

The Beatitudes and the Fulfilled Law

Matthew 5 · A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Matthew

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover the payoff of the New Israel thread: Jesus goes up a mountain and delivers God's teaching, the New Moses giving the law of the New Covenant. They find that the Beatitudes are first a portrait of Christ himself and then the shape of true happiness, and that the antitheses ("you have heard that it was said... but I say to you") do not loosen the Law but drive it into the heart, on the authority of the Lawgiver himself.

Catholic Touchstone. The Beatitudes as the heart of Christian moral teaching (they open the Catechism's entire section on morality), the harmony of grace and lived righteousness, and the visible witness of good works: "that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father."

What You Need to Know

Watch the staging in 5:1–2. Jesus sees the crowds, goes up the mountain, sits down (the posture of a teacher with authority), and opens his mouth to teach. Every element echoes Sinai, where Moses ascended to receive God's law, with one staggering difference: Moses climbed to receive the law from God, while Jesus sits and gives it as his own. The wilderness pattern the group has been tracking (Egypt, water, desert) now reaches its destination: the mountain. This is the moment to let them feel the thread resolve without you announcing it.

The Beatitudes are not eight entrance requirements but a portrait, and the face in the portrait is Christ's. He is the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourner over sin, the persecuted one. The word *makarios* means blessed, happy in the deepest sense, and the Beatitudes answer the oldest human question, how to be happy, with a shape of life the world calls losing. Each one also carries a promise, and the first and last promise the same thing in the present tense: theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The Beatitudes describe kingdom citizens now.

Several Beatitudes quote or echo the Old Testament directly: the meek inheriting the earth is Psalm 37:11, comfort for mourners is Isaiah 61:2, and the pure in heart seeing God gathers up the longing of Psalm 24. Jesus is not inventing a new spirituality; he is announcing that the Scriptures' deepest promises are now being kept.

Verses 17–20 are the hinge of the chapter and one of the most important Christological claims in the Gospel: "I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." Fulfillment here means what it has meant since Session 1: Jesus brings the Law and the Prophets to their intended destination. Then comes the shock of verse 20: entrance into the kingdom requires a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees, the most scrupulous law-keepers alive. The six antitheses that follow show what that exceeding righteousness looks like: not a lower bar but a deeper one, moving from the hand to the heart, from murder to anger, from adultery to the look, from managed divorce to faithfulness, from careful oaths to plain truthfulness, from measured retaliation to love of enemies. And note the formula: the prophets

said “thus says the Lord”; Jesus says “but I say to you.” Only the Lawgiver can speak about the Law this way.

Salt and light (5:13–16) sit between the Beatitudes and the antitheses on purpose: the community shaped by the Beatitudes is meant to be visible. Jesus commands that our good works be seen, not for our glory but so that others “give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Hold that verse in reserve; it does gentle, important work in tonight's steelman.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Exodus 19:3, 20; 20:1.** Moses ascends Sinai and God speaks the Law. Matthew 5:1–2 restages the scene with Jesus in the place of honor.
- **Psalms 37:11.** “The meek shall possess the land.” Jesus universalizes the promise: the meek inherit the earth.
- **Isaiah 61:1–3.** Good tidings to the poor and comfort to those who mourn; the Beatitudes announce this servant mission is underway.
- **Psalms 24:3–6.** Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? The clean of hands and pure of heart. The sixth Beatitude promises that seekers with pure hearts will see God himself.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church: St. Augustine (Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount)

Augustine calls this sermon the perfect measure of the Christian life, and reads the Beatitudes as an ordered ascent: beginning in poverty of spirit, the soul climbs step by step until it reaches the vision of God and the peace of full sonship. The sermon is not advice for the few but the pattern for every disciple.

Voices of the Church: St. Gregory of Nyssa (Homilies on the Beatitudes)

Gregory pictures the Beatitudes as a mountain the Word himself leads us up, each blessing a higher step. The climb is possible only because the One who commands the ascent climbs with us and lifts us; the summit is nothing less than seeing God, for which the heart must be made pure.

Voices of the Church: St. John Chrysostom (Homilies on Matthew)

On salt and light, Chrysostom insists that Christ entrusted the flavor and brightness of the world to his disciples: the account of the world's unbelief will be demanded of a savorless Church. Our good works are meant to be seen, he says, precisely so that praise passes through us and lands on the Father.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1716–1719.** The Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus' preaching, depict the countenance of Christ himself, and respond to the natural desire for happiness that God placed in the human heart.

- **CCC 577–578.** Jesus, far from abolishing the Law, fulfills it perfectly, revealing its ultimate meaning and redeeming the transgressions against it.
- **CCC 1965–1968.** The New Law, the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ, finds its expression above all in the Sermon on the Mount; it does not add new external precepts but reforms the heart, the root of human acts.

Thread Watch

- **New Israel thread (resolve the first arc).** Egypt, water, wilderness, and now the mountain. Let the group discover the Sinai staging themselves in Build question 1; if they gasp, the thread has done its work. The New Moses pattern will echo again later in the Gospel.
- **Emmanuel thread (develop).** God-with-us now teaches face to face, as God once spoke from the cloud. Presence keeps drawing nearer.
- **Son of David thread (dormant).** Nothing new this week; keep it in your pocket.

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Sinai staging of 5:1–2 for themselves and connect it to the New Israel pattern from Sessions 1 and 2.
2. Participants can explain the Beatitudes as a portrait of Christ and the true shape of happiness, with kingdom promises in the present tense.
3. Participants can articulate what “I have come not to abolish but to fulfil” means, and why “but I say to you” is a claim to divine authority.
4. Participants hear the strongest Protestant reading of 5:20 and can answer it honestly, holding grace and real transformation together.
5. Participants identify one antithesis that names their own battlefield and choose a concrete practice for the week.

Timing for 90 Minutes

Win 15 min · Build 55 min · Send and Live It 12 min · Prayer 8 min. If running long, the pre-chosen cuts are, in order: treat only two antitheses in depth instead of three in Build question 6 (saves about 6 minutes), then drop the Dig Deeper box on the structure of the Beatitudes (saves about 4 minutes). Do not cut the Sinai discovery or the steelman chain.

EMMANUEL · SESSION 3 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Beatitudes and the Fulfilled Law

Matthew 5 · 90 Minutes

Opening Prayer

Father, every human heart is built to seek happiness, and we have looked for it in so many places. Tonight your Son climbs the mountain to tell us where it actually lives. Give us ears to hear teaching that turns the world upside down, and hearts willing to be turned with it. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. If you could ask one hundred people on the street what would finally make them happy, what answers would you hear most?
2. Who is the most genuinely happy person you know, and what is different about how they live?

Build (55 minutes)

The Mountain

1. Read Matthew 5:1–2 slowly, noticing every physical detail: where Jesus goes, what he does, his posture. **Live discovery:** now have someone read Exodus 19:3 and 20 and Exodus 20:1. We have been following Jesus through Egypt, through the water, and through the wilderness. Where has the road been leading, and what is different about this mountain?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The pattern completes itself: Egypt (2:15), water (3:16), wilderness (4:1), mountain. At Sinai, Moses climbed up to receive the Law from God. Here Jesus climbs the mountain, sits down as a teacher with authority, and gives God's teaching as his own. He is the New Moses, and more than Moses: the Lawgiver himself has come in person. Let the group say it before you do.

The Shape of Happiness

2. Read Matthew 5:3–12 aloud, one Beatitude per person around the circle. First impression: does this sound like a description of winning or losing by the world's scoreboard? Then ask: whose life, start to finish, does this list actually describe?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

By the world's scoreboard it reads like a list of the defeated: the poor, the mourning, the meek, the persecuted. But the word *makarios* means blessed, deeply happy, and each line carries a promise. Above all, the Beatitudes are a portrait before they are a program, and the face in the portrait is Christ's own: he is the poor one, the meek one, the mourner, the persecuted. To live the Beatitudes is to be conformed to him, and the first and last lines promise the kingdom in the present tense:

theirs IS the kingdom of heaven, now.

Dig Deeper: Old Promises Kept

Several Beatitudes are Scripture quoting Scripture: the meek inheriting the earth comes from Psalm 37:11, comfort for mourners from Isaiah 61:2, the pure in heart seeing God from the longing of Psalm 24. If time allows, send someone to Psalm 37:10–11 to hear the original. Jesus is not inventing a new spirituality; he is keeping Israel's oldest promises.

3. Read Matthew 5:13–16. What two images does Jesus use for his disciples, and what is each one for? Notice verse 16 carefully: what does Jesus command about our good works, and what is the goal?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Salt preserves and flavors; light exists to be seen. Both are useless kept to themselves. Jesus commands that our light shine and our good works be seen by others, not to win praise for ourselves, but “that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Visible, lived righteousness is part of the plan of evangelization. Keep this verse in hand; it matters in a few minutes.

Not to Abolish but to Fulfil

4. Read Matthew 5:17–20. What does Jesus say he came to do with the Law and the Prophets? And what does verse 20 demand of anyone who would enter the kingdom? Sit with how impossible that sounds; the scribes and Pharisees were the most rigorous law-keepers alive.

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Not to abolish but to fulfil: to bring the Law and Prophets to their destination, as he has been fulfilling prophecy since Bethlehem. Verse 20 then raises the bar past the best law-keepers in Israel. The antitheses that follow show what he means: righteousness that goes deeper than the hand, all the way to the heart. The demand is real, and on our own it is impossible. What kind of help we need is exactly tonight's question.

Build Then Press: Is Verse 20 Meant to Drive Us to Despair?

The Strongest Protestant Reading, Given at Full Strength

Classic Protestant teaching, especially in the Lutheran tradition, reads Matthew 5:20 and the antitheses as law in its crushing use: a standard pitched deliberately beyond human reach (“be perfect,” 5:48) so that we despair of our own righteousness and flee to Christ, whose perfect righteousness is credited to believers by faith alone. On this reading, the Sermon works first as a mirror that exposes our sin and drives us to Christ; believers, forgiven and set free, then bear real fruit and do genuine good works by the Spirit, yet never with the sinless perfection the standard demands, so their standing before God rests on Christ's imputed righteousness alone and never on their own obedience. This reading takes both human sinfulness and grace with total seriousness.

Let the group feel its force.

5. Now press from the Sermon itself. Look back at 5:16: whose works do people see, and are they real? Look at 5:19: who is called great in the kingdom? And glance ahead to how the Sermon will end in 7:24–27: what separates the wise builder from the foolish one? Does Jesus talk like a teacher whose commands cannot be lived?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

The Sermon never treats itself as an impossible mirror. Jesus expects disciples to have visible good works that lead others to glorify God (5:16), calls those who do and teach these commandments great in the kingdom (5:19), and will end the Sermon dividing humanity by one thing only: hearing these words and doing them, or not (7:24–27). The commands are meant to be lived.

But the Protestant instinct guards a real truth, and we should say so plainly: on our own strength, verse 20 is impossible, and the Church has always agreed. The Catholic answer is not that we try harder; it is that grace does more than the mirror reading allows. The New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit poured into the heart, which does not merely cover our unrighteousness but actually transforms it, so that the exceeding righteousness of 5:20 becomes real in us, gift before it is task. The Beatitudes are the proof of concept: they are Christ's own portrait, and by grace they become ours. Not imputed only, but imparted; not our achievement, but truly our life.

From the Hand to the Heart

6. As a group, choose three of the six antitheses in 5:21–48 (anger, lust, divorce, oaths, retaliation, love of enemies) and read each aloud. For each, name it in one sentence: what did “you have heard” regulate, and where does “but I say to you” move the battle line? Then the quiet question: which of the six is your battlefield?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Every antithesis moves the line from the external act to its root in the heart: from murder to contempt, from adultery to the deliberate look, from managed divorce to covenant faithfulness, from careful oath-formulas to simple truthfulness, from proportional payback to enemy-love that mirrors the Father's perfection. Notice the formula itself: the prophets said “thus says the Lord”; Jesus says “but I say to you.” No prophet ever talked about God's Law this way. Only its Author can. Let the last question stay personal and unanswered aloud.

Send (12 minutes)

1. Which Beatitude, honestly, do you least want to be true, and what would change if you believed it names real happiness?
2. Where has your righteousness been living at the level of the hand while the heart stays unconverted? What would letting grace go one layer deeper look like this week?

Live It This Week

- Pray one Beatitude each morning, slowly, asking Christ to make his portrait true in you.
- Take your battlefield antithesis to confession or to honest prayer this week, asking not for willpower first but for grace.
- Do one good work this week that someone could see, and when it is noticed, deflect the glory upward.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, teacher on the mountain, your words are not advice but the law of your kingdom, and your Beatitudes are your own face. Pour your Spirit into our hearts so that what you command, you also accomplish in us. Make us salt that has not lost its taste and light that is not hidden, until people see and glorify the Father. Amen.

Scripture Memory

Matthew 5:16 (RSV2CE): *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”*

EMMANUEL · SESSION 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every Passage in Order of Use

The Beatitudes and the Fulfilled Law · Matthew 5

Primary Text

- Matthew 5:1–2 · Matthew 5:3–12 · Matthew 5:13–16 · Matthew 5:17–20 · Matthew 5:21–48 (three antitheses chosen by the group)

Live Discovery Passages

- Exodus 19:3, 20 and 20:1 (Sinai staging) · Psalm 37:10–11 (the meek, if time allows)

Background Passages

- Isaiah 61:1–3 (comfort for mourners) · Psalm 24:3–6 (the pure in heart) · Matthew 7:24–27 (the two builders, for the steelman) · Matthew 5:48 (be perfect)

Catechism

- CCC 1716–1719 · CCC 577–578 · CCC 1965–1968

Memory Verse

- Matthew 5:16