

Building on Christ's Commands

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The *Sermon on the Mount*, and the command to “love your enemies” in particular, was the most quoted teachings of Jesus in the early church. Why? Because for the early church it is the “how” of living God’s love. This side of the Resurrection this reality is plain: the Cross not only announces “forgiveness *from sins*”, it declares “freedom *for kingdom living*”! The Sermon on the Mount is how we live the grace that has saved us so the nations will glorify God. (Matt.5:14-16) The Sermon on the Mount is how sinners like us practice the grace that has made us part of God’s people of peace, humility, confession and integrity in a fallen world. While repentance and obedience might be the least sexy words in the church today, they are the only authentic and joy-filled response to the Gospel of a Crucified yet Resurrected King and his kingdom. So hear Jesus’ words: “whoever hears [the Sermon on the Mount] and puts [it] into practice are like a wise person who built their house on a rock”. (Matt.7:24) *Lord have mercy and make us wise disciples who live your teachings, not moronic religious people who ignore them. Amen.*

Scripture taken from N.T. Wright’s *The Kingdom New Testament Translation*.

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
1	You heard that it was said to the ancient people, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders’; and anyone who commits murder shall be liable for judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; who uses foul and abusive language will be liable to the lawcourt; and anyone who says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to the fires of Gehenna. So, if you are coming to the altar with your gift, leave your gift right there before the altar, and go first and be reconciled to your brother. Then come back and offer your gift. Make friends with your opponent quickly, while you are still with him in the street, in case your opponent hands you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you find yourself being thrown in jail. I’m telling you the truth: you won’t get out until you’ve paid every last penny.	Matthew 5:21-26	<p>PRACTICE 1: GO BE RECONCILED</p> <p>‘Church-going’ is incredibly important, yet God prioritises peacemaking over merely being present. This isn’t a proof text for skipping out on communion, rather it’s the impetus to make things right before coming to the table. “Go first and be reconciled to your brother,” Jesus insists. Peacemaking is always participation in God’s grace. Humbly seeking to right wrongs and be reconciled is even more important than getting to church on time. Before offering ourselves in worship we are to go to those with whom we are in conflict, and do what we can to live peaceably with them, inasmuch as it depends on us. Don’t let the sun set on your anger but become, as <i>Chance the Rapper</i> puts it, ‘a force to be reconciled’.</p> <p>Before you bring your offering on Sunday, who do you need to reconcile with? Who is a reconciler who can mentor you in doing this?</p>	<p>Lord Jesus,</p> <p>Thank you for the grace that has reconciled us to you. Empower us now in our broken relationships to be a part of your ministry of reconciliation.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
2	<p>“You heard,” Jesus continued, “that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you: everyone who gazes at a woman in order to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye trips you up, tear it out and throw it away. Yes: it’s better for you to have one part of your body destroyed than for the whole body to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand trips you up, cut it off and throw it away. Yes: it’s better for you to have one part of your body destroyed than for your whole body to go into Gehenna.</p>	Matthew 5:27-30	<p>PRACTICE 2: DRASTICALLY REMOVE TEMPTATION</p> <p>“Tear out your eye” hardly seems like practical advice. And despite those who claim to be Biblical literalists, you don’t see many men who have blinded themselves in bible studies. Yet don’t miss Jesus’ liberating command to get on with Kingdom living: DO SOMETHING DRASTIC to remove temptation. Here’s a little helpful practice: when tempted to objectify a sister or brother, pray for them. It’s impossible to do both at the same time. We need not look further than the pornification of culture or the sex trafficking industry to know there is hell to pay for unchecked lust.</p> <p>Do you need to confess a time when you have lusted after a brother or sister in Christ? Who could you ask to hold you accountable to discipline your intentions with grace?</p>	<p>Lord Jesus,</p> <p>In the desert you rejected temptation that you might do the will of your Father. Teach us to do the same, that we might do your will.</p> <p>Amen.</p>
3	<p>“Again, you heard that it was said to the people long ago: ‘You shall not swear falsely, but you shall give to the Lord what you promised under oath.’ But I say to you: don’t swear at all! Don’t swear by heaven (it’s God’s throne!); don’t swear by the earth (it’s God’s footstool!); don’t swear by Jerusalem (it’s the city of the great king!); don’t swear by your head (you can’t make one hair of it turn white or black!). When you’re talking, say yes when you mean yes, no when you mean no. Anything more than that comes from the evil one.</p>	Matthew 5:33-37	<p>PRACTICE 3: LET MY YES MEAN YES</p> <p>In a world of spin, half-truths and the abuse of faith to arouse fear and hatred, becoming a truth-telling people is a revolutionary act. God longs for us to become cosmic whistle blowers who point to the truth of the crucified risen King. Ironically, as disciples, we have no need for swearing on the Bible because our Lord commands us to be a people that are taken at our word. Dressing up our dishonesty in religious language doesn’t make our testimony more trustworthy. In fact, Jesus says sanctimonious deception is from the devil. The devil is a liar, and deceit and self-deception have no place in the kingdom. Instead, in all matters, out of our mouth should flow the intention of our heart, to be a truthful witness to Jesus, seasoned with grace. Our yes should simply mean yes.</p> <p>What half-truths have you told recently? How can you plan to tell the whole truth today?</p>	<p>Lord Jesus,</p> <p>You are God’s yes, the truth, the true testimony to the Father.</p> <p>Let my speech and life be a truthful witness to you.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
4	You have heard that it was said: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you: don't use violence to resist evil! Instead, when someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the other one towards him. When someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your cloak, too. And when someone forces you to go one mile, go a second with him. Give to anyone who asks of you, and don't refuse someone who wants to borrow from you.	Matthew 5:38-42	<p>PRACTICE 4: TURN THE CHEEK OF DIGNITY</p> <p>Don't miss this: our Lord commands we DON'T become doormats for injustice. Yes, there are those who will distort these liberating commandments into a wooden legalism to burden abused people with demands to be passive and invite more evil. But that doesn't fit with our Lord's life! The lives of history's greatest change-makers show this way – the way of the cross – is not just faithful; it is the most effective way to fight evil without becoming like its violence. The powerless are invited into a new kind of power, the power of the cross, where the principalities and powers are unmasked and disarmed through the assertion of our dignity, and the practice of a power more potent than violence.</p> <p>Ask God to show you how you can “turn the cheek of dignity”. Have you rejected the way of violence so you can be open to live the way of Jesus?</p>	<p>Lord Jesus,</p> <p>Thank you for the cross where you turned the cheek, where you gave of your garments, where you went the extra mile and gave yourself to meet our debts that we might be reconciled to God. May your cross-shaped power be seen in our lives.</p> <p>Amen.</p>
5	You heard that it was said: Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you: love your enemies! Pray for people who persecute you! That way, you'll be children of your father in heaven! After all, he makes his sun rise on bad and good alike, and sends rain both on the upright and on the unjust. Look at it like this: if you love those who love you, do you expect a special reward? Even tax-collectors do that, don't they? And if you only greet your own family what's so special about that? Even Gentiles do that, don't they? Well then: you must be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect.	Matthew 5:43-48	<p>PRACTICE 5: LOVE OUR ENEMIES</p> <p>Jesus is the exact representation of God whose liberating love endures forever. A love that is perfect; it leaves no one out! Think of your own life: while we were enemies of God, he has lavished his love on us in Jesus. God loves you! It's true! And awkwardly, it's equally true that God loves your enemies, with the same intensity. God's saving, redeeming, transforming love is active in the lives of our enemies. God invites us to live that love and let it be seen in our actions towards our enemies. And not as an optional extra, but as a central response to God's grace.</p> <p>Do you have a practice of praying for those who curse you? How can you imaginatively bless your enemies? How could you do good to them and witness to God's perfect love that leaves no one out?</p>	<p>Abba,</p> <p>Praise you for your redeeming love that shines on all. Send your Spirit that in your power we might love, bless and pray for all, especially our enemies. You know how hard we find this, reveal to us again the power of the cross.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
6	<p>When you are practicing your piety, mind you don't do it with an eye on the audience! Otherwise you won't have any reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give money to the poor, don't sound a trumpet in front of you. That's what people do when they're just play-acting, in the synagogues and the streets. They do it so people will be impressed by them. I'm telling you the truth: they've received their reward in full. No: when you give money, don't let your left hand have any idea what your right hand is up to. That way, your giving will be in secret. And your father, who sees in secret, will repay you.</p>	Matthew 6:1-4	<p>PRACTICE 6: SECRETLY GIVE</p> <p>If we want to welcome God's kingdom transformation in our world, give to the down trodden. If we want to welcome God's kingdom transformation in ourselves, give on the down low. Our Lord doesn't say 'if' we give to the needy, but 'when we give'. The hiding of our good deeds is the best guard against hypocrisy. It also guards the dignity of those who are down trodden. It reminds us that the redistribution of our wealth is an act of repentance in response to God's goodness, not our own righteousness. As followers of Jesus our misdeeds should be confessed in public and our merciful deeds done in private. Distributing our blessings to those on the bottom helps us know the difference between blessings and worldly possessions. God sees who we are in secret and rewards us with his transforming presence.</p> <p>Do you ever sneakily boast in your generosity? Ask God to humble you and show you the better way.</p>	<p>Lord,</p> <p>Rejecting the limelight you came to us in a manger, grew up in the backwaters of Galilee and served as your way of saving. Teach us to be people who confess publicly, and serve and give to others in secret. Amen.</p>
7	<p>When you pray, you mustn't be like the play-actors. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners, so that people will notice them. I'm telling you the truth: they have received their reward in full. No: when you pray, go into your own room, shut the door, and pray to your father who is there in secret. And your father, who sees in secret, will repay you. When you pray, don't pile up a jumbled heap of words! That's what the Gentiles do. They reckon that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard. So don't be like them. You see, your father know what you need before you ask him.</p>	Matthew 6:5-8	<p>PRACTICE 7: SECRETLY PRAY</p> <p>What we do when no one is watching tells us who we really are. The reality is when we give or pray to impress others we receive our reward in full and rob ourselves of the character God longs to form in us. Proud people give and pray to receive praise from others. Humble sinners, who know the joy of being forgiven, pray because God is worthy of all praise. In baptism we are justified in public yet our ongoing sanctification often happens in secret as we seek God in private. So, draw near to God. And rejoice that even the desire to do so, is God drawing near to you.</p> <p>Where is your secret place of prayer? How might you gently develop a rhythm of prayer?</p>	<p>Lord,</p> <p>In private, make me a person of prayer. Rescue me from my many words that I might be still and know that you are God. For you know what I need. You know I need you. Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
8	<p>'Our Father in heaven, May your name be honoured, May your kingdom come, May your will be done As in heaven, so on earth. Give us today the bread we need now, And forgive us the things we owe, As we too have forgiven what was owed to us. Don't bring us into the great trial, But rescue us from evil.'</p> <p>Yes: if you forgive people the wrong they have done, your heavenly father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive people, neither will your heavenly father forgive you what you have done wrong.</p>	Matthew 6:9-15	<p>PRACTICE 8: MAKE JESUS' PRAYER YOURS</p> <p>Jesus not only teaches us how to pray but sums up his prayer by revealing our deepest vocation. What is it? Well, not 'my' Father but 'ours'. Not my name being honoured but God's. Not 'our kingdoms' but God's kingdom! Not 'our will' but God's will being done. Not elsewhere in heaven but here on earth! Not the fleshpots of yesterday's Egypt, but the daily manna of God's promised tomorrow. Not the keeping of records of wrongs but the jubilee of forgiveness for all who don't resist being made a person of forgiveness. Not being led into temptation but God's gracious exodus from all evil! Glory!</p> <p>Is Jesus' prayer a part of your daily prayer rhythm? As you pray his prayer, internalise God's mission of grace and our deepest vocation.</p>	Lord, as I pray your prayer now, teach me to pray, that your desires might become my heart's desire and we might become a people of kingdom forgiveness. Amen.
9	<p>When you fast, don't be gloomy like the play-actors. They make their faces quite unrecognisable, so that everyone can see they're fasting. I'm telling you the truth: they have received their reward in full. No: when you fast, tidy your hair and beard the way you normally do, and wash your face, so that others won't know you're fasting – except your father, privately. Then your father, who sees in private, will repay you.</p>	Matthew 6:16-18	<p>PRACTICE 9: SECRETLY FAST</p> <p>When you fast do you want to be seen by others? The kind of true fasting God desires seeks first God's kingdom away from the spotlight. Our Lord's most often quoted prophet makes it plain what fasting God has in mind (Isaiah 58):</p> <p><i>"On the day of your fasting, you do what you please and exploit your workers ... Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: To loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor refugee with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"</i></p> <p>How might you incorporate fasting in your life that you might hunger more for God's kingdom?</p>	<p>Lord,</p> <p>You anoint my head with oil,</p> <p>You make your face shine upon me. May not my fasting be seen before others but by you alone. Create in me a hungry heart for your kingdom and its healing justice.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
10	<p>Don't store up treasures on earth. Moths and rust will eat it away, and robbers will break in and steal it. No: store up for yourselves treasure in heaven! Moths and rust don't eat it away there, and no robbers break in and steal it. Show me your treasure, and I'll show you where your heart is. The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is honest and clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body is in the dark. So, if the light within you turns out to be darkness, darkness doesn't come any darker than that. Nobody can serve two masters. Otherwise, they will either hate the first and love the second, or be devoted to the first and despise the second. You can't serve both God and wealth.</p>	Matthew 6:19-24	<p>PRACTICE 10: INVEST IN GOD'S KINGDOM</p> <p>You keep things in the fridge. But your hope isn't that one day you'll live in the fridge to eat what you put there. You have money in a bank. But you don't hope that one day you'll move to the bank to enjoy what you saved. In the same way we are to store up treasures in heaven but our hope isn't that we'll go to heaven to enjoy them. The Christian hope is rather that heaven is coming here. So invest in what looks like God's future; heaven on earth. The returns on that are eternal. Jesus doesn't say 'you shouldn't serve God and money', he says, 'You can't'.</p> <p>How can you deepen your investment in heaven?</p>	<p>Lord,</p> <p>We confess we are idolatrous and we seek to serve both you and money. Deliver us that we might invest in the gospel, in the poor, in your people, that above all things we'd seek your kingdom and your healing justice.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
11	<p>So let me tell you: don't worry about your life – what to eat, what to drink; don't worry about your body, what to wear. There's more to life than food! There's more to the body than a suit of clothes. Have a good look at the birds in the sky. They don't plant seeds, they don't bring in the harvest, they don't store things in barns – and your father in heaven feeds them! Think how different you are from them! Can any of you add fifteen inches to your height just by worrying about it? Any why worry about what to wear? Take a tip from the lilies in the countryside. They don't work; they don't weave; but, let me tell you, not even Solomon in all his finery was dressed as well as one of these. So if God gives that sort of clothing even to the grass in the field, which is here today and on the bonfire tomorrow, isn't he far more likely to clothe you too, you little-faith lot? So don't worry away with your 'What'll we eat?' and 'What'll we drink?' and 'What'll we wear?' Those are all the kinds of things the Gentiles fuss about, and your heavenly father knows you need them all. Instead, make your top priority Gods kingdom and his way of life, and all these things will be given to you as well. So don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow can worry about itself. On day's troubles at a time is quite enough.</p>	Matthew 6:25-34	<p>PRACTICE 11: SEEK FIRST GOD'S KINGDOM AND HEALING JUSTICE</p> <p>King Jesus is comparing God's glory revealed in the goodness of creation to King Solomon's splendour. So what is Solomon's splendour? Deuteronomy 17 goes into details about how not to be a king, including specific stuff about how the God who hears the cries of slaves is anti-slavery, anti-arms dealing, anti-idolatry and anti-wealth accumulation. King Solomon does all these things, like he was ticking off a checklist. In fact, Solomon builds a Temple to the God who liberates slaves ... and does it with slave labour! But Jesus is a different sort of King. His glory is seen on a cross. And as slaves set free from sin we are invited to seek first his oppression-free Kingdom and his healing justice.</p> <p>Have you ever found yourself asking God to bless what is anti-kingdom?</p>	<p>Lord,</p> <p>May our lives seek first your kingdom on earth. May we increasingly look like Christ and his cross-shaped glory, not Solomon in all his arms dealing, idol worshipping, slave-trading splendour.</p> <p>Lord have mercy,</p> <p>Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
12	<p>Don't judge people, and you won't be judged yourself. You'll be judged, you see, by the judgment you use to judge others! You'll be measured by the measuring-rod you use to measure others! Why do you stare at the splinter in your neighbour's eye, but ignore the plank in your own? How can you say to your neighbour, 'here-let me get that splinter out of your eye,' when you've got the plank in your own. You're just play-acting! First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you'll see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your neighbour's eye.</p>	Matthew 7:1-5	<p>PRACTICE 12: FIRST REMOVE OUR OWN PLANKS</p> <p>What blinds us is often what bothers us about others. At the cross, we see how wrong our judgments can be: we killed God. Seeing our own sin honestly is a great source of humility. While looking at the sin of others we can quickly forget that no one is righteous, especially not us! Yet our Lord doesn't teach, 'Everyone's got stuff so just tolerate each other's hypocrisy.' No, love is more demanding than that. We are commanded to remove our logs that lock us into condemnation of others so that as repentant sinners who are forgiven, we can approach other broken people in humble love. Removing our blind spots is an ongoing work of repentance. So run to the cross! There, overwhelmed by God's grace, you can then invite others to join you in God's mercy. What we don't confess God can't transform. And the humility to speak into the vulnerability of others flows out of our own need for God's mercy.</p> <p>Do you make a practice of praying "God show me my planks"? How might this change your approach to sisters and brothers?</p>	<p>Lord Jesus,</p> <p>You are the light that is God's judgment, let our planks come into the light that we might be a people of humility, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

Building on Christ's Commands (continued)

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
13	<p>Don't give holy things to dogs. Don't throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they will trample them under their feet – and then turn around and attack you!</p> <p>Ask and it will be given to you! Search and you will find! Knock and the door will be opened for you! Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened. Don't you see? Supposing your son asks you for bread – which of you is going to give him a stone? Or if he asks for fish, which of you is going to give him a serpent? Well then, if you know how to give good gifts to your children, evil as you are, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.</p>	Matthew 7:6-11	<p>PRACTICE 13: ASK, SEEK, KNOCK IN PRAYER</p> <p>Despite how the prosperity peddlers might manipulate this passage, it's not about getting more possessions, but about what power we look to. As Biblical ethicist Glenn Stassen put it, this teaching 'is about the temptation to acquire special privileges by siding with the powerful [Dog/Pig Powers] and ignoring their injustice and violence.' This is such a seductive temptation. We will either give our trust and allegiance to 'dog' and 'pig' powers like the Roman empire or to the Lord Jesus. But our Lord wants us to know God's goodness and keep asking, seeking and knocking for more of the Holy Spirit.</p> <p>How discerning are you about the powers who ask for our allegiance? How can you put your trust in God who gives good gifts?</p>	<p>Father,</p> <p>We have seen your Son, so we know you give good gifts.</p> <p>So we ask, we seek, we knock, for more of your Holy Spirit.</p> <p>Amen.</p>
14	<p>So whatever you want people to do to you, do just that to them. Yes; this is what the law and the prophets are all about.</p> <p>Go in by the narrow gate, the gate that leads to destruction, you see, is nice and wide, and the road going there has plenty of room. Lots of people go that way. But the gate leading to life is narrow, and the road going there is a tight squeeze. Not many people find their way through.</p>	Matthew 7:12-14	<p>PRACTICE 14: DO TO OTHERS WHAT WE WOULD WANT THEM TO DO TO US</p> <p>Today we know all too well that the broad road that leads to destruction. While that road less taken, the narrow path of peace, the way of Jesus is summed up in this final command in the Sermon on the Mount. And this command sums up the law and the prophets: do good to others as God has done good to us. How? By empathetically and imaginatively entering into the realities of others and asking, "if I was them, what good would I want them to do to me?" Then? Enter through the narrow gate, go do it!</p> <p>No, seriously. Go do it.</p>	<p>Lord,</p> <p>May the love that the law and the prophets point to, that is perfectly revealed in your Son, be seen in what we do to others, because of what you've done to us.</p> <p>Amen.</p>