

"How blest are those who know their need of God." Matt 5:2 NEB

The Sermon on the Mount

Four Sessions of Bible study

The 5th through the 7th chapters of Matthew contain core teachings by Jesus. Many consider these the heart of the Christian Scripture.. We **won't** be trying to "keep on schedule" with the rough schedule given below. We don't need to make it through any particular amount of verses on a particular night. Instead, we'll move forward slowly "as the spirit moves", trying to let Jesus' words speak to our hearts - and share with each other what they call up in us.

If you have time, take a few minutes to read through the handful of verses listed before each class. I suggest you try using an approach called "lectio divina" (holy reading). Find a quiet place and read a verse or two. Then stop and reflect in silence how the words resonate in you. Hold them up to "The Light". You may want to journal or jot down some thoughts on what the verses call up (if anything) in you - or questions they raise for you.

Class #1 - The World Turned Upside Down: "The Beatitudes"

Reading: [Matthew 5: 1-12](#) (cf. [Luke's version 6: 17-26](#))

Class #2 - Jesus' New Law: "But I Say Unto You..."

Reading: [Matthew 5: 13-48](#)

Class #3 - Earthly Security vs. Reliance on God: "The Lilies of the Field"

Reading: [Matthew 6: 19-34](#)

Class #4 - Simple Faith: "Ask and It Shall Be Given"

Reading: [Matthew 6:5-14](#), [7: 7-11](#)

Appendix: Where the Sermon on the Mount fits in the Gospels.

Please bring a Bible to each session. I suggest you use a modern translation. The New English Bible, Jerusalem Bible, and New Revised Standard Version are three of my favorites. If you wish to read the King James Version (also known as the "Authorized Version"), you may want to read one of the modern translations as well.

Class #1 - The World Turned Upside Down: The Beatitudes

Reading: [Matthew 5:1-12](#), [Luke 6:17-26](#).

The Sermon on the Mount begins with a section known as "The Beatitudes". These are paradoxical, revolutionary statements that assert the idea that a number of groups who are considered by society in general to be the lowest or least fortunate in the world are in fact the **most** fortunate or lucky in God's kingdom or view of reality.

A shorter list is given in Luke that contrasts rather sharply with Matthew's version. What is the difference between the two lists? Compare Matthew's 1st beatitude with Luke's 1st beatitude, Matthew's 2nd with Luke's 3rd, Matthew's 4th with Luke's 2nd, Matthew's 8th & 9th with Luke's 4th. Which list seems to you to be more "spiritual"? Which is more political? Which list speaks more powerfully to **you**?

Read each beatitude individually asking yourself several questions:

1. What do you think Jesus was trying to communicate to his disciples?
2. Who exactly makes up the group that each particular beatitude is talking about?
3. Is Jesus (or God) asking his disciples to take on the characteristics of this group? If so why is this important for a disciple to do this? What would happen if disciples took on the counter value of those who are usually seen as blessed in the world's value system?
4. Why does God look with particular favor on this group?
5. How particularly do you think this group is blessed - i.e. what specific blessing does this group receive?
6. What does this beatitude say about the nature of the Kingdom of God that Jesus is proclaiming through his ministry?

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit - Matthew 5:3. (cf. Luke 6:20 & 24)

This beatitude has been translated in many different ways. One I especially like is "Happy are those who know their need of God." If you are utterly destitute, then you are utterly dependent on others. Dependency is usually considered a bad thing. How could dependency be considered a blessing or a thing to work towards?

2. Blessed are those who mourn - Matthew 5:4. (cf. Luke 6:21b & 25b)

This could also be translated loosely as "Happy are those who are vulnerable" – or "Happy are those who are willing to let themselves feel pain." Does this mean regular mourning or grieving for losses? Some think it refers to mourning for one's shortcomings and wrong acts. Or for being willing to take on the pain & suffering of the world. How do most people wall themselves off against the suffering of the world? (on TV, in the papers)

3. Blessed are the meek - Matthew 5:5

Meek is not a word used much today. If it is used it has a bad connotation – kind of like victim or wimp or a “loser”. One way to put it might be “Happy are those who have none of the world’s kind of power.” (political power, wealth, weapons, etc.) It says these will inherit the earth: How revolutionary is this politically!

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - Matt 5:6.

(cf. Luke: 5:21a & 25a)

This certainly doesn’t refer to the kind of temporary, mild hunger & thirst that we experience in a very wealthy part of the world. When people suffered hunger or thirst in Judea in the 1st century CE, they really suffered! What does it mean to suffer deeply in longing for righteousness? What is righteousness?

5. Blessed are the merciful - Matthew 5:7

The Catholic Worker talks about the “works of mercy” (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, healing the sick). Being merciful involves compassion for those who are experiencing suffering and doing something about it.

6. Blessed are the pure in heart - Matthew 5:8

What does it mean to be “single-hearted”? How hard is this to do?! Why would those who do this be able to “see God”?

7. Blessed are the peacemakers - Matthew 5:9

Who are the real peacemakers? In many periods the church preferred to think of this in terms of **inner** or spiritual peace. Do you think this is what Jesus meant?

8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake - Matt 5:10-11. (cf. Luke 6:22-3, 26)

Again, what is your attitude towards martyrdom? Some students were expelled from public schools in the past for wearing a button for peace or an armband for the war dead. A man was run over by a train and lost his legs during the Vietnam War trying to block shipments of bombs to Vietnam. Dietrich Bonhoffer was a Christian pastor executed by the Nazis for trying to assassinate Hitler. Would you consider Martin Luther King a martyr? Gandhi? Do you think some people take on persecution joyfully?

Class #2 - Jesus' New Law: "But I Say Unto You..."

Reading: [Matthew 5:13-48](#)

Jesus begins the next section by calling upon his disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Certainly a fitting challenge to Friends today! He moves on next to incendiary material.

The Jews in the time of Jesus (as with Orthodox Jews today) were a people of the Law - meaning the complex set of religious laws believed to have been given forth by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. These laws are recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Bible.

Although there were certainly non-religious and non-observant Jews in the time of Jesus, no Jew who took their religion really seriously ever questioned the absolute authority of this set of rules that governed every aspect of faith and practice. Prophets would speak for God ("Thus saith the Lord...") but it was never considered possible that such prophecy would contradict the fundamental religious laws given forth on Sinai. The form of teaching done by rabbis was to couch every comment, ethical precept or interpretation of a law in terms of reference to other sections of core Hebrew scripture in the first five books of the Bible (ie. "As it is said in the Law...").

Jesus begins his revolutionary message in Matthew 5:17 by reaffirming his own commitment to the integrity of the law. In the next section of the Sermon on the Mount, however, Jesus does exactly what he claims he would never do - asserts without apology, qualification or even justification fundamental, revolutionary alterations in core principles of the Hebrew commandments. He describes six fundamental precepts of the traditional Hebrew canon and then offers five new commandments or at the least extensions of the traditional commandments.

The traditional commandment

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times..."

1. against murder (cf. Lk 12:57-9)
2. against committing adultery
3. liberal rules allowing men the freedom to divorce their wives (cf. Lk 16:18)
4. against breaking oaths (do not swear falsely)
5. carry out only judicious or reasonable revenge ("appropriate to the injury")
6. love your neighbor (& hate your enemies) cf. Lk 6:27-8, 32-36

The new extension of this commandment

"But I say to you..."

1. to not give way to anger or bear grudges
2. against feeling lust towards a woman
3. against divorce "except on the ground of unchastity".
4. against taking oaths ("Swear not at all.")
5. not to retaliate at all against injury (Lk 6:29-30)
6. love your enemies & those who persecute you

Reflection Questions

Are these commandments too difficult to bear?

Do you think Jesus meant them to be taken literally? (We reject the need to literally pluck out the eye that offends us. Yet we are uncomfortable when most of the church takes a similar opposition to whether they are literally expected to refrain from violent retaliation or literal love for enemies.)

If he does not expect us to follow these commandments literally, what is he commanding or inviting us to do?

How do you think orthodox Jews reacted to these teachings of Jesus?

How is Jesus moving from outward behavioral requirements to inward spiritual requirements or change dealing with the inward motions of the heart?

How does he "raise the bar" in fundamental areas of human conduct (anger & forgiveness, lust & faithfulness, truth-telling, the desire to protect what is precious to us, and the ability to care about and be kind to those who intend or carry out harm toward us)?

Do you think we as Friends are up to these high standards? How about Anabaptists (Mennonites, Amish, Brethren)? Groups like the Catholic Worker or Franciscan friars? Buddhist monks and nuns like the followers of Thich Nhat Hanh?

What kind of law is Jesus giving us? Do you see this as a movement towards greater freedom or away from freedom?

How (if at all) can these new commandments be experienced as deeply joyful and liberating?

Class #3 - Finding One's Security in God: The Lilies of the Field

Reading: [Matthew 6: 19-34](#)

Matt 6:19 & 6:24 (cf. Lk 12:33 & 16:13) Where are our treasures? What is our priority? What is most important to us in the whole world?

It is harder to be jealous of workaholicism or internet addiction than a mistress. Yet each can function equally as a betrayal. How does God experience it when our hearts are not in the right place? Is this what it means when it is said that God is a jealous god - or that we must not put any idols before God? Is this what it means to be single hearted rather than duplicitous?

Matt 6:22 (Lk 11:34) What does it mean that the eye is the lamp of the body? How does this tie in with the beatitude that says the pure at heart are blessed for they shall be able to see God? How does addiction or wrong-heartedness affect one's ability to "see God" or discern God's voice correctly?

Matt 6:25 (Lk 12:22) The editor of my NRSV Bible indicates that the passage on the "Lilies of the Field" (is about anxiety. Is this passage about anxiety? Security? Freedom?

What is the Quaker testimony on simplicity about and how does this tie in (if at all) with this section of the Sermon?

Again: is this a realistic way to live? To what extent are we / can we practice these teachings in the world we live in?

Are others doing a better job at this than we are? Is it easier to do this when you have little than much? Is this why "it is harder for a rich man to make it into the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle"?

What was Woolman talking about when he saw the seeds of war in our possessions? How is dependence on material security affecting our country's role in the world today?

Class #4 - Simple Trust: Ask and It Shall Be Given

Readings: [Matthew 6:5-14](#), [7:7-11](#)

Matthew 6:7 (cf. Luke 11:1-4). Do you think Jesus intended for the "Lord's Prayer" to be repeated as it is? If not, what do you think was his intention in this passage? I.e. what does he mean to say "pray **like** this..."?

Matt. 6:9. What does it mean to call someone or something's **name** holy? (Is this connected with orienting one's self or one's heart in a certain direction?)

Matt 6:10. Jesus instructed his disciples to announce the imminent arrival of God's kingdom. If it is coming or "at hand" - why do disciples need to pray that it come? What does it mean to keep praying for it to come when it has **not** come for two thousand years in the manner his disciples (and he?) expected? Is the arrival of God's kingdom an outward eschatological event or something different (inward or ongoing)?

How do you respond to this prayer? Do you find it beautiful in its straightforward simplicity? Comforting? Meaningless/superficial? Empowering? (There is a powerful book on family life called *The Ordinary Way*. Brother Lawrence prayed as he did household chores, described in his book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. There is another book called *The Use of Poor Means in Helping the Third World*. How does this tie in with the blessedness of the meek or those who are poor in spirit?)

Matt 7:11 (cf. Luke 11:9). How does God "answer" prayer? Is this the same as God granting what we pray for?

What **should** we be praying for?

Do you think / experience God as caring for you as much as a parent cares for a child?

Is it dangerous to lean on / depend on God?

How are people affected when they feel betrayed by God after having put their trust in God?

Addendum: Intro to the Sermon on the Mount & its place in the Gospels

The first four books of the Christian Testament are referred to as "gospels". The word gospel means literally "good news" (from the Middle English godspell). These are four accounts of Jesus' life and ministry accepted by church councils as part of the Christian "canon" or scripture.

The contents of the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) overlap in so many places, that it is possible to lay out all the passages in these books side by side to compare how they are arranged. These 3 gospels are called "synoptic" gospels (meaning to view side by side "at a glance"). The "synoptic question" involves theories as to why these 3 gospels are so similar.

Mark is the shortest gospel. Nearly all of Mark (98% of its verses) is included in Matthew and/or Luke. For a wide variety of reasons, most biblical scholars today believe that the authors of Matthew and Luke had access to some version of Mark's gospel and they incorporated Mark's material directly in their own gospels with or without editorial changes. The gospel of Mark is made up primarily of:

- Biography of Jesus' life and ministry
- Accounts of miracles performed by Jesus
- Parables told by Jesus - as his primary form of teaching to the "masses"

"Q." In addition, a large amount of what is **included** in the two longer synoptic gospels (Matthew & Luke) but is **missing** from the shortest synoptic gospel Mark is largely the same in those 2 gospels, although arranged differently and with different emphases. This has led to the theory that the authors of the two longer synoptic gospels also had access to **another** collection besides Mark. Scholars refer to this material shared by Matthew and Luke but missing from Mark as "Q" (from the German word for "source"). No actual copy of this material exists—it's only a theory—one possible answer to the "synoptic question". "Q" contains some additional biographical material and parables but its most important content is teachings. Almost no direct teachings (i.e. other than parables) are included in Mark.

Matthew is a very systematic organizer of material and he chooses to put all of these teachings in one place, in Matthew chapters 5 through 7. Some of this material is included in one place in **Luke** (the "Sermon on the Plain", Luke 6: 17-49), but much of it is scattered elsewhere in Luke.

Again, for various reasons most scholars do not believe this is really a single sermon but rather a collection of teachings that Jesus preached habitually over time gave primarily to his disciples.

You can summarize this theory of how the synoptic gospels were composed by

Matthew = Mark + Q
Luke also = Mark + Q

i.e: Matthew drew on both Mark and "Q" to write his gospel and Luke drew on the same two major sources in composing his gospel.

John, on the other hand, (the favorite of the early Friends) is very different from the other 3 "synoptic" gospels. It does not read historically but rather emphasizes the deeply spiritual nature of Jesus' ministry and his intimate relationship with God

