

SERMON ON THE MOUNTAIN

GROUP STUDY GUIDE





T h e C h u r c h o f G o d

Sermon on the Mount

Group Bible Study Guide

A Verse-by-Verse Group Study Through Matthew 5–7



The Sermon on the Mount stands as the most sustained and searching body of teaching Jesus ever gave. Delivered on a hillside in Galilee early in His public ministry, these three chapters of Matthew's Gospel contain the fullest portrait we possess of what life in the Kingdom of Heaven looks like — not merely as an external code of conduct, but as the natural expression of a heart transformed by grace. For two thousand years the Church has returned again and again to these words, finding in them both the highest standard ever set before human beings and the deepest invitation to trust the One who sets it.

This guide is designed for small groups who wish to take the Sermon seriously — reading it aloud, studying it carefully, wrestling with its demands honestly, and allowing the Holy Spirit to apply its truth to daily life. It does not rush. It does not flatten. It trusts that the Word of God, patiently received, will do what God intends it to do.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is organized into **eight sections** rather than numbered weeks, so your group can move through the material at a pace suited to your depth of discussion. Some sections may take a single meeting; others may warrant two or more sessions. Follow the Spirit's leading — and the group's hunger.

Each section follows the same structure. Here is how to work through it together:

- 1. Open in Prayer.** Begin every session by asking God to open your eyes to His Word. The Sermon on the Mount is not merely literature to be analyzed but living instruction from the Son of God. Come expectantly.
- 2. Read the Commentary.** The brief commentary at the beginning of each section is designed to be read aloud by one member before the Scripture is opened. It prepares the group's mind and heart for what is coming in the text.
- 3. Read the Scripture Aloud.** Members are welcome to use whatever translation they prefer for personal study and discussion, but all verses quoted in this study guide are from the KJV. For the main Sermon on the Mount text in each session, please read the full passage aloud from the KJV so everyone in the group is hearing the same wording for the word studies. Hearing the text read aloud, in community, is itself a formative act of worship.
- 4. Work Through the Word Studies.** The word studies are provided to enrich the group's understanding of key terms in the original Greek and Hebrew. These are not academic exercises — they open up layers of meaning that English translation alone cannot always carry. Encourage members to read them carefully.
- 5. Explore the Old Testament Cross-References.** Jesus was deeply immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures. These cross-references trace the roots of His teaching back into the Old Testament. When time permits, look up these passages together — they enrich the Sermon immeasurably.
- 6. Read the Historical Context Note.** These brief notes place the text in its first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman world. Understanding the original context is a gift to interpretation, not a threat to it.
- 7. Work Through the Discussion Questions.** These questions are designed to move from observation to interpretation to application. Not every question needs to be answered in every session — let the conversation find its natural depth. The group leader should feel free to skip ahead or linger as the Spirit directs.
- 8. Receive the Application Challenge.** Every section closes with a concrete, personal application challenge. These are not optional extras — they are the bridge between hearing and doing, which Jesus Himself identified as the difference between building on rock and building on sand (Matthew 7:24-27).
- 9. Close in Prayer.** Pray specifically over the application challenge. Commit what you have heard to God and to one another.

What to bring: Your Bible. A pen and a notebook. An open heart. A willingness to be corrected, challenged, and comforted by the same words — all three, often in the same session.

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." — James 1:22

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The Sermon on the Mount: Setting, Background, and Significance

It is early in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth — somewhere in the years AD 28 to 30, by the reckoning of most scholars. Galilee is a region of rolling hills, fertile plains, and fishing villages strung along the rim of a freshwater inland sea. The population is predominantly Jewish, devout, and politically restless beneath the heavy hand of Roman occupation. Into this world, a young teacher from Nazareth has begun to move — healing the sick, calling fishermen to follow Him, and announcing a message that is both deeply familiar and wholly unprecedented: "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).

The setting of the Sermon on the Mount is a hillside, traditionally identified near Capernaum on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew tells us that Jesus "went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: and he opened his mouth, and taught them" (Matthew 5:1–2). The detail that He "sat" to teach is not incidental. In the Jewish world of the first century, a rabbi sat when he delivered authoritative, binding instruction. Standing was for reading Scripture; sitting was for teaching with weight and authority. When Jesus sat on that hillside, every Jewish listener understood that what followed was not a casual conversation but a formal declaration of binding truth.

Who was in the audience? Matthew is careful: the disciples came to Him — they are the primary intended recipients of this teaching. But by the end of the sermon, we learn that "the multitudes were astonished at his doctrine" (Matthew 7:28), indicating that the crowds were also present, listening from a respectful distance. The Sermon is addressed first to those who have committed to follow Him, yet it is overheard — and intended to be overheard — by the watching world.

This is the longest single recorded teaching of Jesus in all four Gospels. No other discourse preserved in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John approaches it in length or systematic scope. Matthew's literary artistry is on full display here: his Gospel is structured around five great discourses of Jesus — chapters 5–7 (the Sermon on the Mount), chapter 10 (the Mission Discourse), chapter 13 (the Parables of the Kingdom), chapter 18 (the Community Discourse), and chapters 24–25 (the Olivet Discourse). This five-fold structure is almost certainly intentional, evoking the five books of Moses — the Pentateuch — and presenting Jesus as the new Moses who does not merely receive the Law but speaks as its sovereign Author.

A parallel version of the sermon appears in Luke 6:20–49, commonly called the Sermon on the Plain. Luke's version is shorter and delivers some of the same material in a different setting. Scholars have long discussed the relationship between the two: whether they represent the same event reported

differently, or two separate occasions when Jesus taught similar material. In either case, both Gospels agree on the substance and the tone: this is the most concentrated statement Jesus ever made about what human life, rightly lived before God, looks like.

Jesus was not teaching in a vacuum. He was a rabbi — a teacher thoroughly formed by the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings of the Hebrew Scriptures. His hearers would have recognized the cadences of Psalm 1, the language of the anawim from the Psalms, the echoes of Isaiah's great consolations, and the passion of the prophets' call to covenant faithfulness. He is not abolishing this tradition. He is fulfilling it — bringing it to its full flower, its intended meaning, its living embodiment in His own person.

The grand theme of the Sermon on the Mount is the nature of life in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not primarily a moral code, though it sets the highest moral standard ever articulated. It is not a checklist of religious requirements, though it exposes every attempt at outward compliance as insufficient. It is a portrait — a breathtakingly demanding, strangely beautiful portrait — of the kind of human being God always intended, and of the kind of community He is gathering around His Son. These are not rules to achieve righteousness. They are descriptions of a life only possible when the One who preached the sermon lives it inside us.

"Blessed Are They": The Beatitudes

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 5:1–12 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

Before the group reads the text, take a moment to prepare your hearts. What you are about to encounter is not a list of demands but a series of declarations. The word "beatitude" comes from the Latin *beatitudo*, meaning blessedness or happiness of the deepest kind — and these eight (some scholars suggest nine, counting v.11 separately) opening statements of Jesus announce who belongs to the Kingdom He is inaugurating.

Pay close attention to what Jesus is doing here. He does not say "Blessed are those who try hard to be poor in spirit." He says, "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit." These are descriptions, not prescriptions. They are not a ladder to climb but a portrait of those who already live in the grace of God. The Beatitudes turn the world's value system precisely upside down. The blessed ones, according to every surrounding culture — Roman, Greek, or the prosperous Jewish establishment — were the wealthy, the powerful, the honored, and the admired. Jesus opens His Kingdom Manifesto by declaring the exact opposite.

Notice also the remarkable literary architecture. Verse 3 promises "the kingdom of heaven" and so does verse 10 — forming a literary bracket, or *inclusio*, around the entire set. The first and last beatitudes share the same promise, welding the eight together into a single unified statement. Everything between belongs to those who belong to the Kingdom.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 5:1–12 aloud in your group, slowly and clearly. Allow a moment of silence after the reading before proceeding.

WORD STUDIES

BLESSED (*Greek: makarios, μακάριος; Hebrew equivalent: ashre, אֲשֶׁר*) — Not the ordinary happiness that depends on favorable circumstances, but divine favor resting upon a person — the deep inner joy of one who lives under God's grace and approval. The Hebrew *ashre* appears forty-five times in the Psalms (cf. Psalm 1:1 — "Blessed is the man..."). This word is an objective divine declaration, not a description of a subjective emotional state. God pronounces it; the blessed one receives it.

POOR IN SPIRIT (*Greek: ptōchos, πτωχός*) — From a root meaning "to crouch" or "to cower." This is not the word for an ordinary working poor person (*Greek: penēs*), but for the utterly destitute beggar who has nothing whatsoever to offer. Spiritually, it describes one who comes to God empty-handed, wholly dependent, without any claim of merit. Connected to the Hebrew *anawim* (אֲנָוִים) — the humble, needy ones who trust only in God and appear throughout the Psalms and Prophets as God's beloved poor.

MEEK (*Greek: praus, πραῦς*) — Not weakness, but strength submitted to a master. The word was used of a wild horse that had been trained and bridled — all its natural power now directed by the will of its rider. The same word is used of Moses in Numbers 12:3 and of Jesus Himself in Matthew 11:29. Meekness is self-forgetfulness in the service of God and others.

MOURN (*Greek: pentheō, πενθέω*) — The strongest Greek word available for grief — the grief used of mourning the dead. It includes deep sorrow over personal sin and over the brokenness of the fallen world. It is not self-pitying sentiment but a grief that opens the soul to God's comfort.

PEACEMAKERS (*Greek: eirēnopoios, εἰρηνοποιός*) — Active, not passive. Not those who merely avoid conflict (peace-lovers) but those who actively work to reconcile people — to God and to one another. The Hebrew *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם) underlies this concept: wholeness, flourishing, rightness of relationship between persons and between humanity and God.

PURE IN HEART (*Greek: katharos, καθαρός*) — Clean, uncontaminated, undivided. The word was used in the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) for metals refined and purified by fire — all alloy removed, nothing left but the pure substance. A pure heart is one with a single allegiance, a single master, an undivided love directed wholly toward God.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

Encourage the group to look these up and read them aloud. Note how deeply rooted Jesus' language is in the Hebrew Scriptures.

- **"Poor in spirit" / the humble:** Isaiah 57:15; Isaiah 66:2; Psalm 34:18; Zephaniah 3:12
- **"Mourn... comforted":** Isaiah 61:1–3 (the direct Old Testament background Jesus is echoing — the group should read this passage carefully); Isaiah 40:1–2
- **"Meek shall inherit the earth":** Psalm 37:11 — this is a near-direct quotation; compare the two passages side by side
- **"Hunger and thirst for righteousness":** Isaiah 55:1–2; Psalm 42:1–2; Amos 8:11
- **"Merciful... obtain mercy":** Proverbs 11:17; Micah 6:8; Psalm 18:25
- **"Pure in heart":** Psalm 24:3–4; Psalm 51:10
- **"Peacemakers":** Isaiah 52:7; Numbers 25:12; Psalm 34:14
- **"Persecuted for righteousness":** Isaiah 51:7; 1 Kings 19:10; Psalm 31:13–15
- **"The prophets who were before you":** Nehemiah 9:26; Jeremiah 26:20–23; 2 Chronicles 36:15–16

HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

The Anawim — The Devout Poor of Israel

Throughout the Psalms and Prophets, there appears a class of people called the *anawim* — a Hebrew word meaning the humble, the afflicted, the needy ones. These were often literally poor, having been stripped of social standing and economic security. But their poverty had driven them to a deep, practiced dependence upon God. They had learned what wealth so easily obscures: that God alone is sufficient. Many of the most beloved Psalms were written from this posture. These overlooked, quietly faithful ones formed a stream of hidden holiness running through the life of Israel. When Jesus opens the Beatitudes by declaring that the poor in spirit possess the Kingdom, His Jewish audience would have heard an unmistakable announcement: God's long-promised vindication of the *anawim* has arrived. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs precisely to those the world has overlooked.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the eight Beatitudes speaks most directly to where you are in life right now? Why?
 2. The Beatitudes describe Kingdom character rather than give commands to obey. How does understanding them as descriptions rather than prescriptions change the way you approach them?
 3. Compare the values described in the Beatitudes with the values celebrated in our culture today. What tensions do you feel between these two value systems?
 4. Jesus says the "poor in spirit" *already possess* the Kingdom — present tense, now. What does it mean to possess the Kingdom while still living in a broken and fallen world?
 5. How is the meekness Jesus describes different from weakness or passivity? Can you think of someone — in Scripture or in your own experience — who exemplifies this quality?
 6. The peacemakers are called "children of God" — the only beatitude with this particular promise. What does that title reveal about the nature of God, and what does it demand of us?
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Application Challenge

This week, choose the one Beatitude that challenges you most personally. Write it on a card and carry it with you throughout the week. Each morning, ask God to work that quality into your character by His Spirit — not by your effort alone. At the end of the week, journal honestly: Where was that quality tested? How did you respond — in a Kingdom way or a worldly way? Bring your reflections to share with the group.

Salt, Light, and the Fulfillment of the Law

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 5:13–20 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

Having described who Kingdom people are in the Beatitudes, Jesus now tells them what they are in the world. Two of the most arresting images in all of the Gospels follow in rapid succession: salt and light. Notice, before anything else, the grammar. Jesus does not say "try to be salt" or "work hard to become light." He says, emphatically, "Ye *are* the salt of the earth" and "Ye *are* the light of the world." This is identity language, not instruction language. The identity precedes and grounds the mission. You are salt; therefore, do not lose your saltiness. You are light; therefore, do not hide what you already are.

Then, with verse 17, the entire conversation shifts in register. Jesus addresses His relationship to the Hebrew Scriptures with one of the most theologically freighted statements in the Sermon: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." The word "fulfil" is the hinge on which the entire second half of Matthew 5 turns. Jesus is not canceling the Old Testament. He is filling it with the fullness of its intended meaning — bringing every shadow to its substance, every type to its antitype, every promise to its personal embodiment in Himself. This sets the stage for the six antitheses that immediately follow.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 5:13–20 aloud in your group. Note particularly the shift in tone between verses 12 and 13, and again between verses 16 and 17.

WORD STUDIES

SALT (*Greek: halas, ἅλας*) — In the ancient world, salt was extraordinarily valuable. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid partly in salt — the origin of the English word "salary." Salt preserved food from decay, purified, and added flavor. As disciples in the world, we are a preserving, purifying, flavoring presence in a culture tending toward moral and spiritual decay.

SAVOUR (*Greek: mōrainō, μωραίνω*) — Literally, to become foolish or tasteless — to lose one's distinctive character. The Greek root is the same as our word "moron." Salt that has lost its essential saltiness is not merely flavorless — it is useless, fit only to be thrown out. The warning is vivid: discipleship that loses its distinctive, counter-cultural character loses its usefulness to both God and the world.

LIGHT (*Greek: phōs, φῶς*) — The most elemental reality of creation (Genesis 1:3). God is described as light (1 John 1:5). Jesus calls Himself the Light of the world (John 8:12). Here, astonishingly, He extends that title to His disciples. We bear derivative light — not the source, but reflectors of the true Light dwelling within us.

FULFIL (*Greek: plēroō, πληρόω*) — To fill up completely; to bring to full measure; to bring to its intended completion. Jesus is not merely keeping the rules of the Law — He is filling the entire Law with its full, deepest, God-intended content. Every command finds its true meaning in Him; every prophecy finds its Person; every shadow finds its substance.

JOT (*Greek: iōta, ἰῶτα*) — The smallest letter of the Greek alphabet, corresponding to the Hebrew *yod* (י) — the tiniest stroke of the pen in the Hebrew writing system. Jesus is affirming the complete, permanent, inviolable authority of Scripture down to its smallest textual details.

TITTLE (*Greek: keraia, κεραία*) — A tiny decorative serif or pen-stroke that distinguished one Hebrew letter from another — for example, distinguishing the letter *daleth* (ד) from *resh* (ר). To change such a stroke could change the meaning of a word entirely. Jesus says even these minute details of Scripture will not pass away until all is accomplished.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

- *Salt as covenant and purity*: Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5
- *Israel as light to the nations*: Isaiah 42:6; Isaiah 49:6; Isaiah 60:1–3
- *The lamp as God's word*: Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 6:23
- *Permanence of God's word*: Isaiah 40:8; Psalm 119:89; Psalm 19:7–9
- *The Law pointing to Christ*: Psalm 40:7–8 (quoted in Hebrews 10:7 as Messianic prophecy); Jeremiah 31:33

HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

The Scribes and Pharisees — And a Righteousness That Exceeds Theirs

In first-century Jewish society, the Pharisees were widely regarded as the most righteous men in Israel. They were meticulous, devoted, learned keepers of every detail of the Law — and then of the extensive oral tradition built around the Law to prevent accidental violation. To the average Galilean listener, saying that one's righteousness must *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees would have been breathtaking — perhaps even absurd. Exceed theirs? Who could? But Jesus is not calling His disciples to do more of the same thing, only harder. He is pointing to an entirely different kind of righteousness: not the external compliance of a rule-keeper, but the inner transformation of a heart re-made by God. The Pharisees had the letter perfectly. Jesus is calling for the spirit — which is infinitely more demanding and infinitely more beautiful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus says "Ye ARE the salt of the earth" — not "try to be." What is the difference between identity language and command language, and what does it mean for your mission that your identity precedes it?
2. What does it look like for salt to lose its savor? Can you think of examples — in your own life, or in the broader church — where Christian influence has become flat, indistinct, or "moron-like"?
3. "A city on a hill cannot be hidden." How should the sheer visibility of Christian life shape the way we live in our neighborhood, workplace, and community?
4. Jesus says He came to "fulfil" the Law and Prophets, not destroy them. How does understanding Jesus as the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament deepen your reading of the Hebrew Scriptures?
5. What do you think a righteousness that "exceeds" that of the scribes and Pharisees looks like in concrete, practical terms today?

Application Challenge

This week, identify one specific "dark place" in your sphere of influence — a relationship under strain, a workplace environment, a neighborhood situation, a social circle. Pray daily over it and ask God to show you one concrete way you can be "light" there — not through argument or pressure, but through the quiet, consistent character of Kingdom life. Come prepared to the next session to share what you discovered.

"Ye Have Heard... But I Say Unto You": The Antitheses, Part 1 — Heart Righteousness

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 5:21–37 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

Jesus now introduces what scholars call the "Antitheses" — six contrasting pairs introduced with the phrase "Ye have heard that it was said... but I say unto you." It is critically important to understand what Jesus is contrasting. He is NOT setting His teaching against the Old Testament Scriptures themselves. He is setting it against the scribal and rabbinic interpretations that had, over generations, reduced God's holy commands to minimum external requirements. The rabbis had built careful legal fences around the Law — defining precisely what you must not do in order to remain technically compliant. Jesus sweeps all of that away and digs straight to the heart beneath the behavior.

This section addresses four matters: (1) Murder and anger (vv.21–26); (2) Adultery and lust (vv.27–30); (3) Divorce (vv.31–32); and (4) Oaths (vv.33–37). In each case, Jesus presses beneath the surface act to the condition of the heart that generates it. Rage is the seed of murder. Lust is the seed of adultery. Hardness of heart is the seed of unjust divorce. Dishonesty of character is the seed of oath-taking systems.

The formula "but I say unto you" deserves special attention. No Jewish rabbi ever spoke this way. They always appealed to earlier authorities — "Rabbi Akiva said," or "in the name of Rabbi So-and-so." To speak entirely on one's own authority was either madness or a claim to divine authority. The crowds recognized it as the latter, and were astonished. Jesus is not interpreting the Law — He is authoring it, in the same voice from which it originally came.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 5:21–37 aloud in your group. Consider reading each of the four antitheses in sequence with a brief pause between them.

WORD STUDIES

RACA (*Aramaic: reqa, ܪܩܐ*) — An Aramaic term of contempt meaning "empty-headed," "good-for-nothing," or "worthless one." Jesus reveals that the spirit of murder begins not with a weapon but with contemptuous dismissal of another person's worth and dignity. To treat a human being — made in God's image — as a nonentity is already a kind of killing.

GEHENNA (*Greek: geenna, γέεννα; translated "hell" in KJV*) — Originally the Valley of Hinnom (Hebrew: *Ge-Hinnom*) southwest of Jerusalem — a site where pagan child sacrifices were offered to Molech (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31–32), and which by the first century had become the city's smoldering garbage dump, where fires burned continuously. Jesus appropriates this vivid, horrifying geography as the image of final, irreversible judgment. Every use of this word is a warning of ultimate seriousness.

ADULTERY / LUST (*Greek: moicheuō, μοιχεύω*) — Jesus shifts the legal definition of adultery from the external act to the internal intent: "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (v.28). The heart is the primary battlefield. The law had addressed the act; Jesus addresses the desire that pre-exists and produces it.

FORNICATION (*Greek: porneia, πορνεία*) — A broad term encompassing all forms of sexual immorality outside the covenant of marriage. This is the word Jesus uses in verse 32 as the exception clause regarding divorce — the one circumstance in which the marriage bond has already been catastrophically violated by the other party.

SWEAR / OATH (*Greek: omnyō, ὀμνύω*) — To take a formal oath invoking God or something sacred as witness to guarantee the truthfulness of one's words. Rabbinic tradition had developed elaborate hierarchies of which oaths were technically binding and which were not — essentially providing escape routes from broken promises. Jesus cuts the entire system down: let your simple word be trustworthy, and no oath system is needed.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

- **"Thou shalt not kill":** Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17 — The commandments Jesus is deepening, not dismissing
- **Anger leading to murder:** Genesis 4:5–8 (Cain); Proverbs 14:17; Proverbs 29:22; Psalm 37:8
- **"Thou shalt not commit adultery":** Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18; Job 31:1 (Job's covenant with his eyes — a remarkable parallel)
- **Purity and the temptation of lust:** Proverbs 6:25–29; Proverbs 23:26–27
- **Divorce:** Deuteronomy 24:1–4 (the passage Jesus references); Malachi 2:14–16 ("For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away")
- **Oaths and vows:** Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21–23; Ecclesiastes 5:2–5; Psalm 15:4

HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

The Divorce Debate and the Oath-System

In the first century, a fierce debate divided two major rabbinic schools on the question of divorce. The school of *Shammai* held that a man could only divorce his wife for sexual immorality. The school of *Hillel* — the more popular and influential position — held that a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason, including something as trivial as burning his dinner. Jesus' teaching aligns more closely with Shammai in its rigor, but goes further still by pointing to God's original intention in creation: "from the beginning it was not so" (cf. Matthew 19:3–9; Genesis 2:24). He is not merely taking sides in a debate — He is reaching behind the debate to its foundation.

On the matter of oaths: an entire system of rabbinic jurisprudence had developed to define which oaths were truly binding. Swearing by heaven was less binding than swearing by Jerusalem; swearing by the gold of the Temple was debated against swearing by the Temple itself. The practical effect was a culture of technically honest people who routinely broke commitments they had defined as non-binding. Jesus ends the system entirely: a person of genuine integrity has no need of oath-frameworks at all.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus traces the act of murder back to contempt and anger in the heart. In what ways do we participate in the "spirit of murder" without ever physically harming someone?
 2. Jesus says lust in the heart is adultery already committed. How does this teaching challenge our culture's widespread belief that private thoughts don't harm anyone?
 3. The instructions to "pluck out" the eye and "cut off" the hand (vv.29–30) are clearly hyperbole. What is Jesus actually teaching about the seriousness and cost of dealing with habitual sin?
 4. Why does Jesus emphasize reconciliation with a brother (vv.23–24) as something that takes priority even over worship at the altar? What does this reveal about God's priorities?
 5. In a culture saturated with casual speech and routine broken commitments, what would it look like in practical terms to let your "yea be yea, and your nay, nay"?
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Application Challenge

This week, practice an *anger inventory*. When you feel anger rising toward another person, pause and ask yourself: "What is beneath this anger — contempt? Self-righteousness? Fear?" Practice identifying the root, not just managing the symptom. Additionally: if you have a broken or strained relationship that Jesus' words about reconciliation bring to mind, take one step this week — a phone call, a note, a face-to-face conversation — even if it is uncomfortable to initiate.

"But I Say Unto You": The Antitheses, Part 2 — Radical Grace and Love

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 5:38–48 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

The final two antitheses address the law of retaliation and the law of love — and together they constitute perhaps the most radical ethical teaching ever delivered. The famous *lex talionis* — "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" — was not a permission slip for revenge. In its original Old Testament context, it was a mercy principle: it limited revenge to proportionality and ensured that courts of law rendered just, measured punishment rather than allowing blood-feuds to escalate without limit. Jesus is not arguing against just legal systems. He is freeing His disciples from the spirit of personal retaliation in private relationships.

Then comes the love command. "Love your neighbor" was already embedded in the Law (Leviticus 19:18) — Jesus is not inventing a new idea. The scribal problem was with an addition to the text that is not actually in the Old Testament: "hate your enemy." Certain schools had restricted "neighbor" to fellow Israelites, implicitly licensing indifference or hostility toward outsiders. Jesus demolishes this restriction entirely and calls His people to a love so expansive, so unconditioned, so resistant to natural categories that it can only be explained as a reflection of the character of God the Father Himself.

The section closes with the most searching command in the entire Sermon: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (v.48). This either destroys us with despair or sends us fleeing to grace — or both, in proper sequence.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 5:38–48 aloud in your group. Pause especially at verse 44 ("But I say unto you, Love your enemies...") and verse 48 ("Be ye therefore perfect...") to let the weight of those words settle.

WORD STUDIES

RESIST (*Greek: anthistēmi, ἀνθίστημι*) — To stand against, to oppose with force. Jesus is not teaching absolute passivity in the face of all evil — He Himself overturned the money-changers' tables (John 2:15) and confronted the Pharisees with fierce directness (Matthew 23). Rather, He is forbidding personal vindictiveness — the insistence on getting even, on matching evil with evil's own methods.

PERFECT (*Greek: teleios, τέλειος*) — Complete, whole, having reached its intended end or goal. This is not the word for sinless moral perfection (*hagios* would serve that concept); it is the word for wholeness of character — maturity, completeness, full-orbed humanity as God designed it. The Hebrew equivalent is *tamim* (טָמִים) — blameless, whole-hearted, without division. This verse is both the ultimate standard and, for the honest reader, the ultimate gospel need.

LOVE (*Greek: agapaō, ἀγαπάω*) — Not emotional affection (*phileō*) or sensual desire (*eros*), but a volitional, self-giving, unconditional commitment to seek another's highest good — regardless of that person's response, merit, or attractiveness. *Agapaō* is a choice, exercised toward the undeserving. It is the love that God exercises toward us, and the love He calls us to extend to enemies.

PUBLICANS (*Greek: telōnēs, τελώνης*) — Tax collectors employed by the Roman government, widely despised in Jewish society as traitors and extortionists. Jesus uses them as the very baseline of minimal love: even they love those who love them back. To love only those who love you is to do nothing more than the most disreputable members of society routinely do.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

- **"Eye for eye" — the *lex talionis*:** Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:19–20; Deuteronomy 19:21 — A legal principle of proportionate justice, not a license for private revenge
 - **Against personal retaliation:** Proverbs 20:22; Proverbs 24:29; Leviticus 19:18
 - **"Love your neighbour":** Leviticus 19:18 — The direct Old Testament source Jesus is citing
 - **Love for enemies in the Old Testament:** Exodus 23:4–5; Proverbs 25:21–22 (quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20); Job 31:29–30
 - **God's universal, indiscriminate generosity:** Psalm 145:9; Psalm 104:27–28; Psalm 19:4–6
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HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

Roman Conscription and the "Hate Your Enemy" Addition

The command to "go the extra mile" was drawn from a Roman military practice known as *angaria*: a Roman soldier had legal authority under imperial law to compel any subject of the Empire to carry his equipment for one Roman mile — approximately 1,000 paces. This was a humiliating, hated imposition. For Jesus to tell His Jewish listeners to volunteer a second mile would have been not merely surprising but genuinely offensive to deeply held nationalist sentiment. He is reframing an act of compelled humiliation as a voluntary act of Kingdom generosity and power.

As for the phrase "and hate thine enemy" — this phrase does not appear anywhere in the Old Testament. It reflects teachings found in the literature of the Qumran community (the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls), who explicitly commanded hatred of "the sons of darkness," and in certain rabbinic schools that restricted the love command of Leviticus 19:18 to apply only within Israel. Jesus refuses both limitations and calls His disciples to a love that mirrors God's own unrestricted, scandalous generosity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you understand the difference between "resisting not evil" personally and resisting injustice in society or on behalf of others? Is Jesus teaching total non-resistance in every situation?
2. The "going the extra mile" principle originated in a context of humiliating Roman compulsion. How does that context reframe what Jesus is teaching about serving those who have power over us or who treat us unjustly?
3. Jesus says God sends rain on the just and unjust alike. What does God's indiscriminate generosity toward all humanity reveal about His character — and what does that reveal about what our character should become?
4. Loving those who love you is easy. Who in your life is genuinely difficult to love? What would it look like to move toward that person in *agapaō* love — volitionally, regardless of their response?
5. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Does this verse fill you with inspiration, despair, or both? How does the gospel help us receive this command rather than being destroyed by it?

Application Challenge

Identify one person this week whom you find genuinely difficult to love — someone who has wronged you, someone you naturally avoid, or someone toward whom you feel contempt. Commit to one specific act of *agapaō* love directed toward that person. It need not be dramatic — a sincere prayer prayed on their behalf counts, and costs something. Come prepared to share with the group what you chose to do, and what it cost you.

Authentic Piety: Giving, Prayer, and Fasting

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 6:1–18 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

Jesus now moves from what His disciples do toward others to what they do toward God — and He addresses three central expressions of Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Three times in this passage He assumes these practices are already part of His disciples' lives. He does not say "if you give," "if you pray," "if you fast" — He says "when ye give," "when ye pray," "when ye fast." Charitable giving, prayer, and fasting are not optional extras for the spiritually ambitious. They are the assumed rhythms of Kingdom life.

The danger Jesus is addressing in each case is not the practice itself but the motive beneath it. The word He uses — *hypocrite* — comes from the Greek theater, where it referred to an actor wearing a mask, playing a role for an audience. Jesus is calling His disciples to a life of integrity: to be the same person in private as in public, to do the same things when no human eye is watching as when the whole synagogue is watching. The disease He is diagnosing is the addiction to human approval — performing religious acts not for God's pleasure but for the admiration of people.

The centerpiece of this entire section is the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13). This is not merely a prayer to be recited — it is a model, a template, a school of prayer. Every phrase is a doorway into a world of relationship with God the Father. It is the greatest prayer ever recorded, and it repays a lifetime of meditation. The group should not rush past it.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 6:1–18 aloud in your group. When you reach the Lord's Prayer (vv.9–13), consider reading it a second time — slowly, with pauses between each phrase.

WORD STUDIES

ALMS (*Greek: eleēmosynē, ἐλεημοσύνη*) — Charitable giving to the poor; derived from the Greek root *eleos*, meaning mercy. Almsgiving was one of the three great pillars of Jewish piety in the Second Temple period — alongside prayer and fasting. To give alms was to participate in God's own mercy toward the poor.

HYPOCRITE (*Greek: hypokritēs, ὑποκριτής*) — Literally, a stage actor — one who puts on a mask to play a role before an audience. A hypocrite is a person whose outward religious performance does not correspond to their inward reality. Jesus uses this word six times in Matthew 6 alone. The repetition is deliberate.

REWARD — "They have their reward" (*Greek: apechō, ἀπέχω*) — In verses 2, 5, and 16, this phrase translates a Greek commercial term found on ancient papyrus receipts, meaning "paid in full" — the equivalent of stamping a bill "settled." Those who perform religious acts for human applause have already received their full payment in the admiration they sought. Nothing remains outstanding from God. The account is closed.

FATHER (*Greek: Patēr, Πατήρ*) — Jesus opens His model prayer with "Our Father." While God is called Father in the Old Testament (Isaiah 63:16; Psalm 89:26), the intimate, personal, direct address of God as Father in individual prayer was distinctively Jesus' practice — and He gives it as a gift to His disciples. This single word redefines the entire posture of prayer.

HALLOWED (*Greek: hagiasthētō, ἁγιαζέσθω*) — To be set apart as wholly holy; to be treated and honored as sacred, as wholly other, as glorious beyond all comparison. The petition is not that God's name would become holy — it already is — but that it would be treated and revered as holy by us and by all the world.

DEBTS / TRESPASSES (*Greek: ophelēma, ὀφείλημα; paraptōma, παράπτωμα*) — Matthew uses "debts" in verse 12 and "trespasses" in verses 14–15. Both carry the image of moral obligation — something we owe to God that we cannot repay. Sin as debt is a picture of our utter moral insolvency before a holy God.

TEMPTATION (*Greek: peirasmos, πειρασμός*) — Can mean either a trial/test of faith or a temptation toward sin. "Lead us not into temptation" is a petition for God to keep us from situations where our weakness will be fatally exposed — a prayer of humble self-knowledge rather than confident self-sufficiency.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

- **Almsgiving and mercy to the poor:** Proverbs 19:17; Proverbs 28:27; Deuteronomy 15:7–11; Isaiah 58:6–7; Daniel 4:27
- **Warning against outward piety without the heart:** Isaiah 29:13 (Jesus later quotes this directly in Matthew 15:8–9); Isaiah 58:1–7; Amos 5:21–24; Zechariah 7:5–6
- **God as Father:** Isaiah 63:16; Isaiah 64:8; Psalm 89:26; Deuteronomy 32:6
- **Hallowing God's name:** Leviticus 22:32; Ezekiel 36:23; Isaiah 29:23
- **God's coming kingdom:** Daniel 2:44; Isaiah 9:6–7; Micah 4:1–3
- **Daily bread / manna:** Exodus 16:4 (God's daily provision in the wilderness — a direct parallel); Proverbs 30:8
- **Forgiveness:** Psalm 32:1–5; Psalm 130:3–4; Micah 7:18–19; Nehemiah 9:17
- **Fasting:** Isaiah 58:3–7; Joel 2:12–13; Zechariah 7:5; 2 Samuel 12:16; Nehemiah 1:4

HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

First-Century Jewish Prayer Practices and the Lord's Prayer

In the first century, public prayer was a formalized, rhythmic practice. The *Amidah* — the Eighteen Benedictions — was prayed three times daily, in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Prayer in the synagogue was communal, structured, and largely fixed. Jesus does not condemn public or structured prayer — He participates in synagogue worship Himself. What He condemns is prayer offered not as genuine address to God but as a religious performance designed to impress human spectators.

The Lord's Prayer bears a striking family resemblance to the ancient Jewish *Kaddish* — a prayer still prayed in synagogues today that hallows God's name and prays for the coming of His kingdom. Jesus is not inventing a new religious form from scratch; He is giving His disciples a prayer rooted in the deep soil of their tradition, but reoriented around the arrival of God's Kingdom in His own person. The community dimension of the prayer is also crucial: it is "Our Father" — not "My Father." Kingdom prayer is never merely private.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus identifies three pillars of religious practice: giving, prayer, and fasting. Which of these is most active in your own life right now? Which is most neglected?
 2. The "hypocrites" in this passage were not doing wrong things — they were doing right things for wrong reasons. How do we guard our own hearts against that same subtle trap?
 3. Walk through the Lord's Prayer phrase by phrase. Which petition carries the most personal weight for you right now, and why?
 4. Jesus ties our reception of God's forgiveness to our giving of forgiveness to others (vv.14–15). How do you understand this connection theologically? Is forgiveness earned by forgiving, or is something else being described here?
 5. Fasting is assumed as a regular practice of Jesus' disciples — not optional, not unusual. How does your group think about fasting today? Is it a living discipline, or has it quietly faded?
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Application Challenge

This week, commit to praying the Lord's Prayer slowly and meditatively each morning — not as a rote recitation but as a genuine, unhurried conversation with God the Father. Take each phrase and pause with it. Let it shape your actual prayers. At the end of the week, journal: Which phrase proved most challenging to mean with full sincerity? Which surprised you? Bring your reflections to share with the group at your next session.

Kingdom Priorities: Treasure, Worry, and Seeking First

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 6:19–34 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

Having addressed religious practices, Jesus now turns to what may be the most practical — and most personally searching — section of the entire Sermon: the relationship between His disciples and money. The connection between this section and the previous one is deeper than it first appears. Both sections deal with masters: God or mammon. Both deal with hearts: where is your allegiance, where is your anxiety, where is your trust rooted?

Jesus presents two kingdoms competing for our investment (vv.19–21), two kinds of vision competing for our focus (vv.22–23), and two masters competing for our service (v.24). In each pairing, He insists the choice is mutually exclusive. You cannot simultaneously lay up treasures in both realms. You cannot have a single eye and a divided eye at the same time. You cannot serve two masters with undivided loyalty.

Then He does something extraordinary. He turns to two of the most ordinary, beautiful features of the Galilean landscape — sparrows and wildflowers — and uses them as evidence of God's attentive, personal, specific provision. The argument moves from the lesser to the greater: if the God of creation clothes the grass of the field and feeds the birds of the air, how much more will He care for those made in His image and purchased by His Son? The section closes with one of the most important ordering principles in all of Scripture: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (v.33).

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 6:19–34 aloud in your group. Allow the images of birds, lilies, and grass to land with their full poetic weight before moving into discussion.

WORD STUDIES

TREASURE (*Greek: thēsauros, θησαυρός*) — A storehouse, a repository of valued things — the origin of the English word "thesaurus." The location of your treasure reveals the location of your heart. This is not a metaphor but a diagnostic: what you invest in, protect, and organize your life around is what you truly value.

MOTH AND RUST (*Greek: sēs, σής; brōsis, βρῶσις*) — In the ancient economy, two primary forms of wealth were fine clothing (woolen garments and silk, susceptible to moths) and stored grain or metals (susceptible to corrosion, decay, and vermin). Jesus identifies the two universal destroyers of earthly wealth and uses them to illustrate the inherent instability of any material security.

SINGLE / EVIL EYE (*Greek: haplous, ἀπλοῦς*) — "Single" means whole, undivided, generous — a clear eye that sees with one focus. In Jewish idiom of the first century, the "evil eye" (v.23) signified a stingy, covetous, materialistic spirit (cf. Proverbs 28:22; Deuteronomy 15:9). The "single eye" is one wholly fixed on God; the "evil eye" is one distracted and darkened by greed and anxiety about material things.

MAMMON (*Aramaic: māmōnā, מַמּוֹנָא*) — Wealth, money, property — personified here as a rival deity. The Aramaic root carries the meaning of "that in which one trusts." Jesus does not merely say you cannot have both God and money — He says you cannot serve both as masters. Both make absolute claims. Both demand ultimate loyalty. The choice is not optional and not neutral.

TAKE NO THOUGHT / ANXIOUS (*Greek: merimnaō, μεριμνάω*) — To be pulled in different directions; to be fragmented by competing concerns; to be drawn apart by worry. The word pictures a mind divided against itself — pulled this way and that by anxious "what ifs." It is the ancient Greek description of what modern psychology calls anxiety.

RIGHTEOUSNESS (*Greek: dikaiosynē, δικαιοσύνη*) — Both God's own righteous character and the righteous life that flows from right relationship with Him. To seek God's righteousness is to align your entire life — its values, its priorities, its daily choices — with God's own character and His Kingdom's purposes.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

- ***The instability of earthly treasure:*** Proverbs 11:4; Proverbs 23:4-5; Psalm 49:10-12, 16-17; Ecclesiastes 5:13-15
- ***God as provider; trusting Him over wealth:*** Psalm 23:1; Psalm 37:25; Proverbs 3:5-6; Deuteronomy 8:3
- ***God feeding the birds:*** Psalm 147:9; Job 38:41; Psalm 104:27-28
- ***Solomon's glory / lilies:*** 1 Kings 10:4-7; Song of Solomon (lilies as symbol of created beauty)
- ***Seeking God first:*** Psalm 27:4, 8; Psalm 105:4; Isaiah 55:6; 2 Chronicles 7:14; 1 Chronicles 22:19
- ***Against anxious striving:*** Psalm 127:1-2; Proverbs 12:25; Isaiah 26:3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

First-Century Galilean Economics

The men and women listening to Jesus on that hillside were not comfortable middle-class people with investment portfolios and retirement accounts. They were, by and large, peasant farmers, fishermen, artisans, and day-laborers living in the narrow band between subsistence and genuine hunger. Their anxieties about food and clothing were not theoretical. One bad harvest, one illness, one loss of a fishing boat, and a family could tip into destitution. When Jesus says "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink" (v.25), He is speaking to people for whom this was a daily, urgent, non-abstract concern.

His response to their anxiety is not to minimize it or offer a prosperity formula. He roots it in a theology of creation: the God who feeds sparrows and clothes the grass of the field — the God who created and sustains all things — is the same God who knows specifically what His children need before they ask (Matthew 6:32). Anxiety, Jesus implies, is ultimately a failure of theology: a forgetting of who God is.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." How does looking honestly at how you spend your time and money reveal where your heart actually is — not where you say it is?
 2. The "single eye" and "evil eye" metaphors describe a divided versus an undivided heart. In what specific ways do you find your attention — your "eye" — divided between God and material security?
 3. "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Jesus presents these as mutually exclusive masters. In a culture that treats financial security as basic wisdom, how do we distinguish wise stewardship from serving mammon?
 4. Jesus points to birds and wildflowers as evidence of God's provision. Have you experienced a season when you had to trust God for daily needs with no visible safety net? What did you learn about God — and about yourself?
 5. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." What does it look like, concretely and daily, to seek God's kingdom first — rather than fitting God into priorities you have already arranged around other things?
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Application Challenge

This week, conduct an honest financial audit of the heart. Review your last month of spending — not to produce guilt, but to honestly answer the question Jesus poses: Where is your treasure? Ask God to reveal one specific area where you are anxiously serving mammon rather than trustingly seeking His kingdom. Then take one concrete step to reorder that area — however small. Bring your findings (and your step) to share with the group.

Judging, Praying, and the Narrow Way

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 7:1–14 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

Chapter 7 opens with what may be the most misquoted verse in the entire Bible: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." It has been lifted from its context and deployed in modern culture as an absolute prohibition against all moral discernment — a conversation-stopper that immunizes any behavior from evaluation. But one glance at the context shatters that reading. Jesus immediately illustrates His teaching with the famous beam-and-speck image — and that illustration assumes not only that we will eventually help remove specks from our brothers' eyes, but that we are supposed to. The call is to humble, self-aware, honest discernment — not the elimination of all moral judgment.

Having addressed self-righteous judging, Jesus turns to prayer in verses 7–11 — expanding on what He taught in chapter 6 with three ascending, energetic verbs: ask, seek, knock. He grounds the invitation in the most basic human analogy available: a loving father who gives good things to his children. If earthly fathers, imperfect as they are, know how to give good gifts, how much more will the perfect heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him?

The section closes with the Golden Rule (v.12), which Jesus calls a summary of "the law and the prophets," and with the image of the two gates and two roads: one wide and crowded, leading to destruction; one narrow and difficult, leading to life. The choice between them is the choice the entire Sermon has been preparing us to make.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 7:1–14 aloud in your group. The beam-and-speck image (vv.3–5) was likely intentionally comic — read it with the awareness that Jesus' audiences may have laughed at its absurdity before feeling its sting.

WORD STUDIES

JUDGE (*Greek: krinō, κρίνω*) — To separate, evaluate, condemn. The kind of judging Jesus prohibits is condemnatory, self-righteous, hypocritical judgment rendered by those who are blind to their own greater faults. The same word is used positively elsewhere — "Judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24). Jesus forbids the abuse of the faculty, not the faculty itself.

MOTE / BEAM (*Greek: karphos, κάρφος / dokos, δοκός*) — A tiny speck of sawdust versus a structural timber or log. The image is deliberately, outrageously comic: a man walking around with a load-bearing beam protruding from his eye, squinting and straining to locate a splinter in someone else's. Jesus intended His listeners to laugh — and then to recognize themselves.

ASK / SEEK / KNOCK (*Greek: aiteō / zēteō / krouō*) — All three verbs are in the Greek present tense, indicating continuous, ongoing, persistent action: keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. This is not a vending-machine theology — insert prayer, receive blessing. It is an invitation to a sustained, persevering, relational prayer life that mirrors the tenacity of a child who knows their father loves them.

STRAIT / NARROW (*Greek: stenos, στενός*) — Narrow, constricted — not wide enough to admit those carrying the full baggage of self-sufficiency and worldly attachment. The image is not of an arbitrary difficulty but of the inherent demands of genuine Kingdom life. Few find it — not because God has hidden it, but because its requirements run squarely against the grain of fallen human nature.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

- **Warning against self-righteous judgment:** Proverbs 11:2; Proverbs 21:2; Psalm 19:12–13; Isaiah 65:5
 - **God as the ultimate, perfect Judge:** Genesis 18:25; Psalm 75:7; Isaiah 33:22; Ecclesiastes 12:14
 - **Asking God persistently and expectantly:** Psalm 27:7–9; Psalm 28:1–2; Jeremiah 29:13; Isaiah 55:6
 - **God as good Father and Provider:** Psalm 34:10; Psalm 84:11–12; Psalm 103:13; Isaiah 49:15
 - **"Love your neighbour" — the Golden Rule's foundation:** Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5 — Jesus says the rule "is the law and the prophets"
 - **The two ways:** Deuteronomy 30:19 (life and death set before Israel); Proverbs 4:18; Proverbs 14:12; Isaiah 35:8; Jeremiah 21:8; Psalm 1:1–6; Psalm 16:11
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HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

The Golden Rule and the Gate Imagery

The negative form of the Golden Rule — "Do not do to others what you would not want done to you" — was famously attributed to the great rabbi Hillel, who said it was the whole of the Torah, and everything else was commentary. Jesus affirms the wisdom of the principle but transforms it into a positive, active command: not merely refraining from harm, but actively doing good. This is a significant moral elevation — from restraint to initiative, from avoidance to engagement.

The gate and road imagery in verses 13–14 would have been familiar to any Jewish listener. The idea of the "two ways" — the way of life and the way of death — runs throughout Jewish wisdom literature and was well established in Jesus' day (cf. Psalm 1; Deuteronomy 30:19; the Didache, an early Christian document, opens with exactly this image). Jesus is not creating a new concept; He is announcing Himself as the gate — the Person through whom the narrow way is entered.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. "Judge not" is perhaps the most frequently misquoted verse in the Bible. From the full context of verses 1–5, what IS Jesus actually prohibiting, and what IS He affirming and permitting?
2. The beam-and-speck illustration is intentionally comic and absurd. Why do you think Jesus uses humor here? What does laughter reveal about the human tendency toward self-justification and blindness to our own faults?
3. "Ask... seek... knock" are all continuous present-tense verbs: keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. What does this teach us about the nature of prayer as relationship rather than transaction?
4. Jesus says earthly fathers, imperfect as they are, give good gifts to their children. How does your experience of your earthly father — for good or ill — affect the way you approach God in prayer? How does Jesus' description correct or enrich that picture?
5. The Golden Rule: Jesus says it "is the law and the prophets" — it summarizes the entire Old Testament ethic in one sentence. How does loving others as you love yourself actually fulfill, rather than replace, the whole moral structure of Scripture?

Application Challenge

The beam test: Before pointing out a fault in someone else this week, pause and honestly ask yourself, "Do I have any version of this same fault, only larger?" Practice the spiritual discipline of self-examination before other-examination. Keep a brief, honest journal this week of moments when you caught yourself in self-righteous judgment — and what you discovered underneath it when you looked. Bring your findings to the group.

True and False: Prophets, Prayers, and Foundations

Scripture Reference:

Matthew 7:15–29 (KJV)

COMMENTARY

The Sermon on the Mount does not end with gentle encouragement. It ends with three solemn warnings and one ultimate choice — and all four are designed to ensure that the hearers do not merely admire what they have heard, but act upon it.

The first warning (vv.15–20) is against false prophets — those who wear the appearance of sheep but are inwardly wolves. The test Jesus gives is neither eloquence nor claimed spiritual authority nor even miraculous signs. The test is fruit. Character and conduct, over time, reveal what a tree actually is. You cannot fake the harvest long-term.

The second warning (vv.21–23) is the most sobering passage in the entire Sermon — perhaps in the entire Gospel. Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom. Even those who have prophesied, cast out demons, and worked miracles in Jesus' name may hear the words no human being should ever have to hear: "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." The distinguishing mark of those who belong to Jesus is not religious performance but doing the will of the Father — and being genuinely known by the Son.

The Sermon closes with a parable of two builders (vv.24–27) who hear the same teaching but respond differently: one builds on bedrock, one builds on sand. The storm comes for both. The difference is catastrophic and permanent. And then the crowds respond — not with argument, not with criticism, but with astonishment at the sheer authority of the One who has been speaking to them. "He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (v.29). After three chapters of the most searching, demanding, and beautiful teaching ever given, they have recognized in Jesus something wholly unprecedented: the voice of God Himself, speaking in human flesh.

SCRIPTURE READING

Read Matthew 7:15–29 aloud in your group. Read verse 29 slowly, and allow a moment of silence after it. The crowd's astonishment is the appropriate response — and it should still be ours.

WORD STUDIES

FALSE PROPHETS (*Greek: pseudoprophētai, ψευδοπροφήται*) — Those who claim to speak for God but do not — whether through deliberate deception or through genuine self-deception. The Greek prefix *pseudo* means "false, counterfeit." The danger Jesus identifies is not merely doctrinal error but a predatory spiritual agenda — these come to devour the flock, not to serve it.

RAVENING (*Greek: harpax, ἄρπαξ*) — Ravenous, rapacious, violently snatching. The wolf does not nibble at the edges — it tears and devours. The image is drawn directly from Ezekiel 22:27. False teachers are not merely mistaken; they are dangerous.

INIQUITY (*Greek: anomia, ἀνομία*) — Literally, "lawlessness" — living as though there is no moral law of God, no accountability, no sovereign authority over human life. Those Jesus rejects in verses 21–23 are called "workers of iniquity" — their impressive religious activity was entirely disconnected from genuine submission to God's will and genuine relationship with God's Son.

WISE / FOOLISH (*Greek: phronimos, φρόνιμος / mōros, μωρός*) — The wise man is prudent, practically wise, far-sighted — one who thinks ahead to consequences and orders his life accordingly. The foolish man is the *mōros* — the moral equivalent of a person who builds a house without first checking what is beneath the surface. The same word root gave us "moron." Both men hear the same sermon. Only one allows it to change what he actually does.

ROCK (*Greek: petra, πέτρα*) — Not a small stone (*petros*) but solid bedrock — a massive, immovable foundation. Building on the rock means not merely hearing the words of Jesus, not merely admiring them, not merely discussing them — but doing them. This is the one and only thing that distinguishes the two builders.

AUTHORITY (*Greek: exousia, ἐξουσία*) — Inherent power; the right to act from one's own nature and standing, not delegated from another. The scribes derived all their authority by citing chains of earlier rabbis. Jesus cited no one. He spoke from within Himself — as the source, not the channel, of divine truth. The crowd recognized this as something wholly different from anything they had ever heard.

OLD TESTAMENT CROSS-REFERENCES

- ***False prophets:*** Deuteronomy 13:1–5; Deuteronomy 18:20–22; Jeremiah 23:16–17; Ezekiel 13:3–7; Micah 3:5–6
- ***Known by their fruits:*** Isaiah 3:10; Proverbs 20:11; Jeremiah 17:9–10
- ***"Depart from me" — the direct Old Testament quotation:*** Psalm 6:8 (Jesus quotes the Psalms and applies them as sovereign judge — a profound implicit claim to divine identity)
- ***Outward religion without genuine relationship:*** Isaiah 29:13; Malachi 1:6
- ***The two ways and the two foundations:*** Proverbs 10:25; Isaiah 28:16–17 (the tested cornerstone, cited in 1 Peter 2:6); Psalm 1:1–6 (the clearest Old Testament parallel to the two builders); Ezekiel 13:10–16 (a wall built without mortar that collapses — a direct visual parallel to the house on sand)
- ***God's word accomplishing its purpose:*** Isaiah 55:11; Deuteronomy 18:15–19 (the prophet to come — fulfilled in Jesus); Psalm 29:4

HISTORICAL CONTEXT NOTE

The Authority of Jesus and the Scribes' Method

The scribes — the professional interpreters and teachers of the Law in first-century Judaism — had a very specific and well-established method of teaching. Every ruling, every interpretation, every point of Torah was backed by a chain of authorities: "Rabbi So-and-so said in the name of Rabbi Such-and-such, who heard it from..." Authority was always derived, always borrowed, always traceable to earlier and earlier sources. It was unthinkable for a teacher to simply assert, on his own authority, a definitive interpretation of Scripture — let alone to contradict the received tradition.

Jesus did exactly this, consistently and without apology, throughout the Sermon on the Mount. "I say unto you" — six times — with no appeal to any earlier authority, because none existed that superseded His own. The crowd's astonishment at the end of chapter 7 is the only rational response to someone who either believes He is God or has lost His mind entirely. The Sermon itself, read honestly, forces a conclusion: the One who spoke these words cannot be reduced to a wise human teacher. He speaks as only the Author of the Law can speak.

Note also that when Jesus says in verse 23, "Depart from me, ye that work iniquity," He is directly quoting Psalm 6:8 and applying it in the first person — as the One before whom all humanity will ultimately stand. This is another unmistakable, implicit claim to divine identity woven into the fabric of the Sermon's climax.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus says we can identify false teachers by their fruit. What specific kinds of fruit should we look for — or look for the absence of — in those who claim to speak for God today?
 2. The "Lord, Lord" passage (vv.21-23) is among the most sobering in all of Scripture. What does it reveal about the limits of religious activity — even miracle-working — as evidence of genuine relationship with Jesus?
 3. What does it mean to "do the will of my Father which is in heaven" (v.21)? How is this different from — and deeper than — merely following a set of religious rules?
 4. The two builders hear exactly the same sermon and presumably respond to it similarly in the moment. What makes them ultimately different? What is the difference between hearing Jesus' words and actually building on them?
 5. The crowd was astonished at Jesus' authority. After studying this entire sermon together as a group — from the Beatitudes to the two builders — how has your understanding of Jesus' authority, and of the demands it places on your life, grown or deepened?
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Application Challenge — Final Personal Inventory

Go back through all eight sections of this study. Take your time. Select two or three of Jesus' teachings that you believe you have genuinely built into your life — they have moved from your head into your habits. Then honestly identify two or three that remain more intellectual acknowledgment than lived practice. Write both lists down. Then bring them to a trusted friend from the group and ask them to hold you accountable to building on the rock — not merely hearing these words, but doing them, one specific step at a time.

"Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock." — Matthew 7:24

A Note on the Sermon and the Gospel

The Sermon on the Mount is not a means of salvation by works. This must be said clearly, and said last, because every honest reading of Matthew 5–7 ends in one of two places: pride or despair. Pride is the sure sign that the Sermon has not truly been read — for no one who takes these words at their full weight will conclude that they have achieved them. Despair is the more honest response, but it is not the final one.

The Sermon has two great purposes. First, it describes the life of a Kingdom citizen empowered by the Holy Spirit — the life that Jesus Himself lived, perfectly and completely, on our behalf. Second, and equally important, it exposes our utter inadequacy to produce this life by effort, determination, or religious discipline alone. Every serious reader of the Beatitudes, the antitheses, the Lord's Prayer, and the two builders finishes not with a checklist to implement but with an acute awareness of need — a need only grace can meet.

This is the Sermon's evangelistic genius. It sends us to the cross. Jesus — and Jesus alone — lived this sermon from beginning to end without a single deviation. He was poor in spirit before the Father; He was meek and pure in heart; He loved His enemies unto death; He gave, prayed, and fasted in secret; He sought first the Kingdom of God in every breath. And He died so that what He was might, by the miracle of the indwelling Spirit, begin to be formed in us.

The Christian life is not striving, in one's own strength, to live the Sermon on the Mount. It is receiving the life of the One who did live it — wholly, freely, by grace through faith — and then, day by day, allowing that life to be expressed through us by the Spirit He has given. We are not the light of the world by effort. We are the light of the world because He, who is the Light, dwells within us.

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." — Galatians 2:20

Recommended Resources

The following resources are commended to any group that wishes to go deeper in their study of the Sermon on the Mount. They represent some of the finest pastoral and scholarly work available on these three chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

Primary Text

The Holy Bible, King James Version. The primary text for all sessions. Members are strongly encouraged to bring a personal KJV Bible to every meeting and to read all cross-references directly from the text. No commentary, however good, substitutes for the Word itself.

Pastoral and Devotional Commentaries

Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. A monumental two-volume treatment based on Lloyd-Jones' expository sermons preached at Westminster Chapel, London. Unmatched for theological depth, pastoral warmth, and practical application. Often considered the finest devotional exposition of the Sermon in the English language.

Stott, John R. W. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press (The Bible Speaks Today series). Accessible, scholarly, and beautifully written. Stott brings the text alive for the contemporary reader with clarity and theological precision. Ideal for personal reading alongside this group study.

Chambers, Oswald. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. Grand Rapids: Discovery House. Chambers' penetrating and characteristically vivid treatment of the Sermon, drawn from his lectures and talks. Short, dense, and immensely spiritually nourishing.

Scholarly Commentary

Carson, D. A. *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. Carson's exegetical depth and careful attention to the Greek text make this an invaluable companion for leaders who want to understand the textual foundation beneath the pastoral application.

Reference Tools

Strong, James. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. The indispensable tool for all word studies. Every Greek and Hebrew word underlying an English KJV translation is indexed and defined. Available in print and in numerous free digital formats. Used faithfully, it will transform the depth of any group's engagement with Scripture.

Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias (Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words; Easton's Bible Dictionary; The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia). These reference tools provide historical, cultural, and linguistic context for difficult terms and backgrounds. Any good Christian bookstore or online database will provide access to multiple options.

Soli Deo Gloria



This guide was prepared for small group Bible study use.
All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.