

Upside Down Kingdom

October 5, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Matthew 5:1-16

Session Outline

1. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12)
2. The Salt of the Earth (Matthew 5:13)
3. A City on a Hill (Matthew 5:14-16)

Theological Theme

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outlined the characteristics His followers should have and taught them how to live using metaphor. Though our lives look very different than Jesus's initial disciples, His teachings still show us how to live rightly.

Call to Action

What is your view of the kingdom of heaven? Do you feel blessed in your affliction? Your hunger? Your mourning? Or do you strive to create a world in which you avoid all of those things? Consider the upside-down kingdom of God and the blessings that far outpace anything we could earn or experience through our own efforts.



Leader Guide

Upside Down Kingdom

Introduction

American history has some pretty memorable speeches.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech still inspires us today and reminds us of the need for racial equality we saw Jesus model thousands of years ago.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous Pearl Harbor Address, also known as the "Day of Infamy" speech, is still remembered for the pivotal moment it marks in American history. It galvanized the American people into action, marking our country's official entry into World War II.

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address featured a famous line, "Four score and seven years ago," that is still remembered and quoted today.

Though important in their own right, these speeches pale in comparison to Jesus's most famous teaching: the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus's famous sermon still teaches us important truths we will begin studying today.



Why do you think some speeches throughout history are so memorable?



What makes the Sermon on the Mount so important, even today?

Session Summary

Today we are studying some of Jesus's most memorable teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes—Jesus's famous "blessed are" statements—Jesus outlined the characteristics His followers should have—things like humility, and a right understanding of where we stand in comparison to a holy God.

Jesus went on to teach His followers how to live using metaphors. As believers, we are to be "the salt of the earth" (v. 13), improving the world around us in ways only possible with the help of the Lord. The righteousness that the Holy Spirit cultivates in our "salty" lifestyle should be obvious to those around us, shining like a light on a hill for all to see.

1. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12)



What type of character did Jesus describe in the people He identified as blessed?



How do these characteristics differ from what the world sees as blessing?

Just before this passage, Matthew described the work of Jesus's ministry (4:23). The impact of His teaching and healing drew large crowds to Him (4:25). Seeing the gathered crowds, Jesus gave His most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps the people flocked to Jesus because of His ability to heal them physically (Matthew recorded that the people brought many sick and afflicted to Him and Jesus healed them in Matthew 4:24), but in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would offer spiritual healing.

Matthew's reference to the mountain is meant to remind us of Moses, who ascended Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:3; 24:18; 34:2,4).¹ Just as Moses was God's tool to deliver the people from physical slavery in Egypt, Jesus was sent to deliver the people from slavery to sin. The New Testament consistently presents mankind's relationship with sin as one of slave and master, with freedom coming only from Christ (John 8:34–36).

Jesus's "disciples" (v. 1) extended beyond the twelve we traditionally think of when we hear the word. This refers to the many that chose to follow Jesus, even those who followed just for a time. They would not have all been believers (Judas Iscariot being the best example of this).

Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount began with the *Beatitudes*. We use this word to refer to the "blessed are" statements that Jesus made here in this sermon. Let's break them down one-by-one:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs" (v. 3). The "poor in spirit" are those who recognize they are unworthy sinners, dependent on the mercy and grace God so freely gives us.² The "poor in spirit" understand that they can't do anything to earn salvation, or God's grace and mercy. In Jesus's day, one could buy citizenship to Rome, but God's is one kingdom you can't buy your way into, with money or good deeds.³ The "poor in spirit" recognize that they aren't righteous on their own, but only with God's help. We are unworthy sinners in need of a holy God. This is the attitude of those who will enter the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (v. 4). This Beatitude points back to Isaiah's that the Messiah would come to "heal the brokenhearted" (Isaiah 61:1) and "comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:2).

The Sermon on the Mount

Perhaps no portion of Scripture is as well-known as Jesus' Great Sermon. It begins with the well-loved Beatitudes, which classically exemplify God's inversion of the world's values. In His kingdom or reign, those who are considered fortunate include the poor, sorrowing, humble, righteous, merciful, pure, peacemakers, and persecuted. These are precisely those categories of people too many of us tend to despise and ostracize.

In Isaiah, the people were broken hearted because their sin had led them straight into exile. Here, Jesus points to those who mourn because of their sin and its consequences. When we are mournful because of our sin, we earnestly seek to repent and change in God's power.⁴

“Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth” (v. 5). Humility is a hallmark of Jesus's ministry. Jesus said He was “lowly and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). As Christ followers, we, too, should adopt an attitude of humility. The humble have a correct understanding of their sinful nature and submit to God's authority. An inheritance of this kind is also mentioned in Isaiah 61:7 and Psalm 37:11.⁵

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (v. 6). Christ followers hunger and thirst for personal righteousness. They have a desire to live a righteous life. A desire to live like Christ. This isn't something we can achieve on our own. We will only be filled with righteousness by God's power.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (v. 7). God, **“who is rich in mercy”** (Ephesians 2:4), extends so much mercy to us. We receive His mercy when we do not get what we deserve. We deserve death for our sins, but instead, He sent Jesus to save us. He forgives us. As we have been shown mercy, we should also show mercy to others (Matthew 18:23-35).


“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (v. 8). The pure in heart are devoted to God. Such pureness of heart is an act of God, something that the Holy Spirit works within us on over our lifetimes (progressive sanctification).⁶ They will see God at Jesus's return.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (v. 9). Jesus is the Prince of Peace. His mission wasn't conflict and revenge, it was restoration and salvation and He taught that we should love our enemies (Luke 6:27-36). Jesus washed Judas's feet at the last supper knowing He would very soon betray Him. Paul would later teach, “If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). Peacemakers mimic Jesus.


“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs” (v. 10). Verses 10-12 speak to persecution. The opposition we face in America today looks vastly different than what Jesus's followers faced in the first century, but we face it, nonetheless. When we stand against what culture teaches is “right” and “good,” even when we do so in love, we will face opposition. In John 15:18-20, Jesus


taught that we should expect persecution. In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul wrote, “All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

We can expect to be insulted. We can expect for people to say things about us that aren’t true. We can lose relationships or deals or be “canceled” in the eyes of society, but Jesus told us, when these things happen because we are following Him, we should “be glad and rejoice.” There is a reward in heaven waiting, and we are in good company.

 Application: Which Beatitude (“blessed are” statement) most resonates with or challenges you? Why?

2. The Salt of the Earth (Matthew 5:13)


 What do you know about the characteristics of salt? Why might Jesus have chosen to compare His followers to salt?

 What does it mean for us to be the “salt of the earth”?



Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus taught in ways His followers could understand, connecting common fixtures in their lives with spiritual concepts. He does this here by comparing His followers to salt. This illustration teaches followers of Jesus how to live.

In the Old Testament, salt was used to purify, as in Exodus 30:35.⁷ Salt flavors food. You can use it to preserve food. Salt could even be used to fertilize land.⁸ By comparing His followers to salt, Jesus was saying that they should have a positive effect on the world. Just like salt can improve the flavor of food, followers of Jesus can improve communities, environments, and places we go. When we model Jesus and tell others about them so they can come to know Him too, we have a positive effect on them. We extend the blessings God has given us.

Salt is useful, but if it were to suddenly not be salty, it would not serve its purpose anymore. In Jesus’s day, salt that had surpassed its usefulness for flavoring or preserving was used for coating pathways.⁹ Being “salty” has a somewhat negative connotation today, but in this case, we want to be salty by living for Jesus in a sinful world.

 Application: How are you seeking to live as the “salt of the earth” in your community?

3. A City on a Hill (Matthew 5:14-16)

-  In what sense is the church “the light of the world” (v. 14)?
-  Why is it important that we “let [our] light shine before others” (v. 16)?


Jesus continued His teaching around right-living by comparing His followers to light.

Isaiah spoke of a similar light in Jesus, the Messiah: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness” (Isaiah 9:2). Before we know Jesus, we are still a slave to our sin and we are living in darkness, but when we follow Jesus, we move into the light.

As Jesus’s followers, when we’re living as “salt” in our communities, we are being this “light” to others. It shines from the inward righteousness the Holy Spirit cultivates within us.

Our “light” should be obvious and on display. You wouldn’t put a lamp under a basket. It would be pointless. No, a lamp should be put somewhere that you, and everyone around you, can benefit from the light that it gives. Further, a lamp isn’t usually isolated in the light it casts. It shines all around. In this passage, Jesus is calling us to live similarly, letting our Christian faith and our hearts for Jesus be a clear beacon to those around us.

Note where Jesus said the glory should be given—to God the Father. We don’t create our own light. Just as righteousness is something we achieve on our own, God creates the light in us, and it brings glory to Him. Further, this is not done in isolation. We live as a city on a hill with others in the church. This is good news as God calls us to shine our light before others alongside brothers and sisters and not in a way that depends solely on us.

-  Application: How is our church seeking to shine our light and live as a city on a hill in our community?

Conclusion

When we walk with Jesus, seeking to be more Christlike, we bring glory to God. Trying to be righteous on our own will only get us so far. We need God's help to be truly righteous, and when He stokes the fires of righteousness in our hearts (a life-long process), it brings glory to Him.

In our study today, we only covered the first portion of the Sermon on the Mount, but notice all the characteristics Jesus presented, and the metaphors He used point to things that are public. They are things people will notice. Our identity as disciples of Jesus should be obvious.

As we think on what this means for our own lives, consider: Is your faith obvious to those around you?

- ❓ Where is Jesus calling you further into the blessing of life following Him?
- ❓ How can we seek to live as a city on a hill and a light for others as a group?
- ❓ Who is God calling you to shine your light before that they might come to know Him? How will you respond?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for His teachings that stand the test of time. Praise Him for the mercy and grace He extends for us and ask for His help extending it to others. Ask Him to help you assess how "salty" you are. If you aren't living as a "lamp," ask Him to make this clear, and show you what you need to change.

Memory Verse

"You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden." —Matthew 5:14

Additional Resources

- *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* by John Stott
- *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* by David Platt

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Matthew

Purpose

Matthew probably wrote his Gospel in order to preserve written eyewitness testimony about the ministry of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes certain theological truths. First, Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited King of God's people. Second, Jesus is the new Abraham, the founder of a new spiritual Israel consisting of all people who choose to follow him. This new Israel will consist of both Jews and Gentiles. Third, Jesus is the new Moses, the deliverer and instructor of God's people. Fourth, Jesus is the Immanuel, the virgin-born Son of God who fulfills the promises of the OT.

Author

The author did not identify himself in the text. However, the title that ascribes this Gospel to Matthew appears in the earliest manuscripts and is possibly original. Titles became necessary to distinguish one Gospel from another when the four Gospels began to circulate as a single collection. Many early church fathers (Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaenus, and Origen) acknowledged Matthew as the author. Papias also contended that Matthew first wrote in Hebrew, implying that this Gospel was later translated into Greek.

Setting

Determining the date of composition of Matthew's Gospel depends largely on the relationship of the Gospels to one another. Most scholars believe that Matthew utilized Mark's Gospel in writing his own gospel. If this is correct, Matthew's Gospel must postdate Mark's. However, the date of Mark's Gospel is also shrouded in mystery. Irenaeus (ca AD 180) seems to claim that Mark wrote his Gospel after Peter's death in the mid-60s. However, Clement of Alexandria, who wrote only twenty years after Irenaeus, claimed that Mark wrote his Gospel while Peter was still alive. Given the ambiguity of the historical evidence, a decision must be based on other factors.

Special Features

This Gospel was written from a strong Jewish perspective to show that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

Extended Commentary

Matthew 5:1-16

Perhaps no portion of Scripture is as well known as Jesus' Great Sermon. It begins with the well-loved Beatitudes, which classically exemplify God's inversion of the world's values. In His kingdom or reign, those who are considered fortunate include the poor, sorrowing, humble, righteous, merciful, pure, peacemakers, and persecuted. These are precisely those categories of people too many of us tend to despise and ostracize.

These countercultural values could suggest that Jesus intended His followers to withdraw from the world and form separate communities. Matthew 5:13–16 immediately belies any such notion. Disciples must be salt and light, arresting decay and providing illumination for a lost and dying world.¹⁰

References

1. Charles L. Quarles, "Matthew," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1505.
2. Ibid.
3. Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Matthew," "<https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/matthew/matthew.htm>"
4. Charles L. Quarles, "Matthew," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1505.
5. Ibid.
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7. Charles L. Quarles, "Matthew," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1506.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998).