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## Chapter 5

# Building Our Character and Community

Matthew 5:1-16

**UNDERSTANDING**

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**DISCUSSION**

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read Matthew 5:1–16*

## The Big Picture

The Beatitudes offer a radical picture of what our lives should look like when we follow Jesus.

Chances are, several members of your group are trying to figure out how their lives should be different in light of their relationship with Jesus Christ. This chapter focuses specifically on how to form our characters around the person of Jesus—and how the community around us can help.

Jesus' message in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1–12) seems to turn the thinking of the world upside down. The persecuted should rejoice. The meek will inherit the earth. How can this be? The Beatitudes are a reminder that, if we are truly dedicated to Christ, our lives should look distinctly different from what the world expects.

## **The Life and Times of a First-Century Jew (Matthew 5:1–2)**

During the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were under Roman occupation. The Romans levied incredibly high taxes on the Jewish people, most of whom were impoverished already. The Jews faced this national crisis with the hope that, one day, their kingdom would be restored. Some Jews had already tried to restore this kingdom through revolutionary violence. As Jesus' ministry flourishes, people look to Him to see what kind of revolution He would lead. In response, Jesus gives His famous Sermon on the Mount, which includes the Beatitudes examined in this chapter. (If you want an idea of what a violent Jewish revolution looks like, see 1 Mc 3:15–26. Chapters 1–3 in particular offer more background).

## **Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12)**

The word "beatitude" means "blessing." These blessings not only give us an example to follow; they would also have been good news to the downtrodden Jews held captive under Roman occupation.

### **Application to Jesus**

Jesus calls us to imitate Him in the Beatitudes.

## **Humility**

The Beatitudes build on one another, beginning with "poor in spirit," or humility. Many theologians throughout the history of the Church

have pointed to humility as the starting point in our relationship with God. Humility leads us to see that we cannot do everything on our own; we need God, His salvation and grace, to truly live.

### **Meekness**

The blessing of meekness stands out because it is often seen as weakness. True meekness is not weakness but control over anger, especially during trials. In fact, Jesus Himself says, “Lo, I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29). By examining the Beatitudes, we realize that they are not just an ethical treatise on how we should behave but a reflection of Jesus’ own character. For instance, Jesus shows great meekness during His suffering and death. He could have stopped His torture at any moment and given His persecutors what they deserved—and yet His meekness allows Him to provide salvation for the world (see 1 Pt 2:23).

Meekness can help us defend the faith (1 Pt 3:15–16), control our speech (Jas 1:19–20), and corral our anger (Eph 4:26–32).

### **Mercy**

Being merciful is essential in our outreach to others. An unfortunate part of our coming to Jesus Christ is that we can often become prideful and judgmental of others. Rather, we should be merciful as our Father is merciful (Lk 6:36).

## **Purity of Heart**

Even while doing “religious things,” we can end up doing them doing them out of pride (see Mt 6:2–6). “Man sees the appearance, the Lord sees the heart” (1 Sm 16:7). Purifying our intentions helps us to pursue a relationship with Jesus Christ for all the right reasons.

## **Community of Virtue (Matthew 5:13–16)**

Jesus uses the example of salt and light to show how members of a community can influence others through their example. Salt is instantly recognizable as something used to flavor food. Jesus uses it as an analogy for influencing, or “seasoning,” others with our character.

Jesus also uses the analogy of light. Originally, God made His covenant with Israel so that the people of Israel could follow God’s law and be a light to the nations around them (Is 42:6). Jesus is reminding the Jews of this concept, and that their own faith and character are not just for themselves; they are an example that naturally invites others to want to know more about the God they follow (Is 49:6).

Practicing the Beatitudes and imitating the character of Jesus Christ do not happen overnight. Slowly, through the practice of virtue, we can develop a Christ-centered character. Virtues can be greatly strengthened when we have others around us who push to become better people.

What can you do to hold each other accountable to the people you would like to become? If your group is more than four people, it can be a good idea to have group members break into groups of two or three and hold each other accountable on a weekly basis.

Virtue helps our communities shine the light of Christ for all to see.

**Application to Our Lives**

Members of a community living the Beatitudes push one another to be the best version of themselves.



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Matthew 5:1–16*

## **STEP 1: OPENER**

Have you ever gone to a store and become irritated or angry with the behavior of the staff? How did this affect your view of the store and whether you went back there again?

## **STEP 2: BACKDROP**

During the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were under Roman occupation. The Romans levied incredibly high taxes on the Jewish people, most of whom were impoverished already. The Jews faced this national crisis with the hope that, one day, their kingdom would be restored. Some Jews had already tried to restore this kingdom through revolutionary violence. As Jesus' ministry flourishes, people look to Him to see what kind of revolution He would lead. In response, Jesus gives His famous Sermon of the Mount, which includes the Beatitudes examined in this chapter.

## **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Read Matthew 5:1–16.

## **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.



**1. Taking the historical context into account, what do you see that would be shocking about Jesus' message to the Jews?**

*Answer: The Jews were expecting Jesus to lead a violent revolution, like other revolutionaries in the past.*

**2. What is striking about Jesus' message to us today?**

*Answer: Jesus' message seems counterintuitive—the opposite of the world as we know it.*

**3. What is it about Jesus' revolution that could make it more effective than others?**

*Answer: People know that Jesus acts selflessly, seeking something beyond the confines of the world's categories. People can trust this revolution more than others.*

**4. Give some brief notes from the first paragraph of the "Beatitudes" section from "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" The Beatitudes begin with humility, or being poor in spirit. Why do you think humility is first?**

*Answer: Many theologians throughout the history of the Church have pointed to humility as the starting point in our relationship with God. Humility leads us to see that we cannot do everything on our own; we need God, His salvation and grace, to truly live.*

**5. What does meekness mean?**

*Answer: True meekness is not weakness but control over anger, especially during trials.*

**6. Read Matthew 11:29. How does Jesus demonstrate meekness during His life?**

*Answer: Jesus demonstrates meekness several times, most especially during His trial and crucifixion.*

**7. How can we practice meekness?**

*Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Some examples from Scripture: when we defend the faith (1 Pt 3:15–16), in our speech (Jas 1:19–20), and in our anger (Eph 4:26–32).*

**8. The Beatitudes also call us to be merciful and pure of heart. Read Luke 18:9–14. What is the main difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector?**

*Answer: The difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector lies in their purity of heart and in their understanding of mercy. The Pharisee intends to show others how “holy” he is and, in doing so, inadvertently reveals how he looks down on others. He fails to grasp God’s mercy. The tax collector prays from the heart and directly seeks God’s mercy.*

**9. When we grow in our faith, we often act more like the Pharisee than the tax collector. Why do you think this is the case?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**10. What can we do not to fall into this trap?**

*Answer: As we improve our lives in imitation of Christ, we need to continually remember that we are able to do this because of God's mercy, not our own strength.*

**11. Give some background information on salt in verse 13 from "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" Why do you think Jesus uses this example?**

*Answer: Jesus uses salt as an analogy for influencing, or "seasoning," others with our character.*

**12. Read Isaiah 42:6. What was God's original plan for His people?**

*Answer: God's original plan was that the example of His people would be a light to the nations.*

**13. How is Jesus restoring this plan?**

*Answer: Jesus is hoping that the people in His kingdom can fulfill this plan.*

**14. Think of the example in the opener about the employees working in a store. As members of a community, why should we be concerned about our character?**

*Answer: People normally come to know Jesus Christ through a community. Our lives communicate to others who Jesus is.*

**15. How do we improve our characters and imitation of Jesus Christ?**

*Answer: We improve our character and imitation of Christ by developing virtue. See "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" and the accompanying article for more.*

**16. How do we help each other improve?**

*Answer: See "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" on accountability.*



