

Monday, March 20 – Read Matthew 5:1-16. Jesus did not just preach the Sermon on the Mount once, and then move on to other topics. Greek scholar William Barclay noted that the verb translated “taught” describes, when read in the original Greek, “repeated and habitual action,” and the translation should be: “This is what he used to teach them.” This sermon’s principles have been called the platform, the foundation of all that Jesus taught about God’s Kingdom and those who are its citizens. The Common English Bible renders verses 3-11 as “happy are,” not the more familiar “blessed are.” Jesus would have used the Aramaic phrase “O, the blessedness of ...” Scholar N. T. Wright has said, “In our world, still, most people think wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers.” Which of Jesus’ statements ring most true for you? Of which do you feel, “I sure wish I had some of that”? Jesus told his followers, “You are the salt of the earth ... the light of the world.” Legalistic morality too often brings gloom, criticism and fear. Have you known people whose goodness adds flavor and light to life? How can your allegiance to Christ make you “salt and light,” making your life and that of others brighter and better?

Tuesday, March 21 – Read Matthew 5:17-42. In today’s reading, Jesus quoted five different snippets of Old Testament law. In each case, he echoed the Old Testament prophets by saying God didn’t want just outward compliance. God cares about the inner spirit behind our acts (see Isaiah 1:10–15; Jeremiah 6:20; Amos 5:21–24). That’s why Jesus said he hadn’t come to “do away with” the law. He wanted to apply it to the true source of both good and bad in life: our (often hidden) inner self. Jesus, like many Hebrew teachers, used hyperbole—rhetorical exaggeration to grab attention and underline a point’s seriousness. So “tear out your eye ... chop off your hand” says, “Temptation is serious business. Don’t play with it in your mind, but avoid it.” Reflect on each section. What insights do you get about the basic life principle Jesus wants you to take seriously, and about your own inner attitudes and motives? Matthew said people were amazed because Jesus “was teaching them like someone with authority” (Matthew 7:29). Jesus quoted even two of the Ten Commandments, and on his own authority gave them a deeper heart meaning than most people ever saw. Scholar William Barclay said, “One of two things must be true—either Jesus was mad, or he was unique; either he was a megalomaniac or else he was the son of God.” How can accepting Jesus’ authority over your life move you to search your heart more deeply, and open it to his transforming power in new ways?

Wednesday, March 22 – Read Matthew 5:43-6:18. “Don’t blow your trumpet” is another use of hyperbole. Many charity boxes were trumpet-shaped, which may explain Jesus’ image. Many Hebrew rabbis also stressed the need for pure motives behind good deeds—but that was hard to live. It still is. Scholar Myron Augsberger notes that today “one-upmanship, competition for bigness, assurances that God blesses the faithful with material bonanzas or with health and healing” tempt many of us. Jesus set the plain, straightforward yet profound Lord’s Prayer (verses 9-13) in contrast to showy, ornate prayers filled with “empty words” (verse 7). How can Jesus’ example make your prayers more honest and direct? Verses 2, 5 and 16 used a business word that literally meant “payment in full.” Jesus said showy piety does often produce human admiration and praise— but that’s all it brings us. If the choice is between human praise here and now, or God’s appreciation in eternity, which (if you’re really honest with yourself) does your heart prefer?

Thursday, March 23 – Read Matthew 6:19-34. Understanding Jesus’ use of hyperbole can serve us well in applying this section’s principles. Taken as fully literal, they would seem to say that any saving, any planning for the future on this earth, is wrong and shows a lack of trust in God. Jesus’ point was that, in the end, this world is not the most important reality. True wisdom values God’s gift of an eternal life of joy and freedom over this life’s transient treasures. For most of us, the idea of “slavery” has no connection to our daily lives. In Jesus’ day it was a legal and practical reality for many people under Roman law. Verse 24 literally said, “You cannot be a slave to both God and wealth.” When push comes to shove, which of those concerns most dominates your thoughts and behavior? Scholar Craig Keener notes that “most people in antiquity had little beyond basic necessities—food, clothing and shelter.” Most of us live well above that subsistence level. Sadly, it often seems that our stress level rises in proportion to the additional resources we have. In what practical ways can you apply Jesus’ teaching to “stop worrying about tomorrow” (verse 34) to your attitudes and practices?

Friday, March 24 – Read Matthew 7:1-14. In today’s passage, Jesus taught some crucial relationship principles. Since “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” (Romans 3:23), we need to take responsibility for our own life, rather than spending our energy judging or condemning others. Jesus also told the disciples to “ask,” “search,” and “knock”—in other words, to pray. Deepening our relationship with God through constant communication and trusting that God has our best interests at heart is key. Taking responsibility for our own thoughts, emotions, words, and actions instead of pointing the finger of blame can be difficult. Yet healthy, authentic, loving relationships depend on our ability to “take the log out of our own eye.” What is your “log”? What are the issues that keep you from living as Jesus taught us? How can you more fully reflect God’s grace to you in the way you relate to others? How have you experienced “Ask ... search ... knock”? Has God sometimes given you just what you asked for? Sometimes not given you the answer you wished for? Have you sometimes felt the “no” had actually been “wait” when the answer came later than you asked? Have you ever asked God for one thing, and seen in retrospect that God gave you something better? Do you trust that God is good, and with a larger perspective, always wants the best for you?