



RESOURCES

LIFEHACKS



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"The purpose of discipleship is to be with Jesus, to become like Jesus, and to live as Jesus did"

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WEEK 1

PASSION OVER ANGER

This session is going to explore how we resolve conflict, what we do with our emotions and how they interact with our worship.

ICE-BREAKER

Room 101: In small groups take it in turns telling the group what are some of your 'pet peeves' or 'most annoying things' that you would like to send in to the mythical Room 101 never to be seen again. For example: People who clip their toenails on the tube, whistling out of tune, or films that give human voices to real animals. **Leader Tip:** try and keep it light, fun and impersonal!

REFLECT **Read Matthew 5:21-24 as a group**

It's not every day that murder becomes a conversation topic. However, for Jesus, with the thoughts and actions of the heart being central to our discipleship, and our relationship with God being about who He is and what He has done over who we are and what we do, the path to committing murder starts with anger.

- Bearing in mind that this is part of Jesus' principle teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, why do you think this area was an issue he wanted to speak on?

There are many ways to 'put people to death' without committing a crime. We sometimes choose to stop talking to people, we 'unfollow' people we find mildly frustrating and we avoid some people because we find their company difficult.

- Can you relate to this? How does this teaching affect your attitude towards this person?

Jesus also says that the way you talk about people matters too. 'Raca' (v22) was an Aramaic word of contempt: calling someone a 'fool', Jesus says, would leave you in danger of hell. Why are these things so serious?

Firstly, we must try and think of people as God thinks of them. All throughout scripture we can find examples of just how much God loves his children, despite their actions (Psalm 139 is a great example of this). No matter how much people hurt us or frustrate us, Jesus gives us a model for loving them despite their actions.

Secondly, two chapters later (7:1-5), Jesus tells his disciples that we should judge people with the level we ourselves are willing to be judged. Psychologists suggest that we often notice the flaws in people because we ourselves struggle with the same thing.

- In small groups, discuss: where are your blind spots? What are the things that frustrate you because you yourself struggle with them?

The final part of the passage is a note on worship. Jesus goes as far to saying that if there is an unreconciled issue in the church (brother or sister is translated from the word 'adelphos' which means fellow disciple) then that should be resolved before worship continues. (This is in fact where the idea of 'Sharing the Peace' in Anglican churches come from.) This can jar with a western mindset and some of us may find this kind of conflict resolution terrifying. What would a church look like if issues in relationships were dealt with as and when, in a community of love and non-judgement, rather than resorting to our tendency to pretend everything is always ok?

- As a group discuss: How could we go about resolving conflict in a healthier way in our connect groups and friendship groups in church?

WEEK 1

PASSION OVER ANGER

RESPOND

We are in a world of unreconciled relationships. We probably do not have to think very hard to recall a relationship close to us that is hurting currently. Addressing it is another challenge. Here are some simple steps to address conflict:

- Avoid the temptation to withdraw. One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to stick your head in the sand. Facing the problem directly might make you feel uncomfortable, but it is the right action. Communicate a willingness to discuss the problem.
- Try not to personalise the conflict. Try to approach the conflict with an open mind and genuine curiosity about how the other person sees things. Focus on problem-solving not on personality.
- Think about what you can do differently. If you are willing to consider what changes you can make to improve the situation perhaps the other party will respond in kind.
- It is not necessary to agree completely about past events. Rehashing competing versions of past events can be a dead end that gets in the way of finding a viable path forward. Focus on making new agreements and communicating in ways that develop trust.
- Address issues face-to-face. Email is not an effective channel for resolving conflict.

In groups, discuss which of these 5 steps do you need help with? How can we move forward and be people of reconciliation?

RECEIVE

This session may have brought some hurt to the surface. Leave plenty of time to pray for one another that God may fill each one of us that surpasses all understanding and allow us to cast our burdens on to him.

Also pray for the divisions and unreconciled relationships we see in the world: our current political situations, civil wars, mistrust of authority and institutions and instances of oppression in the world.

A final prayer for reconciliation:

God of all people and all places – who formed each person in their mother's womb and knows each heart inside out – we come to you in confidence that you can see across borders behind closed doors and into the very motives of each person. We pray today for all people of position, power or influence with the means to make peace where there currently is none. We ask that where they have hardened hearts of stone, you would soften them again into flesh that has compassion for others and a desire to carry out your purposes of justice and righteousness. And we pray most of all for those who are especially pivotal today – those who have softened hearts, or some ground of softness in their hearts, or those who are beginning to question and to let in the light, who can speak up for truth and be heard today; give them boldness and use them to soften others and bring about strategic and lasting change for the sake of all who are suffering and afraid and your Son who died for every single one.

WEEK 2

FORGIVENESS OVER RESENTMENT

This session we are going to explore how we interact with those we find difficult, how we deal with resentment and how we serve others.

ICE-BREAKER

A game: divide the group into even teams of however many you'd like to participate. On their turn, each team has thirty seconds to name as many songs as possible that contain the word 'Love' in the title or chorus. Extra points should be given if they can name the artist as well.

Leader tip: try to keep this fun rather than too competitive – maybe look up some extra songs beforehand that you can hint at if one team is struggling.

REFLECT

The aim of that game was to stir up some thoughts on how frequently we encounter 'Love' as a theme within our culture: we could have been naming books, films or TV shows whose main theme was love and come out with similarly long lists. It sounds like our world is familiar with love, and yet Jesus' teaching in today's passage remains incredibly provocative, challenging and counter cultural.

Read Matthew 5:43-48 as a group

Jesus is speaking to a vast crowd made up of people from all over Galilee, Jerusalem and Judea; each group within this crowd will have their own frustrations and suspicions of each other – neighbourly squabbles and historical tiffs. They probably would have been able to tell each other apart from their accents (see Matthew 26:73).

- Who do you see as your neighbour?
- What does that expression mean to you?

To unite the crowd, to remind them of their collective identity as the people of God, Jesus shares a written command from Leviticus, 'Love your neighbour' (19:18) and what was probably a colloquial addition everyone knew, 'hate your enemy'. Jesus challenges the crowd by extending this old teaching, telling them they should in fact love their enemy, praying even for those who hate them for who they are. Just like that, their enemy has been elevated to the level of neighbour. Discuss, think on a person who you have a strong disagreement with.

- What is it exactly about loving an 'enemy' that's hard?
- Why isn't it comfortable to love everyone?

Jesus acknowledges that these enemies may well be evil; in their context, the crowd are being invited to love not only those Galileans and Judeans standing next to them, but also their Roman pagan occupiers – a foreign invading force whose very presence in their land challenges the sovereignty of God. To be a child of God, Jesus invites us to extend our love with the same generosity as our Father, whose provision (sun and rain) covers all people.

- What would it look like for you to extend your love to all people?

The radical, world-changing scope of Jesus' teaching becomes clear in verses 46-47: if we only love those who love us, no one truly benefits. Love would be bottled up, exchanged like a currency, limited in impact. But love expressed in the manner of our Father is a love that is felt by all; it sustains, it grows, it is free from boundary and box.

- When have you bottled up your love, or limited it to only those who would love you in return?
- When did you last extend your love without thought of receiving something in return? How did that feel?

WEEK 2

FORGIVENESS OVER RESENTMENT

RESPOND

If we sought to respond to verses 43-47, we would reduce Jesus' teaching to little more than a idealistic, romantic outlook on life, like so many of those songs we recalled in our opening game: 'Love each other and things will get better. Love yourself first, and you'll learn to love others.' There is a truth to this, but Jesus' invitation runs deeper. He asks that we 'be perfect', that our acts of love and forgiveness see us step toward our heavenly Father.

It is impossible to be perfect. If we set out to do this armed with nothing but a positive attitude, we'd return to our normal lives within a week. But this teaching, and the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, isn't just about us. It's a signpost to Jesus, to how his own life built on these values and teachings can impact and change the world. As the Romans nailed him to the cross, he prayed for them, he extended God's love to them. God's love isn't just for one nation, it is for the entire world.

This isn't just good advice, it's good news. We can only participate in this love and extend it to all people – enemies and neighbours – as we receive it from the risen Christ. We can show the world what love is, what our Father is like, because He has loved us first. As we welcome the Spirit of the living God into our lives, we are transformed by that perfecting love.

Take time alone to think on your response to this teaching:

- How can you receive God's love in order to extend it to others?
- Who do you notice in your life – both neighbour and 'enemy' who could offer love to this week?
- What will it look like to put this love into action? Forgiveness? Treating others as more than equals, but as loved children of God? Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 for inspiration.

RECEIVE

This session may have brought some pain and resentment to the surface, exposing relationships that are in need of love, recalling others who don't love us as we might hope.

Leave plenty of time to pray for one another, that we can receive God's love and be affirmed by the knowledge that He delights in us; that God's "I love you" is written throughout Jesus' life and sacrifice; that just as God forgives us, we are to forgive others.

Also pray for the divisions and resentments we see in the world: our current political situations, mistrust of authority and institutions and instances of division in the world.

You may wish to close the session in worship – receiving God's love in words of praise. Consider listening to or joining in with a worship song that draws us to reflect on God's love for us (What A Beautiful Name It Is, Your Love Never Fails, I Stand Amazed)

WEEK 3

TRUST OVER WORRY

This week our bible study will centre on choosing trust over worry. We will explore Matthew 6:25-34 in which Jesus offers an encouraging-yet-challenging instruction on worry. A life journeying with Jesus doesn't mean we'll be immune from the rough and tumble of life, but we are invited to choose trust over worry.

ICE-BREAKER

You might want to grab some pens and paper for this...

- Ask everyone to make a list of everything they think they'll do tomorrow from the moment they wake up to falling asleep. Ask them to put a big black mark next to the moments they're worried about. Invite them to reflect why they're are worried.
- Ask everyone to count how many messages and emails they got yesterday, and to record which ones caused some anxiety or worry of some sort?

In small groups, if everyone feels comfortable, ask people to share any patterns or themes that they see arising for themselves from these two lists.

REFLECT

In today's passage, Jesus focuses his attention on what it means to trust in God. It's a teaching that is timeless in its encouragement and in its challenge; no matter what point in history this teaching is read, with more technological, social or political complications, humanity will always find opportunities to worry. Our ice breaker will have hopefully brought us into reflecting on those worries unique to our own walk, and the ways in which we seek to control aspects of the world around us.

An important point of context for this teaching – and the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount – is to note that Jesus has invited people into following him in the manner of a rabbi calling disciples (Matthew 4:18).

For the disciples of a rabbi in first century Palestine, you would be signing up for a long season of teaching, learning, discipline and challenge; this wasn't an invitation to a one-day conference but a call to offer up potentially your whole life, or at least until you became a rabbi yourself. A rabbi wouldn't expect a disciple to learn everything they were taught straight away; this was a journey they were embarking on, listening to the teaching they received in addition to following in the footsteps of their teacher, a union of learning, witnessing and practicing. This is how Jesus grew and nurtured his disciples, and this is the life of discipleship he invites us into.

As we come to think about worry over trust today, don't worry if you're still learning how to accept this teaching, it's a journey!

Get into small groups and read Matthew 6:25-34.

Once you've read it through together, read it again with a focus on each of these questions:

- What does this passage reveal about the nature of God?
- What does this passage reveal about people – in any context, at any time?
- What is your initial response to the passage? Are you encouraged, or challenged?

WEEK 3

TRUST OVER WORRY

RESPOND

Jesus offers his alternative response to worry in verses 32-34: '...But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.' Jesus asks us to make a choice about what our first response is to worry – seek FIRST, not second, not after we've thought through what could happen or the unknown risks. If we seek God and God's kingdom first in all things, even in the small details of what we're eating or wearing, God will supply us with all our needs.

Continue in your small groups and chat through these questions:

- Looking back at the lists you wrote in the ice breaker exercise, what would it look like to seek God first in each of these moments?
- Jesus notes that 'Each day has enough trouble of its own' (verse 34). Jesus isn't stating that a life following him will become easy – in fact, he promises we will face opposition for following him (Matthew 24:9). How does this change your response to worry?
- What would it look like to live differently as a result of what you've read? How will you do it?

RECEIVE

Finish your evening with a meditation exercise on Jesus' instruction: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness".

Put some worship music on, maybe something without lyrics (e.g. Without Words: Synthesia by Bethel Music).

Ask everyone in turn to read out Matt 6:33-34 individually, leaving at least one minute between each person.

In this space of silence, ask people to listen to the Spirit of God. What does it look like for each of us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness?

After everyone has said the verse leave another 4 or 5 minutes, praying for anything the Spirit of God has guided people towards, or simply praying for any habit of worry to be broken off, transformed into a new hunger to seek God in all things. Finish the time of meditation with a closing prayer.

WEEK 4

GRATITUDE OVER ENTITLEMENT

ICE-BREAKER

Start the study with a fun building game.

Split the room up into teams of 4-5 and give each team a set amount of uncooked spaghetti and Bluetack or marshmallows. The winning team is the one that can build the tallest free-standing tower out of the provided supplies in the given time.

Did the winning design have the most substantial base/foundations?

REFLECT **Read Matthew 7:24-27 as a group**

For some, this Sunday School classic will have been heard hundreds of times and will seem immensely familiar. It is very important, however, that we do not allow this familiarity to remove the story from its context.

This is Jesus' conclusion to his famous 'Sermon on the Mount.' "These words of mine" that we are encouraged to "put into practice" are the final words of the sermon. It would therefore help at this point, to briefly summarise this ground breaking teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5-7, some of which we've looked at these past weeks.

Sermon on the Mount can be broken down into four core themes:

1. Kingdom attitudes and priorities 5:1-18
2. Kingdom Behaviour – relationships with each other 5:19-48
3. Kingdom Behaviour – relationship with God 6:1-34
4. Kingdom wisdom and discernment 7:1-23

Whether as a large group all together, or in separate groups examining a theme each, scan through these three chapters and see how many times Jesus gives a direct command or instruction. It may be that your group is driven and diligent enough to come up with an exact number, but the main goal of this exercise is to acknowledge that the number is very large. The Sermon on the Mount is not just an inspiring set of moral teachings or a collection of insightful thoughts, but rather words that are expected to be 'put into practice.'

Seeing Matthew 5-7 as a call to a radically new way of life with God and each other frames the starkness of this parable that Jesus concludes with: if we ignore all of the instruction he has given in these verses, we will be building lives without foundations, lives that do not hold up when the weather of life moves in.

Discuss:

- What are our initial responses to this parable? How does it make us feel?
- With this in mind, are there any other ways people can think of summarising the Sermon on the Mount?

WEEK 4

GRATITUDE OVER ENTITLEMENT

RESPOND

There is such a profound tension in the Sermon on the Mount. On one hand, Jesus dramatically raises the bar on righteousness; lust and anger are equal to adultery and murder, clearly reminding us of our need for God's grace. On the other hand, we are given explicit instructions on how to live; obedience is requested.

The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains this tension perfectly:

"Humanly speaking, it is possible to understand the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. But Jesus knows only one possibility: simple surrender and obedience - not interpreting or applying it but doing and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his words. He does not mean for us to discuss it as an ideal. He really means for us to get on with it."

The thrust of the sermon, as highlighted in this concluding parable, is that simple listening is not a response, but instead the words must be heard and put into practice. Likewise, we should be wary of an entitled response to God's grace that does not lead to obedience.

In small groups of 3-4, wrestle with the following questions:

Do we have an attitude of entitlement:

- In our everyday lives?
- In our spirituality?

To what extent are we living with inadequate foundations?

- Do we find our faith, our relationship with God, easily obliterated by the storms of life?
- Which bits of the Sermon on the Mount do we find the hardest to hear and put into practice? The reality is often that these areas are those in which we feel the most entitled.

RECEIVE

The beauty of the Sermon on the Mount is that there is only one human who has ever consistently and persistently lived like this. As theologian N T Wright explains:

"Jesus himself, as the gospel story goes on to its dramatic conclusion, lives out the same message of the Sermon on the Mount: he is the light of the world, he is the salt of the earth, he loves his enemies and gives his life for them, he is lifted up on a hill so that the world can see."

This parable invites us to search ourselves and our response, but it shouldn't leave us with feelings of guilt, shame and a sense of failure. It's an invitation to awe, wonder and gratitude at the grace of God to us, and the desire, motivated by joy and not guilt, to live in obedience. Have a time of worship or reflective prayer while a song is playing to end the session. Encourage the group to call to mind what God has done in their lives, to place themselves in this atmosphere of gratitude. It may be appropriate to invite people to speak out their gratitude to God. After this, while still in an attitude of grateful worship, pray for each other in the smaller groups used earlier, asking God to fill us afresh with his Spirit, that we can live in obedience to him, so that we can be like the man who built his house on the rock.

APPENDIX

This section of your resource is aimed to help supplement your reading and studying for the Life Hacks series.

If you'd like more recommended reading for this series, email david.cornish@htb.org

Our Life Hacks series focuses in on a momentous occasion in the life and ministry of Jesus, commonly referred to as the sermon on the mount.

This block of teaching falls at a particularly interesting time: Jesus has begun to gain notoriety thanks to his healings and preaching on the kingdom of heaven and chooses this moment to deliver key lessons to those who have been captivated by his words and actions. Watch The Bible Project for a brilliant summary of this fits together: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Dv4-n6OYGI>

Matthew wants his readers to know that Jesus goes about delivering this sermon in a way that is incredibly familiar to another key Hebraic leader, Moses – a figure whose life and status Matthew has been drawing parallels with when recording the life of Jesus throughout the first five chapters of his gospel: where Moses escaped death as a baby into Egypt, Jesus too escapes death from a tyrannical leader into Egypt (Matt. 2:13); before Jesus returns to his home, he first has a dramatic encounter in an important body of water, drawing allusions to Exodus 13 & 14; while Moses and the people of God are led into the desert for 40 years (a season in which the Israelites attempt to combat temptation but fail to resist), Jesus is led into the desert for 40 days (Matt. 4:2).

With these early signposts to Moses established, Jesus then begins to preach in synagogues and form his group of disciples, putting himself amongst his rabbinical peers of the day. Jesus was behaving in a way that was counter-cultural, radical and supra-spiritual, stoking a desire amongst those who encountered him to also hear teaching as to what underpinned how he acted. And so, like Moses before him, summits a mount to deliver this crucial block of teaching.

Mountains play an important role throughout scripture, gaining prominence back at the time of Noah (Genesis 8:4). It was Mt. Ararat where the ark rested, marking the beginning of a new dawn for creation. Mt. Sinai was where Moses collected the 10 commandments. Mt. Carmel is where Elijah had a face-off with the prophets of Ba'al to see Yahweh send fire down to prove God reigns. Mt. Zion is where God's people rest and set up the new city Jerusalem. It was on Mt. Tabor that Jesus is later transfigured and it's on the Hill of the Skull, Golgotha, where Jesus is put to death. Finally, it is on the Mount of Olives where Jesus ascends to be with his Father.

These mountain-top moments play a central role in God's story for two reasons: they are a symbol of closeness to the heavenlies, a place where God chooses to show up in powerful ways often to honour the people's desire for proximity with Him. Secondly, and more practically, they are locations suited to more intimate occasions. You don't find a lot of people at the top of a mountain, only the faithful few who are willing to endure pain and suffering to get to the top. God favours those throughout scripture who are willing to endure hardship in order to hear God, be close to Him or be led by Him.

Unlike Moses' mountain-top experience, it is not a disembodied voice giving us tablets of stone, or words of wisdom; Jesus, (the Emmanuel – God with us, Matt. 1:22) is teaching. He doesn't begin with an apologetic 'I think God may be saying...', he declares this teaching as if he himself is God.

If God says these things, they matter.

APPENDIX

The sermon begins with the beatitudes (the 'beautiful sayings') and goes on to cover a multitude of topics from divorce to murder, prayer and fasting. Through these teachings and commands Jesus is reminding the people gathered on this hilltop that God cares deeply about their whole selves, not just our religious attendance or our 'holy activities'. This is about the real stuff, the kind of guidance you really need to live alongside people who are going to rub you up the wrong way.

It's not just the mountain top location that will remind those hearing these sayings, and those reading about it, of the parallels with God's story so far. Jesus frequently mentions old statements and laws from the Torah, but expands their impact in radical new ways. God isn't done, He's not finished, He is not to be confined to old writings and prophets of the past, He's active and interested in you. Matthew makes clear that not only does Jesus' life pull on the themes of the Torah, but his teaching does too.

It's important to note that Jesus is not abolishing these teachings of the Torah, but rather fulfilling them (5:17-20). This a vital statement for our understanding of how we are to approach these commands: this isn't just about us and our practice, this is also about Jesus himself. This is his blueprint, his practice, fulfilling what God had set out many centuries ago. He's not asking his followers to do anything he hasn't faced himself – and as Matthew later records, he's not asking us to respond to this in isolation, but knowing that Jesus is with us always, 'to the very end of the age' (28:20).

Note how the sermon on the mount ends; in true Jesus fashion, with a parable (7:24-27). You have two choices as to how you can respond to this sermon – build your life on something that will fall away when the rains come, or on something rock solid. Jesus wants us to know that it is his teaching that ensures a life on sure foundations, his way that leads to an abundant life and his way that will lead this world into revival.

We, the reader, are left with a choice. Stone or sand. Practice or ignore.