

Week Six

Reactions Speak Louder | Matthew 5:17-48; James 1:2-4, 1:19-27

Our bodies can influence how we receive information and how we relate to other people. As noted previously, our nervous system gathers information through the senses and processes it. Like a computer, our internal system records data through all that we see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. This feedback goes straight to the brain, affecting thoughts and feelings, narrating experiences, and determining how we react. However, when interacting with others or engaging in experiences, our internal system often relies on what it learned in a fallen world, which can lead to negative emotional outbursts and unhealthy behaviours.

As mentioned in week two of this series, awareness of our internal world is a crucial first step in changing our natural (or “automatic”) responses. The next step is developing skills to regulate those responses. Mental health practitioners often recommend practices like breathwork and somatic (bodily) exercises to delay instinctive reactions. Deep breathing, for example, helps calm the nervous system when we feel anger or anxiety.

This is quite consistent with the teachings of Scripture. Dallas Willard, a prominent Christian author, writes that there are two major classes of spiritual disciplines: “engagement” and “abstinence.” Engagement disciplines, such as Bible study, prayer, and worship, help us focus on God. In contrast, abstinence disciplines – like silence, solitude, and fasting – aim to slow us down, helping to manage our instinctive responses.

Through continual time spent in Scripture, in prayer, in silence and solitude, the struggle to reject a fallen world gets easier. And the strength to follow Christ increases as we continue to adjust to His call on our lives – to His definition of “happier-ness.”

Opening Questions

- 1 / What is the difference between reacting and responding? What types of situations tend to trigger a strong instinctive reaction in you?
- 2 / Share an occasion when your instinctive reaction surprised you, or when you regret having reacted in the way you did.

Bible Study & Questions

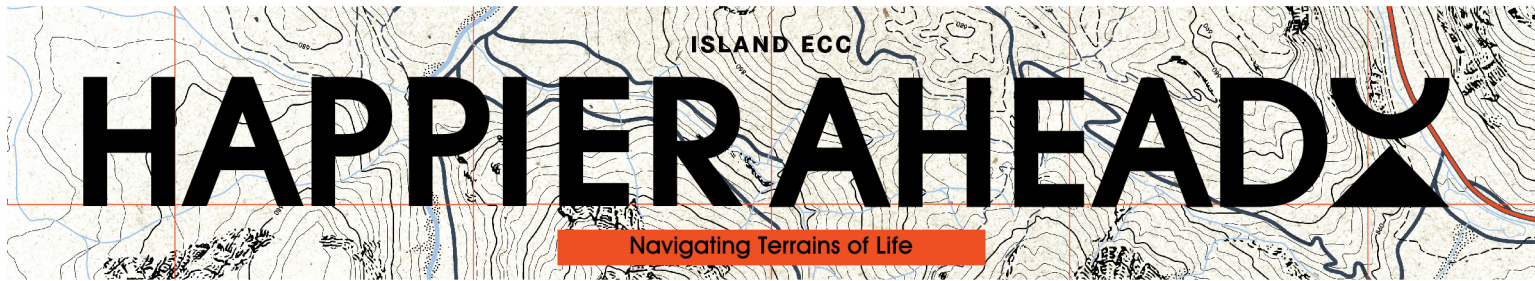
Read Matthew 5:17-48 and James 1:2-4, 19-27, and discuss the following questions:

Matthew 5 marks the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus imparts radical teachings about the kingdom of heaven. In this chapter, Jesus encourages believers to embody a countercultural approach to ethics and relationships, focusing on internal attitudes rather than external compliance. In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus reinterprets Old Testament laws, setting higher expectations for how believers should respond to their impulses, especially in their relationship with other people.

- 1 / Based on Matthew 5:17-20, what was the purpose of Jesus’ coming concerning the Law? What problem was Jesus addressing?
Note: Jesus came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. He addressed people’s misunderstanding of the Law, and challenged legalism and the selective practice of the Law. He also emphasised that true righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, calling people to a deeper, heart-centred obedience.

- 2 / Jesus repeated the phrase “You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you ...” six times. What was Jesus trying to do with the Law? What is the commonality among these six repetitions?

Key ideas: Re-interpreting the Old Testament Law, emphasising a new and higher standard for Christians.



3 / What are the six different impulses that Jesus addressed in the repetitions of “But I tell you ...”? What did Jesus instruct them to do regarding these impulses? (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44)

Key ideas: Anger, lust, divorce (fidelity/unity), oaths (trustworthiness), retaliation, love for enemies

4 / Read James 1:2-4. Matthew 5:48 uses the phrase “Be perfect,” which is the same word “teleios” found in James 1:4 (“mature”). Is it possible for us to achieve this perfection? How can we be perfect or made perfect in our faith?

5 / Read James 1:19-27. How does this passage reinforce Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:17-48? What are some markers of a true and mature or perfect Christian (if such a thing exists)?

Key ideas: i) Practising true religion (not only listening) through practical expressions of faith without hypocrisy, and ii) achieving internal transformation reflected in how we manage our impulses in a way that demonstrates genuine faith.

6 / What is one thing you find most challenging to apply from these passages, regarding your reactions or responses to difficult situations? What is your action plan to grow in this area?

Prayer Activity

Fasting and abstinence are spiritual disciplines that involve refraining from food or activities to deepen our relationship with God. These practices cultivate self-control and enhance our ability to manage impulses, as highlighted in Matthew 5. By creating space for silence and reflection, fasting helps us pause before reacting impulsively, enabling us to respond in a more Christ-like manner.

This week, try fasting.

Step one: Choose a day to fast together as a group. You do not need to agree on the specifics of your fast (such as which meal, time, or duration), focus on being accountable to one another.

Step two: Use the time that you normally spend on meals to pray and worship God.

Step three: Journal your experience and come back next week to discuss it with one another.

Study Concluding Activity: Silence. Silence is a small aspect of fasting and abstinence (from noise). This activity will work whether you are by yourself or with a group. Sit in a room and remain silent for 5 minutes. Turn off your phones and close your Bibles. Do not play any background music, and try to remove any distractions from the room. Use the time of silence to reflect on what God has taught you in the past six weeks. Afterwards, go around in the group and share about which week topic was most transformative for you and why.

Helpful tips:

- Your mind will run wild with thoughts. That’s okay. When your mind starts wandering, take a few deep breaths.
- Notice your feelings as you do this exercise. If there are recurring words or thoughts, pay attention to them.