

March 8, 2026 (Lesson 1)

## THE CHRISTIAN'S CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE

1. **The Blessed People** (Matthew 5:1-12)
2. **Godly Influence** (Matthew 5:13-16)
3. **True Greatness** (Matthew 5:17-20)

**Central Truth:** Our Christlike character can influence others for the glory of God.

**Focus:** Observe how we can glorify God and influence others for Christ by living for Him.

**Evangelism Emphasis:** The demonstration of Christian character can lead others to glorify God.

**Golden Text:** “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

This unit of lessons focuses on Jesus' well-known Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in the Book of Matthew. For centuries, people from different walks of life and beliefs have been influenced by this sermon's moral and ethical teachings. Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, a Hindu and social activist, was inspired by Jesus' teaching in the sermon to lead a nonviolent resistance against the British colonial rule of India. Martin Luther King Jr., an American Baptist minister and key figure in the civil rights movement, came to understand Jesus' teachings about “turning the other cheek” and “loving your enemies” could be applied to the racial tensions in America. King realized love and nonviolence extended beyond individual behavior and were indeed the methods for social and communal reform.

The sermon comes right after Jesus began His earthly ministry in Galilee (Matt. 4:12-17). Because of His preaching and teaching of the good news of the Kingdom and His power to heal “all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people” (v. 23 NKJV), Jesus quickly attracted an innumerable crowd of followers “from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (v. 25). As His ministry grew significantly, it became necessary for Him to teach them what it meant to be His followers.

The reality and accessibility to the kingdom of Heaven by Jesus' followers is a central theme of Jesus' message. God's kingdom has come into this world, and life therein is radically different from

the kingdom of this world. Jesus' sermon supercedes common sense and the norms of mainstream culture. In God's kingdom, true happiness is found in poverty, mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst, mercy, purity in heart, peacemaking, and even persecution. Rather than boasting about our acts of kindness, those in God's kingdom are encouraged to do them quietly. To overcome worry and anxiety, people are urged to seek God's kingdom. There is no room for hate, anger, injustice, revenge, or murder. That is why Jesus taught His followers how to live in His kingdom after repentance. His sermon emphasizes self-examination that leads to humility, love, generosity, compassion, and forgiveness.

## **1. THE BLESSED PEOPLE**

### **A. The First Two Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-4)**

<sup>3</sup> Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Jesus began His sermon with nine beatitudes that capture the key principles and characteristics of His kingdom. The main statements of blessings are the first eight, while the ninth expands on the eighth. Each beatitude has three elements: (1) the word *blessed*, (2) the character of the ones receiving the blessing, and (3) the promise of the blessing itself.

The word *beatitude* originates from a translation of the Greek word *makarios*, meaning "blessed," "happy," or "to be envied." A beatitude is thus a statement of blessing or happiness. Fundamentally, the beatitudes are Jesus' call to happiness. While the beatitudes from Jesus' sermon are the most well-known, beatitudes also appear in the Old Testament. For instance, in Psalm 1:1 and 119:1, we find similar expressions of blessings. In these passages, the Hebrew word translated as *blessed* is *ashrey*, which also carries the meaning of "happiness." This state of happiness or blessedness goes beyond mere feelings or temporary contentment. Unlike happiness that comes from external

circumstances such as wealth, health, or status, this happiness is deep and internal, coming from God and participating in His kingdom even in times of struggle and sorrow.

What makes Christ's beatitudes unique is that He extended these blessings to those who are often overlooked or suffering—such as the oppressed, exploited, marginalized, vulnerable, and persecuted. This is why these beatitudes are both paradoxical and significant. They challenge our usual understanding of blessings and happiness. While we might admire rich and powerful individuals, true happiness is rooted in our relationship with God and in how we treat one another.

The blessings of God's kingdom begin with the "the poor in spirit" (v. 3). Although these mainly refer to those who do not have enough money for necessities, they also include those who are spiritually and emotionally depleted. In other words, the "poor in spirit" do not have the resources to make it on their own. The hopelessness of their challenging circumstances drives them to rely on God completely. To these economically and spiritually impoverished, Jesus offers the kingdom of Heaven. In our modern perspective, *prosperity* signifies God's favor and blessings. This leads us to view the rich and powerful as more desirable and deserving, causing us not only to ignore the poor but also to give them superficial help or handouts. Yet, it is to the undesirable and undeserving that Jesus extends His entire kingdom. Jesus affirms those who are spiritually and economically hopeless are valued, honored, and belong in His heavenly kingdom.

The second blessing is provided to "those who mourn" (v. 4). *Mourning* refers to experiencing deep grief or sorrow over a distressing event or challenging situation. The Greek term is usually associated with great sadness, especially after the death of a loved one. However, *mourning* can also signify feeling sorrow over personal and collective sins, persecution, and the presence of evil. For example, when God saw the constant wickedness of humanity, "the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (Gen. 6:5-6 NKJV). This verse shows

God is deeply affected by sin, and He grieves over the presence of evil in the world. As believers, we are called to share in that grief, mourning over the same things that bring sorrow to God. In light of this, the Apostle Paul said, “Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good” (Rom. 12:9 NKJV), and the psalmist lamented, “Rivers of water run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law” (Ps. 119:136).

Yet, this second beatitude highlights the paradoxical nature of Jesus’ teachings. How can those who are grieving be happy? Their happiness comes from Jesus’ promise that God will comfort them. Even in our mourning, Jesus’ assurance of comfort keeps our grief from leading to despair (1 Thess. 4:13).

### **Comfort for Christians**

Comfort for believers is found in five factors:

1. *God’s promises.* These promises provide hope and assurance during times of mourning (see Matt. 5:4; Isa. 40:10).
2. *God’s actions.* God actively intervenes on behalf of believers, restoring what is lost and turning negative situations into blessings for our good (Rom. 8:28).
3. *Jesus’ return.* We will receive our ultimate comfort when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom. Evil will be judged at that time, and pain and suffering will end (2 Thess. 1:5-10; Rev. 21:4).
4. *The Holy Spirit’s comfort.* The Holy Spirit, known as the “Comforter,” consoles us during times of deep sorrow (John 14:16; Acts 9:31).
5. *The love of community.* During suffering, the love and support of fellow believers provide strength and comfort, helping us endure difficult times.—Lee Roy Martin

**B. The Meek, the Hungry, and the Merciful** (Matthew 5:5-7)

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. <sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

The third beatitude states the meek, much like the “poor in spirit” (v. 3), will experience true happiness because they will “inherit the earth” (v. 5). In the Bible, meekness is associated with both gentleness and strength. It is a defining characteristic of Jesus (11:29-30), who demonstrated how to be powerful without being harsh. In today’s society, people often admire and promote those who are aggressive or intimidating. However, in God’s kingdom, the gentle and humble are the ones who will ultimately reign with Christ forever (Rom. 8:17; Rev. 5:9-10).

In the fourth beatitude, happiness is promised to those who deeply long for righteousness (v. 6). Hunger and thirst are often linked with poverty and can be life-threatening. Just as food and water are crucial for survival, Jesus teaches that we should crave righteousness with the same urgency. For citizens of Christ’s kingdom, righteousness is as essential as food and water are for human life. If righteousness is the food of Christians, what exactly is it? Righteousness includes acting justly and uprightly toward God and humanity. It involves treating each other with fairness and justice. However, true righteousness flows from the heart. It is not just about outward appearances; it must come from pure motives and genuine love. Jesus criticized the Pharisees and scribes for their superficial display of goodness while being inwardly corrupt, lacking in love, justice, and mercy (see Matt. 23:23-28). Therefore, to enter the kingdom of Heaven, “[our] righteousness [must] exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20). This means we need a deep, ongoing hunger and thirst for righteousness—for justice, equity, and what is right to prevail. Those who long for righteousness will be “filled” (v. 6). The Greek term used here suggests such a person will be “fattened” or “fully satisfied,” experiencing true contentment in their pursuit of righteousness.

The fifth beatitude calls Jesus' followers to be "merciful" (v. 7), reflecting God's character. Mercy involves extending forgiveness, compassion, and faithful love to those who may not deserve it. Since Christians have received God's undeserved mercy, they must show the same mercy to others. Being merciful means more than showing forgiveness; it also involves compassion. Compassion is feeling the pain of others who suffer and taking action to help them. It is about stepping into their struggles and making a difference (Luke 7:11-17; 10:25-37). Jesus promised the merciful will find happiness because God will also show them mercy. However, showing mercy does not mean ignoring sin or letting the guilty go unchecked (see Ex. 34:7). It means holding an open mind, considering others' perspectives, and not seeking revenge.

§ *How can we develop and maintain a "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (v. 6), and why is this vital?*

### **C. The Pure, the Peacemakers, and the Persecuted** (Matthew 5:8-12)

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. <sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. <sup>10</sup> Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Spirit-filled Christians deeply long to see God as the Old Testament prophets did. Jesus said purity of heart is necessary for seeing God. The word *pure* encompasses physical, moral, and spiritual cleanness. However, when discussing "the pure in heart" (v. 8), there are three aspects to consider. First, the pure are free from any contaminating or displeasing elements and are set apart from the influence of sin. In other words, they live in this world but remain uncorrupted by worldly pleasures. Second, the pure are not just separated from sin but are fully devoted to God. No person or thing will divert their loyalty and devotion from God. The pure in heart love God with their entire being (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37). Third, the word *heart* does not refer to the physical organ that pumps blood

through the body; it represents our innermost desires and will. It is the driving force behind our actions. Therefore, those who have an unwavering passion for God above all else, making Him the central focus and desire of their hearts, will “see God.”

The seventh beatitude centers on “the peacemakers” (v. 9). The Biblical idea of *peace* indicates well-being and security, involving freedom from hostility and disturbances. It refers to a state of peace rather than merely a peaceful disposition. This beatitude, however, extends beyond merely experiencing peace; it calls for active peacemaking. It challenges believers to take an intentional and proactive role in fostering peace, not only within their own hearts but also in their families, communities, and the broader world. Peacemaking is not passive—it involves the work of healing divisions, mending relationships, and addressing conflicts with wisdom and grace. This calling comes with inherent risks, as stepping into conflict can be uncomfortable and even costly. It underscores the difficult but blessed path believers are called to walk.

Although making peace involves risks, peacemakers are recognized as God’s true children. The phrase “shall be called” is significant, indicating this acknowledgment comes directly from God. It reflects more than a title; it is an affirmation of identity, signifying a deep relationship with God. Peacemakers are living out a divine calling that mirrors the heart of God, who is the ultimate peacemaker. In embracing the risks and challenges of peacemaking, they are recognized and embraced by God as His own.

The eighth beatitude, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 10), not only continues to highlight the danger and risks the “blessed” may face, but also demonstrates happiness in God’s kingdom differs from our usual idea of happiness. Happiness does not mean a lack of conflict or trouble. Righteous people might face persecution from the world, but their happiness comes from knowing the kingdom of God is theirs

right now. The use of the present tense powerfully indicates the persecuted already belong to the kingdom of God. It is important to understand the cause of persecution should come from a commitment to doing what is right rather than failing to consider others' feelings and perspectives, which can result in offending or upsetting people.

The ninth beatitude deepens the focus on persecution. Jesus moved from using the third-person plural "they" to the second-person plural "you," addressing the entire community of disciples. He broadened the scope of persecution beyond physical and economic suffering to include insults, unfounded claims, and malicious slander. The reason for the persecution is also expanded, shifting from righteousness' sake to "because of Me" (v. 11 NASB). Believers will face persecution not only for doing what is right but simply because they follow Jesus. Nevertheless, when the world mocks and damages our reputation, instead of reacting to their offensive actions, we should "rejoice and be exceedingly glad" (v. 12 NKJV) because this is a form of worship. Jesus' followers should respond with joy because our heavenly reward is much greater than any troubles we face here on earth. Jesus reminded His disciples the persecution of God's people is not a new occurrence, as the prophets who came before them were also persecuted (v. 12).

### **Responding to Persecution**

How did Jesus expect His disciples to react under persecution? "Rejoice and be glad!" We are not to retaliate like an unbeliever, nor sulk like a child, nor lick our wound in self-pity like a dog, nor just grin and bear it like a stoic, still less pretend we enjoy it like a masochist. What then? We are to rejoice as a Christian should and even "leap for joy" (Luke 6:23).—John Stott

## **2. GODLY INFLUENCE**

### **A. Salt of the Earth (Matthew 5:13)**

<sup>13</sup> Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Having outlined the principles of happiness in God's kingdom, Jesus continued to address those who have committed to follow Him with the second-person plural "you." This plural *you* highlights the impact the entire Christian community has on the world. Therefore, Jesus is not calling His disciples to live in isolation from the world but to engage, spread through the world, and change the lives of those around us. This is made evident by Jesus' salt-and-light statements.

In the ancient world, salt was considered one of the fundamental necessities of human life, and an eighth-century rabbinic document agrees "the world cannot exist without salt." Salt was mainly used to provide flavor and as a preservative in food. In this light, Jesus' disciples are portrayed as vital to the well-being and preservation of the world, much like salt was to the ancient communities. The next phrase "if the salt loses its flavor" (v. 13 NKJV) does not mean the salt has stopped being. Rather, it means if the salt becomes contaminated, it is no longer useful and needs to be thrown away. In the same way, Christian believers who are led astray by sin and worldly pleasures lose their ability to make a positive impact. Like tainted salt, corrupt Christians can no longer fulfill their purpose and must be rejected.

§ *Describe how a particular Christian has served as "salt" in your life.*

## **B. Light of the World** (Matthew 5:14-16)

<sup>14</sup> Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. <sup>16</sup> Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

To reinforce the idea that Christians should not separate or withdraw from society, Jesus told His disciples, "Ye are the light of the world" (v. 14). Jesus emphasizes it is together, not individually, that we provide light to a world darkened by evil. Scripture clearly states Jesus is "the light of the

world” (John 8:12), and as a collective body, we shine His light and help bring the world to God. Therefore, we cannot retreat from the world’s view. We must avoid creating separated Christian communities that the world overlooks. Instead, we are called to let our lights shine through our “good works” (Matt. 5:16), which are the actions of the righteous (vv. 6, 10). As the world witnesses our acts of love and kindness, it will be led to worship God (v. 16). Our righteous deeds serve as a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, drawing others to glorify Him.

### **What Do Watchers Say?**

To call yourself a child of God is one thing. To be called a child of God by those who watch your life is another thing altogether.—Max Lucado

## **3. TRUE GREATNESS**

### **A. Jesus’ Fulfillment of the Law (Matthew 5:17-19)**

<sup>17</sup> Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. <sup>18</sup> For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. <sup>19</sup> Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Before going any further with His sermon, Jesus made clear that His teachings upheld and expanded upon the teachings of the Old Testament Law (the first five books of the Bible) and the Prophets (Major and Minor) rather than contradicting them. He underscored the significance of the Old Testament by stating He came to *fulfill* it, meaning He aimed to bring its teachings to their ultimate purpose and intended fulfillment. Consequently, not even the smallest letter or the tiniest stroke of Scripture would be lost until everything was fulfilled.

In verse 19, Jesus dispelled the thought that some of His commands and some of the commands of Scripture are of unequal value. Humans tend to categorize commands into two large segments—the more important and the less important. Having done that, the emphasis will be placed on the

greater ones, while frequently neglecting those of the lesser group. But Jesus said all are to receive equal attention.

In light of Jesus' affirmation of all Scripture, His disciples were called to obey and practice it, as well as to teach others to do the same. Those who instruct others in obedience to Scripture will be considered "great" in God's kingdom, while those who deny its authority will be deemed "least" in the kingdom of God.

§ *Why must Christian leaders be consistent in what they "do and teach" (v. 19)?*

### **B. Genuine Righteousness** (Matthew 5:20)

<sup>20</sup> For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Here, Jesus shifted His focus to the scribes and Pharisees, a group of individuals who were considered experts in the Law. In their attempt to righteously keep God's law, they took a path which, in reality, separated them from God. Pledging to keep even the slightest detail of religious tradition, they surrounded themselves with man-made laws that, in their eyes, were more important than what God has said. The approach of the Pharisees caused them to separate themselves from the rest of their Jewish brethren. They became haughty and proud, believing their perceived position was the only interpretation of God's Word. It led them to a religion that emphasized the externals, while neglecting the internals of the heart.

Jesus emphasizes His disciples' righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. This implies that merely following the rules of the Law is not enough to be part of God's kingdom; we must also demonstrate the qualities outlined in the Beatitudes.

### **Righteousness Required**

I believe that a great number of people are going to die and go to hell because they're counting on their religiosity in the church instead of their relationship with Jesus to get them to Heaven. They give lip service to repentance and faith, but they've never been born again.—Adrian Rogers

## **GOD'S STANDARDS**

Through the Beatitudes, Jesus revealed to His disciples the fundamental traits of Christian character. He used the metaphors of salt and light and contrasted His followers with the scribes and Pharisees to emphasize the need for a deeper, more authentic righteousness. His teachings show us how to live by God's standards, make a positive impact on others, and help them to change and move toward God's kingdom.

### **Daily Devotions**

- M. Abram Blessed and Called to Bless (Genesis 12:1-3)
- T. Israel to Influence the Nations (Psalm 67:1-7)
- W. A Light to the Nations (Isaiah 49:1-7)
- T. Centrality of Love in Ministry (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)
- F. The Holy Spirit and Godly Character (Galatians 5:16-26)
- S. The Church to Influence Others (1 Peter 2:4-12)