

Session 1: The Mountain of Happiness

Matthew 5:1-12

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the Beatitudes are Jesus' answer to the question every human being is already asking: what does it take to be truly happy? They see him ascend the mountain as the new Moses, giving the law of the kingdom with an authority all his own.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 1718: the Beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness, a desire God himself placed in the human heart in order to draw us to himself.

What You Need to Know

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) opens with eight short sayings that have shaped the moral imagination of the world. Each follows the same two-part shape: a condition ("Blessed are the poor in spirit") and a promise ("for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"). The Greek word translated "blessed" is *makarios*: a declaration that someone is genuinely blessed, truly fortunate, well off in God's judgment, not in a passing mood. (Greek writers could use it of the untroubled happiness of the gods; but it is the promises Jesus attaches, more than the dictionary, that lift this blessedness beyond circumstance.) Jesus is making a claim about who is actually, objectively well off, and his list contradicts nearly every list the world would write.

Watch the staging in Matthew 5:1-2. Jesus sees the crowds, goes up the mountain, and sits down: in the ancient world, sitting was the posture of the authoritative teacher. His disciples come to him, and he opens his mouth and teaches. Matthew's first readers, steeped in the Old Testament, could hardly miss the picture: a man ascends a mountain and delivers the law of God. But where Moses received the law, Jesus gives it, on his own authority. Six times in this chapter he will say, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you."

Count the promises. The first and eighth beatitudes share the identical promise, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," and both are in the present tense while the middle six are future ("they shall..."). The repetition forms a frame, a literary *inclusio*, marking off the eight as a single composition: the promise of the kingdom frames the whole unit. Verses 11-12 then turn from the third person to the second ("Blessed are you") and expand the eighth beatitude, ending with the command that gives this study its title: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

Do not resolve tonight the tension the group will feel: these blessings sound backwards. Let it stand. The whole study is the answer, and Session 8 will reveal the key: the Beatitudes are, before anything else, a portrait of Jesus himself. Do not say this yet.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 19:3 sets the pattern: "Moses went up to God," and from the mountain Israel received the law. Matthew has already sounded Mosaic and new-Israel chords over Jesus' infancy: a murderous king, a rescue, Egypt, and a call out of it (Matthew 2:13-15, where Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1, God's word about his son Israel). The two types overlap rather than compete: Jesus relives both Moses' story and Israel's. The group will work with the actual texts in the discovery moment at Build 3; do not hand them the conclusion.

Psalms 1 opens Israel's prayer book the same way Jesus opens his sermon: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked." The Old Testament already knew a beatitude tradition: happiness located in relationship to God rather than in fortune. Jesus stands inside that tradition and radicalizes it.

Voices of the Church

ST. AUGUSTINE · DE SERMONE DOMINI IN MONTE, BOOK I

St. Augustine, at the opening of his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, teaches in substance that whoever ponders this sermon will find in it the perfect measure of the Christian life: everything needed for right living is gathered here. The sermon, for Augustine, is the Gospel's condensed rule of life.

Application (ours, not the saint's): if a group learned only Matthew 5-7 and lived it, they would be recognizably, radically Christian.

ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA · HOMILIES ON THE BEATITUDES

St. Gregory of Nyssa preached eight homilies on the eight Beatitudes, and he opens with an image the whole series will climb: the Lord teaching on the mountain is calling us up an ascent, step by step, each beatitude leading higher, through the great promise that the pure in heart will see God, and onward still, through peacemaking and persecution, into the kingdom. The Beatitudes, in Gregory's reading, are not eight scattered sayings but one ascent. (The ladder-and-rung shorthand we will use for it is ours, not his vocabulary.)

We will keep Gregory's ladder in view for all eight sessions.

ST. LEO THE GREAT · SERMON 95, ON THE BEATITUDES

St. Leo the Great, preaching on this passage in the fifth century, teaches in substance that the Lord chose the mountain so that the height of the place might match the loftiness of what he taught, and that the same Lord who once spoke to Moses now speaks in person: the giver of the old covenant is the preacher of the new.

Leo's point guards the group against a common mistake: the Sermon on the Mount does not correct the God of the Old Testament; it is the same God, now speaking face to face.

Catechism Connection · CCC 1716-1719, 1721

CCC 1716-1719 places the Beatitudes "at the heart of Jesus' preaching" and teaches that they respond to the natural desire for happiness. CCC 1718 quotes St. Augustine: "We all want to live happily; in the whole human race there is no one who does not assent to this proposition, even before it is fully articulated." God placed that desire in us in order to draw us to himself, who alone can fulfill it.

CCC 1721 states the destination plainly: God put us in the world to know, to love, and to serve him, and so to come to paradise. Calling the Beatitudes the map of that road is this study's bridge, resting on CCC 1716-1719, which present them as revealing the goal of human existence and the way of the kingdom.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

FACE OF CHRIST (plant, do not reveal): from tonight on, quietly collect evidence that each beatitude describes Jesus himself. Tonight's line: he had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20); the fuller poverty text, 2 Corinthians 8:9, joins the log in Session 2. The thread resolves in Session 8.

LADDER (plant): name Gregory's ladder image tonight; each future session will identify its step.

SEALED GUESS (plant): before the closing prayer, each participant writes one sentence answering "What do you think it takes to be truly happy?" on the provided slip, seals it in the envelope, signs the flap, and hands

it in. The leader keeps the envelopes unopened until Session 5. Do not discuss the answers.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain what *makarios* means and how it differs from a mood.
2. Participants discover the Moses-mountain parallel from the texts themselves.
3. Participants identify the *inclusio* frame (5:3 and 5:10) and the shift to "blessed are you" in 5:11.
4. Each participant writes and seals a My Guess slip.

Time Note

90 minutes: Win 12, Read 8, Build 45, Steelman 10, Send 8, Sealed Guess + Live It + Closing 7. If running short: cut Build 5 and the Dig Deeper box; never cut the sealed guess.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you climbed the mountain and opened your mouth to teach us the way of happiness. Open our ears tonight. Give us the honesty to admit where we have looked for blessedness in the wrong places, and the courage to follow you up the mountain, step by step, all the way to joy. Amen.

Win: Opening the Circle

Win 1. Describe a moment when you were genuinely happy. What made it different from ordinary pleasure?

Win 2. If you asked ten strangers on the street what it takes to be happy, what answers would you get?

Build: Into the Text

Build 1. Read Matthew 5:1-2 slowly, before any beatitude. What does Jesus do, physically, step by step? Why might Matthew bother recording the posture?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He sees the crowds, ascends the mountain, sits down, and his disciples come to him; then he opens his mouth to teach. Sitting was the posture of the authoritative teacher (a rabbi sat to teach, and the teacher's chair became such a symbol of authority that the Church still calls a bishop's seat his cathedra). Matthew is staging a scene of authority before a word is spoken.

Build 2. Read Matthew 5:3-12 aloud, one beatitude per reader. First reactions: which one sounds most wrong to the world's ears? Which one stings you personally?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Let this run; do not correct anyone. The offense is the point. The world calls blessed the rich, the amused, the assertive, the satisfied, the winners. Jesus overturns that entire ranking of who is fortunate. Name the tension and promise the group that the study exists to resolve it honestly.

Build 3. DISCOVERY. Half the group reads Exodus 19:3-8 and Exodus 20:1-3; half reads Matthew 2:13-15 and then rereads Matthew 5:1-2. Compare notes: what echoes do you hear, and what picture is Matthew painting?

Leader cue: Live discovery: let them find the new Moses parallel. Supply nothing until they have worked at it.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

A man goes up a mountain and the law of God is given. Moses received it; Jesus gives it on his own authority ("but I say to you," 5:22 and following). And Matthew 2 has already sounded the chords: a murderous king, Egypt, a call out of Egypt, with Matthew quoting Hosea 11:1 about God's son Israel, so Jesus is painted as new Moses and faithful Israel at once. The conclusion the group should reach: the Beatitudes are not good advice; they open Christ's authoritative proclamation of the New Law, which is chiefly the grace of the Holy Spirit and finds its written expression above all in this sermon (CCC 1965-1966).

Build 4. Compare the promise in 5:3 with the promise in 5:10. What do you notice about the wording and the tense? What do the six promises in between have in common?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

5:3 and 5:10 share the identical promise, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," both present tense; the middle six are future ("they shall be comforted... shall see God"). The repetition frames the eight as one unit: the kingdom brackets everything. The present tense means the kingdom is not only a future reward; it begins now, in the poor in spirit and the persecuted.

Build 5. In verse 11 the grammar suddenly changes. Find the change. What does it do to you as a listener?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The third person ("blessed are those") becomes second person: "Blessed are you." The sermon stops describing categories and starts addressing the room. Every listener since has had to decide whether verses 11-12 are about them.

Build 6. The word "blessed" translates the Greek *makarios*: truly fortunate, genuinely well off. Try reading verses 3-12 three ways: "blessed," "fortunate," "truly happy." What do the attached promises tell you about which sense Jesus means, and what does the strongest sense do to the sermon's difficulty?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Most groups find the strongest reading also the hardest, and that is honest. The promises (the kingdom, comfort, the vision of God) show Jesus means more than luck: he is claiming the mourning are genuinely well off, not technically fortunate in some spiritual bookkeeping. Either he is wrong, or our working definition of happiness is.

Steelman: happiness is pleasure plus good fortune

Present this at full strength; let the group feel its weight before answering. The most instinctive rival account of happiness is also the most plausible: happiness is pleasure, security, and success. Health, money, love, esteem, and freedom from pain. Every advertisement assumes it; most of our decisions assume it. On this view the Beatitudes are a beautiful coping mechanism: a way for the poor, the grieving, and the persecuted to reinterpret their losses as wins. Consoling, perhaps, but false, and even a little cruel, because it dresses misfortune up as blessing. And its refined forms are stronger still: Epicurus taught stable tranquility over consumption, and modern secular accounts locate flourishing in virtue, meaning, relationships, and agency; these versions already explain why the rich can be miserable.

Press the group: if a friend said that to you kindly over coffee, what honest evidence could you offer against it? Do not let anyone answer with a slogan.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Two lines of answer, one from experience and one from Israel's own wisdom literature. First, experience: comfort has not abolished misery, and everyone in the room knows satisfied, successful, miserable people; even the refined versions of the rival account (tranquility, meaning, relationships) name goods that death, loss, and boredom can still reach. Ecclesiastes stages the same experiment in its royal speaker's voice ("whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them," Ecclesiastes 2:10) and files the verdict one verse later: vanity (2:11). Pleasure and fortune are goods, but they leak. Second, the Beatitudes do not call suffering good. They locate happiness in something suffering cannot confiscate: the kingdom, comfort, mercy, the vision of God. The question the study will keep asking is whether that something is real. Tonight it is enough to establish that the rival account, even at full strength, cannot explain why the people who

have the most are not the happiest people we know.

DIG DEEPER

Luke 6:20-26 records a shorter, sharper form of the Beatitudes, delivered "on a level place," with four blessings matched by four woes ("woe to you that are rich..."). The Church receives both forms as inspired. Matthew's "poor in spirit" and Luke's blunt "you poor" illuminate each other, and Session 2 will take up exactly that relationship.

Send: Down the Mountain

Send 1. Which beatitude will be hardest for you to believe by the end of this study? Say it out loud; the group will hold you to it in Session 8.

Send 2. Jesus' first hearers walked down the mountain into ordinary life. What is one situation this week where the world's definition of happiness will be preached at you?

Live It This Week

- Memorize Matthew 5:12a and say it each morning: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."
- Once this week, catch an advertisement in the act of defining happiness for you. Name its definition in one sentence.
- Read Matthew 5:1-12 once, slowly, before Session 2.

Closing Prayer

Father, you made us for happiness and we have hunted it in a hundred wrong places. Thank you for a Teacher who tells us the truth. Seal in our hearts what we heard tonight, and bring us back up the mountain together. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

MATTHEW 5:12A

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 1, in order:

- Matthew 5:1-2 (staging)
- Matthew 5:3-12 (full read)
- Exodus 19:3-8 (discovery)
- Exodus 20:1-3 (discovery)
- Matthew 2:13-15 (discovery)
- Matthew 5:22 (answer citation)
- Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 (steelman)
- Luke 6:20-26 (Dig Deeper)
- Psalm 1:1-2 (leader background)
- Matthew 8:20 (leader thread, unread)
- Matthew 5:12a (memory verse)