
Sermon on the Mount Bible Study

Matthew 5-7. 7 sessions of about 45 minutes, or one longer session. For small groups and personal study.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' longest block of teaching, in Matthew 5 to 7. It opens with the Beatitudes, calls his followers salt and light, and says he came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it. Then it moves through anger, lust, oaths and enemies, giving, prayer and fasting, money and worry, and judging others. It ends with a choice: build on his words, or build on sand.

READ TOGETHER: MATTHEW 5:1-12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain and sat down. His disciples came to Him, ² and He began to teach them, saying: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you.

Scripture from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.

BACKGROUND

Where the sermon sits in Matthew

Matthew alternates stories about Jesus with long blocks of his teaching, and this is the first block. Tyndale's study notes say that here "Jesus summarizes the requirements of discipleship in his Sermon on the Mount." Just before it, Jesus has called his first disciples and drawn crowds from all over the region.

The sermon is spoken to disciples with the crowd listening in. Jesus sees the crowds, goes up the mountain, sits down to teach, and "His disciples came to Him" (5:1). By the end the crowds are amazed (7:28).

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

Seven sections, one verse each

Matthew 5 to 7 is 111 verses, so this study reads it in sections. This study prints the opening, the Beatitudes, in full. For each of the other six sections, here is the verse that best sums it up. Read each section in full in your own Bible at its session.

After the Beatitudes come salt and light (5:13-16) and the Law fulfilled (5:17-20).

In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17)

From "you have heard" to the two builders

Six times Jesus says "You have heard that it was said" and then "But I tell you" (5:21-48). Then come giving, prayer and fasting done in secret (6:1-18), treasure and worry (6:19-34), and a closing run on judging, asking, the narrow gate and the two builders (7:1-29).

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:44-45)

But when you pray, go into your inner room, shut your door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:6)

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33)

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matthew 7:24)

The Law and the Prophets, at both ends

Jesus says in 5:17 that he came to fulfill "the Law or the Prophets". In 7:12 he says the Golden Rule "is the essence of the Law and the Prophets." Many commentators read the two verses as bookends. Everything between them shows what fulfilling the Law looks like in a disciple's life.

The sermon closes on Jesus himself. The crowds notice that he does not quote other teachers. He speaks on his own authority.

In everything, then, do to others as you would have them do to you. For this is the essence of the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. (Matthew 7:28-29)

THE BEATITUDES

Eight sayings that begin "Blessed are", then a ninth addressed to the listeners directly. The first and the eighth both end with "theirs is the kingdom of heaven", which frames the set.

The poor in spirit (5:3)

Not people who are low on confidence, but people who know they have nothing to bring to God. Isaiah 66:2 says God looks to the one "humble and contrite in spirit". The kingdom belongs to them now: "theirs is", not "theirs will be".

Those who mourn (5:4)

Many readers hear Isaiah 61:2-3, where God's anointed servant comes "to comfort all who mourn". The mourning may be grief over loss, grief over sin, or grief at the state of the world. The promise does not say the sorrow was unreal. It says it will be met.

The meek (5:5)

This echoes Psalm 37:11: "the meek will inherit the land." Meekness is not weakness. It is refusing to grab and fight for your own way, and trusting God to give what is right. Jesus calls himself gentle, the same word, in 11:29.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6)

Righteousness is a major word in Matthew. It can mean right living, God setting things right, or both. Either way this is a longing, not an achievement, and the promise is that God will satisfy it.

The merciful (5:7)

The only Beatitude where the promise matches the action. It looks ahead to the Lord's Prayer (6:12) and to the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:21-35). People who know they have received mercy show it.

The pure in heart (5:8)

Purity of heart means an undivided heart, inside as well as out. Psalm 24:3-4 asks who may stand in God's holy place and answers, the one with "clean hands and a pure heart". The sermon keeps returning to the heart (5:28, 6:21).

The peacemakers (5:9)

Not peace lovers but peace makers, people who do the work of reconciling. Children resemble their father, and this Father makes peace. Jesus will tell his followers to go and be reconciled before they bring a gift to God (5:23-24).

Those persecuted because of righteousness (5:10)

The list ends with a cost. People who live this way will not always be welcomed. The promise repeats the first one word for word, so the whole list is held inside the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you (5:11-12)

Jesus switches from "those" to "you" and makes the last Beatitude personal. He puts his listeners in the line of the prophets, who were treated the same way, and he tells them to rejoice. Persecution here is "because of Me", which is a large claim for a teacher to make about himself.

SESSION 1 OF 7

The Beatitudes

Read Matthew 5:1-12. See who Jesus calls blessed, and what that says about his kingdom. Also read: Isaiah 61:1-3; Psalm 37:11; Luke 6:20-26.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Who is listening in 5:1-2, and who is Jesus teaching?
2. Which promise appears twice? Where?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Are the Beatitudes commands to obey, or descriptions of the people God blesses? What in the wording points one way or the other?
4. Read Isaiah 61:1-3. What does Jesus seem to be claiming about his own mission?
5. Read Luke 6:20-26. What does Luke add that Matthew does not?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Which Beatitude surprises you most? Which describes someone you know?
7. Where in your life would you like to be a peacemaker this week?

SESSION 2 OF 7

Salt and light

Read Matthew 5:13-16. See what Jesus says his followers already are, and what they are for. Also read: Isaiah 42:6; Philippians 2:14-15; 1 Peter 2:12.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Jesus says "you are", not "try to be". What two things does he say his disciples are?
2. What happens to salt that loses its saltiness, and to a lamp under a basket?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Salt preserved food and gave it flavor. Which use fits the picture best, and does it matter?
4. Verse 16 says people will see your good deeds and glorify your Father. How does that fit with 6:1, which warns against doing good to be seen?
5. Read Isaiah 42:6. What was Israel's calling, and how does Jesus pass it to his disciples?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Where are you tempted to hide your faith to fit in?
7. What good deed could someone see from you this week that would point them to God rather than to you?

The Law fulfilled

Read Matthew 5:17-20. See what Jesus says about the Law, and what kind of righteousness he means. Also read: Romans 3:21-22; Matthew 22:37-40; Jeremiah 31:33.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What does Jesus say he did not come to do, and what did he come to do?
2. Whose righteousness must his followers' righteousness exceed (5:20)?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. What might "fulfill" mean here: obey, complete, bring to its goal? Look at how Matthew uses "fulfill" elsewhere (1:22, 2:15).
4. The scribes and Pharisees were known for careful law keeping. How could anyone exceed them? Read the next section before you answer.
5. Read Jeremiah 31:33. How might the new covenant help explain the righteousness Jesus describes?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Do you tend to treat the Old Testament as out of date, or as a rulebook? How does this passage challenge that?
7. Where is your obedience on the surface only?

SESSION 4 OF 7

"You have heard", "But I tell you"

Read Matthew 5:21-48. Walk through Jesus' six contrasts and see how he takes the Law to the heart. Also read: Exodus 20:13-14; Leviticus 19:18; Romans 12:17-21.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. List the six topics Jesus takes up. For each, what had people heard, and what does Jesus say?
2. In 5:23-24, what comes before worship?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Does Jesus make the Law stricter, or show what it was always aiming at? Take anger and lust as test cases.
4. "Eye for eye" (Exodus 21:24) limited revenge in court. What is Jesus asking of a person who has been wronged in 5:38-42?
5. Why does Jesus say God sends rain on the just and the unjust (5:45)? What does that teach about loving enemies?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Is there someone you need to be reconciled with before you next worship?
7. Name one person you find hard to love. What is one way you could pray for them this week?

SESSION 5 OF 7

Giving, prayer and fasting

Read Matthew 6:1-18. See why Jesus moves practice out of public view and into the Father's sight. Also read: Isaiah 58:3-7; Luke 18:9-14.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What three practices does Jesus name? What pattern repeats in each?
2. Who sees in secret, and what does he do?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Jesus assumes his followers will give, pray and fast. What does that tell you?
4. How does the Lord's Prayer (6:9-13) fit the warning against babbling in 6:7?
5. Read Isaiah 58:3-7. What did God say was wrong with Israel's fasting?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Which of the three do you practice least? What would be a small first step?
7. What good thing are you doing partly to be seen? What would it look like to do it for the Father alone?

SESSION 6 OF 7

Treasure and worry

Read Matthew 6:19-34. See how Jesus links money, the heart and worry, and what he tells us to seek first.

Also read: Luke 12:13-21; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What destroys earthly treasure in verses 19 and 20?
2. How many times do the words "worry" or "do not worry" appear in 6:25-34? What examples does Jesus use?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21). Which follows which: the treasure or the heart?
4. Why might money and worry come in the same section? Look at the word "Therefore" in 6:25.
5. Does 6:33 promise that believers will never be in need? How do you hold it beside Christians who have gone hungry?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. What do you worry about most often? What would seeking God's kingdom first look like there?
7. What is one way you could store up treasure in heaven with your money this month?

SESSION 7 OF 7

Judging, asking and the two builders

Read Matthew 7:1-29. See how the sermon closes: how to treat others, how to ask, and the choice it leaves.

Also read: Luke 6:37-42; James 1:22-25.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What image does Jesus use for judging others in 7:3-5? What does he tell us to do first?
2. List the pairs in 7:13-27: two gates, two trees, two kinds of people, two builders.

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Does "Do not judge" mean we may never say something is wrong? How does 7:5 and 7:15-20 help you answer?
4. In 7:21-23, some people did impressive things in Jesus' name. What was missing?
5. What is the difference between the wise and the foolish builder? Both heard the same words.

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Is there a speck in someone else's eye you keep noticing? What might the beam in your own be?
7. Looking back over the whole sermon, which part do you most need to put into practice?

ONE-SESSION PATH

The whole sermon in one evening

Read Matthew 5:1-20 and 7:24-29. About 60 to 75 minutes.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Who are the Beatitudes about? List three of the people Jesus calls blessed.
2. What does Jesus say his followers already are in 5:13-16?
3. Skim 5:21-48. What phrase repeats six times?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

4. What does Jesus mean when he says he came to fulfill the Law (5:17)?
5. Skim 6:1-18. Why does Jesus keep sending good deeds out of public view?
6. Is the sermon a list of rules, an impossible ideal, or something else? Look at who it is spoken to (5:1-2) and how it begins (5:3).

Apply: what does it mean for us?

7. What is the difference between the two builders in 7:24-27, and which one are you being right now?
8. Choose one section of the sermon to put into practice this week, and tell the group which one.

FOR THE LEADER

- Read the session's section aloud at the start. Only the opening is printed in full here, so ask everyone to bring a Bible.
- This is a seven-week study. If your group meets for fewer weeks, combine sessions 2 and 3, which are both short, and sessions 6 and 7.
- The sermon is easy to read in one of two wrong ways. Some hear a checklist for earning God's favor. Others hear a beautiful ideal no one is expected to live. Keep pointing to the setting: Jesus is teaching people who already follow him, and he begins with blessing.
- Session 4 covers divorce (5:31-32). Some in your group may be divorced, or children of divorce. Christians apply this passage differently, especially the exception Jesus names. Do not try to settle it in the group, and follow up privately with anyone it touches.
- Turning the other cheek (5:39) is not a command to stay in an abusive situation. If anyone in your group is being harmed, help them get safe and involve your pastor.
- Do not let the group skip the hard sayings by explaining them away too quickly. It is fine to sit with "Be perfect" (5:48) for a while before talking about what it means.

- If someone shares something that needs more than a group discussion, follow up with them privately and involve your pastor.

WHERE CHRISTIANS READ IT DIFFERENTLY

Is the sermon meant to be lived, or to show we cannot live it?

Both answers have a long history. Some stress that its demands expose our need for grace, since no one meets the standard of 5:48. Some read parts of it as mainly for a future age of the kingdom. Some read it as a plain rule of life, to be obeyed as it stands (7:24). Most commentators today hold that it is spoken to disciples (5:1-2), opens with grace in the Beatitudes, and is meant to be lived, imperfectly and with God's help, while also showing how far short we fall.

Are the Beatitudes promises or requirements?

Jesus does not say "try to become poor in spirit." He says the poor in spirit are blessed. Many readers take the Beatitudes as a description of the people God's kingdom welcomes, and of what it is like to belong to it. Others stress that they also describe character to grow into. The two readings sit together without much strain.

Turning the other cheek and refusing oaths: literal or principle?

Some Christians refuse all oaths and all violence, taking 5:34 and 5:39 as they stand. Most read these sayings as forbidding revenge and dishonest speech, while still allowing truthful oaths in court and, for many, the use of force by governments (Romans 13:4). All agree that Jesus is calling his followers to give up personal retaliation.

What does "Be perfect" mean?

The word in 5:48 can mean complete, whole or mature. In context it sums up loving enemies the way the Father sends rain on everyone. Luke's parallel reads "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Most readers take it as a call to love without exceptions, as God does, rather than a demand for flawless performance.

SOURCES

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Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible (1898): Salt, Oath, Lily. James Hastings. Public domain. Linked dictionary entries for the things the sermon names.

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