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Discover
**THE SERMON
ON THE MOUNT**



LEADER GUIDE

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Discover
**THE SERMON
ON THE MOUNT**



by
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Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1958.

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Introduction

Can a sermon delivered by a Jewish teacher almost two thousand years ago be relevant today? Studying Jesus' Sermon on the Mount will point you to the answer—indeed it can! This sermon deals with such varied topics as murder, adultery, peacemaking, ambition, and righteousness. This variety is beautifully woven together to form a coherent whole, depicting the new life to which Jesus' followers are called.

The Ten Commandments, given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai centuries before Jesus' birth, formed the basis for the Jews' relationship with God throughout the Old Testament. Those laws governed their lives as God's people. However, over the years the Jewish teachers of the law had added literally thousands of minute rules and regulations, sometimes distorting or missing altogether the law's true intent.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brings his listeners back to what God intended the law to be. He presents it as a guide for the believer's new life—a new life that comes from a changed heart, not from following a set of rules.

Reading Jesus' words may cause us to ask of this new life, "Is it practical? How can anyone reach the high standards that Jesus sets?" The standards will remain unattainable ideals unless we experience new birth through Jesus Christ. Only in light of this new birth can we read and understand Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with neither shallow optimism nor defeatist despair. Welcome to this exciting and challenging study of some of Jesus' best-known words!

Glossary of Terms

beatitude—a pronouncement of exalted joy. Matthew 5:3-12 (beginning “Blessed are . . .”) is often referred to as the Beatitudes.

blessed—receiving approval and prosperity from God.

fasting—voluntarily not eating for a religious purpose.

hypocrite—one who mistakenly thinks he is pious and right with God but whose faulty judgment deceives him.

judgment—God’s pronouncement that a person is sinful or righteous.

kingdom of heaven—the rule of God over all of creation, especially over the lives of God’s people. Often used interchangeably with “kingdom of God.”

law—the moral standard for living given by God in the Old Testament.

meek—a gentleness of heart and mind that opposes self-interest.

oath—a binding promise.

pagans—those who worshiped any gods other than the one true God.

Pharisees—members of a religious party that emphasized precise obedience to the law.

prophet—one who speaks God’s message; generally used to refer to the Old Testament prophets.

righteousness—the fruit of faith in a believer’s life.

Sanhedrin—the supreme council and religious ruling body of the Jews.

scribes—teachers of the law who often reduced religion to external formalism.

sin—going against God’s will.

Solomon—third king of Israel, renowned for his wisdom and great wealth.

synagogue—the building in which the Jews gathered for religious instruction. (There were many synagogues throughout Israel, but only one temple, located at Jerusalem. The temple was used for worship and sacrifices.)

tax collector—one who collected government tax (often dishonestly) from the Jews.

the Law and the Prophets—the body of Old Testament writings that the Jews used as their Scriptures.

Lesson 1

Matthew 4:23-5:6

First Things First

Introductory Notes

There are many ways to live. In this study your group will discover Jesus' teaching about a more excellent way—the way of the kingdom of God.

The Sermon on the Mount summarizes this way of life in capsule form. The Beatitudes, which form the first eleven verses of Jesus' sermon, may be familiar. Their fresh simplicity of word and thought still attracts readers. And yet their meaning is elusive. The more we explore them, the more it seems there is more to discover. Allow for this in your study.

Matthew's account suggests that Jesus gave this sermon at the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus had just called twelve disciples, and he sat down to teach them the way of the kingdom of God. Although his sermon was intended for their instruction, it applies as well to all who follow Christ.

Use the first two sections of this lesson as an introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, as these questions deal with the context of Jesus' sermon.

1. *Matthew 4:23-25*

- a. *Trace Jesus' steps. What had he been doing?*
- b. *Why were the people following Jesus?*

If you have a map of the Holy Land, bring it to your study group. Be prepared to point out the locations mentioned in these verses. **How wide an area had Jesus' reputation spread through? What had made him so popular? Why did people come to him?**

You may have some newcomers in your group who have not been involved in a Bible study before. This may be their first glimpse of Jesus—and what a glimpse it is! **Besides his preaching and teaching ministry, what was Jesus doing for people? What ailments was he able to heal?**

Look briefly at what this tells us about Jesus. **Does it appear that there was any limit to his healing power? What does this reveal about him?** Note that the Bible teaches that Jesus is the Son of God and records many instances of Jesus' ability to heal all kinds of illnesses and even to raise people from the dead.

Look also at Jesus' teaching and preaching ministry. **What good news did he preach?** If group members ask what "kingdom" is referred to in verse 23, mention simply that Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of God

or the kingdom of heaven (see glossary). Note that there will be more opportunity to discuss this later in the lesson.

2. *Matthew 5:1-2*

- a. *Where did Jesus go, and why?*
- b. *Whom was Jesus teaching here?*

Jesus went up onto the mountainside, perhaps to get away from the crowds for a little while or perhaps to find an open space where the multitude of people could hear him easily. **Whom was he teaching primarily?** Matthew tells us that Jesus' disciples—those who followed and believed in him—came to hear his teaching.

Why might Jesus' disciples have needed special instruction? Note that Jesus was teaching a new message to people, a message of good news about the kingdom of God. He would have wanted to make sure that his closest followers understood his teachings.

Note also that Jesus "sat down" to preach. Sitting was the common posture for a rabbi, or Jewish teacher, when officially teaching. You might also tell your group that the original language of verse 2 suggests opening one's heart to give a weighty teaching. **What do these things tell us about the significance of the message that follows?**

If you are leading a group, some members may ask about the difference between Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Sermon on the Mount. Some commentaries question when the sermon was preached and whether it was indeed one sermon or a collection of several teachings. If members ask about this, offer to look together at what commentators say about these differences and discuss it with them after the group study. Be sure to stay focused on the lesson at hand.

3. *Matthew 5:3*

- a. *Who is "blessed," according to this verse?*
- b. *What might it mean to be "poor in spirit"?*
- c. *What will such people receive?*

The Beatitudes (vv. 3-12) at first glance appear to be a collection of distinct, separate sayings about life in the kingdom of God. Group members who read it for the first time may assume that Jesus is referring to different types of people—the meek, the pure in heart, and so on. Throughout your discussion, help members to see that these sayings combine to form a complete character description of those who belong to God's kingdom.

The first beatitude mentions "the kingdom of heaven." Note that Jesus uses this phrase interchangeably with "the kingdom of God." Ask questions like the following to help your group members begin to explore the meaning of this kingdom: **What is a kingdom? Who usually rules a**

kingdom? Who is the ruler of the kingdom that Jesus is talking about? What might that tell us about it? Do you think it's possible to be part of the kingdom of heaven while living on earth? Why might someone want to be part of this kingdom?

At this early point in the study, use these questions primarily to find out where group members are spiritually rather than to teach them about the kingdom. Let the meaning of the kingdom of God gradually unfold throughout this study.

The first characteristic Jesus speaks about is “poor in spirit.” Some of your group members may be unsure of what this means. You’ll want to begin with some questions to help them explore Jesus’ meaning. **What does the word “poor” mean? Who would have been considered poor in Jesus’ day?** Share two things about this phrase to clarify it. First, the original language uses a term for “poor” that implies abject poverty—a person with absolutely nothing. Second, the Hebrew culture of Jesus’ time viewed such a person as completely helpless, having no earthly resources to rely on, and therefore having to trust totally in God.

What do you think was Jesus’ idea of someone who is poor in spirit? Whom would such a person rely on for emotional and spiritual strength? Whom would they turn to for guidance and direction in moral crises? Help your group to see that being poor in spirit does not mean feeling sad, grouchy, or inferior. Rather, it means seeing the weakness and limitations of our own spirit and relying completely on God for strength and wisdom.

If you are leading a grow group, you may want to look briefly at Luke’s parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:10-14). **Which of these men would Jesus have described as “poor in spirit”? How did God look on that man? How does that explain how the poor in spirit are “blessed” by God?**

According to Jesus, what will those who are poor in spirit receive? Jesus promises the poor in spirit entrance into the kingdom of heaven. **What does this tell us about the attitude of heart required to be part of God’s kingdom? Is it possible to enter the kingdom of heaven by relying on one’s own merit, or does Jesus imply a different kind of attitude?** Look also at Isaiah 57:15 and Luke 4:18 to help illustrate the kind of spirit Jesus is talking about.

4. Matthew 5:4

- a. *Who else does Jesus say is blessed?*
- b. *What kind of mourning might Jesus be talking about?*
- c. *What will happen to these people?*

The second beatitude presents what seems to be a contradiction in terms: Happy are the unhappy. **What kind of sorrow leads to joy?** Group members may wonder whether Jesus is promising universal comfort to

everyone who is sad, or perhaps saying that Christians should walk around with sad faces.

To help group members unravel this seeming contradiction, ask them to describe different kinds of mourning or sadness. Some people are overwhelmed with grief at the death of a loved one; others are filled with sadness over a broken relationship. Some mourn the loss of their youth or an opportunity that has passed them by. **Is this the kind of mourning Jesus is talking about?**

To answer this, read with your group the apostle Paul's definition of godly sorrow, found in 2 Corinthians 7:10. Godly grief leads to repentance before God; it is grief over the sin in our life. **How is this related to the poverty of spirit mentioned in the first beatitude?**

Jesus promises comfort to those who mourn their sin, weakness, and poverty of spirit. **What would give comfort to such people? What would they long for from God?** Talk about people's desire to be forgiven of their mistakes and wrongdoing, their need for love and acceptance. **How would God's forgiveness, love, and acceptance bring the comfort that is needed?**

Do not feel that you have to fully explore God's offer of forgiveness and acceptance in your newcomer group just yet; allow the Spirit to gradually work in their hearts and prepare them for the good news of the kingdom of God.

5. Matthew 5:5 (read also Psalm 37:7-11)

- a. *Define the word meek, using a dictionary.*
- b. *What is Jesus encouraging when he says, "Blessed are the meek"?*
- c. *What does he promise the meek?*

Today most people regard the quality of meekness with some disdain; they equate it with being, in Webster's words, "deficient in spirit and courage"—being a pushover, a doormat. However Webster also gives a primary meaning that has been lost in today's usage but is much closer to the biblical meaning: "gentle, enduring injury with patience and without resentment."

Talk about the dictionary definitions that your group found; then look together at Psalm 37:7-11. **Which verse in this passage resembles the one in Matthew?** Note that Jesus and his disciples would have been very familiar with the psalms; his listeners would have recognized the reference to this psalm. **What else does this psalm teach us about the qualities of the meek? How does this compare with Webster's definition? What does this psalm tell us about Jesus' meaning?**

The biblical quality of meekness runs counter to much that is taught in North American society, so group members may struggle to understand Jesus' teaching. Western culture promotes the belief that the ruthless and ambitious are the ones who will inherit the earth. **In what sense is this true?**

If you believe that material possessions are the most important benchmark of achievement and that this life ends at death, then Jesus' teaching will make no sense.

But the Bible gives us another perspective. If you have time, read Matthew 6:19-20 and Revelation 21:1-4. **How do these passages explain how the meek really will inherit the earth? What earth might Jesus' promise refer to? How does this fit with Psalm 37:10-11?** As you discuss this, listen closely to find out how much your group members are able to grasp Jesus' meaning. It is important that they are not left simply to wonder how Jesus could have made such conflicting statements.

6. *Matthew 5:6*

- a. *What are the people Jesus speaks of hungering and thirsting for?*
- b. *What do you think this means? (See the glossary definition of "righteousness.")*
- c. *What is Jesus' promise to those who "hunger and thirst" for righteousness?*

The fourth beatitude has been called the keynote of the entire sermon. Jesus later talks more about what it means to seek true righteousness (Matt. 6:1-18). Begin your discussion by talking about what it means to hunger and thirst for something. **Have you ever gone more than twenty-four hours without food? What did it feel like? How did your first bite of food taste? Have you ever been very, very thirsty? What is on your mind when you suffer from extreme thirst?**

Remind your group that "hunger and thirst" probably had a stronger meaning for Jesus' listeners than for those of us in North America today. In general, our hunger can be satisfied by a light snack, our thirst by a glass of iced tea. But people in the poor desert land of Palestine were often near starvation for much of their lives because they earned so little; in their dusty, arid land, they knew what it meant to be parched with thirst.

What new meaning does this give Jesus' parable? Is our desire for righteousness only an occasional passing desire that quickly gets lost in our desire for other things? Or is it a deep hunger of our spirit?

It might also be helpful to explain that the spiritual dryness of the Jewish religious practices of that time had left many people hungering and thirsting for true righteousness and goodness. Religious life as prescribed by the Jewish leaders was largely external—a myriad of laws governing the details of daily life. People obeyed the law because it was expected and was required for social acceptance and approval. **What happens in a situation like this? How does it encourage hypocrisy rather than true righteousness?**

If group members appear intimidated by the challenge in this beatitude, ask what Jesus is requiring here. **Does he say that we must attain**

righteousness, or simply hunger for it? What does he promise to those who have this hunger and thirst? Some in your group may question how the desire for righteousness will be filled if even believers are not able to achieve perfect goodness. Read passages such as Philippians 1:6 and John 15:5, which speak of the righteousness that believers are given through faith in Christ.

Grow groups may want to further explore this theme of righteousness with questions such as these: **How might we seek a righteousness different from that which Christ spoke of? What might a believer's slow spiritual growth indicate about his or her spiritual appetite? What can we do to change this?**

7. Matthew 4:23-5:6

- a. *How are these beatitudes similar?*
- b. *What do they deal with?*
- c. *What do these teachings of Jesus reveal about the kingdom of God? In what way could this be considered "good news" (Matt. 4:23)?*

After working through the first verses in the Beatitudes, group members will probably be struck by their structural similarity. **What word does each begin with? What follows each "blessed are . . ." statement?**

Look also at the qualities that Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes. **Could a person have more than one of these qualities? If we put them all together in one person, what kind of person would this be?** Help your group to see that Jesus is not talking about isolated qualities but rather is describing the character of someone who represents the kingdom of God.

If some in your group seem overwhelmed by Jesus' words, you may want to reassure them that God does not expect people to achieve this kind of character by their own efforts and goodness. Many passages in the New Testament, including the passages mentioned previously, assure us that this righteousness comes from God. He does not expect us to do it on our own, but to look to him, through faith in his Son, Jesus.

If you have some time at the end of your lesson, you may want to suggest the following exercise for your group. Ask them to try to paraphrase the Beatitudes in their own words to help explain their meaning. Work on this together as a group, and remind them that this paraphrase does not take the place of the verse itself; it is merely a tool for understanding it. If members find this helpful, encourage them to write the paraphrased version in their booklets for future reference.

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How to Study

The questions in this study booklet will help you discover for yourself what the Bible says. This is inductive Bible study—no one will tell you what the Bible says or what to believe. You will discover the message for yourself.

Questions are the key to inductive Bible study. Through questions you will search for the writers' thoughts and ideas. The prepared questions in this booklet are designed to help you in your quest for answers. You can and should ask your own questions too. The Bible comes alive with meaning for many people as they discover for themselves the exciting truths it contains. Our hope and prayer is that this booklet will help the Bible come alive for you.

Questions are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Step 1. Read the Bible passage several times. Allow the thoughts and ideas to sink in. Think about its meaning. Ask questions of your own about the passage.

Step 2. Answer the questions, drawing your answers from the passage. Remember that the purpose of the study is to discover what the Bible says. Write your answers in your own words. If you use Bible study aids such as commentaries or Bible handbooks, do so only after completing your own personal study.

Step 3. Apply the Bible's message to your own life and world. Ask yourself these questions: What is this passage saying to me? How does it challenge me? Comfort me? Encourage me? Is there a promise I should claim? A warning I should heed? For what can I give thanks? If you sense God speaking to you in some way, respond to him in a personal prayer.

Step 4. Share your thoughts with someone else if possible. This will be easiest if you are part of a Bible study group that meets regularly to share discoveries and discuss questions. If you would like to learn of a study group in your area or if you would like more information on how to start a small group Bible study, write to Discover Your Bible, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560 or P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8.

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Lesson 1

Matthew 4:23-5:6

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1. Matthew 4:23-25

a. Trace Jesus' steps. What had he been doing?

b. Why were the people following Jesus?

2. Matthew 5:1-2

a. Where did Jesus go, and why?

b. Whom was Jesus teaching here?

3. Matthew 5:3

a. Who is "blessed," according to this verse?

b. What might it mean to be “poor in spirit”?

c. What will such people receive?

4. *Matthew 5:4*

a. Who else does Jesus say is blessed?

b. What kind of mourning might Jesus be talking about?

c. What will happen to these people?

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