's newspapers and some scissors to the session. Ask the group to go through the papers finding two categories of news item. First they should find things that they can thank God for. Second they should find things that they want to bring to God and ask for his involvement and or blessing.



Word

Make sure that everybody in the group either has a Bible or has a sheet with the Bible passage printed on it.

Ask someone appropriate to read Matthew 5: 21- 22.

Now ask everybody to write down their first impression about the passage. It may help them to give an answer to the question, “What is this all about?”

The Old Testament law told God's people that they should not commit murder. Jesus now tells his disciples what this fully means when lived out in his Kingdom. The passage starts with “You have heard that it was said” (v. 21) and he then speaking with his full authority goes on to tell the disciples and consequently us what it really means. (v. 22)

Some questions for your group to discuss:

Is Jesus making the law stricter?

Is Jesus saying that all forms of killing people are wrong?

In what ways is being angry the same as killing a person?

What does this command both in the Old Testament and in New Testament say about God's view of human life? (Look at Genesis 1: 27)

Jesus is teaching the disciples that their attitudes are as important as their actions. He is looking at the cause of murder and that is the hatred and anger that leads to the crime. It is not good enough to never murder another person. To live according to the values of his kingdom we need to not be angry with people either. Even if earthly courts and codes of conduct only deal with the deed, God's standards are higher.

session 1: Killing me softly

Why does Jesus think anger is so bad?

Anger is part of sinful nature (Galatians 5: 20).

What about the wrath of God which leads to judgement?

Unrighteous anger leads to hate and revenge (1 John 3: 15).

Ask someone appropriate to read Matthew 5: 23-26.

In these verses Jesus addresses the issue of unresolved conflict with others. Conflict is a natural part of human life and cannot be avoided. It can however be ducked or left unresolved. Unresolved conflict and the pain and division which so often follow are not part of the Kingdom of God.

Get everybody to think of an unresolved area of conflict. This can be on a global, national and personal level.

As a group discuss these questions:

Why do these conflicts arise?

Were they avoidable?

Why is it so difficult to resolve issues?

Jesus gives some clear instructions as to what should be done when there is a problem between two Christians:

What should we do where there is conflict?

How should this affect how and when we worship God?

Who do you think should take the initiative?

What problems will arise if conflict among Christians is not sorted out quickly?

Getting personal

How have we made attempts to resolve problems? What has and what has not worked?

Are there issues that we need to go and resolve?

session 1: Killing me softly

Extra note for group leaders

It may be that your group wants to get talking about the death penalty. If you get on to this it is important to remember that thoughtful and biblically faithful Christians have differed on this for centuries. It may therefore not be clear what the ‘right answer’ is. A look at Romans 13: 1 where Paul talks about submitting to earthly authorities and Genesis 9: 6 where God wants an account of life shed may be helpful.



So what now?

So how does this apply to us?

Jesus’ teaching is as relevant and as important to us today as it was to the first disciples. We therefore all need to ask ourselves the question, “What do I need to do about this now?”

Ask the group to think about how people they know outside of the church view the community of Christians. What do people at school, college or work think about the relationships that exist in the church?

Option one

Allow for some quiet thought and then read the words of Saint Francis as a prayer

Lord, make me a channel of thy peace.
That where there is hatred I may bring love,
That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness,
That where there is discord, I may bring harmony,
That where there is error I may bring truth,
That where there is doubt I may bring faith,
That where there is despair I may bring hope,
That where there are shadows I may bring light,
That where there is sadness I may bring joy.

This version of the prayer was used by Mother Theresa when she addressed the United Nations in 1985.

session 1: Killing me softly

Option two

Ask everybody to think about a conflict situation that exists outside of church maybe at home or among friends.

Bring this situation and the people to God in prayer asking God to make us agents of reconciliation.

Pray for the wisdom and opportunity to be proactive and do or say something helpful about this sometime during the next week.

“But I say...”

session 2: Getting my own back



Aim/Background

In this session we are thinking about retaliation and vengeance. Wanting to get your own back is normal human reaction to having been wronged. However the Kingdom of God is based on different values and has different behaviour. Once again Jesus starts with the words “*You have heard it said*” (verse 38) and then tells them and us how his followers should think and respond. Verse 38 comes directly from Old Testament law (Exodus 21: 22-25), but was actually an instruction relating to courts of law not individual behaviour. One intended effect of this Old Testament law was to limit vengeance and restrain revenge.

Key Passage

Matthew 5: 38-48



Welcome

It's a taboo

Borrow or buy the game Taboo. This is great fun and the aim is to describe the word on the card without using any of the other prohibited words shown. Much fun and much frustration will ensue. If you are unable to get hold of a copy even having searched the charity shops you could make up your own version on small cards.

Don't forget to bring along some food. Maybe in advance of next time you could suggest that another member of the group brings something.



Worship

Map Point

In advance print out a map of your area as large as you are able (A3 would be good). Either using small round coloured stickers or coloured pins get the group to mark all the significant places in the area. These should be whatever they decide but will probably include: certain shops, schools and communal areas. Ensure that one colour is not used. With this remaining colour mark all the places where the group knows that a Christian lives, works or goes to school or college.

Use this Map Point to fuel some prayers of thanks for the Christians that God has placed around the area and to pray for the issues that the group can think of that need God's intervention or blessing.

session 2: Getting my own back



Word

Make sure that everybody in the group either has a Bible or has a sheet with the Bible passage printed on it. Ask someone appropriate to read Matthew 5: 38-42. Ask everybody to think what the main point of the passage is. Get those who are prepared to do so to share their thoughts. Explain that the words in verse 38 come from Exodus 21: 22-25 where God is explaining to the Israelites how vengeance and retaliation should be limited. This was not intended as permission or encouragement to take retribution.

Ask the group what they think that verse 39 means. Does not resisting an evil person mean that we are ignoring or approving of evil people and their behaviour? The slap on the right cheek was a personal insult: Ask the group for examples of when they have been insulted, maybe publicly or on Facebook for example. How did they react? How do they think that a Christian should react?

How does the Holy Spirit help us and how do we help each other to put into practice “Seeking first God’s kingdom” when we are wronged?

What do the four cameos – the slap on the cheek; someone wanting our coat; going the extra mile and being asked for something (in verses 39-42) – say about the way Christians should respond to personal injustice?

Is there a role for Christians taking others to court? When would this be appropriate and when would it not be appropriate? Should we ever look for compensation? There is a lot of talk in the media and in society about suing people who have wronged us. Is it ever appropriate for a Christian to follow this course of action?

Does this only apply if we are wronged by a Christian? (NB: It was probably Roman soldiers who forced people to “go one mile” as this was the max they could demand)

Verse 43 is not in the Old Testament law. This misquotation leaves out “as yourself” and so has the effect of narrowing the law’s requirement (Leviticus 19: 17-18). It also qualifies the law by saying that only neighbours should be loved and that enemies should be hated.

Christians are supposed to go further than just loving our friends and neighbours and love our enemies as well in order to live out the values of the Kingdom of God. Verse 48 says that we should be perfect. What does being perfect mean for us? Does God actually expect us to be perfect all the time?

This passage is about love, so arguably the instruction to be perfect refers to our love. How can our love for other people reflect God’s perfect love? In practice how easy is it to return good when we are wronged?

“But I say...”

session 2: Getting my own back



So what now?

So how does this apply to us?

Jesus' teaching is as relevant and as important to us today as it was to the first disciples. We therefore all need to ask ourselves the question, “What do I need to do about this now?”

Loving our enemies is a tough challenge. Some young people will have enemies or other people who actively dislike them or bully them. This can make life particularly difficult and make it even harder to live according to the values of the Kingdom.

It would be good to discuss the challenges that your group face at school, college, work or at home. Some of these questions may help them to identify current issues and help them to bring them to God.

Who are the people we find difficult to love?

What is it about these people that makes them difficult to love?

What are their good characteristics?

If there is somebody who is being either unfriendly or aggressive to us, why do we think they are behaving like that?

Pray for these people.

Ask God for the strength to show them love maybe with a small act of kindness.

Ask God to help us not to fight back when that is not the best way.

Are there other people who are being picked on or victimised that your group know?

Pray for these people.

Think of a way that you can show support for them.

Consider whether it is helpful to say or do something.

Think of ways in which as young Christians your group can support each other.

session 3: Say it like it is



Aim/Background

The media today is full of debate over who said what and whether they were telling the truth. On occasions it seems that truth telling may not be seen as important as being seen to be clean or seen to be innocent. In the 21st century world, does truth matter anymore? What is being honest? Who in public life and in our local communities do we believe and why?

God is a god of faithfulness, integrity and honesty. These are values of his kingdom.

This session looks at Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount about oaths and honesty. This passage is not about swearing in terms of bad language. Rather it is about the issue of telling the truth. Jesus again questions what people have heard said. This time it is the so-called command to *“not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.”* (verse 33). Jesus points out that this is not actually an Old Testament law but an inference from several commands that suggest that people should keep the vows that they have made (Exodus 20: 7; Numbers 30: 2; Deuteronomy 23: 21). The Pharisees were trying to allow people to wriggle out of an oath because of the technical wording used; Jesus is pointing us towards something far more important. He is saying that honest people should not need to take an oath. He is however not saying that they must never take an oath.

Key Passage

Matthew 5: 33-37



Welcome

1 I don't believe it

Ask each person in the group to think of 4 “facts” about themselves. They can be for example about themselves, their family or something they have done. One of these “facts” must be untrue. Once they have had time to think of these four they take it in turns to tell them to the rest of the group. The other members have to guess which one is the “untrue” piece of information.

2 Would I lie to you?

Ask the group members to think of some incident from either the news or TV or in a movie when there has been an issue that involves lying. Have a discussion about whether it is, on occasions, acceptable to lie or whether it is always wrong.

Discuss occasions when they think it's alright to tell a lie. Might it be right to tell a half truth if it protects somebody?

“But I say...”

session 3: Say it like it is



Worship

What is God like and how should we respond?

Here are three ways of looking at Psalm 138 to choose from:

Give each person a copy of Psalm 138 as printed on the sheet at the end of this session. Arm each person also with either two pens of different colours or two highlighters of different colours. With some mellow music playing in the background ask everybody on their own to read through the Psalm and mark two different things one in each colour. First anything that the Psalm tells us about God’s character. Second mark what it says about how we should behave or respond to him.

Ask everybody to make themselves comfortable (best to suggest this is done without touching anybody else). When everybody is settled explain that you are going to read this Psalm through slowly a couple of times. It is valuable to pause after each natural break. As you read the Psalm, ask everybody to listen out for what phrase or sentence particularly strikes them. Remind them that God wants to speak to us through his word so before you start pray that this is what He will do and that people are open to hearing from him.

Place a large piece of paper in the middle of the group. Ask everybody to write down three words to describe God’s character. These can be anything that they genuinely believe describes God. Once they have done this, read Psalm 138 and ask them to write down any new thoughts they have about God’s character now.

Hopefully among other things they will bring out that God is loving and faithful and should be exalted above all things (verse 2). He also answers us and strengthens us (verse 3).

We in turn should praise him, bow down to him and call to him.

Make sure each person has the opportunity, if they wish, to talk about what they have found from the Psalm. Have some time to pray together thanking God for among other things his faithfulness to us (verse 2).

session 3: Say it like it is



Word

Explain to the group that today you are going to be looking at what Jesus has to say in the Sermon on the Mount about honesty. Lately the press has been full of stories about enquiries into events that have happened sometimes many years ago. People want to know the truth – what really happened and often who was responsible and who is to blame.

Often we hear stories of people whose word or statements are being questioned. It would seem that people don't always tell the truth!

Make sure that everybody in the group either has a Bible or has a sheet with the Bible passage printed on it. Ask someone appropriate to read Matthew 5: 33-37.

Once the whole passage has been read ask someone to reread verse 37.

Ask the group what they thought Jesus meant by this and why he said it.

Which of the Ten Commandments is Jesus referencing here?

What does Jesus say should be our way of speech?

Why did people feel the need to invoke heaven, earth, hairs on head, etc (verses 34-36)?

Would it be fair to say that some people are afraid of telling the truth?

In what ways are we tempted or inclined to be 'economical with the truth'?

Is it ever right to be less than totally honest?

Is there any valid role for spin doctors who make the truth more palatable?

Sometimes telling the truth is not well received by other people. The truth can even make us unpopular. Sometimes we will feel the need to speak the truth whatever the outcome is going to be. If this is the case we will want to think carefully about how we speak the truth.

How should we go about speaking truth when it is not going to be received well? It may help to look up Ephesians 4: 15 and discuss what speaking the truth in love means.

What happens if we speak the truth without being loving?

What happens if we simply love and omit to speak the truth?

“But I say...”

session 3: Say it like it is

Some people will do everything possible to avoid actually telling the truth.

What examples are there from the media of people using clever words to wriggle out of telling truth (e.g. taking out super injunctions; using Twitter; using the word “allegedly” etc.)?

The first part of the passage is about making oaths. The Pharisees were trying to allow people to wriggle out of an oath because of the technical wording used; Jesus is pointing us towards something far more important. He is saying that honest people should not *need* to take an oath, but is not saying they *must* not.

What sort of things do people invoke today when making a promise or oath (e.g. mother’s grave, own life)?
What does this add to a promise?

Why do people feel the need to make an oath? Is the need for oaths in fact just a reflection of humans’ dishonesty?

If we meant what we said would there be no need to invoke anything to suggest we are now being truthful?
What difference would this make to our society?

How does Jesus simplify and strengthen the command given in the Old Testament? Refer to Exodus 20: 16.
Why is this sometimes difficult to do?

Is there a place for oaths in court when a Christian is giving evidence? In Matthew 26: 63 Jesus answered questions when under oath during his trial.

In what ways may we be tempted to say things that are not exactly untrue but imply something (e.g. comments on Facebook, passing on rumours, not finding out exactly what was said or what happened)?



So what now?

So how does this apply to us?

Jesus’ teaching is as relevant and as important to us today as it was to the first disciples. We therefore all need to ask ourselves the question, “What do I need to do about this now?”

To conclude this session it would be helpful to have some thought and prayer about how honest we are as individuals and as a community of people in the church.

session 3: Say it like it is

Further Reflection

Read through the passage one more time. Ask each person to think about whether there is one area of their lives where God wants them to make a change in the way they speak.

Allow some time for silent prayer.

Ask everybody to think about how the group as a whole behaves. Are they known as an honest group of people whose yes means yes and whose no means no?

Ask people to consider whether there are any areas where as a group they need to be speaking about people and speaking generally in a more God honouring way.

Pray together as a group about your thoughts, asking God to help everybody live and speak more his way.

“But I say...”

session 4: Who gave you the right to judge me?



Aim/Background

In this session we are looking at Jesus' teaching to his disciples on judgement and how we should behave when we see fault in others. As Christians none of us are going to be living perfect lives and our faults will be first real and second sometimes more obvious to others than to ourselves. Admitting we are at wrong and confessing our faults is both necessary and a powerful relationship building exercise. Growing an attitude of accountability and allowing others to help us improve our behaviour will be far more beneficial than us seeing our role as correcting everybody else's behaviour.

This passage is not referring to judges in a court of law, rather to how individual Christians treat each other. We need to have judgment to put the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount into practice in our lives.

This passage contains Jesus' particularly brilliant analogy of the speck and the plank. However, when we dig deep into the passage we find that it has for us warning, prohibition and instructions that we should follow.

Key Passage

Matthew 7: 1-5



Welcome

Sweets and habits

Get hold of a bag of sweets that have sweets of at least two different colours. Have them on a table in a bowl in front of the group. Tell everybody that, one at a time, they can choose a sweet. If they choose one colour (say red) they must tell everybody one of their bad habits. If they choose one of the second colour (say blue) they tell everybody one of their good habits. Allow as many goes as you have time for. Try and ensure that everybody gets at least one turn at telling their good habit.

session 4: Who gave you the right to judge me?



Worship

Thank you prayer wall

Have a piece of Flip Chart paper stuck to a wall with Blotak. In advance draw one row of bricks along the bottom of the sheet. Give each person a marker pen and tell them that you are all going to build a Thank you prayer wall. To do this starting on top of the row you have already drawn on the sheet people in turn draw a similar sized brick and write inside it a thing to thank God for. See how high the wall can be built.

You may want to keep the wall and add to it another week.



Word

Being a Christian and therefore part of the Christian community does not mean that we will all manage to behave perfectly. There will be many occasions on which we and others will not behave as Jesus wants us to and we will need to amend our ways. Issues of behaviour will lead to tensions and often a loss of patience. In these situations we all need Jesus' guidance and help to change our ways. Jesus points out in this passage two things we should not be doing and a third and better way of life.

Some questions:

Do we have any role in judging other people? If so, what is that role?

What should we do or say when people do things that are against God's laws?

Is Jesus asking us to turn a blind eye to other people's faults?

What responsibility do we have for other people's behaviour?

Is there a difference between making a judgement and being judgemental?

What is this difference?

What does it look like?

(The difference is likely to be between discernment and harsh judgementalism.)

Is the passage saying we should not comment on others' behaviour?

“But I say...”

session 4: Who gave you the right to judge me?

Jesus does not want us to forget or ignore our critical abilities. Discernment is an important ability and making good decisions will be a necessary part of living a Christian life. Jesus consistently calls his followers to live a life that is different from those around them. This requires discerning decisions. What Jesus does not want us to do is put ourselves in the place of the judge. That is God's role and not ours. We need to be humans who use discernment and don't try to be God who is Lord and Judge of all. In 1 Corinthians 4: 4, Paul tells the readers that judgement should wait for the time when the Lord comes.

First wrong approach

In verses 1-2 Jesus talks about not judging and the way in which we will be judged.

Does verse 2 suggest that God's standard for judging us changes depending on how we treat other people?

Does God change his mind?

Does God treat different people differently?

We are not God; the role of judging is his. If we take it on we are claiming to be able to take his place. By saying that we will be judged in the same way that we exercise judgement Jesus is telling us that we cannot expect one rule to be applied to others and another to ourselves. If we want to take the place of a judge we must also be prepared to be the defendant in the same system.

Second wrong approach

The next few verses warn us against the second wrong attitude and that is falling into the trap of being a hypocrite. Jesus uses a particularly brilliant analogy of the speck and the plank.

Read Matthew 7: 3-5.

Ask for a volunteer to explain what Jesus means by this.

See if anybody else has anything to add.

What are the speck and plank telling us to avoid?
Do we find it easy to recognise first that we are all sinners? Why is this?

session 4: Who gave you the right to judge me?

There will be things in our ‘eye’ that need dealing with.

Why is it easier to be positive about our lives and negative about other people? Self-righteousness is often a pleasure whereas confession is far more painful.

How can we avoid being hypocritical?

Do we ever want other people to live to higher standards than those we expect of ourselves?

Third and correct approach

So having considered the need not to be hypocritical what is our course of action?

Reread Matthew 7: 5.

What is the first thing we need to do?

Once we have removed the “plank” from our own eye what are we better able to do?

Why will this now be easier?

When we see wrong in others, our first responsibility is to see the error in our own lives. Then we are in a better place to help other people correct their ways. Notice that Jesus describes the obstruction in our eye as being significantly larger than in the other person’s. As a community of Christians we have a responsibility for each other. Together we are stronger and better able to live a life that is pleasing to God. Once we have dealt with the issues of our own behaviour, we then have a role to help others with theirs. Doing this we must remember to let God have his role as judge and keep our role as disciples.



So what now?

So how does this apply to us?

Jesus’ teaching is as relevant and as important to us today as it was to the first disciples. We therefore all need to ask ourselves the question, “What do I need to do about this now?”

How can we develop a habit of acting this way round?

Making ourselves accountable and practising self-examination and confession are good habits to build into life.

“But I say...”

session 4: Who gave you the right to judge me?

Self examination and confession

Give each person a piece of A5 size paper.

At the top they should write their name.

With a pen they should draw a horizontal line half way down.

Under this line they should write “My Christian Friend”.

Then explain that we are going to have a short time to think over our attitudes and see what “planks” God may want to remove from our eyes.

Part 1

While you read out the words below from Galatians 5: 22-26 ask each person to prayerfully consider whether there are some areas of behaviour or attitudes which are not up to God’s standards.

They should make a note of these on the top half of the sheet.

Suggest that they think of one or, at most, two.

The leaders should then pray that God will help each person to remove that plank from their eye.

Part 2

Then ask each person to think of one other Christian friend (who may or may not be in the group) who they might be able to ask to be a Christian brother or sister to help them with the area that they have identified. Ask them to write this person’s name below the line on the second half of the page. They could then consider chatting to each other at some point and agreeing to pray either for or with each other.

Finish by reminding everybody that these words from Galatians tell us that God has given us his Holy Spirit in order to help us to become more like Jesus. We are not alone.

Galatians 5: 22-26

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

session 5: What's prayer got to do with anything these days?



Aim/Background

In today's session we are going to look at what Jesus taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount about prayer. It is a good guess that although all Christians pray, nobody actually thinks they have cracked prayer nor do they think that they pray enough. Today we are going to see what we can learn straight from the master about praying. Jesus gives us warnings about how not to pray and then gives us a model of how to pray. You and your young people may find it encouraging that Christians have been praying this prayer, all over the world, in different languages for over 2000 years. What a great symbol of unity this prayer provides.

Jesus tells us about two different people at prayer and points out that our motives in prayer are the main issue not the method of prayer. Jesus is not criticising regular prayer nor is he saying people should not pray standing up or on street corners. He is shining a torch at the motives that some people may have of wanting to be seen to be praying. Have we or our young people ever given in to the temptation of giving the impression that we are super spiritual or biblically well informed by praying clever prayers? If so what was our motive?

Key Passage

Matthew 6: 5-15



Welcome

Have a general time of catching up and chatting about the week. Never underestimate the value of this social time in building relationships and deepening friendships. Sometimes it may feel like idle chat but it is really valuable. Find out how people's weeks have been.

1. Play a game. The suggestion for this session is jungle speed. A great game based on snap although genuinely more exciting and involving speed (appropriate given the name!). See if anybody has it or track it down on Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk) or Ebay (www.ebay.co.uk).

2. On a large piece of paper (suggest A3 size) get the group to list all the different types of prayer they can think of. Hopefully they will at least come up with Asking; Confession; Meditation; formal and informal.

Have a brief chat about these different types of prayer. Who has done any of them? Did they find them helpful etc.

“But I say...”

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Worship

Set up a thankful circle.

Tell the group that you are going to thank God for all the good things that you can as a group think of. Give everybody a few moments to think of some things. Then pray round in a circle. The leader starts with something like “Dear God, we thank you for...”, then each person only needs to mention a particular thing one at a time. Keep going round until the blessings dry up.



Word

Make sure that everybody in the group either has a Bible or has a sheet with the Bible passage printed on it.

Ask someone appropriate to read Matthew 6: 5-8.

Give everybody a piece of A5 paper and ask them to draw a vertical line down the middle.

On the left of the line ask them to note down all the things Jesus says we should not do when we pray. On the right make a note of why this is the wrong thing to do.

Some questions for discussion:

How should our praying compare with the way that Jesus says the “hypocrites” pray?

Is there anything good and if so what about being seen praying in public?

Do we ever do this?

In this passage Jesus says that when we pray we should do it, in effect, in secret. It is significant that the “you”s here are all singular. This is different from the Lord’s Prayer, where all the requests are in the plural.

What does this mean for prayer meetings, prayer triplets or prayer partnerships?

What is Jesus saying is wrong with the pagan prayers?

What sort of praying do you think God wants from us?

How often do we hide ourselves away in secret and pray?
Why is this?

“But I say...”

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Read the Lord's Prayer in verses 9 – 13.

Make the point that to find out the best way to pray it is a really good idea to go back to how Jesus told his disciples to pray. After all Jesus was both a man who prayed to his heavenly father and God who knows best how we should pray to him. This is not a prayer that we know Jesus used, rather one he gives us, so it could more appropriately be termed *“The Disciples' Prayer”*.

Jesus gives the disciples this prayer. His reason for doing this is different in Luke and in Mathew's gospel. Here in Matthew it is given as a template of a prayer: *“This is how you should pray”* (v.9) and in Luke's gospel Jesus gives it as an actual prayer: *“When you pray, say...”* (Luke 11: 2).

How do we think of God when we pray? Do we think of him as a father?

What does the prayer say should be our priorities? (6: 9 -10)

“Your kingdom come” (v 10). Where do we want God's kingdom to come?

Ask your group to think local, national and global and prepare a short list of areas where they want God's Kingdom to come.

Verse 11 is a short but hugely challenging verse. In it we ask God to give us what we need for today.

What do we need today?

What do we want for today?

How similar are our wants and our needs?

In the west we can easily trust other things for what we need and not depend on God.

What other things do we rely on each day for our needs? (parents and their money)

Think through each day and what comes our way that we take for granted. (E.g. food; education; housing; peace; rights)

So what things do we actually need to depend on God for?

“But I say...”

session 5: What's prayer got to do with anything these days?

Verse 12, in one way, assumes that we have already done what we are asking God for. God forgives people who are repentant. A good sign of the fact that we know we are sinful and in need of forgiveness is that we are forgiving of others who are in the same boat. We should therefore make sure we are not harbouring resentment and unforgiveness of others

Are there any people we need to forgive?

Some other discussion areas about prayer:

Why do we need to pray to God when he already knows the stuff we are praying about?

Does prayer change God or does it change us?

Has anybody ever had a prayer answered by God? Maybe chat about it.



So what now?

This teaching from Jesus on prayer is intended to be intensely practical. It is not merely a theory lesson in prayer. It would be really valuable if everybody left today with a different understanding of prayer and an intention to pray differently.

Ask everybody to reflect quietly on what they may have learned or thought about maybe for the first time.

Option 1

Reflection

Spend some time in quiet. Ask each person on their own to reflect on this question:

How can we find the space and time to get away from everything and spend unhassled time with God?

Suggest they try and identify a regular and specific time to make this work.

Option 2

How do we picture God?

Ask everybody to quietly bring to mind how they picture God. Is it as a loving heavenly father? Is it as a school teacher? Do they think of him in terms of “our father”, a personal loving being?

“But I say...”

session 5: What's prayer got to do with anything these days?

Option 3

Prayer wall

Get three large pieces of paper (Flip chart size) and some marker pens. Before the session mark the three as follows: KINGDOM COME, WHAT WE NEED, FORGIVE US.

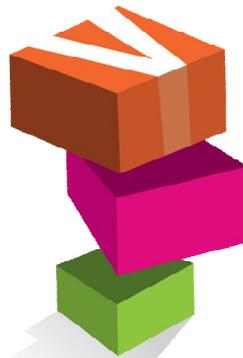
Place the sheets around the room on the floor with the pens.

Ask everybody to walk round and write something on each by way of a prayer.

Close by praying, thanking God that he is a loving heavenly father who wants to hear from us and answer our prayers.

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