

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a church interior. The view is from the back of the sanctuary looking down a central aisle towards the altar. The aisle is carpeted with a light-colored runner and dark borders. On either side are rows of wooden pews. At the front, there is an altar with a white lace cloth, a large stained glass window with a central figure, and several hanging lanterns. The lighting is warm and bright.

Holy Living

Christ's Sermon

on the Mount

Bible Study

on

Matthew 5, 6, 7

by Terry A. Modica
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Session 1

Matthew 5:1- 6

As the scene opens, we see Jesus preparing to teach on a mountainside. In Biblical symbolism, when an event takes place on a mountain, it means that this is an important contact with God.

First, Jesus notices the crowd. We can imagine that he feels a great concern for each person. He understands their needs, and he wants to help them. The best teaching he can give them is one that will guide them into a more love-filled life – an abundant life in which they are closer to God than ever before, loving him more, becoming more aware of his love, and more able to love one another.

Picture yourself in the crowd. He is speaking to you, too. He is addressing the needs that you have today.

The first set of Beatitudes (verses 3-6) focuses on our relationship with God. The rest of them will center on our relationships with each other. This pattern reflects Jesus' core message: First love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and the second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37).

The first four Beatitudes tell us that God is the source of our happiness. When we accept into our daily lives the values of God's kingdom, we grow into a fuller relationship with him.

We are "poor in spirit" when we stop placing our confidence in material security or other false gods (the kingdom of the world). By depending instead on God (the kingdom of heaven), we experience his power and love and faithfulness.

We "mourn" when our fallen flesh-nature wants to take the easy path that leads to sin while our sanctified spirit chooses to resist and to take the

holy path. God comforts us while we struggle with it.

We are "meek" when we're submissive to God and obedient to his commands. Inheriting the "land" means becoming one of God's royal children in the kingdom of heaven on earth.

We "hunger for righteousness" when we want to live morally, i.e., when we want to conform our will to God's will. This hunger will be satisfied because God helps us achieve righteousness. Even though we may get frustrated with our spiritual progress, what may seem impossible for us is never impossible for God.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Describe a time when you felt poor in spirit, relying on God when it seemed easier or more sensible to trust in the things of this world.
2. Describe an experience of fighting against yourself because you did not want to do something God's way. Did your flesh-nature mourn when you refused to give in to it? How did God comfort you?
3. What are some rules of the Church that people don't like to obey? Is there a rule that you first disobeyed then obeyed? Why did you change? What effect did it have on your life?
4. Name ways that can help us grow in righteousness. What activities purify us? What has helped you become more loving or more morally upright?

Session 2

Matthew 5:7-12

The second half of the Beatitudes focuses on our relationships with each other. The first three of these (7-9) deal with how to live like Christ. Verses 10-12 show what results from that kind of living. The second half of the Beatitudes reflects the spiritual growth that is produced by the first half.

When we are poor in spirit and place our trust in God's mercy (verse 3), the next step is to give his mercy to others, and this results in the blessing of receiving even more of God's mercy (verse 7).

When we've wanted to sin but we've chosen instead to live God's way, even though it makes our flesh-nature mourn (verse 4), we become pure in our hearts and we can see God more fully, i.e., we dwell in the presence of God (verse 8). This purity allows the light of Christ in us to shine more brightly onto others, and they are brought closer to God through the witness of our lives.

When we are meek (verse 5), we become peacemakers (verse 9), because we no longer fight and argue with others. Consider how God deals with us when we choose the path of sin. Does he fight against us? Sometimes it seems like we're wrestling with him, but it's not God who's arguing: We're the ones who do all the complaining and yelling and struggling.

Being peacemakers means we live as his children by handling conflicts the same way he does. We love our enemies, forgiving them and doing good for them, regardless of whether or not they want to change. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, which tells us how God wants us to handle conflicts: by being patient instead of demanding, by showing kindness, by not being rude, by not defending our own causes, by not being quick-tempered or brooding over our injuries, by bearing whatever is done to us (however, this does not

mean we stay in abuse; Jesus always – except on Good Friday – walked away from his abusers), by never giving up hope, and by always enduring.

When we live this way, we become more like Christ than those who don't. For this reason they persecute us, trying to convince themselves that they should never become like us so that they won't have to give up their old ways and be converted. If we're not experiencing persecution, we're not really living the Beatitudes.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Name some of the contrasts between the world and Christianity (for example, lying versus honesty). How does the Christian way show purity of heart?
2. Tell the story of a time when you served as a peacemaker. How did it reveal Jesus to the people who witnessed what you did? If you saw that it made a difference in their spiritual lives, tell about that, too.
3. Describe a time when you were persecuted because of your relationship with God. Perhaps someone misunderstood your faith, or rejected you, or deliberately created problems for you. Did you feel blessed by it? Did you feel closer or further from Jesus when it happened? Did you grow spiritually or did you lose some faith because of it? Why?

Session 3

Matthew 5:13 - 16

"You are the salt of the earth" (verse 13). What does it mean to be salt? Think about what salt does. It adds flavor to something that lacks sufficient taste. Jesus also says that if someone loses his flavor, "with what can it be seasoned?" Re-read that as: "by *whom* can it be seasoned?"

Only God can renew a flavor that has been lost.

The Christian is someone who has been made flavorful — alive in holiness — by Christ's Holy Spirit.

The *useful* Christian is one who evangelizes by adding the seasoning of Jesus' love to another person's life. But beware of trying too hard! What happens when food is over-salted? It tastes terrible; people don't want to eat it.

No matter how good our intentions may be, if we come on too strong, we do more harm than help. Maybe we're trying to bring an unwilling spouse to church or to convince a neighbor to trust God, but they don't want a Jesus who seems condemning or forceful. They're much more likely to turn to a Jesus who loves them just the way they are, who is gentle, who serves them in their needs whether they deserve it or not.

Verses 14 - 16 tell us to be a light that others cannot help but notice. What kind of light? One that blinds? Of course not.

In John 8:12, Jesus says "I am the light of the world." Because of our baptism, Jesus' Spirit is within us. His glow should be what others see when they look at us.

We are not to hide our relationship with Jesus. An effective Christian is one whose faith is visible, whose glow is the love that comes from the Holy Spirit, and whose good deeds glorify the Father

because they are accomplished through the resurrection power of Christ.

Notice in verse 14 that Jesus calls us a "city." We are not to evangelize alone. A city is a group of people: a parish, a family, a church organization. Being Christian means being in community.

When our light is joined to the lights of others, our collective glow is much brighter and much more effective in revealing the love of Christ to the world. Why? Because when nonbelievers see Christians living out that love with each other, they become convinced that the love of Christ is real. How important it is that we love each other unconditionally, generously, and with a servant's heart (see Acts 2:42-47)!

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you know when someone's life is lacking the full flavor of God's love? And how can you season their life with the love of Jesus that shines within you?
2. Were you ever over-salted by someone who tried too hard to change you? How have you over-salted others? What were the results?
3. What obstructs the light of Christ that glows within us? Why don't others always see Christ in us? What blocks their view of him? What needs to be changed in us so that they can see him clearly?

Session 4

Matthew 5:17-20

The Jewish religious authorities of Jesus' day were often literalists in their interpretation of the Law of God, which had been given to them through Moses. Jesus, however, gave a deeper meaning to the Law. He placed his focus on the *goal* of the Law: perfect love. He taught it through his words and in the way he treated people.

This approach sometimes seemed to contradict the Law, causing confusion, so Jesus clarified his meaning. In effect, he said, "The interpretation that I give to the Law does not mean that the laws are invalid. Rather, it shows that you're not even fulfilling the Law if your so-called obedience isn't motivated by love for God and love for neighbor (see Matt. 22:35-40)."

When Jesus spoke of heaven and earth passing away (verse 18), he was not referring to a literal end of the universe. Astute Jewish listeners understood that he was referring to the well-known prophecy in Isaiah 65:17, where God promised to create a new heaven and a new earth by sending the Messiah.

They didn't know it yet, but the passing away of the old heaven and earth was going to happen at the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. And this was not going to happen until Jesus had finished his work by fulfilling the true meaning of each and every law. As our true Messiah, he had to make up for our every failure, fill in every gap, and restore everything that was lacking in the way humankind had obeyed God. Thus, he fulfilled the Law in the most loving way possible.

Therefore (verse 19), as his followers, we also are to be generous with love. Obeying all the commandments — truly obeying them — requires loving God with our whole heart and our whole soul and our whole mind, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

For example, consider the Church law that says we must attend Mass every weekend, and missing Mass (except when we're incapacitated) is a sin. Does this mean that we are obeying God if we sit in church without missing a Sunday? No, not really — not if, while we sit there, we do nothing to experience a genuine relationship with God. Attending Mass should result in a growth of loving God and neighbor. Encountering Jesus in the Word and in the Eucharist should make a difference in how we love.

The bottom line is always love.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Were you ever treated unlovingly because of another person's legalism? How did that experience hide the true nature of Jesus?
2. Name common ways that Christians fail to obey God. What did Jesus do to make up for those failures? For example, how do you suppose Jesus treats unborn babies who've been aborted? How does he treat the mothers and the abortionists?
3. Imagine that you've met a couple who are living together unmarried. What's the best way to invite them to partake of the Sacrament of Marriage? With other group members, do some role playing to try different approaches.

Session 5

Matthew 5:21-26

Jesus continues the sermon by giving specific examples of how to transform the literal interpretations of Mosaic laws into the Law of Love. In each case, he explains that true believers choose the more difficult, more loving approach.

His first topic is anger, and he makes us aware of the increasing dangers of anger by referring to increasingly disastrous results in the angry person's soul.

At the lowest level, anger in the heart results in "judgment," which is represented by the Jewish local court, where the least of the three punishments are meted out.

Then, he names one of the initial ways that anger in the heart becomes anger that kills: To shout "raqa" at someone is to call them a nitwit or imbecile. It destroys their self-esteem. It belittles them. The abuser must now face a trial before the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial body.

Finally, Jesus warns that calling someone a fool is even worse. No longer an "imbecile," the person under attack is "worthless" (the direct meaning of the Greek word). The Jews understood the word to be filled with contempt. To hate someone so much as to see no value in them is to condemn oneself to Gehenna.

Gehenna was a name of a nearby valley that was the center of a cult that killed children by fire as a sacrifice to the gods. The Jews used the name to illustrate the concept of punishment by fire; today we call it "hell."

This theme of anger being equal to murder is easier to understand in light of 1 John 4:7-21, which says that God is love, and when we have anger, we have hatred; we don't have love, so we don't

have God, and we therefore don't have eternal life.

The rest of this passage is God's remedy for the times when we do feel anger. In essence, Jesus says: Go and do whatever is necessary to be reconciled with the one who's made you angry.

This, he points out, is even more important than worshiping God. How genuine can our worship really be if anger has replaced love in our hearts, since God is love?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Jesus used name-calling as an example of how we treat others unlovingly. What are some other ways that we belittle people or kill their self-esteem?
2. Why does expressing anger hurt the people who experience our anger?
3. Can you recall an incident in which someone treated you unfairly, but you responded with an act of love? How difficult was it to give that love? What were the results?
4. Anger is a normal human feeling. In itself, it is neither right nor wrong. Even Jesus felt angry. At what point does anger become sinful?