



## Group Discussion Guide

*For group meetings from October 4 afternoon through October 11 morning*

### Matthew 5

Matthew 5-7 records what is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount. There are various proposed interpretations and applications of this sermon; too many to list here. This note from the Expositor's Bible Commentary on Matthew sheds some light on how these teachings of Jesus should be viewed:

The unifying theme of the sermon is the kingdom of heaven. This is established, not by counting how many times the expression occurs, but by noting where it occurs. It envelopes the Beatitudes (5:3, 10) and appears in 5:17–20, which details the relation between the OT and the kingdom, a subject that leads to another literary envelope around the body of the sermon (5:17; 7:12). It returns at the heart of the Lord's Prayer (6:10), climaxes the section on kingdom perspectives (6:33), and is presented as what must finally be entered (7:21–23). Matthew places the sermon immediately after two verses insisting that the primary content of Jesus' preaching was the gospel of the kingdom (4:17, 23). It provides ethical guidelines for life in the kingdom, but does so within an explanation of the place of the contemporary setting within redemption history and Jesus' relation to the OT (5:17–20). The community forming around him, his "disciples," is not yet so cohesive and committed a group that exhortations to "enter" (7:13–14) are irrelevant. The glimpse of kingdom life (horizontally and vertically) in these chapters anticipates not only the love commandments (22:34–40) but also grace (5:3; 6:12; 7:7–11; cf. 21:28–46).

*D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 127–128.*

If the theme of the kingdom of heaven is to be seen as the overarching truth that unifies the contents of this sermon, we must then discern what exactly is the kingdom of heaven. While in the Old Testament God's kingdom was seen in the earthly kingdom of Israel, the Old Testament prophets consistently pointed to a new future kingdom. It is this kingdom that was now in view with the coming of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. John himself proclaimed that Jesus' coming meant the kingdom of heaven was "at hand." Jesus also preached this message. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven as referenced by Jesus can be understood as those who entered into a relationship with God through the forgiveness of sins provided by the person and work of Jesus Christ. In short, the kingdom of heaven in view here is the Gospel. It is accepting the truth of the Gospel and applying it to our lives that makes us part of the kingdom of heaven. This

reconciles us to God and empowers us to live in obedience to God's commands. The teachings in the Sermon on the Mount can only be understood and followed in the power of the Gospel.

### **Matthew 5:1-16**

Matthew gives us the setting of this sermon. While the exact location of the mountain is unknown, it was in Galilee near Capernaum. Jesus preached this sermon sitting down, which was customary of rabbis. The disciples referenced here are not the 12, but rather a larger group of people who had begun to follow him. This group probably included those of the 12 who already had responded to his call, and perhaps others who would later respond.

Verses 3-11 contain the "beatitudes," which simply means statements that start with "blessed are." These statements are not meant to point to various groups of people, but rather to those who display the characteristics of those who have a relationship with God. Each of these character traits results in a blessing that is best viewed as eternal, though no doubt these are related to similar temporal blessings associated with being a child of God as well. This teaching challenges us to examine our own lives for these character traits, and encourages us by showing us how we will be blessed both now and in eternity. Jesus closed this section with a reminder that his followers should rejoice in persecution because of the eternal rewards associated with it. He also reminded his audience that they are in good company when facing persecution, because the Old Testament prophets also were the recipients of this type of treatment.

Jesus taught that his followers must be like salt and light. Salt was a preservative and a flavoring, but was only useful while it maintained its taste. A light could only be seen if it was out in the open. Jesus taught that those who follow him must be able to be identified by the rest of the world, and the goal was to point others to the Father.

### **Matthew 5:17-30**

Verses 17-20 record a truth that is integral to our understanding of Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament law. Jesus did not come to abolish (destroy) the law, but instead came to fulfill it. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:4, Jesus is "the end of the law" because he completes it and transcends it. The law and prophets pointed to him, and now he had come. His teaching in verse 19 demonstrates the need for all people to respect God's law. However, Jesus was not necessarily teaching that his followers must obey every written command in the law, as evidenced by his teaching in the rest of this sermon and his attitude regarding the Sabbath seen during his earthly ministry. Rather, his main point was obedience to the spirit of the law. This is something the scribes and Pharisees missed, which is why Jesus taught that a true follower must have righteousness that exceeds theirs.

Jesus began to teach obedience to the spirit of the law in verse 21, with the first of many statements that include, "You have heard" ... "But I say to you." With these teachings, Jesus was effectively raising the bar of the obedience that was emphasized by the religious leaders of his day. No longer was it enough to merely follow the letter of the Old Testament law; in fact it truly never was enough to do so. God had always intended that his people follow the law on the

basis of their love for Him and love for one another. This is why the ten commandments focus on the relationship with God and relationships with fellow human beings. However, the religious leaders had twisted the law into a list of rules that must be kept, and had even added their own requirements to the law. In verses 21-26, Jesus focused on one's relationship to God and to other people, and how these are connected. Anger towards another person was as bad as murder, and having ill feelings towards another person would interfere with the true worship of God. Jesus emphasized the need for reconciliation among God's people.

In verses 27-30, Jesus taught that lust was no different than adultery. Simply avoiding the physical act of adultery was not enough. Even sinful desires present within the heart would be considered adultery. He also taught that one must be willing to go to extreme measures to avoid this sin.

### **Matthew 5:31-48**

As Jesus continued with his teaching that compared the letter of the Old Testament law to the spirit of obedience found in the kingdom of heaven, he addressed four more topics recorded in Matthew 5. His teaching about divorce elevated the importance of the marriage covenant to its proper place. Rather than look for ways out of a marriage, a husband or wife (Jesus references the husband most likely because this was a patriarchal society) should stay committed to the spouse unless that spouse commits adultery. He even said that a man who marries a woman who has been divorced commits adultery. Our application of this teaching to marriage relationships today is fairly simple: God desires that a man and woman who are married should remain married. This is not to say that there are not circumstances where divorce should take place due to some violation of the marriage covenant. Jesus did not give details regarding this and we must seek God's wisdom in discerning the right course of action in each situation.

Verses 33-37 record Jesus' teaching on making an oath, or swearing to do something. He said a person should not swear to anything or by anything because all is connected to God and swearing would therefore be using His name in a way it should not be used. Rather should leave an answer with a simple "yes" or "no." The need for this teaching might seem somewhat foreign to us today, but in the day of Jesus swearing oaths in various ways was widely discussed and there was even official guidance on how it should be done.

The last two topics in Matthew 5 are closely related. Jesus referenced Old Testament law regarding how the legal system handled punishment for a crime. It was not meant to bring vengeance into the equation; the purpose was justice and a deterrent for wrong behavior. Jesus addressed this on a personal level and instructed his followers to operate on the basis of peace, love, forgiveness and generosity. Much like the teaching on divorce, this teaching must be applied with the wisdom of the Spirit. There could be circumstances where love dictates action against evil or even choosing not to give to someone who asks for help.

In conjunction with this teaching on retaliation, Jesus shared how his followers are to love their enemies. He used the Old Testament command to love one's neighbor and then added a teaching not found in the Old Testament: "hate your enemy." Perhaps this second portion had

been added by some teachers of the law. Regardless of its origin, Jesus clearly dismissed it as false and instead taught that we who follow him are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He stated that even those who do not follow the ways of God love people who love them. Regarding the final verse of this chapter, Matthew 5:48, this note offers valuable insight:

In the light of the preceding verses (vv. 17–47), Jesus is saying that the true direction in which the law has always pointed is not toward mere judicial restraints, concessions arising out of the hardness of men’s hearts, still less casuistical perversions, nor even to the law of love ... No, it pointed rather to all the perfection of God, exemplified by the authoritative interpretation of the law bound up in the preceding antitheses. This perfection Jesus’ disciples must emulate if they are truly followers of him who fulfills the Law and the Prophets (v. 17).

*D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 161.*

## Discussion Questions

1. Which “blessed are” statements most speak to you, personally? Which ones challenge you the most?
2. How does Jesus’ teaching in verses 11-12 match up with our culture? Can you imagine yourself actually rejoicing when facing persecution? Why or why not?
3. What did Jesus mean when he stated his followers are salt and light (vs. 13-16)? How have you seen others be salt and light? How have you been salt and light? How can you be a more flavorful seasoning and a brighter light?
4. Jesus said he came to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it. What did he mean by this? In light of this, how do we view the Old Testament Law and Prophets?
5. How can our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20)? What is the difference between their idea of righteousness and our idea of righteousness?
6. In his teaching about anger, lust and divorce, Jesus “raised the bar” from what was known in the Old Testament Law. If it is impossible for anyone to keep every aspect of that law, how can we be obedient to these new standards?
7. Instead of getting revenge on those who harm us and hating those who are evil, Jesus taught that we are not to resist them and we are to love them. How do we get to the place of seeing this become a reality in our lives?