

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: The Blessed Life: The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1–12

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this opening lesson has to establish what the entire sermon assumes: that there is a kingdom, that Christ is its king, and that the blessed life Jesus describes is the life of people who already belong to that kingdom. Guard against two errors. The first treats the Beatitudes as detached moral ideals or a self-improvement checklist; the second pushes the whole sermon off into a future millennial age, as if Jesus were describing rules for a kingdom that has not yet come. Neither is faithful to the text. Jesus says plainly that the kingdom of heaven already belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted (verses 3 and 10). The kingdom he proclaimed arrived with his ministry and was established when his church began on the day of Pentecost (Mark 1:14–15; Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13), and he reigns now from the right hand of the Father. The Beatitudes describe the present life of citizens of that kingdom.

At the same time, this passage was never meant to merely settle a doctrinal point. It is a portrait that searches the heart. Jesus is describing a character that is, frankly, the opposite of what comes naturally to any of us. We are not born poor in spirit; we are born self-sufficient and self-protective. So the aim with your class is formation, not just information. Help your students see their own faces in this portrait, feel the gap between who they are and who Christ calls blessed, and find in that very gap the doorway to grace. Poverty of spirit is not a personality trait reserved for the gloomy; it is the honest posture of every soul that has stopped bargaining with God.

So aim at both targets this week. Anchor your class in the truth that they live in Christ's kingdom now, under his reign, with all its present blessing and its present cost. And press the Beatitudes gently into their hearts as a mirror, so that they leave not merely admiring this portrait but longing to be remade into it. The good news running underneath every line is that the very people Jesus calls blessed are the ones who thought they had nothing to offer.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus begins by calling the "poor in spirit" blessed and says "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3). What does it mean to be poor in spirit, and why is this the doorway into the kingdom rather than something that disqualifies a person from it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start by slowing down on the word “blessed.” It is not the same as “happy” in the shallow, circumstantial sense we usually mean. The Greek word points to a settled state of well-being that comes from being in right relationship with God and under his favor. A person can be blessed in this sense while weeping, while poor, while persecuted, because the blessing does not depend on the circumstance but on the King who has drawn near. Help your students hear the word the way the first hearers would have: this is the language of someone being welcomed into God’s own joy.

Then define “poor in spirit” carefully, because everything else hangs on it. To be poor in spirit is to recognize your spiritual bankruptcy before God, to know that you have no merit to bargain with and no righteousness of your own to present. It is the tax collector in Luke 18 who will not even lift his eyes but beats his chest and says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” It is the opposite of the self-confidence the world prizes. This is why it comes first. No one enters the kingdom of God strutting; we enter empty-handed or not at all.

Notice the tense of the promise: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” present tense, a possession now. This is your first opportunity in the whole study to establish that the kingdom is a present reality. Jesus is not promising the poor in spirit a reward in some distant age; he is telling them that the kingdom already belongs to them. Tie this to the larger biblical witness that the kingdom arrived with Christ and was established in his church (Mark 1:14–15; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13).

Finally, help students see why poverty of spirit is the doorway rather than the disqualifier. The world says you get into the important rooms by accumulating, achieving, and impressing. The kingdom of God reverses this. The one qualification is to know you do not qualify. That is good news for everyone in your class who has ever felt like a spiritual failure, and a gentle warning for everyone who has quietly felt they had it together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The meaning of “blessed” as God-given well-being grounded in relationship with him, not circumstance
- Poverty of spirit as honest spiritual bankruptcy before God, the necessary starting point of salvation
- The kingdom of heaven as a present possession of Christ’s people, not only a future reward (Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13)
- The contrast between the world’s measure of greatness and the kingdom’s measure
- Why humility, not achievement, is the entrance to grace (Luke 18:9–14; James 4:6)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the practical difference between being “poor in spirit” and simply having low self-esteem?

- How does it change your week to believe that the kingdom of heaven is already yours, not just waiting for you?
- Where do you see the world's "blessed are the strong" mindset shaping your own goals?

Question 2

Student Question:

Being poor in spirit means coming to God with empty hands, owning that you bring nothing to bargain with. Where in your life are you still trying to come to God on the strength of your own goodness, your record, or your usefulness, rather than as one who simply needs mercy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the goal is honesty, not performance. Most of us live with a low-grade instinct to come to God on the strength of something: our church attendance, our decency, our usefulness to others. The question invites students to notice that instinct and name it. Be ready to go first with a gentle example from your own life, because that gives others permission to be honest.

Help the class see that trying to come to God on our own strength is not just a mistake; it actually keeps us out of the very blessing Jesus describes. As long as our hands are full of our own credentials, they are not open to receive his mercy. Poverty of spirit is not a one-time admission at conversion; it is a daily posture the mature believer returns to again and again.

Watch for two ditches as people answer. One is the person who uses this question to pile on shame, as though feeling worthless were the goal. Gently redirect: poverty of spirit is freeing, not crushing, because it ends the exhausting project of earning. The other ditch is the person who cannot think of a single way they lean on their own goodness, which usually means the question has not yet landed. A patient follow-up question often helps more than a lecture.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The daily temptation to approach God on the basis of our record rather than his mercy
- Self-righteousness as a subtle and respectable sin
- The freedom that comes from stopping the project of earning God's favor
- Poverty of spirit as an ongoing posture, not only a one-time admission

Discussion Prompts

- What is one "credential" you are most tempted to hand God when you pray?
- How might naming that change the way you come to him this week?
- Why is it actually good news that we cannot impress God?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (v. 4). What kind of mourning is Jesus describing here, and how does godly sorrow over sin differ from mere regret or self-pity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The mourning Jesus blesses is not general sadness, and it is important to say so plainly. In the flow of the Beatitudes, this mourning follows poverty of spirit, so the most natural reading is mourning over sin: our own sin first, and then the brokenness of a world in rebellion against God. The person who has seen their spiritual bankruptcy cannot help but grieve it. Paul calls this “godly grief” that “produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Draw the contrast your students need: godly sorrow versus worldly regret. Worldly regret is mostly about consequences and wounded pride; it is sorry it got caught, sorry it looks bad, sorry it feels bad. Godly sorrow is grieved that it has offended a holy and loving God. The first turns inward and curdles into self-pity or despair. The second turns upward and outward toward repentance and change.

Then hold up the promise, because the comfort is the point. “They shall be comforted.” The comfort is not a vague feeling but the real forgiveness and restoration that God gives to those who turn to him. There is a strange and wonderful logic here: the way up is down. The people who let themselves grieve sin honestly are the ones who taste God’s comfort most deeply, because they are the ones who actually come to him for it.

You might note that this comfort comes to us in concrete, covenant ways. God comforts his mourning people through his word, through the fellowship and encouragement of the church, and through the assurance of forgiveness that belongs to those who have obeyed the gospel and walk in the light (1 John 1:7–9). Mourning over sin is never meant to be a solitary, hopeless experience for the Christian.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mourning over sin as the natural fruit of seeing our spiritual poverty
- Godly grief versus worldly regret (2 Corinthians 7:10)
- The comfort of God as real forgiveness and restoration, not a passing feeling
- The church and the word of God as means by which God comforts his mourning people
- The danger of letting conviction curdle into self-pity or despair rather than driving us to repentance

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between being sorry for sin and being sorry you got caught?

- How has God comforted you in a season when you grieved your own failures?
- Why might a healthy church be one where people are free to mourn sin honestly?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think about how you typically respond when you become aware of your own sin. Do you tend to brush past it, excuse it, or sink into shame, and what would it look like instead to mourn sin in a way that drives you toward the comfort God offers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the previous truth into the student's actual habits. Most people have a default response to their own sin, and it usually falls into one of two patterns: minimizing (brush past it, explain it away, compare favorably to others) or drowning (sink into shame and self-condemnation). Help your class recognize which way they tend to lean, because the cure is different for each.

For the minimizer, the invitation is to take sin more seriously, to let conviction actually land rather than be managed away. For the one who drowns in shame, the invitation is to take grace more seriously, to let mourning move all the way through to the comfort God promises rather than stalling in self-punishment. Both need to learn the same rhythm: honest grief that travels toward God, not away from him.

Encourage concreteness. A vague resolution to "do better" rarely changes anyone. Ask what it would look like this week to bring a specific sin to God honestly, perhaps to confess it to a trusted brother or sister (James 5:16), and then to receive his comfort rather than rehearsing the guilt. The aim is not more intense feelings but a truer path from conviction to cleansing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing our default response to personal sin (minimizing or drowning in shame)
- Letting conviction lead all the way to repentance and comfort
- Confession to God and to trusted believers as part of healing (James 5:16; 1 John 1:9)
- The difference between healthy grief over sin and unhealthy self-condemnation

Discussion Prompts

- When you become aware of sin, do you tend to minimize it or drown in it?
- What would it look like to grieve a specific sin this week and then actually receive God's comfort?
- Who in your life could you trust to confess to and pray with?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus says the meek “shall inherit the earth” (v. 5) and that those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” will “be satisfied” (v. 6). How do meekness and a hunger for righteousness describe the inner life of someone who truly belongs to Christ’s kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Meekness is widely misunderstood, so define it carefully. Meekness is not weakness, timidity, or having no opinions. It is strength under God’s control, a settled willingness to entrust yourself and your rights to God rather than grasping and defending them yourself. Moses was called the meekest man on earth (Numbers 12:3), and he was no doormat. Jesus described himself as “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29), and he overturned tables and faced down the powerful. Meekness is power that has learned to wait on God.

The promise that the meek “shall inherit the earth” deliberately echoes Psalm 37, where the meek inherit the land while the arrogant and violent come to nothing. The point is that God, not self-assertion, secures our future. The world says the earth belongs to those who seize it; Jesus says it belongs to those who surrender it to God and wait on him.

Then turn to hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is the most active of the Beatitudes so far. To hunger and thirst is to crave, to feel the lack daily and want it badly. Righteousness here means both being made right with God and living rightly before him; the blessed person craves both. Notice that the promise is fullness: “they shall be satisfied.” God does not tease this appetite; he answers it.

Put the two together for your class. Meekness and hunger for righteousness describe an inner life that has stopped trusting itself and started craving God. They reveal the character of God himself, who is both gentle toward the lowly and passionately committed to what is right. A heart that increasingly looks like this is a heart that the kingdom has gotten hold of.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Meekness as strength under God’s control, not weakness (Numbers 12:3; Matthew 11:29)
- Entrusting our rights and our future to God rather than grasping for them
- The echo of Psalm 37 and God as the one who secures the inheritance
- Righteousness as both being made right with God and living rightly before him
- God’s promise to satisfy, not merely stir, the hunger for righteousness

Discussion Prompts

- Where is the line between godly meekness and simply being passive or fearful?
- What does it tell us about God that he satisfies, rather than frustrates, our hunger for righteousness?
- How does waiting on God to secure your future differ from grasping for it yourself?

Question 6

Student Question:

Hunger and thirst are cravings that return every day and demand to be satisfied. Be honest about your own appetites. What do you find yourself hungering for most, and what would have to change for a hunger to be right with God to become that strong in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is an appetite question, and appetites are revealing. We make time for what we truly hunger for. Invite the class to be honest about what their cravings actually point to: comfort, approval, security, control, entertainment, success. None of these is necessarily evil, but any of them can quietly take the place that hunger for God and his righteousness was meant to fill.

Help students see that appetites can be trained. Just as the body can be retrained to crave healthier food, the soul's hunger can be reshaped by what we feed it. We grow hungry for righteousness by tasting it, through the word, through prayer, through the fellowship of the church and the Lord's Supper, through obedience that proves God good. The person who waits to feel hungry before they come to God usually waits a long time; appetite often follows the first bites.

Press gently toward one concrete change. What is one ordinary practice that would feed a hunger for righteousness this week, even before the feeling arrives? Reading a Gospel slowly, praying honestly each morning, serving someone quietly. Spiritual appetite is rarely a matter of trying harder to feel; it grows as we draw near and taste that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Our actual appetites as honest indicators of what we treasure
- Good desires that can crowd out the hunger for God
- Spiritual appetite as something trained and fed, not merely felt
- The means of grace God gives to feed our hunger: word, prayer, fellowship, the Lord's Supper

Discussion Prompts

- If someone watched how you spend your time and attention, what would they say you hunger for most?
- What is one practice that has actually increased your appetite for God?
- How might you feed a hunger for righteousness this week, even before you feel it?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus blesses the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, and says the pure in heart “shall see God” (v. 7–9). How do these three qualities flow out of a heart that has been changed by God, and what do they show us about the character of God himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These three Beatitudes, mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking, move from the inner life outward toward others, and each reveals something of God’s own character. Mercy is compassion in action toward those who are suffering or in the wrong; it is love that gives what is not deserved. The merciful “shall receive mercy,” not because they earn it, but because a heart that refuses mercy shows it has never truly received it (compare Matthew 18:21–35).

Purity of heart means singleness and integrity, an undivided heart that wills one thing before God rather than living a double life. The promise is staggering: the pure in heart “shall see God.” In a world that assumes God is hidden and unknowable, Jesus says the clean heart will behold him, both now in growing intimacy and finally face to face.

Peacemaking is active, not passive. A peacemaker does not merely avoid conflict or keep the peace by staying silent; a peacemaker steps in to reconcile, to mend what is broken, to bring warring parties together. That is costly work, and Jesus says those who do it “shall be called sons of God,” because they are doing the family business. God is the great peacemaker who reconciled us to himself through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18–19), and his children look like him.

Tie the three together. Mercy, purity, and peacemaking are not techniques; they grow out of a heart that has been changed by encountering the mercy, holiness, and reconciling love of God. They show us what God is like, and they show the world whose children we are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mercy as love in action toward the suffering and the guilty, reflecting the God who showed us mercy
- Purity of heart as an undivided, integrated life before God (Psalm 24:3–4)
- The promise that the pure in heart will see God, now and finally
- Peacemaking as active reconciliation, the family business of the children of God (2 Corinthians 5:18–19)
- These graces as fruit of a changed heart, not techniques to perform

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus connect being merciful with receiving mercy?
- What does a “divided heart” look like in everyday Christian life, and what would purity look like instead?
- What is the difference between keeping the peace and making peace?

Question 8

Student Question:

Mercy, purity, and peacemaking are not feelings, they are things we do toward real people. Name one relationship in your life right now where God may be calling you to extend mercy, guard your heart's purity, or actively make peace rather than keep your distance.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves mercy, purity, and peacemaking out of the abstract and into a specific relationship, because that is the only place they ever actually happen. Encourage students to let one face come to mind: a person they have been withholding mercy from, a relationship where their own heart is not clean, or a broken connection they have been content to leave broken.

Be ready for resistance, especially around peacemaking. Many of us prefer distance to the hard work of reconciliation, and we baptize that distance with words like “healthy boundaries” when it is really just avoidance. Without dismissing genuine wisdom about difficult or unsafe relationships, gently challenge the class to ask whether they are keeping the peace by staying away when God is calling them to make peace by drawing near.

Aim for one concrete step rather than a sweeping resolution. A single phone call, a confession, an act of mercy toward someone who cannot repay it. The Beatitudes are not admired from a distance; they are lived in particular relationships, this week, with particular people God brings to mind.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mercy, purity, and peacemaking as things lived out in specific relationships
- The difference between godly boundaries and using distance to avoid reconciliation
- The cost and the calling of taking the first step toward peace
- Guarding the heart's purity in particular relationships and habits

Discussion Prompts

- Who came to mind as you read this question, and why?
- What is one concrete act of mercy or peacemaking you could take this week?
- Where might you be calling avoidance a “boundary” when God is calling you to reconcile?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Jesus ends by pronouncing blessing on those “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” and says “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 10–12). He speaks of the kingdom as a present reality that already belongs to his people. How does this passage teach us that the kingdom of God is something we enter and live in now, under the reign of Christ, rather than only a future reward we wait for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it does two things at once: it prepares disciples for persecution, and it reveals the present nature of the kingdom. Notice that the promise attached to the persecuted is identical to the one attached to the poor in spirit: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (verses 3 and 10). The Beatitudes open and close with the same present-tense possession, framing the whole portrait as a description of people who already belong to the kingdom of God.

This is the place to teach clearly what the kingdom is. The kingdom of God is not a future earthly, political reign that Christ is still waiting to begin. Jesus announced that the kingdom was at hand (Mark 1:14–15), promised that some standing there would not taste death before they saw it come with power (Mark 9:1), and that promise was fulfilled when the church began on the day of Pentecost and the gospel went out under the reign of the risen Christ (Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). Daniel foresaw exactly this: a kingdom the God of heaven would set up that shall never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44). Christ reigns now, and his people live in his kingdom now.

That truth reframes persecution entirely. Jesus tells his disciples to “rejoice and be glad” when they are reviled for his sake, not because suffering is pleasant, but because it places them in the noble line of the prophets and confirms that they belong to a kingdom the world cannot touch. The world’s rejection is not evidence that something has gone wrong; it is often evidence that we are living as citizens of another King.

Guard against two errors as you teach this. Do not let students hear that we should seek out persecution or wear it as a badge; the blessing is for being persecuted “for righteousness’ sake,” not for being obnoxious. And do not let them push the kingdom off into the future, which drains the Beatitudes of their power. The blessed life is the life of the kingdom, lived now, under the present reign of Christ, even when it costs us.

Bring it home pastorally. Many of your students will not face violent persecution, but they will face the smaller, steadier pressures of ridicule, exclusion, and the temptation to blend in. Jesus is telling them that faithfulness will sometimes cost them, and that when it does, they are not unlucky; they are blessed, and the kingdom is theirs.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The kingdom of heaven as a present reality already belonging to Christ’s people (verses 3 and 10)
- The kingdom established at Pentecost with Christ reigning now, not a future earthly millennial reign (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13)
- Persecution “for righteousness’ sake” as a mark of genuine discipleship, not something to provoke or boast in
- Joy in suffering grounded in our place in the line of the faithful prophets

- The everyday forms of pressure (ridicule, exclusion) that test ordinary believers

Discussion Prompts

- How does believing that the kingdom is present, with Christ reigning now, change the way you read the rest of this sermon?
- Why would Jesus connect being persecuted with being blessed?
- What everyday pressures tempt you to blend in rather than live openly as a citizen of Christ's kingdom?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over all nine Beatitudes as a single portrait of the blessed life. Where is Jesus most clearly putting his finger on your heart through this passage, and what is one specific way you sense him inviting you to let his kingdom reshape you this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to step back and view all nine Beatitudes as one portrait rather than nine separate sayings. Together they describe a single kind of person: someone who has come to the end of their own resources, grieved their sin, surrendered their rights to God, hungered for his righteousness, and learned to show mercy, guard their heart, and make peace, even at a cost. That is the face of a kingdom citizen.

Your goal here is not to add a tenth item to a to-do list but to help each student hear the Spirit's particular invitation to them. Where did this passage press on their heart most? For one it will be poverty of spirit; for another, mourning sin; for another, peacemaking in a fractured relationship. Encourage them to name the one place, not all nine, and to bring it to God specifically.

Close the lesson by lifting their eyes back to grace. The Beatitudes can feel like an impossible standard if we read them as demands we must generate by willpower. But they are a portrait of what God grows in those who belong to him. The same Jesus who describes this life is the one who forms it in us as we walk with him. Send your students home not crushed by the portrait but drawn to the One who is painting it onto their lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Beatitudes as a single, unified portrait of the kingdom citizen
- Discerning the Spirit's particular invitation rather than generalizing
- Christian growth as God's transforming work, not self-generated willpower
- Naming one specific area of formation and bringing it to God

Discussion Prompts

- Which single Beatitude is God pressing on your heart most right now?
- What is one specific way you sense him inviting you to change this week?
- How does it help to see this portrait as something God grows in you, rather than something you must achieve alone?