



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Do you think it is acceptable to hate another person as long as we're polite to their face? If so, why? If not, why not?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Compassionate and insightful God,
you have known us from even before our birth,
and are familiar with all our words and thoughts and deeds.
We thank you for the grace with which you hold us,
for the work of refinement and growth you work in us,
and for the love with which you embrace and change us.

Help us to strive towards aligning all of our ways
with the life-giving values of your Kingdom.
In the name of Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit,
we offer our thanks and praises. **Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 119:1 – 8 (StF 829)

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.

**Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.**

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

**O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!**

Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

**I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.**

I will observe your statutes; do not utterly forsake me.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Reading Matthew 5:21 – 37

Sermon

Sometimes, it can be quite interesting to read the problem pages in newspapers and magazines, to see the kinds of dilemmas that folks write in about and the sorts of responses their letters attract. Today, our reading covers a significant portion of the Sermon on the Mount, and it portrays Jesus as a very harsh agony aunt indeed! Somebody speaks of being full of anger toward another person, and Jesus tells

them this is as bad as if they had murdered them. A man admits he cannot stop thinking about a woman other than his wife, and Jesus's reaction is to tell them this is as wrong as if he had gone ahead and had an affair with her. A third writer protests they had not done what they were accused of, and they swore this upon their own life, which leads Jesus to inform them that they shouldn't do that because they cannot change the natural colour of just one hair on their head. With replies like these, Jesus' agony aunting career would probably have been short-lived! So, just what is going on in today's reading?

One approach to making sense of the passage is to go through it in detail, and draw out each aspect in turn. However, there is so much depth to this text that the result would be a long commentary indeed, and there are whole books written about particular aspects of it, like whether getting divorced or swearing an oath is permissible. Really getting to grips with everything here requires immersing oneself into a different time and space, culture and set of values. If that interests you, then you can do worse than looking at William Barclay's writing on Matthew's Gospel as a starting point. Instead of going down this road, however, I am going to focus on three observations about this text, as a unit and as a subsection of the Sermon on the Mount.

First, immediately before our passage, in Matthew 5:20, Jesus talks about righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees and Scribes being necessary in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The great Jewish historian Josephus informs us that the Pharisees were seen as bearing the 'gold standard' for righteousness in their commitment to holiness, and the seriousness with which they treated the Mosaic Law was well-known. Jesus questioned the system of oral laws they added on top of the biblical injunctions, as they sought to apply them to everyday life. Yet, the challenge of 5:20 is real, because Jesus is calling those who would be disciples to get to the heart and the deep meaning of the vision laid down within the Law and the Prophets. In the formula 'you have heard it said, ..., but I say, ...', he quotes from

the Ten Commandments (found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5), but does not overrule or discard them; instead he seeks the reasons why they matter. So, in 5:21 – 26 for example, he highlights how the violent anger that can result in murder actually starts with words and attitudes. Jesus is intensifying and radicalising the Commandments for his hearers, by pointing to their true essence.

Secondly, it's important to note just who Jesus was speaking to here on the mountainside. In relation to murder, he says those who insult a brother (note, the addition of 'sister' is a modern step toward more inclusive translation) will be hauled before the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council. Only men of status would've been called to account in this way. When teaching on adultery and divorce, Matthew makes it clear that he was directly addressing male hearers, in what was a highly patriarchal culture and society where everyone was assumed to be heterosexual. Challenging those who were lusting after extra-marital sex and whose eyes and hands were the mechanisms which enabled them to sin was about treating women with respect. Within a world in which some powerful Rabbis argued that burning a dinner was sufficient grounds for divorce, and in which women on their own were immensely vulnerable, Jesus was making it clear that it wasn't acceptable to treat women as discardable property. Finally, given it was only men who could testify in court, the issue of oaths impacted them alone. In this #MeToo time, in which we have at last begun to see powerful men called to account for their abuses towards women and girls, this teaching is very relevant indeed. Moreover, given the shameful lack of integrity that appears to have infected public life in this country, Jesus's call to straight-talking cannot do any harm!

Thirdly and finally, the text points towards how he fulfils the Law and the Prophets (5:17 – 20), as part of a wider unit in which he expands on what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13 – 16). We can connect much of what we discover therein back to the blessings of the Beatitudes in 5:1 – 12, in which Jesus speaks

of the countercultural dynamics of the Kingdom of God. The product that results is undoubtedly a challenging text, and it reminds us that our thoughts and words matter as much as our deeds. It is probable that, if Jesus were preaching this sermon today, he'd be accused of acting like the thought police. Yet, the point stands that, despite how faith has increasingly been treated as a private matter in our society, Christian discipleship involves the vulnerability of opening up to the God who loves us while also knowing everything about us, for better or worse, so that our intentions and attitudes do indeed count.

Pulling all of this together as we rapidly approach the season of Lent once again, I'd like to invite you to spend some time with this section of the Sermon on the Mount in the coming weeks. Lent is that period of the year in which we reflect on our attitudes and intentions before God, as well as our acts. Jesus calls us to a standard of faithfulness which goes beyond the foundations of the Ten Commandments and has implications for every aspect of life and relationships. The Spirit is the one who helps us in responding to that challenge, and so that means we are not alone as we seek to grow and to flourish. So, with all that the next few weeks might bring, I pray you will discover more of God's grace and love upholding you as you seek the Kingdom.

Prayers of Renewal

God of compassion and insightfulness,
as we approach you in prayer and humility,
aware of the many burdens on our hearts and minds,
we bring to you those things in need of renewal:

For the words and actions for which we're sorry,
grant us your forgiveness.

For the burdens we carry and the sorrows we bear,
bring us your comfort.

For the struggles we may experience to trust we are loved,
offer us your assurance.

For the injustice and oppression which blights our world,
inspire us to respond courageously.

For the failings and disunity of your Church,
make us ready to change.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of compassion and insightfulness,
thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
heal our wounds and transform our world.

Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Margaret Rizza's *Music for Lent and Holy Week* is a beautiful set of hymns and songs which relate well to this week's theme.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing