

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: The Beatitudes; Salt and Light

Matthew 5:1–16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Matthew 5:1–16 is the threshold of the Sermon on the Mount, and what is doctrinally at stake is the very nature of life in Christ's kingdom. The Beatitudes are not entrance requirements that we satisfy in order to make ourselves acceptable to God. They are a portrait of the character God produces in those who have come to Him empty-handed and received His grace. Notice the order: it begins with poverty of spirit, the honest admission that we bring nothing, and only then moves on to mourning, meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity, peacemaking, and finally a willingness to suffer for the name of Christ. This is the anatomy of a heart formed by grace, and it stands directly against any notion that we climb a ladder of works to earn salvation. Help your class see that grace comes first, and this character is the fruit, not the root.

But the passage does not stop at character; it moves to mission. Salt and light are not optional add-ons for especially zealous Christians. Jesus says “you are” salt and light, a statement of fact about every kingdom citizen. The people God has remade by grace are sent into the world to preserve it from decay and to shine into its darkness. This is where the inward work of the Beatitudes turns outward into visible, influential holiness and good works. And it points forward to the kingdom Christ would establish in His church, a people whose distinct lives put the glory of God on display before a watching world.

So teach for both. Aim to ground your students more deeply in grace, so that they stop trying to impress God and learn to come to Him poor in spirit. And aim to send them out, refusing to hide, ready to be tasted and seen, so that the people around them glorify the Father. The lesson succeeds when students are both humbled by grace and stirred to shine.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus pronounces “blessed” over the poor in spirit, the mourners, and the meek (5:3–5), the very opposite of who the world calls happy. Taken together, what are the Beatitudes actually describing, and why is it important to see them as a portrait of the kingdom citizen rather than a checklist for earning God's favor?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by setting the scene. Jesus has been preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing the sick (4:23–25), and now He sits down on the mountainside to teach His disciples with the crowds listening in. The very first word out of His mouth, repeated nine times, is “blessed.” The

Greek word carries the sense of a deep, settled happiness, the flourishing of a life that is right with God. Jesus is announcing where true human flourishing is actually found, and it is nowhere the world would look.

Help your class hear how shocking this list is. The world blesses the rich, the powerful, the self-sufficient, and the comfortable. Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, and the hungry. He is not romanticizing misery; He is revealing that the kingdom belongs to those who know their need. The Beatitudes describe one connected portrait, not eight unrelated virtues. They sketch the character of a single kind of person, the citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

Press the crucial point: this is not a checklist for earning God's favor. If we read it as a ladder, we miss the gospel entirely. The list begins with poverty of spirit precisely because the door into the kingdom is empty-handed admission of need, not accomplishment. Everything else flows from grace received. The Beatitudes are the shape that grace takes in a human life, the fruit of God's work in us, not the price of admission.

Tie this to the larger biblical story. This is the heart Jesus came to create in His people, and it is the character of those who will make up His kingdom, the church He was about to establish. Plant that thread now; it will run through the whole Sermon on the Mount and into the rest of Matthew.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Beatitudes as a portrait of the kingdom citizen, not a ladder of works to earn salvation
- The flourishing life as God defines it, over against the world's definition of blessing
- Grace received first, with Christlike character as the fruit (Ephesians 2:8–10)
- Poverty of spirit as the doorway into the kingdom
- The unity of the Beatitudes: one heart formed by grace, described from many angles

Discussion Prompts

- Which beatitude is the hardest for you to believe is really a blessing, and why?
- How does reading the Beatitudes as fruit rather than requirement change the way you hear them?
- Where do you see the world's definition of the good life competing with Jesus' definition in your own heart?

Question 2

Student Question:

The first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (5:3), means coming to God empty-handed and admitting you have nothing to offer. Where in your life are you still trying to impress God, or others, instead of simply confessing your need of Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and it presses on the foundation stone of the whole sermon. To be “poor in spirit” is to stand before God with empty hands, knowing you are spiritually bankrupt and have nothing to bargain with. It is the tax collector in the temple who would not even lift his eyes but beat his breast and prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Jesus says the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like that.

Help students see how counterintuitive this is. We are trained from childhood to earn approval by performing, by impressing, by hiding our weaknesses. We carry that same instinct into our walk with God, quietly trying to be impressive enough to deserve His attention. The first beatitude dismantles all of it. The kingdom is not for the impressive; it is for the needy who know it.

Invite honest reflection without forcing confession. Ask where they are still performing. For some it is at church, projecting a put-together faith they do not feel. For others it is in prayer, where they only come to God once they have cleaned themselves up. For others it is comparing themselves to other believers. The cure is not trying harder but coming poorer, learning to say, “Lord, I have nothing; have mercy.”

End on the gift. Poverty of spirit is not despair; it is the only doorway into the kingdom, and what lies on the other side is everything. The empty-handed receive the kingdom of heaven.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Poverty of spirit as honest acknowledgment of spiritual need (Luke 18:9–14)
- The danger of performance-based religion and the fear of being truly known
- Grace received by the needy, not earned by the impressive
- Humility before God as the posture of every genuine disciple

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to impress God or others instead of confessing your need?
- What would change in your prayers if you came empty-handed rather than cleaned-up?
- How can this class help one another drop the pretense and be honest about our need of grace?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (5:6). What does it mean to hunger for righteousness, and what does this beatitude teach us about where real satisfaction is found?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This fourth beatitude is the hinge of the eight. The first three describe emptiness: poor in spirit, mourning, meek. Now comes hunger: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (5:6). The one who has admitted spiritual bankruptcy now craves what only God can give. Help your class feel the intensity of the image. Jesus does not say those who prefer righteousness, or those who admire it, but those who hunger and thirst for it the way a starving person craves bread and a parched throat craves water.

Explain the double sense of righteousness here. It includes the right standing with God that we cannot manufacture and must receive, and it includes the righteous life, the longing to actually be good, to do what God commands, to see His justice done in the world. The kingdom citizen wants both: to be made right with God and to live rightly before Him.

Then draw out the promise: “they shall be satisfied.” This is one of the most hopeful words in the sermon. So many people pour their lives into appetites that never satisfy, chasing money, status, pleasure, or approval, only to find the hunger returns sharper than before. Jesus promises that this one hunger, the hunger for righteousness, will be filled to overflowing by God Himself.

Bring it home. The reason so many believers feel spiritually flat is that they are feeding on the wrong things. Real satisfaction is not found by lowering our hunger but by aiming it at the only One who can fill it. Encourage your class to ask honestly what they are truly hungry for.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Righteousness as both right standing with God and righteous living
- The kingdom citizen’s deep desire for God and His ways
- The promise that God satisfies the hunger He awakens (Psalm 107:9; John 6:35)
- The futility of chasing satisfaction in lesser appetites

Discussion Prompts

- Be honest: what are you most hungry for right now, and is it satisfying you?
- What would it look like this week to feed your hunger for righteousness rather than starve it?
- Where have you settled for spiritual snacks instead of the satisfaction Jesus promises?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus blesses the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers (5:7-9). Which of these three is God most clearly pressing on you right now, and what is one relationship where it needs to show up?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question gathers three beatitudes that all turn outward toward other people: the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers (5:7–9). The grace that begins as poverty of spirit does not stay private; it overflows into the way we treat others. Mercy means treating people not as they deserve but as God has treated us. Purity of heart means a single, undivided devotion to God rather than a double life. Peacemaking means actively pursuing reconciliation, not merely avoiding conflict.

Notice the staggering promises attached. The merciful shall receive mercy. The pure in heart shall see God. The peacemakers shall be called sons of God. These are not rewards earned by effort but the natural inheritance of those whose hearts God has remade. The merciful receive mercy because they have understood and welcomed it; the pure see God because their gaze is no longer divided; the peacemakers are called His children because they bear the family likeness of the God who made peace with us through His Son.

Bring this directly into your students' relationships. Ask each one to consider which of the three God is pressing on them right now. Some are withholding mercy from someone who wronged them. Some are living with a divided heart, devoted to God on Sunday and to something else the rest of the week. Some are avoiding the hard work of peacemaking in a strained relationship.

Keep it concrete and personal. The goal is not to admire these virtues in the abstract but to name one relationship where the Spirit is calling them to embody it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mercy as treating others the way God has mercifully treated us (Matthew 18:33)
- Purity of heart as single-minded devotion to God (James 4:8)
- Peacemaking as bearing the family likeness of the God of peace (Romans 12:18)
- Christlike character expressed outwardly toward other people

Discussion Prompts

- Which of these three, mercy, purity, or peacemaking, is God pressing on you most right now?
- Name one relationship where it needs to show up, and what your next step would be.
- Where is your devotion most divided, and what would single-hearted purity look like there?

Question 5

Student Question:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (5:10), and Jesus tells His disciples to rejoice when reviled (5:11–12). What does this teach us about what it costs to belong to Christ, and why can such suffering be called blessing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The final beatitude breaks the pattern by lingering. Jesus blesses “those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (5:10), then turns from the third person to the second, looking His disciples in the eye: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (5:11). The blessing is not for suffering in general but for suffering because of Christ and His righteousness.

Help your class grasp why this belongs in the list. The character described in the Beatitudes will inevitably collide with a world that runs on the opposite values. A people who are meek, merciful, pure, and committed to righteousness will provoke a world built on pride, retaliation, and compromise. Persecution is not a sign that something has gone wrong; it is often a sign that the kingdom is showing up. Jesus places His disciples in the company of the prophets who were persecuted before them (5:12).

Then explain how such suffering can be called blessing. Jesus gives the reason: “for your reward is great in heaven” (5:12). Persecution for His name is evidence that we truly belong to Him, that our lives are bound up with His. It is fellowship in His own sufferings, and it carries the certainty of reward from the King Himself. This is also a sober reminder that the Christian life is costly. Following Christ is not a path to comfort and applause but to faithful endurance, and we are called to remain faithful even when it costs us (2 Timothy 3:12).

Be tender here. Some in your class may face real opposition at work, in their families, or among old friends. Others may have made faith easy by quietly hiding it. Use this question to encourage the persecuted and to gently challenge those who have avoided all friction by going silent.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cost of belonging to Christ in a world opposed to His ways (John 15:18–20)
- Persecution for righteousness as a mark of genuine discipleship, not a sign of failure
- The reward of heaven for those who suffer faithfully for Christ’s name
- The call to remain faithful under pressure rather than soften or hide the faith (2 Timothy 3:12)
- Fellowship with the prophets and with Christ Himself in suffering

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you experienced any cost, large or small, for following Christ?
- Have you ever avoided friction by quietly hiding your faith, and what did that cost you?
- How does knowing the reward is in heaven help you endure opposition now?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth," and warns that salt can lose its taste and become useless (5:13). Where might your own influence as a Christian be at risk of going flat, and what would it take to recover your saltiness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

With verse 13 Jesus turns from describing His people to commissioning them. "You are the salt of the earth." In the ancient world salt was precious; it preserved meat from rotting and gave food its flavor. By calling His disciples salt, Jesus says they are meant to slow the decay of the world around them and to bring out a flavor of life that would otherwise be missing. This is influence, the quiet, pervasive, preserving presence of holy lives.

Then comes the warning: "but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (5:13). Salt that has gone flat is useless. Help your class see the danger Jesus names. A Christian can lose his distinctiveness, blending so thoroughly into the surrounding culture that there is nothing left to preserve or flavor. When our lives look no different from everyone else's, our saltiness is gone.

Press the question into real life. Where might their influence be going flat? Often it happens gradually: small compromises, a slow conforming to the values around us, a quiet decision to keep our convictions to ourselves until there is nothing left that anyone would notice. Salt loses its taste not in one dramatic fall but by slow dilution.

Then point toward recovery. The remedy is not to become harsh or preachy but to recover the distinct character of the Beatitudes, a life so shaped by grace that it preserves and flavors everything around it. Saltiness is restored as we return to the source, letting Christ make us genuinely different again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian's calling to be a preserving, flavoring influence in the world
- The danger of losing distinctiveness through conformity to the culture (Romans 12:2)
- Holiness as visible difference, not withdrawal or harshness
- The need to return to grace to recover our influence

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you sense your own saltiness has gone flat or diluted?
- What small compromises tend to erode a Christian's distinctiveness over time?
- What would it take this week to recover a flavor of life that others can actually taste?

Question 7

Student Question:

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says, and “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (5:14). What does it mean that the church is meant to be visible rather than hidden, and how does that shape the way we think about holiness and good works?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus shifts the image from salt to light: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (5:14). Where salt works quietly and unseen, light works by being seen. The two images together capture the full shape of Christian witness: a preserving presence and a visible testimony. Help your class notice that Jesus states this as a fact. We do not generate the light; in Him we have become light, and light by its nature shines.

Then He drives home the absurdity of hiding it: “Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house” (5:15). It would be ridiculous to light a lamp only to cover it. Yet that is exactly what many believers do, keeping their faith private, tucked away where it cannot embarrass them or inconvenience anyone. Jesus says the church is meant to be like a city on a hill, openly visible, impossible to miss.

This reframes how we think about holiness and good works. They are not meant to be hidden, private matters between us and God alone. They are meant to be seen, not for our glory but as a testimony that points beyond us. The church is God’s lampstand in a dark world, and the good works of His people are the light that draws attention to Him.

Help your class feel the weight of this calling. To be visible is to be vulnerable, open to scrutiny and even to opposition. But hiddenness is not an option for the people of the kingdom. We were made to shine.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as the visible light of the world, not a hidden private faith (Philippians 2:15)
- Holiness and good works as meant to be seen, pointing beyond ourselves to God
- The absurdity and disobedience of hiding the faith God has given
- Christian witness as both a preserving presence (salt) and a visible testimony (light)

Discussion Prompts

- In what ways have you been keeping your faith under a basket?
- What makes being visibly Christian feel risky to you, and is that risk worth avoiding?
- Where is God calling you to let your light be openly seen rather than carefully hidden?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus says to let your light shine “before others” (5:16). Who are the specific people in your everyday life, at work, at home, among neighbors, who are watching, and what would they actually see if they looked closely at you this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question moves the truth from the abstract to the concrete. Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others” (5:16). Light is not for the lamp’s sake; it is for the people in the house. So the question for each student is simple and searching: who, specifically, are the others? Not the world in general, but the actual people who share their days, the coworker in the next cubicle, the spouse across the table, the neighbor over the fence, the cashier they see every week.

Help your students name real people. Witness becomes vague and toothless when it stays general. It becomes powerful when we picture a particular face and ask, what does this person actually see when they look at my life? Do they see patience or irritability, generosity or self-interest, hope or the same anxiety everyone else carries?

Encourage honest self-examination here. Often our public faith and our daily behavior do not match. We may be known as a churchgoer and yet show none of the salt and light of Christ to the people closest to us. The aim is not to perform but to let the genuine character of the Beatitudes become visible in ordinary interactions.

Close by turning the gaze forward. Ask each person to choose one specific individual and one specific way their light could shine for that person this week, in a way the person could actually notice.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Witness made concrete in specific, everyday relationships
- The consistency of our daily behavior with our profession of faith
- Good works as the visible evidence others actually observe (1 Peter 2:12)
- The danger of a faith that is public in name but invisible in practice

Discussion Prompts

- Name one specific person who watches your life closely. What do they see?
- Where does your daily behavior fail to match what you profess on Sunday?
- What is one concrete way your light could shine for that person this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus says the purpose of our shining is “that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). How do we let our light shine openly without slipping into

showing off, and how does the whole Sermon on the Mount, which warns against doing righteousness to be seen, keep these two in balance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, because it holds together two truths that can easily fall apart. Jesus commands us to let our light shine openly so that people see our good works (5:16), yet in the very next chapter He warns against practicing our righteousness “before other people in order to be seen by them” (6:1). At first glance these seem to contradict each other. Take your time helping the class resolve the tension, because getting this right protects both bold witness and genuine humility.

The key is found in the last words of verse 16: “that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” The difference between shining and showing off is not visibility; it is the aim of the heart. Both the hypocrite and the faithful disciple may do visible good works. But the hypocrite does them so that people will glory in him, while the disciple does them so that people will glory in God. The good works are the same; the destination of the glory is opposite.

Draw out how the whole Sermon on the Mount keeps these in balance. Jesus is not against being seen; He is against doing righteousness for the purpose of being praised. A city on a hill cannot be hidden, and it should not try to be. Yet the giving, praying, and fasting of chapter 6 are to be done in secret, before the Father, free from the craving for human applause. The reconciling principle is this: live openly, so that your life points beyond you, but examine your motive relentlessly, so that the glory lands on God and not on yourself.

Help your students apply this honestly. The same act, serving, giving, speaking up for Christ, can flow from love for God’s glory or from hunger for human approval, and often the two are tangled together in the same heart. The answer is not to retreat into hiddenness, which is its own form of disobedience, nor to perform for praise, but to do visible good while continually surrendering the glory to the Father.

End in worship. The deepest cure for the craving to be praised is a heart so satisfied in God’s approval that it gladly directs every eye to Him. When the Father’s glory is our joy, we are free both to shine and to disappear behind the light.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The aim of good works: that others glorify the Father, not the doer (5:16)
- The difference between visible witness and self-promotion lies in the motive of the heart
- Jesus’ warning against practicing righteousness to be seen by men (6:1) held together with the call to shine
- Humility and bold witness as partners, not opposites, in the kingdom life
- Living openly while continually surrendering the glory to God

- Freedom from the craving for human applause through satisfaction in the Father's approval

Discussion Prompts

- When you do something good, how can you tell where you want the glory to land?
- Where are you tempted either to hide your faith or to perform it for applause?
- What would it look like to do visible good this week while deliberately directing the glory to God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage, from the Beatitudes to salt and light. Name one specific way Jesus, who blesses the empty-handed and sends out the renewed, is reshaping either your heart or your witness this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole passage and press it toward the heart. Matthew 5:1-16 has shown two great things: the kind of person Jesus blesses, the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, the peacemaking, the persecuted; and the mission He gives that person, to be salt and light in a watching world. The aim now is not more information but transformation.

Encourage students to be specific. A vague resolution to "be a better Christian" will fade by Tuesday. A concrete answer might sound like: "I will stop performing for God and come to Him poor in spirit," or "I will pursue peace with the person I have been avoiding," or "I will let my faith be seen at work instead of hiding it under a basket." Specificity is where formation actually happens.

Let the question divide naturally into the two halves of the lesson. For some, the work this week is inward, letting Christ reshape the heart according to the Beatitudes. For others, the work is outward, refusing to hide and letting their light shine. Invite each person to name which one God is pressing on them.

Close in worship, not mere resolve. The wonder of this passage is that God blesses the empty-handed and shines His own light through ordinary people. Our response flows from gratitude, not anxiety. Lead your class to marvel that the King who sat down on that mountainside still calls people like us blessed and still sends us out to shine for His Father's glory.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of inward character (Beatitudes) and outward mission (salt and light)
- Specific, concrete obedience as the fruit of genuine encounter with Christ
- Worship and gratitude as the proper motive for Christian transformation

- The lifelong process of being formed into a kingdom citizen who shines for God's glory

Discussion Prompts

- Is God pressing more on your heart (the Beatitudes) or your witness (salt and light) this week?
- What is the one specific step you will take in response?
- How can this class pray for you and help you take that step?