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"new"

# THE NEW NORMAL

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### **CROSSWALK Church**

10421 Corporate Dr,

Redlands, CA 92374

### **Ordering Information:**

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

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## Introduction

Welcome to the New Normal Series Guide. We have all heard the phrase “the New Normal” as it relates to our current and future Covid-related lives. None of us are too excited about what the future holds and how things are changing, but we are learning to lean into whatever the new normal will be. While we don’t know exactly how things will look, we do know that we can never go back to the same life we were leading before. Whether masks are here to stay, social distancing will become the new rule of our social lives, or perhaps working from home will be the norm rather than the exception, things will be different.

But for those of us who call ourselves followers of Christ, we know that there has been a “New Normal” for us for the last two millennia. Jesus came and ushered in a different kind of life, a different kind of worldview, and a different kind of compassion. His Gospel was the good news of love, the salvation for all humankind, and the desire for a new kind of community, one that accepted all, including those who had been marginalized from the greater society. This message still rings true and is still as powerful today as it was in the first century.

While followers of Christ have not always done a great job at living this new normal, every day we have an opportunity to continue the gospel work of Jesus Christ by the way we live our lives, interact with people, seek justice, mercy and compassion, and help those living in the margins. Also, we have the opportunity to speak of the greatest love ever given to humanity through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Our new normal is a privilege to live and experience. While it is easy to get distracted by everything that is happening in the world today, we must maintain a focus on that which transcends, on that which is eternal, and on that which will lift up our eyes beyond the idols and temples of this world and into heaven.

May this series guide be a healing balm to your soul, a bit of wisdom for your life, and a catalyst for your faith.

Grace to you, and Peace.

Pastor Timothy Gillespie

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Gillespie', with a stylized flourish at the end.

# WEEK 5

## MATTHEW 5:1-10 & 17-48 (NLT)

### The Sermon on the Mount

**1** One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, **2** and he began to teach them.

### The Beatitudes

**3** “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

**4** God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

**5** God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.

**6** God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.

**7** God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

**8** God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

**9** God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

**10** God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

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### Teaching about the Law

**17** “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. **18** I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. **19** So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. **20** “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!

### Teaching about Anger

**21** “You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ **22** But I say, if you are even angry with someone you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell. **23** “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, **24** leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. **25** “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will

be thrown into prison. **26** And if that happens, you surely won't be free again until you have paid the last penny.

#### Teaching about Adultery

**27** "You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' **28** But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **29** So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, 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. **30** And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, 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 be thrown into hell.

#### Teaching about Divorce

**31** "You have heard the law that says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.' **32** But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.

#### Teaching about Vows

**33** "You have also heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.' **34** But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, 'By heaven!' because heaven is God's throne. **35** And do not say, 'By the earth!' because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, 'By Jerusalem!' for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. **36** Do not even say, 'By my head!' for you can't turn one hair white or black. **37** Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

#### Teaching about Revenge

**38** "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' **39** But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. **40** If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. **41** If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. **42** Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

#### Teaching about Love for Enemies

**43** "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. **44** But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! **45** In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. **46** If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. **47** If you are kind only to your friends,[s] how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. **48** But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

- 1** One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him,  
**2** and he began to teach them. **3** “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.  
**4** God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
**5** God blesses those who are humble,  
**6** God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.  
**7** God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.  
**8** God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.  
**9** God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.  
**10** God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

**W**ell, today we get to take a look at this famous oration called the Sermon on the Mount. Many of us see this first section and assume this is the vast majority of the teaching, but it is really just the prologue. The first verse references the crowds that had come to hear Jesus. If you have ever been to this area where the crowds would have been, you know the look of the area. It is pastoral, somewhat beautiful, and at times ridiculously hot. But it is a great place for a conversation about God, his kingdom, and how he interacts with his people. The Greek calls these Macarisms-(from the Greek word for blessed).

Now I know the word macarisms

sounds like the Macarena, but it could not be further from the silly dance we all did a quite a few years ago. It speaks of those who are blessed for particular reasons, and what we see in this prologue is an outline of kingdom values that need to be recognized. The New Living Translation sounds a little different, beginning with “God blesses” rather than “blessed”. However, it means the same thing, and is actually a bit more specific, because it is truly God who blesses. Taking this all in for only one day does not do this text justice, but there is much we need to go over this week, so I apologize, and hold on, we will go quickly.

Matthew has Jesus on a mountain, where he loves to put Jesus. Jesus also

gives the “great commission (Matthew 28:19-20) from an elevated place. As he jumps into the teaching, we know that Jesus is teaching to two groups, the disciples who are seated in a semi-circle around him, and then the greater multitudes that are back a bit, but surrounding the disciples and Jesus as well. The comments Jesus makes are to the whole of Israel, that they might understand the kingdom of God. In the same way, we are being asked to understand the kingdom a little better than before. Jesus uses alliteration from the greek in a great way to make these statements resonate and be remembered. He is using a format that draws on Isaiah 61. So the language would have been familiar to the crowd.

He begins with the Poor is spirit, who Luke simply calls the “poor.” Matthew’s list has a bit more of a spiritual bent than

that of Luke’s, which is common in their language and emphasis. But those who are poor in spirit will gain the Kingdom of heaven, no small point of reference in all the good things that Jesus promises.

When we talk about the poor in spirit, we don’t just mean those who are having a hard time having a decent attitude, but those who are actually poor. Perhaps the phrase can mean both! This phrase shows up once in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but can hardly be known as a popular phrase. Jesus seems to be setting up this list of those who might be considered “last”, to be those who the Kingdom of God considers to be first.

Have you ever considered yourself to be last? Why would Jesus want to consider you to be first? And how is it that the kingdom of God could be so different from the world we currently inhabit?

**1— Do you ever consider yourself to be “poor in spirit?”**

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**2— What does that mean to you, and does knowing that you are blessed help you each day?**

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**3 – Why do you think Jesus was saying all that he did at the Sermon on the Mount?**

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**17 “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. 18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. 19 So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.**

**M**ost of us read the Sermon on the Mountain and find ourselves very familiar with the first 10 verses, yet not as familiar with the following advice and declarations. We must remember that this pericope really goes through Chapter 7:12, so there is a great deal to unpack. Here, in verses 5:17-19, Jesus unpacks why he has come and why it is important. He reminds people that they did not come to get rid of the law and the prophets’ teaching, but rather, to fulfill and accomplish their purpose. What is the purpose of the Law? Perhaps we can say it in a shortened way:

Jesus came to fulfill the law, which means he came to show us a greater and more perfect love.

In fact, in the previous verses Jesus is showing us a greater and more perfect way. The way of the kingdom

shows us that we are in fact blessed when we feel as if we are not, and that the law has a purpose, but it is not what we have originally thought it to be. The Law is not what saves us, or brings us into the kingdom of heaven, rather it is the righteousness that the law exposes, and of course, that righteousness does not come from our human behavior, but from the very God who established the law in the first place.

Through this sermon Jesus seeks to establish the import of the principles of the law, but does not allow the law to exceed his purpose and task while here on earth. Jesus upholds the law, but not as the bellwether of our salvation, rather, it is the outcome of a search for righteousness and a right relationship with God. Rather than allow for us to think that we must keep each iota of the law, the law is put in its



proper place in relationship to Jesus. Jesus is the one who has fulfilled the law, and that does not make the law any less important, in fact, it means that if we are in Jesus, understanding the importance of the ethical practices that the law expresses will become paramount in our lives. However, we also understand the law's rightful place in our understanding. Rather than being a conduit for our salvation, keeping the law becomes the fruit of the new root that Jesus has given us.

It is easy for us to get down on ourselves for our own inability to keep the law. However, when we understand the importance of keeping the law as a result of our own salvation, the law ceases to be a burden and becomes a roadmap to Jesus for others who might be amenable to accepting Jesus by seeing the righteousness that God has placed in us through Jesus.

**1— How many times have you tried to keep the law, only to fall short?**

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**2— How has that restoration changed when you began to realize that Jesus has already kept the law for us, and now our call is to accept his righteousness in our lives?**

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**3 – If Jesus came to fulfill the law, does this mean we don't have to?**

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**20 “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”**

**N**ow, what are we going to do with this verse today? Because it seems to push back on everything that we were just discussing. How can all the previous assertions be true, when this text says that we must have a better righteousness than all the teachers of the law and the Pharisees if we are to enter into the kingdom of heaven? How does any of this make sense?

I can understand the confusion. Obviously, the teachers of the Law must have a greater understanding of the law than we do; as well, the Pharisees were concerned with scrupulously keeping the law in every aspect of their lives. How is it possible to maintain an understanding of the law when these two groups didn't do a great job with it in the first century. In fact, they did such a bad job of understanding that Jesus actually had to spend a great deal of time reworking everyone's understanding of the Law and our relationship to it.

There is one very simple variable that we have and can understand that they didn't. The variable is Jesus. Not only is he explaining how things should be, he is also explaining what they all

mean. He redefines righteousness to be connected deeply to him, his adherence to the law, and our accepting of his righteousness as our own. As well, he is letting us know that while the law is good and proper, the keeping of the law has been fulfilled, so the law that we keep means something else to us than it did to the Pharisees. For us, the law is the expression of our love for Jesus, rather than a roadmap to salvation.

We keep the law because Jesus did and because he loves us so much as to save us. Rather, the Pharisees kept the law in order to find acceptance from God. Our keeping is because of the acceptance we have already received. The righteousness that we express has been given to us through the grace of Jesus Christ, rather than through our own efforts and expressions. We have found out that we are the recipients of the greatest love and righteousness ever given to humanity.

Through this, our righteousness does exceed that of the experts and the Pharisees, because that righteousness is given to us by Jesus and his grace and love. Righteousness is the expression of a right relationship with God,

not simply our behavior. Our behavior changes according to the relationship, not the other way around. Once we figure that out, these kinds of verses

are not things that create fear, but rather comfort, knowing that we have been saved and given the righteousness that can only come from God.

**1— How does God’s righteousness come to us/ What do we have to do?**

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**2— Have you ever been afraid that you are not good enough to receive the righteousness of God?**

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**3 – How did Jesus change everything on the Cross?**

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**43 “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. 44 But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!**

In today’s text, we see a reversal of what we have known to be true from Levitical law. While the Levitical law says that we should love our fellow Israelites, it doesn’t say that we should love our enemies. Jesus is explicit in his admonishment that we should “love our enemies”. This is new and goes well beyond what they had experienced before as a nation. These words would have been hard for many to hear.

You see, Jesus was clear on the fact that we should move beyond a tribal idea of God and Nation, and realize that the God we serve is a God who is over all mankind, not just our tribe and our people. Those who claim Jesus as their savior, belong to the same tribe, the human tribe. Paul tells us that there is no Jew, no Gentile, no man or woman, slave or free. (Galatians 3:28) Because of this, the concept of a monotheistic God is now expanded beyond a tribal territory to anyone who believes. This creates a greater understanding of who God is, and how he is interested in being the God of all who would believe, all who would follow, and all who could understand.

So what does this look like in your

life? We all have people that we love, people that are easy to find a good reason to have strong and positive feelings for. However, what does it mean to love your enemies? I don’t think we have the same kind of enemies that were perhaps being spoken of in the first century. We don’t have an occupying army, nor do we have another country that is seeking to be the enemy of our country. So we have to look beyond any sort of nationalism and realize that our enemies are often ideological enemies and those who would see the name of God sullied in reputation.

Perhaps your enemies are not so obvious. Perhaps those who claim Christ yet seem to have such a different understanding of what living kingdom principles are have become those who seem so far from your understanding of Christ that they seem like they are serving a different Christ than you are. These are very real and disconcerting ideas, that our unity is so fractured that even the Name of Christ seems to be divisive. Can this really be true in our daily experience of following Jesus?

Things are complicated today. Let’s just admit it. I see some who are

claiming Christ but seem to hold up values that I would think would be anathema to Christ. However, we are called to love those who differ from us as well. Perhaps love, at this point, can be seen as withholding judgement on those who disagree with us. How can we stay strong to our convictions, while at the same time learn to love those who differ from us?

This will always be a difficult task. But do you think it is any different than what Jesus was asking his contemporaries to do? I don't think this task has gotten any easier, rather, I think it has remained as difficult as it ever was. Why would our call to this be any easier today?

**1— Who do you define as your enemy?**

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**2— How can you love them today?**

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**3 — Do you think it's easier now than it was 2000 years ago when this command was given to us?**

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**45 In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.**

**46 If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much.**

**S**o, Jesus goes a little deeper into the reasons we should love our enemies. He wants us to identify most clearly with God, but he also wants us to understand he is the God of those who we may find unacceptable to our particular understanding. God is expanding his kingdom to be even greater than we might be comfortable with. This seems to always be the way of the Gospel, it pushes us out of our comfort zone and into a place where love is particularly difficult.

This is both good news and terrible news. It is terrible news for us because it means we have to learn to love in ways we don't want to, and love people we don't identify with or even like. But it is also great news for us as well because it means that we can always be included in those Jesus calls others to love. We won't be excluded because we are part of the enemies. While we might not want to be someone's enemy, we might be an enemy because of what we believe the Gospel to really be about. While it might be hard to believe that this would make you someone else's

enemy, it is very possible that you are thought of in this way.

I know those are not comforting words, but it is important to remember that this is one of the hardest commands we have in scripture. God is not calling us to comfort, but to discomfort, not to ease, but unease. If love is not hard, is it really even love at all? We are admonished in Scripture again and again to find ways to love the unlovable, and sometimes we are the unlovable to someone else.

The good news of the Gospel is that you can be loved for everything that you are by someone else as well. And again, this is such good news for us. Without this, we would be just as lost as those we have a hard time loving. We are pushed to be more gracious, more understanding, more compassionate than we would otherwise be.

Now, the question that really makes it tough is the one that asks "how does this work in your life today?" The good news for me is that I don't have to make that distinction for you, but you will have to do that work. With a little inten-

tion and willingness to listen to the Holy Spirit, you will know what to do when the time comes. Without this intention and listening, however, you will continue

on with only loving those who love you, and as the scripture says; “what reward is there for that?”

**1— Who do you think might think of you as an enemy?**

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**2— Do you expect them to love you anyway?**

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**3 – How seriously do you take this command? Are you willing to go where the Holy Spirit takes you with this idea?**

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**47 If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. 48 But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.**

**T**oday's text may seem like a bit of repetition from yesterdays, but we will focus on the final phrase in just a bit. Before that, let us think about the reasons for repetition. If you have kids, you know you have to repeat things all the time for it to get into their little skulls. We tell them again and again because they don't always have the maturity to understand all the time, and repetition allows them to hear it and hear it again.

Jesus is doing the same thing here for us, as we are not yet spiritually mature, nor were his listeners. The case is made that it is easy to love and be kind to your friends, but to love and be kind to those you don't like, and who don't like you, that is the very definition of a greater love. The distinction that this gives us from any other type of love available in the world is pretty profound. We distinguish ourselves from the world by the type of love that we express into the world. Our love has to supersede that which is experienced in the world around us. Pagans have a simple type of love that can be seen anywhere, but Christians are to have a

love that supersedes, and even eclipses what the world has come to expect.

Too often Christians have defined themselves by what they are against. Jesus didn't really do that, he spoke of the kingdom of God as the antithesis of what he was against. When he spoke of this, he was able to vision people into a new world that motivated them to love and react differently than they would have if they just knew what they were against. How can we do that today? How can we show a vision of a world that is not defined as us against them, but as us for them?

Wouldn't you rather live in a world where love was defined by the way we loved those who disagreed with us? By love rather than anger, by hope rather than vitriol, by grace rather than gratuitous anger? I know I would, and I fear that people are stepping away from that kind of interaction.

The last phrase says "be perfect like your father in heaven is perfect..." and that is a powerful statement. However, it is not a statement of behavior, but of maturity. We are to grow into those God would have us be. His perfect love



is to be expressed in us, and that only happens by us growing in his love for us. We grow and mature according to the way we understand God's love for us. So what are you waiting for? How

can you experience his love in a more profound and tangible way? How can you find someone to shower love upon like God has showered his love upon you?

**1 — Do you really believe that love is supposed to bring us together with our enemies?**

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**2 — How is your love different than what the world has to offer?**

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**3 — How can you show a different kind of love today?**

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**T**his week has been all about love, but not the easy kind of love, rather the love that sets us apart from other people in the world. Have you ever wondered if people think of love when they think of Christians? Shouldn't that be what we should first be known for? Can you think of instances where that is true in today's world? How can we be part of the change that creates in people an understanding that Christians are first known for our love?

The words that are given to us by Jesus on the sermon on the mount push back against all our understandings of the Law and the Prophets, and while they in no way undermine the importance of the law, they teach us what it means to supersede the law in all aspects. As well, we begin to learn that being perfect like God is perfect has so much less to do with behavior and so much more to do with learning and going in faith and maturity.

To be mature in our faith means that we are not easily put off-kilter by someone criticizing us or disagreeing with us. It means we maintain our cool when someone is offended, and it means we understand how to get along with others when it is possible. We grow, unimpeded by our own

faults and desires, rather, always seeking to move more closely to what Jesus wants for us.

But the love that Jesus expects and expounds on in these texts is not the easiest kind of love. It requires us to live beyond the kind of love that the world expects, and it means that we often have to humble ourselves in order to live this way. It is not easy, simple, and quite honestly, it requires more of us than we might require of ourselves. By learning to love in this manner, we can truly show the world what God means when he says that we should "love our enemies."

Have you ever thought about the difficult love you have in your life? There is usually someone you find it difficult to love, even though you know you are expected to show love to this person. It is sometimes family, friends, or people you are in contact with at work. How do you show love to them, while at the same time creating healthy boundaries in your life so abuse doesn't take place. I don't believe that this is a call for us to accept abuse in our lives, but I do believe that is a call to find out how to love the most difficult of our relationships.

**Here are some questions to get you thinking:**

- 1** — How do you love your enemies?
- 2** — Who do you think your enemies are? Do they consider you an enemy?
- 3** — How do you learn to love them well?
- 4** — What does this text tell us about how God is perfect?
- 5** — What does it mean to be perfect like God is perfect?
- 6** — How are you working on your faith maturity?
- 7** — What helps your faith grow?
- 8** — How do small groups fit in with how you are growing?
- 9** — Are you accountable to anyone with your spiritual walk?
- 10** — What can you give to those you may not find lovable that will show them you do care, even if you struggle?

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## Notes

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## Notes

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# WEEK 6

## MATTHEW 6:1-21 (NLT)

### Giving to the Needy

**1** “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

**2** “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 honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. **3** But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

### Prayer

**5** “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. **6** 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. **7** And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. **8** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. **9** “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, **10** your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. **11** Give us today our daily bread. **12** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. **13** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ **14** For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

### Fasting

**16** “When you fast, do not look somber 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. **17** But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **18** 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.

### Treasures in Heaven

**19** “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. **20** But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

**1 “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. 2 When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. 3 But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. 4 Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.**

**T**he New Normal requires us to think differently about the things we do and say. Our actions are no longer the vehicle to get us somewhere, rather, they are an exposition of what we believe God calls us to be. Perhaps this is why in the first verse we are given the command to do what God is asking you to do not out of a desire to be noticed, but rather out of a sense of simple compassion and duty to forward the love of God that you have received through Jesus Christ. We are asked to go and give, to do good deeds, and to do them not for the reward of recognition, but rather, for the good of those who are in need. While this seems so simple and compassionate, it is often the exception, rather than the rule.

Have you ever had someone do something so nice for you that you could never repay them? One of those gifts that was outlandish, but was relative-

ly quietly given? I have had a few gifts given to me this way, and it was almost unnerving to receive such a great and free gift. Of course, you thank them profusely, but you also realize that the gift was not given out of duty or out of a desire to be noticed. Rather, it was given as a simple act of love and grace. Those are the kinds of gifts that I think God loves to give to his children, and when you give a gift like that, you are referencing the grace you have been given by God. A grace that is not only undeserved, but incredibly valuable. So valuable, that trying to pay it back would actually diminish the gift in the first place.

That’s the thing about grace, to repay it in kind is impossible. It would be like someone giving you the cash to have a \$50,000.00 surgery, and you show up at their house to give them a \$20.00 bill after the fact. It is not only ludicrous, but it is diminishing of the incredible generosity of the giver. We are not asked to

pay Jesus back for the grace we receive, rather, we are asked to “pay it forward” by giving love to those who need the same kind of grace from us.

The New Normal will never make sense, because love is not based on log-

ic, but it is based on an incredible savior who loves you so much he was willing to give you everything he had, even his life, so that you may learn to Lovewell.

**1— Have you ever received a gift you could never repay?**

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**2 — What is the best gift you have ever given?**

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**3 — How can you “pay forward” the gift that God has given you?**

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**5 “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. 6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.**

**T**oday’s texts deal with the same concept as yesterday, but they move it from gifts and help given to the prayers that we pray. It is a reminder that our relationship with God is not something to profit from, either financially or from a popularity perspective. To be sure, in Jesus’ day there were celebrities of the faith. Those who were not only popular, but had influence over other believers. While this is not unheard of, Jesus speaks against using one’s faith as a way to gain influence over people.

When people pray publicly, it is often for those who are hearing the prayer, rather than for God. It reminds me of a story my father used to tell of a time when he was eating dinner with a bunch of theologians at a restaurant near a conference they were attending. As there were about 20 people eating, the table was long and the restaurant was a bit noisy. As they began to eat, one theologian said he would pray. He stood up and began to pray, and someone from the other end of the table

shouted out “Can’t hear you!” To which the first theologian replied “I’m not talking to you...”

This is perhaps a truth we can all acknowledge. When we speak to God, we are not doing it for show. We are doing it to maintain the connection that God has asked us for, and we do it without expectation that we will receive some sort of reward for this connection. When I speak with my wife, it is not for public consumption, because that relationship is intimately personal and private. The same can be said of our conversations with God.

This is not to say that public prayer and exhortation has no place. However, we must check our intention to make sure we don’t fall into the trap of making prayer, even public prayer, a public spectacle. Jesus is speaking to a particular problem must have been happening at the temple at the time. As always, there were those who were interested in making a parade of their piety, and in such a way diminished the actual experience of prayer and lever-

aged it to become more influential in their society.

I used to go to a big church when I was growing up, and we knew the pastor pretty well. Sometimes, as a joke, we would hold up our fingers in a rating system for his prayers. I don't think he loved it, but he was my uncle, so he had to take it from us! We would rate his "preachers voice" or "prayer voice" that always seemed a little different from his regular speaking voice. I don't

think he did it on purpose, it was just the way everyone was taught back then. Prayer always seemed like an event in that church. And while there was something great about it, sometimes it would seem more showy than I think was the intention. Even here at Crosswalk, we have to make sure our prayers, corporate or private, are simply for reminding us all that we need to be in deep connection with God.

**1— Have you ever prayed so others would be impressed? Have you known anyone who has?**

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**2— What did that make you feel like?**

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**3 — How do you approach prayer in your personal and private life? Is it something you spend time doing, or something you pass by pretty quickly?**

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**7 “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. 8 Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! 9 Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. 10 May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today the food we need, 12 and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. 13 And don’t let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.**

**T**his is a comforting text if there ever was one. Jesus doesn’t always give direct instructions on how to do something, but in these texts we see the beginning of a wonderful model for prayer. We will finish the prayer tomorrow, but today we begin with his admonishment on how we pray.

We are first told not to babble on like the Gentiles. As well, not to be so repetitive that we annoy others, perhaps even God. Volume and quantity does not mean a prayer is more important, more thoughtful, or more answerable than one that is short, heartfelt, and full of truth. In fact, it seems like we are being told that there is a simple way

to pray, with direct language, a simple heart, and clear intention.

One of the reasons for a clear and concise language of prayer is that you don’t need to impress God and you don’t need to convince God of anything. The Father that Jesus spoke of has the best interest of his children in mind, and he always has an ear inclined to hear the prayers of his children. In fact, he knows what they will ask, because he knows them so well. He is not one that is too busy, too distracted, on vacation, or unwilling to listen and hear the prayers of his children.

The sample prayer that Jesus gives to us is testament to simple language, intimate relationship, a willingness to

ask for what we need, and an acknowledgement of the power of God over evil. IT begins with a recognition of where God is (heaven) and his status (our father). As well, it then moves on to our hope that his name will remain holy, his will might be done on earth, and that heaven is not so far away as to be forgotten. Our desire for his will to be done is a constant reminder for us to continue to do and search for his will in our lives, both corporately and individually.

And while this prayer is so familiar to us, we must not disregard it as empty words that should be relegated to rote memorization. Rather, they are a philosophical and theological template for us to use in order to keep our prayers focused on God, and his interaction and will for our lives. May we always keep our prayers this simple, with a focus on Gods desires for his people corporately and his will for us individually.

**1— When was the first time you prayed the Lord’s prayer?**

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**2— Do you return to it as a model for the prayers you pray each day?**

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**3 – What stands out to you in this prayer? What do you love about it?**

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**14 “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. 15 But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.**

**E**very time I read these phrases, I am struck by the simple formula that is expressed. If we forgive others, our sins will be forgiven. But if not, then God has no time for our forgiveness.

Now doesn't this fly in the face of the grace we have received? It would be easy to think so, and I sometimes wonder. However, perhaps there is something more going on here that needs to be recognized. When we receive grace, our understanding of forgiveness should change. There should be a desire to spread that grace far and wide, and our forgiveness does that readily. It is possible to forgive those who are not seeking forgiveness, and that is good for our own hearts. While forgiveness does not always preclude consequences, it does a great deal of good both for the one who forgives as well as for the forgiven.

How often do we see this one-to-one formula in scripture? Not often, and that is what makes this text so important for us to take seriously. Have you ever thought of this text when you were in a situation that needed forgiveness? Whether the forgiveness was needed from you, or whether the forgiveness

was needed for you, this text reminds us that followers of Christ move to forgiveness first.

Now, I mentioned it before that forgiveness does not always preclude consequences. This is an important point to circle back to. Sometimes, what we do does preclude us from a reconciliation that creates a perfect reconstitution of how things were before the transgression. Our actions do have consequences, but our forgiveness should be forthcoming. And while we, at times, have forgiveness that clears the air and reconstitutes a relationship back to its original standing, there are times when that forgiveness allows for a slower reconciliation.

Forgiveness is difficult, and sometimes can be used as leverage in our relationships. This is something that Christians should not do. We cannot withhold forgiveness, unless we are interested in God withholding it from us as well. Since we do not want that, we should be as free with our forgiveness as he is with his.

**1 — Have you ever withheld forgiveness?**

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**2 — How can you make sure you are creating a culture of forgiveness in your life?**

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**3 — Is there anyone you need to forgive, who is waiting on your answer in their lives right now?**

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**16 “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. 17 But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. 18 Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.**

**A**re you sensing a pattern here? It is pretty clear that when we do things for our spiritual improvement—like the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and serving, we are not to be doing them for others, but for our relationship with God and for his edification alone. The spiritual disciplines are broken into two categories, those that are vertical—between us and God; and those that are more horizontal and teach us to love our brothers and sisters in a more profound way.

While our particular faith tradition has not delved into the spiritual disciplines in the way that many others have, we do belong to the great tradition of Christianity that has delved deeply into the spiritual disciplines over the last two millennia. There is much to learn about our relationship with God and how he works in our lives by increasing our engagement with the disciplines. Fasting is a great way to begin to delve into the disciplines.

Fasting doesn't have to be food, although that is often assumed. In today's world there is much we can fast from, and it all does our spiritual journey a kindness. I stepped away from social media a while ago, and it has allowed me more focus, less lost time, and less anxiety. I am able to direct my thoughts toward prayer before directing my thoughts toward what everyone around me is posting. That is just one example, but fasting is done for personal reasons first and foremost. Everyone has a different relationship with a spiritual discipline like this.

Richard Foster, in his seminal work “Celebrating the Disciplines”, says that the disciplines don't create spiritual health, but they put us on the road to it. In this way, we are doing those exercises that help us understand the spiritual realities of our lives that redirect us toward God. A mature faith sees the importance of growth and discipline, and seeks to engage these things in our spiritual walks.

The New Normal embraces spiritual disciplines, knowing that often we are flailing around in our spiritual lives, not sure of our direction. Engaging in the disciplines, for our own edifica-

tion, rather than as a tool to leverage influence or piety, allows us to take a moment to connect in a greater way with God and his will for our lives.

**1— Have you ever fasted? How was it, and did you learn anything?**

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**2— If you were going to fast, what would you take a fast from?**

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**3 — How would you break your fast?**

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**19 “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 21 Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.**

**W**e are all familiar with this particular text. We have heard it quoted many times, even if we don’t know exactly where it comes from. We are not to store up things here on earth, because they are fleeting. By mentioning the moths and the rust, we see that Jesus is letting us know that the transitory things are not the kind of things that we should be investing in. Rather, the things we can store in heaven are those things that are eternal; our characters, our love, and our God.

Now, this does not mean that what we do here is creating some sort of reward system in heaven. Many of us probably remember when we were growing up and hearing about “stars in your crown” and that would be how we would know who did good deeds on earth by the number of stars that their crown was laden with. This couldn’t be further from the truth, and shame on those who taught us that! It was a silly thing to say. Our reward IS heaven, not something IN heaven. And the reward does not come because we are so good

at what we do here, rather, it is because of the goodness of God both here and in heaven. Grace gives us the reward, not something that we do here on earth.

Our works, while valuable, do not create an easier path to heaven for us. We do them as a response to the grace and love that Christ has given us each and every day. What awaits us in heaven is solely because of how much love and grace we were given by God here on earth. Let us never confuse the graciousness of God with our own works.

What we gather here on earth stays on earth. Truly, this should give us a moment to pause and not be too uptight about what we are gaining or losing. Of course, we want to be able to take care of our families, and we want to be able live lives of relative comfort, and God helps us to provide for our families and our lives. However, I think this is a commentary on the hoarding of material things on this earth. At the end of our lives we only take our reputations and characters and legacy of love with us.

When a pastor leaves a church, it

always seems like it is the end of the world, especially for a pastor that is well loved. Their legacy lasts in the people they loved, but the church moves on,

and someone fills that spot and God is honored again. We should not get too attached to that which is not in our hands and will rot when we go.

**1 — What do you own that owns you?**

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**2 — How can you de-emphasize the things that you own and re-emphasize the things that are not so transitory or temporary?**

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**3 — How much time do you spend on your things as opposed to your people?**

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**W**e began the week with the most famous texts from the sermon on the mount, and we ended it with a reminder that the things of this world are fleeting and will rust and get eaten by moths. The Sermon on the Mount is a masterwork of Jesus' teaching on how we should live our lives and on what is really important in the end. It is easy to take it as a guidebook with checkmarks to check off, but when we do that, we miss the deeper understanding of our lives and the world around us. This world is built as a precursor for the world to come, and what we have thought of as logical is often not kingdom thinking, so Jesus remakes our ideas of what is important, what character aspects we should seek, and how we can reach into the kingdom for a better expression of our lives today.

I am always amazed when I meet someone who follows Christ and seems to hold the values of the world so dear to them. Whole theologies have been created in order to maintain what we believe the order of the world should be. (I am talking about prosperity gospel principles, civil religious principles, and theologies that lead to chauvinism and racism). Unfortunately, these theologies have caught hold of many followers of Christ and has confused

them as to what Jesus held dear. The only way to thwart this kind of aberrant and abhorrent theology is to go back to scripture and simply read the words that Jesus actually said about what we should hold dear and who God will bless. It is not the mighty, the rich, the easy, or the perceived power. Rather, it is those who have been disenfranchised, those who have been marginalized, and those who have been left behind.

This is a problem for many of us, especially in first world churches. We think that the blessing of God comes in the form of success, but Jesus seems to be speaking directly against that in these verses. Why is it that in the Old Testament when things are going well for the people is when the prophets show up. In Amos 4:1-3 the prophet calls the Israelite women in Samaria "cows" in order to help them to recognize that even though they are the influencers and the trendsetters, they care nothing for those who are perceived as less than they are.

Are the influencers and leaders of society today any different? Jesus pushes back on conventional wisdom, because God has never been conventional. He sets the stage for us to be living a kingdom life, not increasing the empire of man.



## Notes

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## Notes

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