**Group Session**

Small Group Study

**Overview**

*After months of traveling around the region, Jesus’ miraculous exploits were well known. Crowds quickly gathered and willingly followed wherever He went. Now that He had their attention, Jesus took the opportunity to teach about God’s kingdom. He wanted those who chose to be a part of this Kingdom to know how they should live. This session covers highlights of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount, which spans Matthew chapters 5–7. After Jesus shared these memorable insights, the people were amazed because He taught with authority, unlike other religious teachers.*

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**Engage**

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| **QUESTION**Think back on your days in school. Who was your favorite teacher? What made him or her so special? |

Any scholar—secular or religious—will tell you Jesus was an incredible teacher. And like all great teachers, He drew huge crowds. The Book of Matthew tells us people followed Jesus everywhere He went because of His powerful teaching and the unbelievable miracles He performed. People were healed, delivered from demon possession, and set free. The same opportunity is available for us today as we listen to Him through His Word.

**Watch**

As we watch this video, consider this question:

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| **QUESTION**What can make living for Jesus difficult in our culture today? |



**Consider**

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| *She was known as the toughest teacher in school. She made you work hard—harder than you’d ever worked before. You wanted to quit. You daydreamed about the day you’d be out of her class forever! But earning a good grade from her felt like winning an Olympic medal, and years later, you think of her every time you conjugate a verb, use algebra to solve a real-life problem, or apply the scientific method to draw a logical conclusion.**Nearly everyone has had a teacher or mentor whose high expectations were at first shocking and challenging. Surprisingly, these same teachers often end up being the ones we appreciate most because they pushed us to do more, to be more. In the moment, we may have thought those expectations were harsh, but later we realized they were born out of genuine concern for us and our future.**Undoubtedly, Jesus was the best teacher of all. Matthew chapter 5 documents one occasion when the crowd had grown to a particularly enormous size. It was a great opportunity for Jesus to build His following. All He had to do was inspire the crowd and win them to His side.* *If you were Jesus’ campaign manager, you would have taken Him aside and said something like: “Now Jesus, don’t waste this moment. This is it. We’re going to triple your followers, maybe even more. Give it all you’ve got. Promise them peace and prosperity. Give them hope and a bright future. Win them to our side. If we are going to change the world, we need all the people we can get!”**But Jesus didn't do what we might expect. Instead of rallying the crowd to His side with promises of a trouble-free life, He took the opportunity to sit down among them and teach them a better way to live. What’s more, He dramatically raised the bar.* |
| **QUESTION**Why do you think we often bristle at difficult teachings or teachers who challenge us? |

**What the Bible Says**

Note: Sessions for younger age levels focus on the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–10.)

Through His teaching which we now call the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus made it clear that following Him came with a price. His true followers would live differently from the world around them. Jesus demanded more from them in every way. Over and over, Jesus hit them between the eyes with statements and commands that were as difficult and confrontational then as they are today. Like any good teacher, however, His high expectations were not without purpose: He was building a following that would stand the test of time.

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| **QUESTION**What can we understand about God’s character based on Jesus’ willingness to tackle tough subjects? |

**Blessed**

Read Matthew 5:3–12.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount is known as the Beatitudes. Beatitudes were commonly used by rabbis and teachers as the introduction to a talk. The teacher concisely laid out the philosophy he would unpack in the rest of the message. Jesus used a familiar format, but the content of His message brought a fresh and expanded perspective to these topics. To a society that valued strength, position, power, prestige, and possessions, Jesus very clearly signaled to the crowd that He was no ordinary rabbi.

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| **QUESTION**Which beatitude is most meaningful to you? Why? |

**Live in Right Relationship**

Read Matthew 5:21–24; 6:14–15.

Jesus often stated God’s instructions from the Old Testament, the Law. Then He raised the bar by calling His followers to a higher standard. For example, Jesus said merely being angry with someone is as sinful as murder. Furthermore, in the religious system of the day, sacrifices and offerings were the way to set things right with God when someone sinned. But Jesus told the people they should make things right with one another *before* coming to God. That’s how much a restored, right relationship with others matters to God.

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| **QUESTION**Why do you think it matters so much to God that His children live in right relationship with one another? |

**Love Your Enemies**

Read Matthew 5:43–48.

Loving your enemies is not an emotional sentiment. Rather, it’s the decision to pursue another person’s good, despite what you may feel. Praying for your enemy is a practical way of pursuing their good—and yours. As you pray, your heart will soften toward them. When you no longer hate your enemy, you win! It doesn’t make sense by the world’s standards. But remember: You aren’t playing by the world’s rules*.* When you love your enemies, you rise above the world’s imperfect system and play by God’s rules instead. The difference people see in you will ultimately point them to Him.

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| **QUESTION**Have you ever been shown love by someone who—by the world’s standards—had every right to consider you an enemy? What effect did it have on you? |

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| **QUESTION**Think of a time when you put this teaching of Jesus into practice. How did you love your enemy? What was the result? |

**Do Not Judge**

Read Matthew 7:1–5.

Jesus was not afraid to discuss difficult issues. He confronted those who placed themselves in a position of judgment over others. He explained that we should view others’ actions, attitudes, and motivations through the same lens of grace and mercy with which we hope to be viewed. Jesus also pointed out that judging others can be tied to hypocrisy. Instead of judging others, Jesus said we should be honest with ourselves about our own imperfections.

Unfortunately, Christians are often viewed as hypocrites. You likely know someone who left church, is afraid to return to church, or simply dislikes church people because of a bad experience with a judgmental Christian. While Christians are certainly required to hold each other accountable, we are no one’s eternal judge. It’s exclusively God’s job to judge those who are not believers.

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| **QUESTION**What do you think Christ-followers can do to welcome—and even be agents of healing—to those who have been hurt by the sting of hypocrisy? |

**Build on the Rock**

Read Matthew 7:21–27.

You might expect Jesus to end the Sermon on the Mount on an encouraging note that would draw more followers, but Jesus wasn’t trying to recruit fans. Instead, He was trying to cultivate committed, lifelong followers. He taught that they should follow Him with their actions, not just their words. The same is true for us today. And when we do, we build our spiritual house on a strong foundation—one that stands the storms of life.

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| **QUESTION**Why do you think acting on what you know is such a fundamental part of being a Christ-follower? |

**Reflect**

As a good teacher, Jesus began His teaching with the end in mind. He knew what was ahead for His followers—the unimaginable adversity and persecution they would face. He knew it was critical for them to develop a strong, healthy community they could lean on in the days to come. He was also preparing them to establish a way of living that echoes the kingdom of heaven for future generations. Jesus’ teachings still give us a clear picture of how we should live in stark contrast to our world today—for our own good and as a testimony to those around us.

**Listen to God**

The goal of ***Listen*** is not only to gain an understanding of God’s Word, but also to pause and listen to what God our Creator might want to say to us about what we have read and shared. Be silent for a few moments and reflect on the following questions. Choose the one that most resonates with what God is saying to you now. Then complete the others during Day 1 of your devotion time this week.

**Personal Reflection Questions**

*Record your answers to the following questions in the space provided or in your personal journal.*

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| **QUESTION**The way to eternal life is to put your faith and trust in Jesus and His death on the cross as payment for your sins. Then as a Christ-follower, you should obey His commands. Do you feel one of these is easier for you than the other? Explain. |

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| **QUESTION**Jesus’ teaching clarifies that you cannot always interpret hardship and adversity as a sign you’re doing something wrong. Have you ever blamed yourself for things in your life that are out of your control? Based on Jesus’ teaching, what should you do instead? |

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| **QUESTION**Jesus talked about judging others in Matthew 7:2. Are you comfortable with being judged by the standard you use to judge others? Why or why not? What changes do you feel God may be calling you to make? |

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| **QUESTION**Jesus taught that being angry at someone is as sinful as murdering someone. Do you have anger in your heart against anyone? Ask the Lord to search you and reveal any discord that you need to make right. Write about it below, then determine—with God’s help and wisdom—to resolve it. |

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| **QUESTION**Praying for your enemies will soften your heart toward them. Make a list below of people (individuals or groups) toward whom you have a hard heart. Commit to spending some time each day this week praying God’s blessings over them. At the end of the week, reevaluate your feelings towards them. How has your heart changed? |

**Prayer Requests**

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| Note any requests from the group and remember to pray for them during the week. |

Before next time, continue to listen with the personal devotions.

**Did You Know?**

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| *The Sermon on the Mount isn’t the only time Jesus listed beatitude-style blessings. The Gospel of Luke also includes a sermon that began with blessings, but it differed quickly from the previous sermon. In Matthew 5, Jesus stood on at an elevated point and gave what we call the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke 6, He delivered the Sermon on the Plain after walking down off of a mountain to a lower, level area. Both sermons began with blessings toward those experiencing challenges, but the message on the plain took a negative turn as Jesus spoke about the sorrow awaiting those who are interested in receiving full contentment in this life rather than contentment through His kingdom.*  |