

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Introduction

Aug. 28 Questions for Discussion Introduction, Pages 1-13

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Introduction:

The author asks, “What’s our problem?” Using the illustration on pg. 8, how would you answer this question?

How would you define the term “culture war” as it relates to Christians today?

How would you answer the question that the author posed to his students: “How many of you think Jesus actually expects us to live out these commands?”

Part 1

Sept. 4 Questions for Discussion Part 1, Pages 14-37

“Who is Really Blessed?”

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 1

Consider the illustration on pg. 16. How well do we, as God’s partners, reflect the kingdom definition of “blessed?” Would outside observers see consistency or hypocrisy?

The author makes a distinction between description and prescription with regard to the Beatitudes. Did you find this new or helpful? Why or why not?

Reading 2

What qualities do you admire in other people? What qualities do you strive for yourself?

Jesus’ teachings challenge how we view others, especially the marginalized. What practice could you engage in to shift your thinking to be more aligned with Christ’s?

Reading 3

Consider the illustration on pg. 24. Which option best reflects how you have thought of the kingdom of God? Define “kingdom of God” in your own words.

Reading 4

What if Jesus was serious? Reading Schedule

- Week of August 29th: Introduction
- Week of September 4th: Part 1 {Matthew 5: 1 – 12}
- Week of September 11th: Part 2 {Matthew 5: 13 – 20}
- Week of September 18th: Part 3 {Matthew 5: 21 – 37}
- Week of September 25th: Part 4 {Matthew 5: 38 – 48}
- Week of October 2nd: Part 5 {Matthew 6: 1 – 15}
- Week of October 9th: Part 6 {Matthew 6: 16 – 34}
- Week of October 16th: Part 7 {Matthew 7: 1 – 12}
- Week of October 23rd: Part 8 {Matthew 7: 13 – 23}
- Week of October 30th: Part 9 {Matthew 7: 24 – 29}

How well would you say your faith system accommodates grieving, sadness, or struggle? Do these feelings make you uncomfortable?

In what ways does the church environment create an expectation to be doing “pretty good” all the time (what the author calls “happy-clappy people”)? How do you engage your faith with the times when you are lamenting things that are broken? Why do you think Jesus says, “Those who mourn are blessed” (Matt 5:4)?

Reading 5

We live in a violent, angry, polarized world. How does the way of Jesus show us a different way to deal with conflict?

Do you think that the gentle, peaceful, and meek can really make a difference in our world? Is that the point?

What differences do you see between Jesus’ promise that “the meek... will inherit the earth [or land]” (Matt 5:5) and contemporary political rhetoric? What ways do you see yourself (try not to talk about other people!) drawn toward the political rhetoric? How do you think Jesus’ message can counteract that attitude in yourself?

Reading 6

The word “righteous” is often understood by Christians to refer to an individual being in a right relationship with God. How does Jesus expand this meaning?

Reading 7

What are the ways that you demonstrate your love for God?

How did you react to the author’s statement, “We desperately want to believe that we can stand blameless before God and utterly despise, mistreat, and condemn those created in His image.”

Reading 8

We are all being formed by something. What are some of the things that shape your self-image and values?

What are some ways that you can expand on your Christian spiritual formation?

Reading 9

Consider the illustration on pg. 36. How hard are you willing to work for peace? Or do you find the path of avoidance to be your default setting?

Why was it so costly for Jesus to make peace between us and God? How does this highlight the difference between being a peacemaker (Matt 5:9) and being a “peace-faker” in relationships with others?

Part 2

Sept. 11 Questions for Discussion Part 2, Pages 38-53

“Christians and Culture”

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 10

“Persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable value systems.” What does this mean to you, and what are the implications for living in our country at this time in history?

Reading 11

“Jesus affirms the world-shaping value of ordinary people who follow the ways of an extraordinary God.” How does this influence the way that you think and live? Do you value being “influential?”

Why do you think Jesus chose to share his message with “the crowds” (Matt 5:1) instead of scholars, rulers, or wealthy business backers? How does that affect the role you believe Jesus has for you?

Reading 12

Think of someone who has been important in your spiritual formation. What is it about them that was illuminating or beneficial to you?

Reading 13

Consider the two roles of being “salt” (preventing decay) and “light” (illuminating truth), or justice (reconciliation between people) and evangelism (reconciliation with God). Which is more challenging for you, and why? How can love bring them together?

Reading 14

The problems of the world can be overwhelming. We are inundated with constant information, outrage, and criticism. How can we stay engaged in our society in ways that bring goodness, healing, and love?

In what ways do you find yourself tempted to “flee into safe enclaves of holiness, far removed from the decay of society”? What do you think it would take to be “salt and light” in a ways you can sustain your whole life while keeping your faith strong (Matt 5:13-16)?

Reading 15

"The Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus." How does Jesus help us understand the Old Testament? How does the Old Testament help us understand Jesus?

Reading 16

What do you think "righteousness" is, and what does it look like? What does it look like for Jesus? Is it different for you?

Part 3

Sept. 18 Questions for Discussion, Part 3, Pages 54-69

"Inside-out Righteousness"

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 17

What makes you angry? How do you justify your anger? How do you disarm your anger?

Why is it so hard to "wield anger" with clear vision? What is the right way to respond to anger when you feel it rise in you (cf. Matt 5:22)?

Reading 18

The author suggests that this "age of outrage" among Christians may be due to our loss of power in our culture, that we are grieving this loss. Do you agree or disagree? And why?

Reading 19

Contempt seeks to diminish the inherent value of another person. How can we contribute to solutions rather than problems in our current atmosphere of contempt for people who are "not like us?"

When is it tempting to think of someone else as "raca" (Matt 5:22), contemptible, not worthy of care? How do we show people respect even when we disagree (strongly) with them?

Reading 20

Who are the "invisible" in your community?

How do you respond to the author's statement, "Any heart that feels so indifferent toward those created in God's image cannot be suitable for God's kingdom."

Reading 21

Consider the illustration on page 64. How does it help you understand the author's statement, "Jesus isn't merely interested in good behavior; He wants us to be good people." What are the limits of guardrails (following rules)?

Reading 22

How does the inclusion of the word “intent” change your understanding of Jesus’ teaching on lust? Do you find this helpful?

Reading 23

How do you understand these strange words of Jesus, about tearing out your eye or cutting off your hand?

Part 4**Sept. 25 Questions for Discussion, Part 4, Pages 70-81****“Love in Action”**

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 24

The author asserts that there is a significant gap between the noble idea of loving others and the practice of loving “the annoying humans who interfere with our wills and obstruct our desires with mundane regularity.” Have you found this to be the case? How do we bridge that gap?

What are some challenges you find if you redefine “love your enemy” (Matt 5:44) to include the everyday annoying people in your life?

Reading 25

Jesus cleverly draws attention to our assumptions with his remix of the commandment to “love your neighbor.” Think deeply about assumptions you may have that distort your image of what God is like, what he wants, what he thinks of people, etc. How can you correct this distortion?

Reading 26

“To love is to act in a manner that is in the best interests of another, even if the person resists the action.” How does this definition of love vary from our culture’s traditional definition? Do you find this helpful?

Reading 27

What is the difference between reading the Sermon on the Mount as commands to be obeyed vs. illustrations of a life shaped by God’s kingdom? Is this a new idea for you?

Reading 28

Have you ever prayed for an “enemy?” What was it like for you? How did you see them differently, if at all? Did you feel like it was sincere?

Do you have anyone you don't like on your regular prayer list (cf. Matt 5:44)? If so, how has it changed the way you see them? How do you think our church could pray for each other that builds community more personally?

Part 5

Oct. 2 Questions for Discussion, Part 5, Pages 82-98

“A Prayer for Losers”

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 29

How do you think participating in social media affects our sense of love, belonging, and value?

The author says, “Real intimacy—whether with another person or God—requires privacy and shuns publicity.” What do you think intimacy with God looks like? Why is privacy important for nurturing it (Matt 6:1, 4, 6)?

Reading 30

The western value of individualism permeates our perspective on many things, and unconsciously influences our understanding of scripture. Because English does not have a second person plural (unless you are from the south, or routinely use “y’all”) we miss where scripture is addressing communities rather than individuals. “It turns out there are at least 4,720 verses (2,698 in the Hebrew Bible and 2,022 in the Greek) with you plural translated as English “you” which could lead a reader to think it is directed at him or her personally rather than the Church as a community.” (check it out at <https://yallversion.com/>) How might you expand your individual perspective to be more in line with the Bible's intent and teaching for communities?

Reading 31

Consider the illustration on page 88. Where do you find yourself in terms of relating to God? Why might someone be uncomfortable with the left section? or the right section?

Reading 32

Think about the popular vision of heaven as a place to go to after death. Is this what Jesus and the Bible teach? If not, why do people think this?

Reading 33

What can you let go of, or where can you slow down to practice trusting God?

Reading 34

What is the relationship between God forgiving us and our forgiveness of others?

How often are you consciously aware of sin in your life you need God to forgive? In what ways do you see this influencing the ways you give and receive forgiveness with others (Matt 6:12, 14-15)?

Reading 35

“God doesn’t merely deliver us from something. He also delivers us to something.” How does this influence your understanding of deliverance or salvation?

Part 6

Oct. 9 Questions for Discussion, Part 6, Pages 100-121

“Freedom From Fear”

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 36

Jesus was unconcerned with, and unaffected by, the opinions of others. How might you live differently if you truly did not care what other people think of you?

Reading 37

In what ways do you try to appear better or more “spiritual” than you really are? What is at the root of that need to be praised by people?

Reading 38

Consider the illustration on page 106. The author states that “This future orientation, however, is not present in Jesus’ actual words. How, then, did the popular view (delayed gratification, rewards in heaven) develop?

Reading 39

What occupies your imagination? What motivates your actions? What does this say about what you ultimately value?

Reading 40

How does the ancient understanding of sight change how we understand Jesus’ words here?

Reading 41

One way to evaluate what, or who, has mastery in your life is to imagine life without it or them. What would happen if your bank account was hacked and you lost everything? Or the important people in your life abandoned you?

Reading 42

When humanity exited the garden of Eden, the reality of abundance was replaced by the myth of scarcity. We are afraid that we will never have enough. This is one of the reasons that wealth is so tempting. How might you be able to grow in your trust of God in this area?

Reading 43

Consider God's provision of food in the desert wilderness. Although this is a specific story for a specific time and place, there is wisdom for all people available through it. What is the underlying wisdom that is there for us?

Reading 44

What fears enslave you? How might you find freedom from them?

Reading 45

Think of your time, talent, and treasure. How might you let go of fear and grow in generosity toward others?

PART 7

Oct. 16 Questions for Discussion, Part 7, Pages 122-141

“Judging, Asking, Blessing”

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 46

Public surveys list judgement and condemnation among the top complaints against Christians. How does the distinction between discernment and judgment help us in this?

Reading 47

The path from discernment into judgement, condemnation, and exclusion is swift and often unconscious. How can we disrupt this path?

Why do you think it's difficult to distinguish between judging in the sense of moral discernment and judging in the sense of condemning from place of superiority (Matt 7:1-2)? What can help us do the first without being guilty of the second?

Reading 48

We find the self-righteousness of the religious rulers in Jesus' day to be glaringly obvious. What about ours? How are we also self-righteous, and how can we work to change that?

Reading 49

Asking often implies need, which we then associate with being needy. To need is to be human. How do we lean into the reality that we are supposed to need each other? How might this change how you pray?

Reading 50

What kind of relationship do you have with your father? Does it help or hinder your vision of God as kind, compassionate, and generous?

How can you engage with God the way that Jesus shows us: with the “dignity of children rather than the humiliation of slaves?”

Reading 51

How do you respond when God seems to say “no” to your prayers?

Has there been a time you were glad God said “no” to your prayer? What are some of the better things God graciously gives us that we don’t often think to ask him for (Matt 7:11)?

Reading 52

Consider the illustration on page 136. Would you honestly say that this is how you view the power of prayer?

Reading 53

Most people are familiar with “The Golden Rule.” Are you familiar with “The Platinum Rule?” How are they different? What example has Jesus set for us?

Reading 54

“What would I want if I were you?” How does practicing “The Golden Rule” lead to empathy and action?

PART 8

Oct. 23 Questions for Discussion, Part 8, Pages 142-169

“Good and Bad Fruit”

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 55

Modern, western Christianity has put a strong emphasis on having the “right belief.” This has resulted in a tidy little formula for “how to get to heaven when you die.” Is this what Jesus actually taught? If not, how did we get here?

Reading 56

In your own Christian life, are you following ideas merely because they are popular, or are you discerning their conformity to Jesus and His way?

What popular ideas do you sometimes want to justify, even though you know they run against Jesus' teaching? How will it influence the way you live if you know that following Jesus is a minority ("narrow," Matt 7:14) way of life?

Reading 57

What is your understanding of "the narrow way" that Jesus talks about? What else could it mean?

Reading 58

Consider the illustration on page 150. Why do you think there is such a large disparity between the values or "fruit" on the left versus that on the right?

Reading 59

"The call of Christ, however, is not to improve our fruit but to instead seek the transformation of our identity." What does that mean and how do we live it?

Reading 60

We must grow deep roots and fruit will come naturally. But, there are many pressures to squeeze out fruit quickly! How do we cultivate flourishing and fruitfulness?

What are some practices you think would be beneficial if we want to be living trees that grow fruit instead of dead trees decorated with fake fruit (Matt 7:15-20)? What expectations might we need to lay down in order to give up the temptation to focus more on fruit than life?

Reading 61

Do you feel like the leaders in your life are approachable and available? If so, do you spend time with them? If not, why not?

Reading 62

Do you think these "frightening" words of Jesus are meant to be taken literally? Could they be understood any other way?

Reading 63

"The true lord of our life is revealed by our actions, not our declarations." Are there actions that betray your allegiance? How might we narrow the gap between what we say and how we live?

Reading 64

What impresses you? Is it possible that what impresses you may not impress Jesus?

Reading 65

Without going on a guilt trip, how do you understand this difficult text? What makes a person “fit” for the kingdom of God?

Reading 66

Consider the illustration on page 166. Do you put more value on “being used by God” or “belonging to God?” How do you feel if your life plods along in abject ordinariness?

Why is it important to distinguish between those God might use and those who belong to him (Matt 7:21-23)? What are some important ways to tell the difference?

Reading 67

Do you feel pressure to “change the world?” Did Jesus “change the world?” Do you think that your value is linked to the magnitude of your influence?

PART 9**Oct. 30 Questions for Discussion, Part 9, Pages 170-181****“Be Smart”**

What stood out to you in the readings or sermon this week?

Reading 68

Is the author’s interpretation of this well-known parable different from your understanding? If so, how?

Reading 69

What are some of the unseen patterns of obedience that make our faith foundation strong?

The author suggests that the foundation of our spiritual house needs to be built with the difficult hidden work of “prayer, solitude, confession, and discipline.” How do these hidden disciplines relate to more visible and social practices? Which of these do you find easier? How do we keep them in balance?

Reading 70

If you were among the crowds on that day, listening to Jesus, what conclusion would you come to? Was he crazy? A liar? The Messiah? Why?

Reading 71

What draws you into the presence of God? Crisis? Gratitude? Need?

What do you think it was that so amazed the crowds about how Jesus taught (Matt 7:28-29)? How did this come across? What do you think your soul is attracted to?

Reading 72

Have you ever considered this truth, that Jesus is the smartest person who ever lived? If not, why not? Do you think of him as competent?