

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 5: The Beatitudes; Salt and Light -- Matthew 5:1-16

Picture the scene. The crowds have been growing. People are streaming in from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and even from beyond the Jordan, dragging the sick and the broken with them, all of them hungry for something they cannot quite name. And Jesus, seeing the multitudes, does something surprising. He goes up on a mountainside, sits down the way a rabbi sits when He is about to teach with authority, and His disciples gather close. Then He opens His mouth. What comes out is not what anyone expected. He does not begin with a list of demands. He begins with the word “blessed.”

And notice who He calls blessed. Not the impressive. Not the self-made. Not the religious experts who had the rules memorized. He blesses the poor in spirit, the people who know they are spiritually bankrupt. He blesses the mourners, the meek, those starving for righteousness. He pronounces happiness over the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. It is as though Jesus turned the whole world upside down, or rather, as though He turned it right side up, and let us see for the first time how God has always measured a life.

These sayings have a name, the Beatitudes, and they are not a ladder to climb in order to earn God’s favor. Look carefully and you will see that they describe a single kind of person: a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, a heart that has been reshaped by grace. The first beatitude sets the tone for all the rest. You begin not by trying harder but by coming empty-handed, admitting you have nothing to offer, and receiving the kingdom as a gift. Everything else grows from that soil.

Then Jesus turns from describing His people to giving them their mission. “You are the salt of the earth,” He says. “You are the light of the world.” He does not say you ought to be, or you could be if you try. He says you are. A people remade by grace cannot stay hidden any more than a city set on a hill. So He sends us out to be tasted and to be seen, to preserve and to shine, so that others see our good works and give glory, not to us, but to our Father in heaven. This is where the sermon begins, and it is where your life in the kingdom begins too.

Group Discussion: Jesus opens the most famous sermon ever preached by calling “blessed” exactly the people the world tends to overlook: the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek. Why do you think He started here, and what does this opening tell us about the kind of kingdom He came to bring?

Personal Reflection: Jesus says you are salt and light, not that you might become it someday. Where in your daily life have you been tempted to keep your faith hidden, to put the lamp under a basket, and what would it look like this week to let it shine where people can actually see it?

Read Matthew 5:1-16

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. “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?
6. 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?

7. “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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 61:1–3, the promise of good news for the poor and comfort for those who mourn, which Jesus takes up; Psalm 37:10–11, the meek shall inherit the land; Philippians 2:14–16, shining as lights in a crooked generation; 1 Peter 2:9–12, a holy people whose good deeds glorify God; Colossians 1:13, being transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son.