

SESSION 1: Respect

Wired for social connection

What makes for good relationships

Think of someone whom you respect.

Q. Why do you respect them?

Q. What difference does this respect make to your relationship?

Robert Waldinger (TEDx speaker): "Social connections are really good for us, and loneliness kills...Relationships are messy and they're complicated and the hard work of tending to family and friends, it's not sexy or glamorous. It's also life-long. It never ends¹

Respect is about having due regard for the feelings, wishes, or rights of others². In the messiness and complexity of relationships, respect isn't always easy.

The world-famous moral teaching of Jesus

The following is a part of a famous speech given by Jesus 2000 years ago, which is referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount". Jesus' words are recognised wisdom that have echoed down through the ages (for example, it's where we get the expression: "do to others as you would have them do to you".)³

Matthew 5:20-30 [New International Version]

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness⁴ surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law⁵, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder⁶, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca'⁷, is answerable to the court⁸. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

¹ Robert Waldinger, "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness", TEDxBeaconStreet 2015.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/respect>

³ This kind of moral teaching is not unique to Jesus. Many other religions and worldviews echo similar sentiments. Why then listen to Jesus? It becomes a question of assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of Jesus' other claims, for example his claim to be the Son of God.

⁴ Or "doing the right thing before God".

⁵ In Jesus' day, these were Israel's religious elite known for their zealous adherence to the laws of the Old Testament.

⁶ "You shall not murder" was one of the 10 Commandments in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:13).

⁷ In Jesus' local language (Aramaic) this was a term of contempt.

⁸ The religious courts were made up of Pharisees and other Jewish sects.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery⁹.’ ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, 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 right hand causes you to stumble, 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 go into hell.

Q. What interests you here?

Q. What questions would you like to ask Jesus?

What is Jesus saying here?

Elsewhere Jesus says this about the religious elite. ²⁷ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, that look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. [Matthew 23:27]

So for Jesus, having a righteousness that exceeded the Pharisees was not about more strenuous external law keeping but rather a matter of the heart. Jesus goes on to give two examples of where the Pharisees had misunderstood the intent of the law.

Firstly, anger. Anger is just as worthy of God’s judgement as murder. Why? Because where murder is the conclusion, anger was the beginning. Anger is the real and greater issue. Calling a person “Raca” questions their mental competence (“you idiot”). Calling a person “a fool” questions their moral competence (“you moron”). It is not as if the consequence of one is worse than the other (court verses hell). Rather both are an expression of the anger in someone’s heart. Anger is the real and greater issue.

Jesus goes on to explain how to fix things. Jesus gives the harder case: when someone is angry with you (the harder case because it’s easier to say: “not my problem – they need to deal with it!”). Jesus’ advice when you know someone is angry with you is to go and seek reconciliation. The same would apply if you were angry with someone. Jesus’ other piece of advice is to resolve it before the problem gets bigger. (Note: it takes both parties to actually reconcile. The important thing here is the seeking of reconciliation).

⁹ “You shall not commit adultery was one of the 10 Commandments in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:14).

Secondly, lust. Lust is as bad as adultery. Why? Because what lust starts, adultery can end. Lust is the real and greater issue. Jesus' case study is men lusting after women but it would equally apply the other way around.

Jesus goes on to explain how serious lust is, using the language of exaggeration (he doesn't literally mean "gouge out your eye").

Q. What interests you in what you have just read?

Q. What questions do you still have?

What has this got to do with respect?

AI's story

Ok I admit it, I get angry. Not red hot angry, well not very often anyway. Usually for me it's just old man grumpy: "The world is full of idiots" grumpy. Why can't they just do what I want, or act with common sense? It's obvious that I'm right. Then I cool down a bit. I think my anger comes from my unmet expectations. I expect "x" and it hasn't happened. I think "x" should be the case and it's not, so I'm angry.

Sometimes anger can be good –motivating us to intervene, to speak up and to protect those who need to be helped. At other times, it's selfish anger that spills out. It damages others in terrible and obvious ways like domestic violence or more subtly in gossip and character assassination.

Most anger I believe is ultimately selfish – and it kills relationships. Over the years I've known men who've been consumed with anger and frustration, because the world is not how they think it should be and they've been treated unfairly. I've seen how that anger poisons relationships, ultimately leaving them alone.

The best cure for selfish anger is the realisation that what we want and our expectations aren't the only legitimate way of seeing the world. Being able to "walk in someone else's shoes" may be a cliché but it will also change the way we respond to people and events. Anger damages relationships and it can be difficult to fix. Not that it's hard to know what has to be done – it's just that fixing relationships is costly. It requires the humility to ask for forgiveness, to apologise, and the generosity to forgive. And yet the cost of not doing these things is much higher.

There's an old song called "Love makes the world go round" written in 1958¹⁰. Today we could change it to "Lust makes the world go round". There's many multibillion dollar industries built on lust, with pornography being the most obvious (pornhub has 64 million

¹⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Makes_the_World_Go_%27Round_\(1958_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Makes_the_World_Go_%27Round_(1958_song))

visitors each day)¹¹. What these industries won't tell you: lust isn't about commitment, or intimacy, or love. It's about the desire to use someone.

In my experience – and I've talked to many people over the years – no one wakes up one morning and out of the blue decide to leave their partner. Adultery isn't one decision – it's many little compromises. It's the snowball that begins to roll down the hill. Each decision – each compromise – makes it bigger and harder to pull up. I've seen many marriages end this way.

I know our world calls adultery “an affair”, but the euphemism isn't doing anyone a favour. Adultery begins with lust – the desire to use someone to make up for what is missing in our existing relationships. I'm being blunt but let's call it for what it is. I'm not saying that genuine feelings don't develop. I'm just talking about how things start off. Unbridled lust doesn't respect or honour our existing relationships. Adultery destroys marriages, families, lives and it always ends in tears.

Jesus' teaching on anger and lust is tough! If we think Jesus is on about meeting impossibly high standards then that can leave us in one of two places. Either we'll become self-righteous because we've deluded ourselves into thinking we've achieved it. Or – and more likely – we'll be crushed by guilt and sadness at our failures.

Jesus is more than just a good moral teacher. He goes on to die on a cross so that we can be fully and freely forgiven even with our failings. So when I take Jesus' teaching on anger and lust seriously – it's the way I can express my gratitude for being forgiven. I'm not earning that forgiveness – I'm celebrating the fact that I have it. And I've been “celebrating” for the last 40 years.

(Al works for City Bible Forum).

Q. When it comes to respect, what do you need to work on?

Q. What will motivate you to do this?

¹¹ <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review>

SESSION 2: Trust

Wired for social connection

What makes for good relationships

Think of someone whom you trust.

Q. How do you know you can count on them?

Q. What difference does this trust make to your relationship?

Robert Waldinger (TEDx speaker) says that social connections are really good for us, but relationships are messy and complicated and hard work over the long term.¹

Trust is the firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone². In the messiness and complexity of relationships, trust isn't always easy.

The world-famous moral teaching of Jesus

The following is a part of a famous speech given by Jesus 2000 years ago, which is referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount". Jesus' words are recognised wisdom that have echoed down through the ages (for example, it's where we get the expression: "do to others as you would have them do to you").³

Matthew 5:31-37 [New International Version]

³¹ *"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'*

³² *But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

³³ *"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfil to the Lord the vows you have made.' ³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one⁴.*

Q. What interests you here?

Q. What questions would you like to ask Jesus?

¹ Robert Waldinger, "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness", TEDxBeaconStreet 2015.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/trust>

³ This kind of moral teaching is not unique to Jesus. Many other religions and worldviews echo similar sentiments. Why then listen to Jesus? It becomes a question of assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of Jesus' other claims, for example his claim to be the Son of God.

⁴ Or the devil or Satan. Elsewhere Jesus refers to the devil as liar and the "father of lies" (John 8:44).

What is Jesus saying here?

In the Old Testament, a man could divorce his wife if he found something “indecent” in her (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). This might sound like easy divorce, but that wasn’t the intent. The fact that a certificate was required and that they could not re-marry each other was to discourage hasty divorce. By Jesus’ time, one school of Jewish thought interpreted “indecent” to include trivial offenses, such as burning a meal⁵.

Divorce was a hot topic in Jesus’ day.

³ Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

⁴ “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ [Genesis 1:27] ⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’ [Genesis 2:24]? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

⁷ “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

⁸ Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” [Matthew 19:3-9]

Jesus treats marriage as special. Divorce was a concession and permissible on the grounds of sexual immorality as in this case what was core to the marriage (sexual faithfulness) had been violated.

Oath-taking occurs right throughout the Old Testament (even God himself took oaths). The purpose of the oaths was to encourage truthfulness – an honouring of one’s word.

By Jesus’ day, oath-taking was a complex business. For example, swearing by heaven and earth was not binding, nor was swearing *by* Jerusalem, though swearing *towards* Jerusalem was⁶.

Jesus would prefer to abolish oaths than have them as an occasion for a clever lie or deceit. Besides, whatever a person swears by is related to God in some way, and therefore every oath is implicitly in God’s name – heaven, earth, Jerusalem, even the hairs of the head are under God’s control. So making one’s “yes” “yes” and one’s “no” “no” avoids game playing and values truthfulness.

Q. What interests you in what you have just read?

Q. What questions do you still have?

⁵ Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*), tractate [Gittin](#), 90a.

⁶ D A Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995, p153.

What has this got to do with trust?

Al's story

I've been married 38 years, to a great lady, who I would trust with my life. I suppose in some ways I have trusted her with my life, day by day for all those years. Often not easy day by day (I mean being married to me for example). The romance in a relationship doesn't completely disappear but after a few years it can be AWOL⁷ for long periods of time. Every married couple eventually has periods of time when they have to function with each other simply on the basis of – "I promised you I'd be here, and treat you a certain way, so I'm here again today"–, and we keep turning up. I remember asking my wife one day: 'Do you still love me?' Her answer: "Well I'm still here aren't I?" I took that as a 'yes'. It's not always like this, but sometimes that's what you've got to do.

Marriage and taking oaths – why would Jesus put these two topics together? It's worth thinking about what they have in common. The answer is they are both about keeping our word or our promises. Another way of saying it is "faithfulness".

Today marriage has been devalued and weddings over-valued. The average wedding in Australia now costs around \$36,000⁸. It's the price we gladly pay for the dream day and social media opportunities. Fair enough it's a free country, and it is a special day. Maybe I'm seeing too many ads for reality TV shows like "Married at First Sight" and I'm becoming a bit cynical (I've not seen the show, I'm just responding to the ads). To me, it does seem that marriage is disposable these days. I'm not making a comment on particular people as I say this. I'm just speaking overall, as a trend. And I'm certainly not saying it in judgement from the relative safety of my own lofty tower – marriage is hard work, just ask my wife.

Marriage is the promises (an old word is 'covenant') made between a man and a woman, in front of relatives and friends, and the government, that they will love and honour and stay faithful to their spouse; emotionally and sexually faithful, to them alone. Trust is a very precious thing. It's delicate and slow to build, and easily damaged. Jesus is warning that adultery destroys trust in a marriage so badly, so thoroughly, that it may not be able to be repaired. It is grounds for dissolving a marriage. Ideally trust can be repaired but sometimes sadly that's not possible.

With regard to oaths and faithfulness Jesus is making the point that being trustworthy is a matter of the heart and character. If your heart and character are dishonest, or dishonourable, then all the oaths, or promises in the world, even swearing on a stack of Bibles aren't worth a cigarette butt. However if your heart is faithful, and you honour your word, then oaths are unnecessary.

Stephen Covey in his book: THE 8TH HABIT, speaks about "the Speed of Trust", that is when you trust someone you are able to work together with great speed and efficiency. But when

⁷ A military term meaning "absent without leave".

⁸ <https://www.moneysmart.gov.au/search?collection=asic&profile=moneysmart&query=weddings>

there is no trust things are much slower and harder to get done. Just contrast buying a car from your best friend who you've known for years, compared to buying a car from a used car dealer with a gold tooth and white shoes (or a white suit). Which is going to take longer, and need more work? Why would that be?

It's interesting how much trouble we have to go to in our dealings with people we don't know because we assume that many people will be dishonest. It's when we can operate at "the speed of trust" with people that life really works.

(AI works for City Bible Forum).

Q. When it comes to trust, what do you need to work on?

Q. What will motivate you to do this?

SESSION 3: Selflessness

Wired for social connection

What makes for good relationships

Think of someone you'd describe as selfless.

Q. How did they put your interests above their own?

Q. What did that experience do for your relationship?

(Or if this is too hard, do the opposite and think about someone who has acted selfishly).

Robert Waldinger (TEDx speaker) says that social connections are really good for us, but relationships are messy and complicated and hard work over the long term.¹

Selflessness is the opposite of selfishness. It's about being concerned more with the needs and wishes of others than with one's own². In the messiness and complexity of relationships, selflessness isn't always easy.

The world-famous moral teaching of Jesus

The following is a part of a famous speech given by Jesus 2000 years ago, which is referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount". Jesus' words are recognised wisdom that have echoed down through the ages (for example, it's where we get the expression: "do to others as you would have them do to you").³

Matthew 5:38-48 [New International Version]

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'.⁴ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy'.⁵ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain

¹ Robert Waldinger, "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness", TEDxBeaconStreet 2015.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/selfless>

³ This kind of moral teaching is not unique to Jesus. Many other religions and worldviews echo similar sentiments. Why then listen to Jesus? It becomes a question of assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of Jesus' other claims, for example his claim to be the Son of God.

⁴ Leviticus 24:20: "...fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury."

⁵ Leviticus 19:18: "'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.'"

on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect⁶."

Q. What interests you here?

Q. What questions would you like to ask Jesus?

What is Jesus saying here?

The "eye for an eye" business comes from the Old Testament. It sounds violent but it was instituted to limit revenge, as one could only inflict the same kind of injury back. Otherwise the cycle of revenge could have been endless.

Jesus says it's not about getting even. His followers are to "not resist an evil person". This means they are not to fight back at all. Rather, they are to be prepared to suffer harm. He then gives some examples. It might be suffering harm to your reputation by enduring another insult (the "slap" was a way to personally insult someone at that time). It might be suffering harm to your legal position when being sued by also giving them your coat (which was your most valuable garment because you slept in it). It might be suffering harm to your time by being prepared to go the extra mile (apparently at that time a Roman soldier could give their 45kg backpack to any civilian to carry for one mile. Jesus is saying literally 'go the extra mile'). It might be suffering harm to your possessions by being willing to lend with no guarantee of return.

Jesus is using language of exaggeration and it does capture our attention! Jesus is talking about suffering a double injustice. You've already been personally insulted, sued, inconvenienced... and Jesus is saying: "take another hit". Be prepared to suffer harm.

The "love your neighbour, hate your enemy" DOESN'T come from the Old Testament. It seemed like the original command to "love your neighbour" was embellished by Jesus' contemporaries – the flipside of loving those who are for you is to hate those who are against you.

Jesus says it's not about hating your enemy but doing good to them by loving them and praying for them. In other words, it's about acting in their best interests.

Jesus then gives three reasons why his followers are to love their enemies. Firstly, God cares for their enemies – he sends rain on everyone. Secondly, if they don't then they are no different from anyone else, since the standard of the day is to just love those who love you. And thirdly, loving your enemies is the way you can imitate God and be "grown up" or mature in relationships (this is what the word "perfect" means).

Q. What interests you in what you have just read?

⁶ Or "mature".

Q. What questions do you still have?

What has this got to do with selflessness?

Caroline's story

I used to read these words of Jesus and didn't think they applied to me. Sure I have difficult people in my life but none of them (to the best of my knowledge!) were out to destroy me. That was my Hollywood-based definition of "enemy". And then someone pointed out that an enemy is someone who doesn't act in my best interests. I realised this included a lot more people than I originally thought because even good friends let me down at times.

I then felt the full force of Jesus' teaching. To do good to someone who hasn't acted in my best interests is hard! Because by definition if they haven't acted in my best interests, they have hurt me. It's easy to love those who deserve it. It's much harder to do good to those who don't. To be selfless like that.

When I'm hurt, my natural reaction is to nurse a grudge and to seek some form of payback. But what is the natural conclusion of that, when say my good friends let me down (which they all will at some point, because no one is perfect)? I end up friendless and alone.

If I don't want to actively seek revenge, then the message I often hear is I need to protect myself. Which makes sense if a work colleague is a bit of bully – I shouldn't just roll over and be a doormat. Being treated like that isn't just or right or loving. [And if I can't get justice now, then I have the comfort of knowing there will be justice in the future, because God cares and sees everything (Romans 12:19).]

But when it comes to our good friends, self-protection can mean our relationships start to wither and die. By not opening myself up I can keep others at a distance – safe but minus a richness of relationship that comes with us being more vulnerable with each other.

I don't think Jesus is saying here that there is no place to look after our own interests. After all, he goes on to say: "love your neighbour *as yourself*" (Matthew 22:39). I'll naturally look after my own interests. The problem is when I do this completely at the expense of the interests of others. Holding grudges, payback, even self-protecting... the focus of these things has become my interests, not theirs.

I can see that if I want some particular relationships to endure, then being prepared to suffer harm and being prepared to do good will help to enable just that. That might include the good friend – but also the difficult work colleague if for other reasons I choose to continue working there.

What I'm talking about is not easy. The larger the hurt I've endured – the harder it is to do good. What keeps me going is the knowledge that Jesus loved me when I was his enemy. He died on the cross to bring me forgiveness for the ways I'd been selfish and self-centred.

And not just in my human relationships – in the way I had treated God as well. In saying I need to “love my enemy” Jesus isn’t asking me to do something he hasn’t done himself.

(Caroline works for City Bible Forum).

Q. When it comes to selflessness, what do you need to work on?

Q. What will motivate you to do this?

SESSION 4: Genuineness

Wired for social connection

What makes for good relationships

Think of someone whom you'd describe as genuine.

Q. Why would you describe them in this way?

Q. What difference does their genuineness make to your relationship?

Robert Waldinger (TEDx speaker) says that social connections are really good for us, but relationships are messy and complicated and hard work over the long term.¹

Genuineness is about being who one claims to be². In the messiness and complexity of relationships, being genuine isn't always easy because it requires us to be vulnerable.

The world-famous moral teaching of Jesus

The following is a part of a famous speech given by Jesus 2000 years ago, which is referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount". Jesus' words are recognised wisdom that have echoed down through the ages (for example, it's where we get the expression: "do to others as you would have them do to you").³

Matthew 6:1-18 [New International Version]

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness⁴ 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 hypocrites⁵ do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured 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.

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

¹ Robert Waldinger, "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness", TEDxBeaconStreet 2015.

² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/genuine>

³ This kind of moral teaching is not unique to Jesus. Many other religions and worldviews echo similar sentiments. Why then listen to Jesus? It becomes a question of assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of Jesus' other claims, for example his claim to be the Son of God.

⁴ Or "doing the right thing before God".

⁵ The word "hypocrite" originally came from the Greek theatre and described actors playing a part. It is the idea of claiming something (generally higher or more noble) than is the actual reality.

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, hallowed⁶ 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 temptation⁷, 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.

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look sombre 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.

Q. What interests you here?

Q. What questions would you like to ask Jesus?

What is Jesus saying here?

The "hypocrites" that Jesus most likely has on view are the religious elite. Elsewhere he roundly condemns them: ²⁷ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, that look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. [Matthew 23:27]

These hypocrites say they want the praise of God – but in reality they are after the praise of men. Jesus gives three examples of their hypocrisy, the way they give, pray and fast.

Note that with each of these examples, being ostentatious does earn human praise – but that is it's only reward "reward in full". The way to safeguard one's motives – to truly care for the praise of God – is to perform these acts in secret. Secrecy is the safeguard to sincerity. (Jesus doesn't say what the "reward" is – but just that it is worth having).

⁶ Or "recognised as holy".

⁷ The biggest temptation is to not trust the words of God. This is what the "evil one" (Satan) tries to do with Jesus in Matthew chapter 4.

Jesus gives most of his attention to prayer. Why pray at all if God knows what we need before we ask him? Firstly, because prayer is an expression of relationship: it shows us what we desire and on whom we depend. Secondly, God answers prayer. The “Lord’s Prayer” (as it became known) begins with wanting to see God honoured and his kingdom expanded; God is then acknowledged as the source of life (“daily bread”), forgiveness and deliverance. That forgiveness is elaborated upon shows its importance. One cannot ask from God what one is not prepared to do for others. Forgiveness is the dynamic of all relationships rather than being the way to earn God’s forgiveness.

Throughout these three examples, one thing is clear: God sees everything, and weighs motives. Forgiveness is also on the table.

Q. What interests you in what you have just read?

Q. What questions do you still have?

What has this got to do with genuineness?

Caroline’s story

Sometimes when I’ve cleaned the bathroom, my flatmate comes home and doesn’t seem to notice anything different. When that happens I’m so tempted to say to her: “I’ve just cleaned the bathroom” – basically so that she’ll reward my labours by thanking me. I know cleaning the bathroom is a trivial example, but it goes to show how deeply engrained it is in me to want the approval of others.

The real issue here isn’t the good deed itself but who the audience is and why I am doing it. If the audience is other people and it’s done to lift my own status, then really at heart it’s a selfish act. So if I’m honest – at times my selfless act of cleaning the bathroom is really about the credit I can chalk up as a flatmate. I can almost hear what my flatmate would say to her friends if they were to ask what I am like to live with: “Caro is a such a considerate flatmate”.

And I know I’m not the only hypocrite around. We all put our best faces forward at times because it gets us what we want.

I was facilitating a group at work the other day when one of the students remarked on how relaxed the other facilitator was – even joking around at times. The student wasn’t making a comment about my facilitation style – but that’s how I took it! It got me thinking. I’m all seriousness in that context because I want to be accepted and approved. As a female working in a predominately male environment, I feel like I need to prove why I have a seat at the table. I put my best face forward because I want to project confidence and capability. So definitely no joking around. My fear is that they will somehow discover I don’t measure up (which in this case is a completely unreasonable fear – but a fear nonetheless). So they get the “competent Caro”.

In other work situations where I know I have proved my worth, I'm more relaxed - and dare I say it, even funny at times. I don't mind that people get a glimpse of the real me that hasn't quite got it altogether. I know that if they do, their approval of me isn't at stake. They get more of the authentic me.

The scary thing is that the older I get, the easier it is to put on the mask to win the approval of others. Perhaps because (unfortunately) I am becoming more practiced at it.

It's interesting that hypocrisy is the sin that Jesus gets fired up about, more than any other. Hypocrisy treats God as stupid, as if he doesn't see into our hearts.

The answer to all this is to get our audience straight. Jesus says we should live and act with an audience of One, our creator. If we do our good deeds for him only, if he is our audience then our motives will be pure, and he promises to reward us. It's actually faith in action: I trust that God sees and God rewards those who trust him. This sets us free from constantly looking sideways, trying to win the approval of the people around us. It means we can be more of our authentic selves without the worry that people will reject us if they know what we are really like.

A life lived looking up, rather than sideways will set us free to be ourselves and be the same person regardless of who's watching.

(Caroline works for City Bible Forum).

Q. When it comes to genuineness, what do you need to work on?

Q. What will motivate you to do this?

SESSION 5: Acceptance

Wired for social connection

What makes for good relationships

Think of someone whom you'd describe as accepting (of themselves and others).

Q. Why would you describe them in this way?

Q. What difference does this acceptance make to your relationship?

Robert Waldinger (TEDx speaker) says that social connections are really good for us, but relationships are messy and complicated and hard work over the long term.¹

Acceptance declares that something is adequate². In the messiness and complexity of relationships, acceptance of ours or others imperfections isn't always easy.

The world-famous moral teaching of Jesus

The following is a part of a famous speech given by Jesus 2000 years ago, which is referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount". Jesus' words are recognised wisdom that have echoed down through the ages (for example, it's where we get the expression: "do to others as you would have them do to you").³

Matthew 7:1-12 [New International Version]

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³ "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

⁶ "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

¹ Robert Waldinger, "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness", TEDxBeaconStreet 2015.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/acceptance>

³ This kind of moral teaching is not unique to Jesus. Many other religions and worldviews echo similar sentiments. Why then listen to Jesus? It becomes a question of assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of Jesus' other claims, for example his claim to be the Son of God.

⁷ "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹ "Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! ¹² So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Q. What interests you here?

Q. What questions would you like to ask Jesus?

What is Jesus saying here?

Jesus isn't saying there is no place for making judgements. After all, it takes discernment to work out what a pearl is and what a pig is so we don't throw the pearl to the pig! The judgements we often make on others are more often than not about feeling good about ourselves at the expense of others. They are condemnatory in nature. They are not necessarily right or fair. This is the kind of judgement that Jesus says be careful of. He then gives reasons for this.

Firstly, God will judge you the same way! If God is to judge, then we want his judgement to be right and fair.

Secondly, we're not objective. We notice the speck in someone else's eye, unaware of the log in our own. It's hypocritical to call others to a standard of judgement that we are unwilling to meet for ourselves first. We need to be humble and recognise our own failings.

The judgement we should be exercising is to stop when what we are saying is falling on deaf ears. (The "sacred" Jesus is referring to here is probably what he thinks is most precious, which would be these words he is teaching. There's no point sharing this pearl with those who don't appreciate his teaching).

Jesus goes on to say that God won't hold back from anyone who asks him (no judgement here!). Note the: ask – given, seek – find, know – opened repetition. Jesus makes a comparative statement – if human fathers can discern what is good for their children then how much more can God!

Jesus finishes with a summary statement of his teaching: "do to others as you would have them do to you". Interestingly, Rabbi Hillel's summary of the law (around 20 AD) was somewhat different: "That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the

whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it."⁴ The difference is that Jesus would say return someone's unkindness *with kindness* [see session 3 on selflessness]. This is a high standard – a tall order.

Q. What interests you in what you have just read?

Q. What questions do you still have?

What has this got to do with acceptance?

Sam's story

I'm constantly judging my wife for being more of a hoarder than me. I blame her for the messiness in our kitchen. I blame her for the cluttered state of our bedroom. I blame her for the way our pantry and fridge are jam-packed with too many condiments, jams, sauces, cheeses, and snacks. But if I was honest with myself, I'm just as much of a hoarder. But I conveniently ignore how I've contributed just as much to the clutter as my wife has. Usually when I'm stressed or tired I will blurt out something about the state of our house and that will usually make her feel insecure, judged, and unappreciated; and it will make me feel innocent, blameless, and off-the hook.

At work, I assist several different surgeons. Most of my surgeons are laid-back and easy to work with. But there is one surgeon who is highly critical of those with whom he's working with—nurses, doctors, ward staff, trainees, anyone! Perhaps he's like this because it confirms to him that he's the most important person in the room; because no one would dare do the same to him. Or perhaps he's deliberately overly critical because he thinks it brings out the best in everyone. But it only has the opposite effect. Whenever we work with him, there's what I call "negative energy". We start to second-guess ourselves. We wonder if we're good enough. We'd rather not be there. And it ends up bringing the worst out of us rather than our best.

The older I get, the more laid back I get about my imperfections. Nobody's perfect. Nobody expects me to be perfect. So why should I put the same unfair expectation upon myself? I'm not meant to be perfect. I'm not meant to be the best either. All I'm meant to be is to be the best I can be with what God has given me.

I like to warn my young sons that I'm not a perfect father. One day they'll see me for who I really am—a finite, fallen, fallible human being. I warn them so that they're not too shocked when that day comes. But to be honest I also warn them so that they don't place unrealistic expectations upon me. I won't be at all their school concerts. I won't be full of wise advice. I won't be able to teach them how to sail a boat.

But if that's true, it's got to go both ways. I can't expect my boys to be perfect. I need to allow them the freedom and permission to fail. I can't project upon them my fears and insecurities. I can't make them my trophy children—as if I'm defined by their successes and

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a

threatened by their failures. I can't live my ambitions through them. As a result, when I watch my boys play Saturday sports, I'm one of the calmest parents on the sideline. I don't scream at my boys to run faster, tackle harder, and kick more goals. After all, why should I impose upon them impossible levels of perfection, which I could not possibly attain for myself?

I personally find Jesus' teaching on perfectionism and judgmentalism to be a message of hope and empowerment. On the one hand, it's a *humbling* message because we need to 'fess up and say that we can never live up to Jesus' level of perfection. But on the other hand, it's a *secure* message because we don't have to live up to Jesus' level of perfection. Jesus message to us is basically, "Jesus is perfect so we don't have to pretend to be perfect anymore." If Jesus can love me just the way I am right now, maybe it's time I learnt to do the same. That means I don't need to put others down; and I don't have to elevate myself either.

(Sam works for City Bible Forum).

Q. When it comes to acceptance, what do you need to work on?

Q. What will motivate you to do this?