

UNIT 1: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Lesson 1

March 8, 2026

The Christian's Character and Influence:

Our Christlike character can influence others for the glory of God.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. Here, Jesus reveals that the arrival of His Kingdom would bring unexpected blessings to people who put their trust in Him. Those who follow Him would become beacons of hope and righteousness, spreading faith and good deeds to highlight God's presence. These verses emphasize the significance of Christian witness, demonstrating how believers can be a powerful force radiating God's love and truth. In essence, Christians are entrusted with illuminating a dark world, inspiring others to acknowledge God's glory and embrace the values of His kingdom.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Matthew 5-7, commonly known as the "Sermon on the Mount," is a foundational passage in the Bible that encapsulates the essence of Jesus' teachings on life in the kingdom of God. This sermon serves as a profound declaration of the values and principles that define life under God's rule for those who believe in Him. Key themes – including the blessings of living in alignment with God's will, the responsibility of exercising godly influence in the world, and the fulfillment of the Law through Christ – are highlighted in 5:1-20. The remainder of the sermon elaborates on these ideas, offering timeless guidance for righteous living and spiritual growth.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. THE BLESSED PEOPLE: Matthew 5:1-12.

- A. Jesus Teaches the People, (1-2)
- B. The Beatitudes, (3-12)

2. GODLY INFLUENCE: Matthew 5:13-16.

- A. Salt of the Earth, (13)
- B. Light of the World, (14-16)

3. TRUE GREATNESS: Matthew 5:17-20.

- A. God's Word Is Eternal, (17-18)
- B. Living By God's Word, (19-20)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. THE BLESSED PEOPLE: Matthew 5:1-12.

A. Jesus Teaches the People, Matthew 5:1-2

The Apostle Matthew sets the scene for the Sermon on the Mount by reporting that when Jesus saw the multitudes of people, He climbed up the side of the mountain. The imagery is important, as it harkens back to the experience of Israel at Mount Sinai. God had delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery through His mighty acts and later gathered the people at Sinai. There, He delivered the Law to them through Moses. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had performed powerful saving actions that drew a multitude, and then He delivered His message.

We should remember, however, that Jesus was proclaiming and teaching "the gospel of the kingdom" (4:23). He was not delivering another law, nor was He abolishing the revelation that God had previously given to His people (5:17). Rather, Jesus was reinterpreting what they had already received in terms of how we ought to live in the kingdom of God. Jesus was concerned with showing us that life in the Kingdom is transformational.

B. The Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12.

Jesus began by identifying the truly "blessed" people. This section of the Sermon on the Mount has traditionally been referred to as the Beatitudes. (Beatitude is from a Latin word meaning "a state of blessedness.") Jesus announced the kinds of people who are blessed from God's perspective. This announcement is striking for two reasons. First, at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, divine blessings were declared on the people who kept the Law. In Matthew, Jesus begins with the pronouncement of blessings. Second, the kinds of people called blessed are not what the world considers to be favored. The blessings are pronounced on those who are often mocked and despised.

The first beatitude is for "the poor in spirit" (v. 3; see Isaiah 61:1), meaning those who are humble and contrite. These people know they have nothing worth bartering for the blessings of God, yet His kingdom is given to them. While "kingdom of heaven" is Matthew's way of referring to the kingdom of God, the term heaven is important here. Heaven is where God dwells beyond the sight of mortal humans. It is also where God's eternal promises are reserved for His people (1 Peter 1:4). Jesus was announcing that the spiritual riches of God's kingdom are now made available to Jesus's disciples who may appear to have nothing.

The second beatitude promises comfort for those who "mourn" (v. 4; see Isaiah 61:2-3). Jesus did not reject the broken-hearted. Instead, He said they would receive courage and a reason to rejoice. Though He did not go into specifics, the context is the announcement of the kingdom of Heaven. Their mourning over what they had lost would be turned to joy by what God would give them.

The third beatitudes, promising property to "the meek" (v. 5), is from Psalms 37:11. The world believes it is the strong who survive, but that's not how God's kingdom operates. In His kingdom, those who live humbly while trusting God find that He will provide for them, even as the wicked lose their fortunes. Psalm 37:9 states, "For evildoers shall be cut off; but those that wait upon the Lord, they shall inherit the earth."

In the fourth beatitude, Jesus promised satisfaction for those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (v. 6). Righteousness not only refers to one's standing with God, but also

conditions between people. In this verse, it can also be understood as “justice.” In God’s kingdom, the wrongs will be made right, and those who have suffered injustice will find justice.

Fifth, Jesus announced that the “merciful...shall obtain mercy” (v. 7). The merciful are those with a generous spirit – they give and forgive. The world often scorns the merciful as people who can be easily taken advantage of. Jesus declined, however, that the merciful will find generosity extended to them when they are in need. As Proverbs 19:17 says, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full” (NRSV).

The announcement that “the pure in heart ... shall see God” (v. 8) echoes Psalm 24:3-4. The psalmist said those whose hearts are not given over to idolatry will be able to “ascend” the mountain of God and enter His temple. Single-hearted devotion to God will give them the vision to see Him. Worldly people chase what they see with their physical eyes, but the pure in heart will see the one God, who is described as “invisible” (Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17). Their ability to see God also means that they are near God. This is a promise of the divine presence.

With the next beatitude, we see another sharp contrast with worldly wisdom. Selfish ambition produces strife because people seize what they want and fight over what they do not have. Jesus, however, told His audience that truly blesses people are those who are willing to forego selfish ambitions to pursue peace (Matthew 5:9). These people can suffer much as they are assailed from both sides. Still, they are valued as God’s children. This is because they resemble God’s only begotten Son, who “made peace” though sacrificing His body (Colossians 1:20).

Jesus then announced a blessing on those who are “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” and for the sake of His name (Matthew 5:10-11). Like the poor in spirit, those who are persecuted for righteousness are heirs of what lasts, even though the powers of this age may attack them. Those who are persecuted for the sake of Jesus are promised everlasting and abundant rewards (v. 12). Although the world may reject His followers, the time will come when they will see the truth. Therefore, His followers have reason to rejoice (Acts 5:41).

The Beatitudes are not just a set of obligations but a joyous proclamation of uplifting news, offering encouragement and comfort, inspiring hearts, and minds with profound promises for Christians who embrace them. Take a moment to reflect on where you find yourself within these blessings. What message is Jesus sharing with you personally? Which of these Beatitudes is most challenging for you now, and how might you strive to live it out?

2. GODLY INFLUENCE: Matthew 5:13-16.

A. Salt of the Earth, Matthew 5:13.

Jesus moved from the Beatitudes to talking about who has lasting influence in this world. Just as Jesus’ audience on the mountainside were likely surprised by learning about those who are considered blesses in God’s kingdom, we might equally be surprised to find these are the people through whom God chooses to work in this world. The recipients of the Beatitudes may be neglected, abused, and despised by those who follow worldly wisdom. However, Jesus taught that these people are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (vv, 13-14).

In the ancient world, salt had many useful functions in addition to flavor. The Old Testament shows that salt was used in sacrifices (Leviticus 2:13), considered necessary for purification (Ezekiel 16:4; 2 Kings 2:19-22), and represented loyalty (Numbers 18:19). Salt was also considered an agent of preservation by many cultures in addition to Israel. Consequently, Jewish

people came to consider salt as one of the basic necessities of life. The way salt loses its power is by becoming defiled. Salt that is made impure through mixture with other minerals is useless. Jesus was telling His disciples that if they followed Him, they would become what the world needs. However, if they diluted His teaching and example with the ways of the world, they would not be successful. They may receive the world's approval, but they would not be able to fulfill their purpose as His disciples.

B. Light of the World, Matthew 5:14-16.

Jesus next described His followers as “the light of the world” (v. 14). The people of Israel were supposed to be a light to the nations around them (Isaiah 42:6). After Jesus, the true Light, had come into the world (John 1:1; 8:12), His followers were to reflect His radiance as witnesses to the world. If we, as disciples of Jesus, obey His Word, we will show the world the better way to live. Our good deeds will counter the darkness and point people to the heavenly Father (Matthew 5:16).

This works, however, only if we do our works in Jesus' name. The way Jesus calls us to live makes us stand out in the world. We should not confuse Jesus' meaning here; He is not talking about religious boasting, which He later condemns (6:1). Jesus was saying as we live according to His teachings and in His name, our lives will point others to God.

As a Christian living in a sinful world, you can be tempted to either retreat from the world or to compromise with it, but Jesus offers another way – living authentically and humbly, letting God's light shine through you. Consider how your life can radiate hope and guidance, serving as a beacon in the surrounding darkness. By embracing this path, you can inspire others to see the beauty of faith and the power of God's love.

3. TRUE GREATNESS: Matthew 5:17-20.

A. God's Word Is Eternal, Matthew 5:17-18.

Jesus' mission was not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. He came to show the real meaning of the Law, which had always been pointing to Him. His teaching was what the spirit of the Law intended. Jesus reminded His audience that they received the Law from God, and since God is eternal, so is His Word. Jesus' affirmation of the enduring quality of God's Word is in line with the Old Testament teaching in Isaiah 40:8: “The word of our God shall stand for ever.” Jesus emphasized this point, saying, not “one jot or tittle will ...pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:18 NKJV). “Jot” refers to the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. “Tittle” refers to the protruding stroke on a letter. In contemporary language, it would be like saying, “Not one dot of an l or cross of a t will pass until everything is completed.” The Greek word for fulfilled means to come into being. All that the Law and the prophets proclaimed would be realized, and Jesus had come to make it so.

B. Living By God's Word, Matthew 5:19-20.

Contrary to the opinion of some, Jesus was not offering an easier way out that abolished the Law. Indeed, He warned His hearers against carelessness toward the Law (v. 19). Furthermore, the most scrupulous among His audience, the scribes and Pharisees, had not risen to the level of greatness in the Kingdom. They had failed to fulfill all the Law. Jesus's statement must have

astonished His hearers. The scribes were copyists, essentially committing the Law to memory. Still, according to Jesus, that was not good enough.

It will become plain throughout the remainder of Jesus' teaching what He meant. He describes a way of being in His kingdom that points to a different kind of humanity altogether. It is a way of life where righteous behavior flows from a righteous heart. Some hear this and suppose Christianity is all about the heart, usually meaning that it should be an easy way that cares more about how we feel and believe rather than what we do. This view, however, does not align with what Jesus taught. Never did Jesus hint that how we live is of no consequence so long as we meant well. He said the opposite. The truly righteous heart will produce righteous living. Jesus would fulfill the Law through the creation of a people whose hearts and lives were sincerely devoted to God. It was long expected that the day would come when God's Spirit would fill His people and transform their hearts so they would live righteously out of their inmost being (Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27). That day is now!

God's eternal Word offers us timeless truth and guidance. As we reflect on Jesus' sermon, let's approach it as an invitation to grow into people shaped by His teachings and love. Take a moment to consider what the Lord might be speaking to your heart through what we have studied today. How does it challenge or encourage you? Embrace this opportunity to deepen your understanding and connection with God's purpose for your life.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

The Sermon on the Mount is both a description of and an invitation to the new life that Jesus offers. Blessed are the disciples of Jesus who hear and obey!

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Commit to begin each day this week with resolve to live the Kingdom way in the Spirit's power. Let the blessedness of living in the light be the salt that draws others to Jesus

WORKSHEET

Perspectives on the Sermon on the Mount:

The Sermon on the Mount is likely the best known of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Portions of this teaching which many people regard as the most difficult to obey (for example, Matthew 5:28, 39, 44; 6:20, 33; 7:12), get the most popular attention. The following are brief perspectives on the Sermon on the Mount from a variety of sources.

“The Lord’s discourse in Matthew 5-7 setting forth the principles of the Christian ethic” (The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church).

“The first of six extended discourses of Jesus given in the Gospel of Matthew, covering chapters 5-7 The Sermon on the Mount is Christ’s instruction to us for godly living in the present world” (The New International Dictionary of the Bible).

“Containing, as it does, the very heart of Jesus’ teaching, we may think of the Sermon on the Mount as being to the New Testament what the Ten Commandments were to the Old Testament. Every Christian ought to memorize the Sermon on the Mount, and strive earnestly to live according to its teachings” (Halley’s Bible Handbook by Henry H. Halley).

“It is Christ then, as the King, who is here flinging open the gates of His Kingdom. To study it more closely: in the three chapters, under which the Sermon on the Mount is grouped in the first Gospel (Matthew 5-7), the kingdom of God is presented successively, progressively, and extensively” (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah by Alfred Edersheim).

The law of God as “positive enactment is the expression of God’s will in published ordinances. These consist of His definitely moral precepts, as the Decalogue [the Ten Commandments] (Exodus 20:1-17) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)” (Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology by Henry Clarence Thiessen).

Salt and Light

- How can Christians act as “salt” (Matthew 5:13) in the lives of others?
- Name two Christians who have “salted” your life by their influence.

Albert Schweitzer was a 20th-century medical missionary to Africa who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. He declared, “Example is not the main thing in influencing others; it is the only thing.”

- Why would any Christian try to hide their “light” (v. 15)?
- How is our church functioning like “a city that is set on a hill” (v. 14)?
- Hannah Arendt said, “the hypocrite’s crime is that he bears false witness against himself.” How does this statement relate to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:20?