

Working Challenges

Six sessions on the Sermon on the Mount looking at key challenges at work

Week 1: Our Character at Work (*Matthew 5:1-12*)

ICEBREAKER: Either in one group, or in several small groups, go round and share what work each person is involved in. Remember that work can be paid or unpaid, in an office or a home or anywhere. Work is what we do when we are not resting. Then discuss what character qualities are most needed in your work to be a success and impress the people you work with.

Introduction:

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most famous sermon and is recorded in the Bible in Matthew 5-7. We are going to look at it to see what it teaches us about various challenges we face in our workplaces. The Sermon on the Mount is about:

1. **Kingdom Living** – Jesus is addressing his disciples (5:1-2) rather than outsiders. Jesus is not outlining the way to be saved, but the way God's saved people should live.
2. **Horizontal and Vertical Living** – There are lots of references to God as our Father in the sermon – the vertical relationship. And yet the sermon is very practical – about our horizontal relationships with other people. You can't divorce the two dimensions from each other.
3. **Counter-cultural Living** – Jesus' teaching is radical and often the very opposite of what the world says.

BUZZ GROUPS: Read the Beatitudes (5:3-12). In groups discuss whether these are the kind of characteristics that are respected and lauded in your workplace, or are they the opposite of what the world values?

1. Attitudes are more vital than Platitudes

The illustration: The Beatitudes are seen as prime fodder for Christian gift cards/posters. You could find such a picture on the internet to show the pastorate. E.g. A picture of a cat playing with a ball of wool – and beneath it is written: “blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God”.

The point: Gift Card Christianity is not a reality. The Beatitudes are not platitudes, but attitudes that Jesus wants from his followers. It is a challenge being a Christian in the workplace. Platitudes won't help. This is a tough ask.

The application: Don't be surprised if there are challenges in living as a Christian in the workplace. Give an example of how you have found being a Christian in the workplace a challenge – either to live out the Beatitudes, or to live in an environment which seems to run counter to the desires of Jesus.

2. Persecution is more likely than Praise

The illustration: Paint a picture of living out the Beatitudes at work:

“We'll be people who acknowledge that we are spiritually bankrupt before God and have nothing to commend ourselves to God – poor in spirit (v.3). We'll be upset when we have treated our colleagues badly or let them down. We won't be self-righteous at work, thinking that we are pretty good and moral (v.4). We won't be a bit of a wet-blanket – but we will be humble. We won't see the need to do everything to protect our own interests and make sure we look good and we are well thought of. We won't be aggressive and cut throat in trying to get to the top. Because actually we'll know that we are going to have everything in the future – we're going to inherit the earth - so what we have now is of relatively little importance (v.5).

While others might be hungering and thirsting for more money or more status or more sexual fulfilment, we'll be thirsting for righteousness (v.6). We'll be people who say “I'm sorry”. We'll be people who say “I forgive you”. We'll be people who know we make mistakes, so admit them, and are understanding when others make mistakes as well (v.7). We'll be utterly sincere and totally transparent in our dealings with people. We will be authentic – our actions will match our thoughts, our character on a Sunday will match our character on a Monday

(v.8). We'll long for peace for our colleagues – horizontally between them when there are tensions, and vertically when there is tension between them and God. We will want peace and we will actually look to make it happen (v.9)”

BUZZ GROUPS: If we were able to live like that in our workplace, what do you think would be the response from our colleagues?

The point: Even if we were able to live like that at work, it is more likely that we will face persecution because of our connection to Jesus. The last Beatitude makes this clear (vv.10-12).

3. The future is more glorious than the present

The point: The second half of each Beatitude is a mixture of information about the present (v.3,v.10) and the future (v.4-9). There is a mixture of experiences for the Christian right now. We have the joy of being in God's Kingdom, having a relationship with Jesus and knowing the Spirit's help in our life. And yet in the present we also know struggle, suffering, persecution, frustration. The eternal future will be more glorious. When we will inherit the earth (v.5). When we will see God face to face (v.8).

BUZZ GROUPS: Do you find it easy to lift your eyes up to the eternal future in the busyness of work? What practically can you do to help with this?

4. Our character is more important than our job

The point: In life we are judged by what we do. What job we have. What we have achieved. What school we went to. Or we are judged by what we have. Wealth. Good looks. Our own office. An iPhone. Lots of friends. Jesus says actually what matters more to our Father is what kind of people we are. Poor in spirit. Meek. Pure in heart. Peacemakers, etc. We are blessed – our Father in heaven is objectively pleased with us - because of who we are, not because of what we do or what we have.

The illustration: Give a personal example of when you have been more focused on status/possessions etc than your character.

The application: Choose people in your pastorate. Say “So X is not primarily a secretary who happens to be a Christian, but a Christian who happens to be a secretary. Y is not primarily a banker who happens to be a Christian, but a Christian who happens to be a banker. Z is not primarily a mother who happens to be a Christian, but a Christian who happens to be a mother”.

We don't work primarily for our company or organisation. We work primarily for the kingdom of heaven (v.3,v.10). At this moment in time, God has seconded each of us to work within particular companies or organisations. But if there's a clash of interests between the kingdom and the company, then the kingdom has first allegiance. Our 'Character at Work' should be the character that Jesus lays out here for all the members of His Kingdom.

MINISTRY IDEA: Speak out Col 3:23-24. Pray for everyone to know they are working for the Lord in their work. Ask the Lord for any pictures/verses/words particularly for those who are struggling to know that they are working for God in their work.

[See chapter 6 and 11 in *Working without Wilting* by Jago Wynne (IVP) for more info]