

# Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner's Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven

## Introduction

- **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, as we embark upon another journey through your Son's most famous sermon, let us approach it with fresh eyes and ears. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.*

- **Introduction**

- What are your first memories of the Sermon on the Mount?
- What words come to mind when you think of this famous passage in Matthew?
- How does Levine's observation that the Sermon on the Mount is teaching from a Jew to a collection of Jews impact your perspective?
- Levine writes that in her past, she was reluctant to read this passage because it was labeled as a "sermon."
  - When you see "sermon" listed in the weekly church bulletin, what do you expect?
- If heaven is "where God's will is done," how much of heaven is currently present on earth?... Put another way – do you think "Thy kingdom come" is intended to happen incrementally rather than in one big event?
- Levine points out that the Golden Rule is not a replacement for the New Testament, but rather a lens through which the Bible should be interpreted.
  - Think of a story or parable from scripture. How does applying the Golden Rule help with the interpretation of the scripture you chose?
- Luther speaks of a "counsel of despair" when reflecting on the instructions of Jesus that no one could follow (e.g., "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you").
  - How do you respond to the tall order that Jesus' teachings present?  
*Levine says that it is not to reproach us, but rather to spur us to do better*
- What is your reaction to so many of Jesus' teachings being direct pulls from Old Testament scripture?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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# Chapter 1 – The Beatitudes

- **Opening Prayer**

[Leader's Guide:4] *O God, most holy and praised: As your Son gathered disciples to himself to teach them your ways, so your Spirit has gathered us in this time and place. Make us alert and attentive as we read and reflect on Jesus' words; help us take them to heart and live into them so that your will is truly done on earth as in heaven. We pray in the name of our true Teacher, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

- **Video (12:33)**

- What would the advantages and disadvantages be of introducing a new convert to The Beatitudes first and the rest of the New Testament afterward?
- "Poor in spirit" – recognizing the dependence on others
  - How do you see this as a blessing?
- "Meek" – having authority but understanding they can learn from those with less power
  - How have you seen this meekness in our world today?
- "Mourn" – community-focused (lack, poverty, etc.)
- "Pure in Heart" – those who don't think evil thoughts of others; they know who they are, their talents, and their relationships with others
- "Peacemakers" - compromisers
  - How might this be the hardest of the Beatitudes?
  - You know who they are because "nobody dies at the end"
    - How does this make sense to you?
- The Beatitudes are not at all controversial; they are familiar to the Jews
- How have you experienced persecution in your life?
  - If you haven't, do you consider this a failing?
- Levine creates her own beatitude – "blessed are those who remember"
  - Can you similarly come up with another beatitude?
- What do you think of Levine positing that Jesus didn't deliver the entire Sermon in one sitting?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 1**

- [1] "Disciples are active learners: they ask questions, they seek clarification, they raise objections, they seek to take their teacher's comments to the next level."
  - In what way are you an active Christian learner?
- [3] "Jesus's import is not that he works miracles...More important...are...Jesus's death and resurrection and his teachings."
  - What is the importance of miracles to Jesus' ministry? Could he have been as effective without them?
- Read Matthew 5:1-12 (everyone follows along in different translations – RSV, NIV, The Message, etc.)
  - Pause after each verse and ask if there are significant differences among the translations
- Different translations of Matthew 5:3 use different adjectives:
  - KJV/NIV/The Message/NRSV – Blessed
  - CEB/Good News - Happy
  - How do these work/not work for you?
- Why do you think Matthew, unlike Luke, refrained from introducing the woes?
- Poor in Spirit [Mat 5:3]

- [8] “ani” is the Hebrew word for “poor” but connotes recognizing a dependence on God
    - When are you “poor in spirit”?
    - Do you consider such times as blessed?
  - “poor in spirit” also connotes economics (Luke just uses “poor”)
    - What do you think of Levine’s observation that the Gospels don’t consider being rich as evil?
  - Mourn [Mat 5:4]
    - “They’re in a better place” is frequently cited as an unhelpful thing to say to someone who’s lost a loved one.
      - What are examples of helpful things you’ve used or heard said to you or others?  
*Levine’s – “May his [or her] memory be for a blessing.”*
    - Levine points out that merely being able to mourn is a blessing.
      - Sitting shiva – offering memory, story, and presence
      - How is being able to mourn a blessing to you?
    - *Jesus may be foreshadowing his own death and resurrection, and preparing his disciples for mourning and comfort*
  - Meek [Mat 5:5]
    - Psalm 37:11 – “But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.”
    - Considering how we defined meek in the introduction as having authority but understanding and learning from those who do not.
      - Why does it make sense that they should inherit the earth?
      - What is their responsibility here?
    - [19] Levine says that Jesus’ disciples are from the privileged class, and therefore more easily able to hear this message.
      - In what ways do you consider Jesus’ disciples as privileged?
  - Righteousness / Merciful [Mat 5:6-7]
    - How do you respond to Levine’s claim that “Justice without mercy is intolerable, but mercy without justice is equally intolerable”?
      - Can you provide examples?
  - Pure in Heart / Peacemakers [Mat 5:8-9]
    - <covered above in Video section>
  - Persecuted because of Righteousness [Mat 5:10]
    - What does this say to you?
  - Persecuted because of Jesus [Mat 5:11-12]
    - What does this say to you?
  - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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# Chapter 2 – The Extensions

- **Opening Prayer**

*Lord God, as we take direction from your Son, we ask this day that we bind these words to our hearts, and carry them with us always. In Christ's Name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video (11:14)**

- “Antitheses” vs. “Extensions”
  - Put in your own words Levine’s assertion that “Extensions” is better used for this section of scripture.
- When is debating God’s Law healthy, and when is it hurtful?
- What is your reaction to the strategy of “building fences” to better ensure laws are followed?
- Has it ever occurred to you about the hypocrisy of swearing on the Bible when Jesus instructs not to do so?

- **Chapter 2**

- Read Matthew 5:17-19
- Do you think of Jesus as having come to fulfill the Law? Why or why not?
- How much does OT Law guide your life today?
- Levine points out that Paul was not against the Torah. He was against Gentiles converting to Judaism.
  - In what ways do you feel left out in not sharing Jewish heritage and culture with Jesus?
- Jesus extends the Torah, “building fences” around sinful behavior:
  - Murder → anger
  - Adultery → lust
  - Tightening divorce → sexual unfaithfulness
  - Fulfilling pledges → not making pledges at all (“Let your yes mean yes”)
  - Eye for an eye → turn the other cheek
  - Love your neighbor → love your enemies
- When do you consider this as hyperbolic idealism and when do you consider it more literal instruction?
- Levine discusses the concept of hell, and points out that scripture does not suggest eternal punishment but annihilation or oblivion.
  - How does this help with your understanding of the afterlife?
- Scripture doesn’t provide examples of capital punishment for adultery (e.g., David, Samaritan woman at the well, adulterous woman brought before Jesus). Rabbis sought to prevent the death penalty.
  - What do you feel justifies capital punishment?
- “Porneia” is a vague Greek term inclusive of sexual immorality. Levine points out that “Not all marriages are made in heaven” and implies that the use of this general term broadens the direction for when divorce makes sense.
  - Have you witnessed harm done by using a more narrow interpretation and thus perpetuating loveless or abusive marriages?
- When do you find it more compelling to use “an eye for an eye” vs. “turn the other cheek”?
- Levine says that Jesus wants us to love our enemies because “people should act as God acts.”
  - How does looking at it through God’s eyes help with loving your enemies? Even with neo-Nazis and KKK members?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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# Chapter 3 – Practicing Piety

- **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, help us to learn this day, and every day, to practice piety in ways that are meaningful to others and to You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video (10:52)**

- What is your definition of piety? *The quality of being religious or reverent*
- How naturally does piety come to you?
- When do you most feel like you are “the light of the world”?
  - Are these the times when the focus is elsewhere rather than on you?
- In what ways does a goal of perfection help you or hurt you in your practice of piety?
  - How does this reconcile with the aphorism “perfect is the enemy of good”?
- In which emotional states have you found yourself praying?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 3**

- [45] “Salt of the earth” has become a cliché.
  - When you hear it in a secular sense, what does it imply to you?
  - When you hear Jesus say it, what does it imply to you as a disciple?
    - *We are not for ourselves but for the world*
    - *Valuable*
    - *Simple element*
    - *Cannot live with too much of it (doesn't call attention to itself)*
    - *True to oneself*
    - *Valuable for what we contribute to the world*
- “Light of the world”
  - What light imagery can you think of that is presented in the Bible?
- [50] “Any faith that does not manifest itself in works is not faith; it is complacency and self-satisfaction.”
  - What are your reactions to this?
- When have you witnessed (or demonstrated yourself) being righteous to be recognized?
- [57-59] *Eight levels of charity identified by Jewish teacher Maimonides (1138-1204)*
  - *Giving unwillingly*
  - *Giving willingly but inadequately*
  - *Giving only after being asked*
  - *Giving before being asked*
  - *Giving anonymously, except for the beneficiary*
  - *Giving to a recipient you know but who doesn't know you*
  - *Giving to a recipient you don't know and who doesn't know you*
  - *Enter into a partnership with the recipient (teach them to fish)*
- What examples can you give for any of these levels?
- Does this progression of charity work for you? Are there other levels?
- Levine notes that The Beatitudes are addressed in the plural (blessed are “you all”), as are the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” statements. But Jesus' direction to give alms in Matthew 6:2 is in the singular.
  - How might this be important?
- [61] “Showing off in prayer is nothing new, despite the fact that it is annoying to pretty much everyone except the showoff.”

- When have you witnessed what seems like showing off in prayer?
  - Jewish tradition of moving lips when praying silently.
    - Have you ever tried this? Do you think this helps in staying focused?
  - Other reflections?
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- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
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# Chapter 4 – Our Father

- **Opening Prayer**

*Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come, thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil,  
for thine is the kingdom,  
and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.*

- **Video (11:21)**

- When you pray the Lord's Prayer in church, in what ways are you aware of the "community" orientation?
- What titles do you use when you pray to God?
- Would you want the job of being a prophet?
- What do you think of when you pray "give us this day our daily **bread**?"
- Which works best for you – sin, debt, or trespass?
- What things in life "put you to the test"?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 4**

- [67] Levine discusses five of the purposes of prayer:
  - *To express our feelings*
  - *To improve our relationship with God*
  - *To unite ourselves to our community and to our past*
  - *To remind us we are not all in the same place*
  - *To discern*
- How do these purposes resonate with you? Are any more important than others?
- Are there others you would call out?
- How do you react to different versions of the Lord's Prayer when visiting different churches?
- Our Father
  - *"Abba" might have a connotation of "daddy" in modern Hebrew, but not in Jesus' time. It was a term used to address God.*
- Who Art in Heaven
  - Why do we stick with the King James Version language when it seems so dated?
  - [74] *The prayer is a political statement – emphasizing the one Father in the heavens as the ultimate authority as opposed to the Roman emperor who was the "father of the fatherland."*
- Hallowed Be Your Name
  - Who do you think is doing the hallowing (sanctifying/making holy)? God? His people?
- Your Kingdom Come
  - What does this phrase imply to you?
  - [78] *"America's famous 'separation of church and state' does not mean that churches should be silent in the face of oppression."*

- In what ways do you see the church as vocal? As silent?
  - Your Will Be Done on Earth as in Heaven
    - Levine points out that Jesus responds to temptation by quoting the Bible
    - Is the Bible the first place you turn when discerning divine will? Should it be?
  - Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread
    - What do you think about Levine’s proposal that this likely meant “Give us tomorrow’s bread today,” implying eating at God’s ultimate messianic feast?
  - And Forgive Us Our Debts as We Also Have Forgiven our Debtors
    - How does the use of “debt” instead of “trespass” change the meaning to you?
  - And Do Not Bring Us into the Time of Trial
    - Do you think God puts us to the test?
  - But Rescue Us from the Evil One
    - What do you mean when you pray this? Do you think of the Evil One as Satan or as a metaphor for evil?
  - For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen
  - Other reflections?
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# Chapter 5 – Finding Your Treasure

- **Opening Prayer**

*Lord God, we frequently slip into behaviors you explicitly cautioned against – accumulating stuff, worrying, judging. Thank you for showing us the better way. Help us to embrace it more readily. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video (9:36)**

- In what ways does a “heavenly bank account” resonate with the way you handle your finances?
- Can you think of any of Jesus’ teachings where your response is similar to Levine’s, as in “Really Jesus? ‘Don’t worry’? Are you kidding me?”
- How do you combat over-worrying?
- Where have you witnessed people being judgmental?
  - Where have you witnessed yourself being judgmental?
- What are your reactions to Levine’s comments about being judged by the one worst thing you’ve done?

- **Chapter 5**

- Fasting
  - What is your experience with fasting as a spiritual discipline?
  - What do you see as the benefits (and drawbacks) of fasting?
- Storing Up Treasures
  - [95] “Stuff cannot save us. Instead, it draws us in.”
    - What is Levine driving at here?
  - Can you personally relate to the Ecclesiastes 5:10 verse Levine quotes (“The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.”)
- Eye is the Lamp
  - How do you interpret the symbolism in Hiram Powers’s quote “The eye is the window of the soul, the mouth the door”?
- Worry
  - Who is the biggest worrier in your family?
  - What are the situations that worry you the most?
  - Why do we continue to worry if we acknowledge it is of little benefit?
- Judging
  - When does judging turn into being judgmental?
  - How do you think people a century from now might judge us?
- Other reflections?

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# Chapter 6 – Living Into the Kingdom

- **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, as we come to the end of our study of your Sermon on the Mount, we pray that you help us to put your words into action. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video (13:24)**

- How does the addition of "...for this is the law and the prophets" change your perspective on The Golden Rule?
- How can the concept of "living into the Kingdom" influence your day-to-day living?
- Who are the "swine" in your life to whom casting pearls makes no sense?
- Where do you see argument replacing negotiation in our society?
- What baggage is keeping you from passing through the narrow gate Jesus describes?
- "False prophets are politicians who promise everything but demand nothing."
  - Can you provide examples?

- **Chapter 6**

- Read Matthew 15:21-28
  - *Levine points out that Jesus does not mean "Gentiles" when he refers to "dogs." Rather, he uses the word for "little dogs" or "puppies."*
  - How does this alter your interpretation of the passage?
  - How does the Canaanite woman's reaction align with the positive response to name-calling that Levine counsels in the video?
- How much of your prayer life is devoted to "asking and knocking"?
  - Why do you think Jesus even needed to remind us to "Ask, and it will be given you"?
- Put the Golden Rule into your own words.
- What parts of faith seem to be a narrow gate [Mat 7:13] and what parts seem to be a light burden [Mat 11:30]?
- How do you discern false from true prophets?
- Who are the false prophets you see in the Christian church today?
- What are your biggest takeaways from Levine's study of the Sermon on the Mount?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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