

CCUA SS Initiative
January 4, 2026

Transparent AND Secret

Note to Online CCUA Participants:

The lessons that I prepare each week are based on material printed by the Sunday School Curriculum office of the Church of the Nazarene. If you have followed these lessons, you will have recognized that I refer to these materials from time to time as I go through my presentation. The class that I teach has been very satisfied using these materials for several decades now, and we cover the costs of them so that the church can use its financial resources for other ministries. Materials cover a three-month time span, with the current period finishing at the end of February. For each quarter there is a student lesson booklet, with lessons written by some of the best scholars in the Church of the Nazarene, and an accompanying daily devotional guide based on the texts selected for each Sunday's lesson. We will soon be placing an order for materials for the quarter beginning in March. If you would like to receive copies of the materials at the beginning of each quarter, please send a note to that effect to jlyons@collegechurch.org with your mailing address. We will be happy to send them to you at no cost to you.

Introduction to the lesson:

Written communication from CCUA has made you aware that the Sundays of Dec. 28 and Jan. 4 have been designated as Family-Worship Sundays. That means no Sunday School classes for anyone. I did not prepare a Sunday School lesson for Dec. 28. However, since we are in series of lessons taken from selected texts in the Gospel According to Matthew, I thought it best to prepare something this week to cover the two lessons that we will be missing due to the cancellation of classes for those two weeks, for the sake of keeping up with what Matthew is saying about Jesus and the gospel so that we don't overlook something important as we pick up the next lesson on the 11th of January.

For the lessons on the third and fourth Sundays of Advent, we looked at two episodes in Matthew's presentation of events surrounding the birth of Jesus: the announcement by the angel to Joseph to take Mary as his wife (Dec. 14), and the visit of the Magi, first with Herod in Jerusalem and then with the holy family in Bethlehem (Dec. 21). In his message last Sunday morning, Pastor Mark picked up Herod's response to the Magi's having deceived him by taking a different route home.

The Sunday School lesson for last Sunday, however, skipped a few chapters and jumped to the Sermon on the Mount, and is staying there this week as well. The Sermon on the Mount is a very important element of Matthew's Gospel, both because of its position in the gospel, its comparison between Jesus and Moses, and Jesus' rereading of the role of the law in the life of God's people. For those reasons we shouldn't just skip these lessons.

I. The Beatitudes (The lesson for Dec. 28) **Read Matthew 5:1-12**

There are very few passages of Scripture more familiar to us than these first verses of the Sermon on the Mount. However, as familiar as they are, we don't all agree on the conditions described in each of them. There appears to be full agreement on the meaning of the opening word, "blessed" in each of the verses 3-11. This word, "blessed," is one of the first indications that as Matthew will be presenting Jesus' Kingdom, he will do so with the idea that it's an upside-down kingdom. George Lyons, the lesson writer, says that "blessed" "normally recognized the happiness of people resulting from their favorable circumstances or winning dispositions. But Jesus paradoxically celebrated the good fortune of those who lacked the conventional prerequisites for happiness." Then Dr. Lyons adds parenthetically this very interesting question for reflection:

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION:

"Is the kingdom of heaven upside-down? Or, is this world's value system upside-down from God's perspective?"

It's in the conditions given in each beatitude that we notice how "upside-down" the beatitudes appear to be. There is a question that comes with each of them. Are these conditions examples of the qualities of some people based on their nature or their circumstances, or are they qualities that Jesus wants all his followers to develop, and he is somehow calling them to those standards? In other words, is Jesus giving a word of hope to persons who are seen as 'meek' or is he calling all his disciples to become 'meek,' if they're not already? The answer to that question is not as clear as one might hope it to be. Most likely, the answer lies within the individuals themselves, as to how they see themselves in relationship to the specific condition. Obviously, the last one has to do with one's commitment to Jesus. But even that one isn't a call to purposefully get oneself persecuted. The others are not quite as easy to decipher.

In Matthew chapter 3, John the Baptist notices that in his audience are people with repentant hearts prepared to be baptized. However, he also notices quite a few religious leaders, whom he recognizes as not having the same kind of repentant spirit. He challenges this second group at that specific point, helping them see that their heightened sense of religious superiority does not cover up their need for repentance and that nothing else will take its place. Perhaps Matthew has the same idea within the audience listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is primarily for Jesus' disciples, but there is a large crowd there, as well. There are a lot of people in Jesus' audience in greater Galilee who have the feeling of being forgotten by God, because of the strict rules assigned by religious leaders and their lack of grace and mercy in relation to the people under their care. In Jesus, these otherwise forgotten persons finally have a sense that God may be concerned about their lives, and they are developing a new hope as they listen to Him speak. On the other hand, as the Sermon continues, it becomes obvious that Jesus will be teaching some things to his own disciples about humility and piety that borders on developing the attitudes of meekness, mercy, peacemaking, etc. (See the texts selected for today's lesson below.)

One of the things that I appreciated very much about how Dr. Lyons addressed this lesson is his concentration not on the conditions in the beatitudes, but the results. For v. 3, for example, he says, “By renouncing their right to rule, they shared in the blessedness of God’s rule.” In relationship to v. 4 he says, “Jesus offered a foretaste of the wholeness disciples could expect when the kingdom comes in its fullness.” Writing about v. 5 he offers, “Their refusal to make themselves important qualified them in God’s sight to rule the renewed earth.” He continues in that manner throughout each of the beatitudes. As a conclusion to this lesson, it is precisely the qualities that the world frowns upon which qualify disciples to function as ambassadors for Christ.

II. The transparency of salt and light (the lesson for Jan. 4, 2026). Matthew 5:13-16

This lesson covers two paragraphs of the Sermon on the Mount; two paragraphs that at one level appear to be contradictory. The first is the famous comparisons of Jesus calling his disciples the “salt of the earth,” and “the light of the world,” with his call for them to be visible in the world. The second paragraph is a form of prohibition, calling his disciples to “practice your righteousness” in secret, not publicly. Thus, the paradoxical lesson title, “Transparent AND Secret.”

This first paragraph, Matthew 5:13-16, is the bridge between the opening list of beatitudes with their questions and their challenges, and Jesus’ reinterpretation of several of the laws, beginning with the laws about murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, the *lex talionis* (“eye for an eye”), and love for friends and hatred toward enemies. Before Jesus begins to teach his perspective on living out the various laws on a daily basis, he offers this challenge that their behavior needs to be both visible and transformative. Light is designed to uncover what is hidden as well as show the way to get somewhere. For its part, “salt” is understood as either a flavor enhancer or a preservative, or both. The point for both is the same: their presence has a positive effect. That’s the challenge disciples of Jesus face—our lives should have a positive effect on others either as individuals or in our society as a whole.

Jesus offers a warning about salt. The experiences of Jesus’ audience members would have indicated that salt can apparently lose some of its more important positive qualities. That point probably has something to do with a refining process. But I noticed something about this warning when I was in Israel the first time. There is a hidden hope in it as well. Jesus said, “it is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” Our group was in some agricultural fields overlooking the Sea of Galilee. We noticed there were paths in some of the fields that allowed access to plants so that they could be cared for as needed. We discovered that those paths were created by trampling salt into the dirt so that nothing else could grow there. Certain crops need such paths for access. To me that warning of Jesus, offers grace and purpose even to someone who feels defeated after some failure. There is still a valid purpose for living for Jesus, even after some failure. Salt “trampled underfoot” still has viable purpose. Furthermore, with God all things are possible—salt can regain its saltiness.

When talking about light, Jesus used two illustrations: a city built on a hill, and a lamp hiding under an overturned basket. The first one appeared obvious to me. However, I had never experienced seeing such a phenomenon. I'm from the Midwest, where the land is primarily flat or has slightly rolling hills. Towns were built with easy access to water. In some of my earliest days as a missionary in Italy, when riding on the train through the Apennines, I saw for what seemed to me to be the first time a large number of towns built on top of high hills. My first thought was, "Jesus was right; you can't hide that." My second thought, was, "What do they do for water?" It could be that Jesus was saying that the life of his disciples should be something rather obvious and quite visible, and hopefully attractive as well. On the other hand, such locations create questions, and curiosity draws people to find answers. My son and I spent a fabulous day in San Marino last summer. The place was packed with tourists. We explored, we relaxed, and we wanted to stay there.

In terms of a lamp, a lantern, or a flashlight, the function is to be able to see in locations or situations where sufficient light is not otherwise available. Such light is needed for many things including maintaining daily activities, finding things that are lost, or alleviating fear. A good sanctified imagination can create interesting applications in the Christian life based on any of those three and other qualities of taking light into places where one doesn't ordinarily find it.

III. Practice piety in secret. Read Matthew 6:1-4

It's easy to see a contradiction between these two texts as soon as we get to the three words, "practice your righteousness." We read those three words as though they meant the same thing as "your good deeds" in Matthew 5:16. For us "good deeds just are acts of righteousness." Simply stated: in this context and in Jesus' mind they don't mean the same thing at all. Everything is recognized in the two completely different contexts of Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. In Chapter 5, "good deeds" are the result of our living out of our relationship with Jesus—the flavor enhancement and the preservative quality of salt; what the light of Christ allows others to see, to hope, and to feel. This is what Jesus' rereading of the laws is all about in the rest of Chapter 5. Chapter 6, however, deals with the private exercises of piety in terms of prayer (vv. 5-14), fasting (vv. 15-18), and generosity (vv. 19-24), all items Jesus condemned religious leaders for because they often did those things both publicly and loudly. The word hypocrite that appears in chapter 6 makes reference to an actor's mask that had a small megaphone built in at the mouth so that audience members near the back could hear their lines. The quantity of offerings given in the treasury was announced out loud.

These verses aren't talking about the outworking expression of our relationship to Jesus Christ. No! These verses talk about what we do personally to build and maintain that relationship. For first-century Jews, specifically the three areas of prayer, fasting, and alms giving. Jesus himself modeled this all the time by getting away, either early in the day or after a particularly tiring day, away from his disciples to be alone with the father. Jesus says, "pray in your closet." One of my seminary profs went into his basement. When you fast, look normal: wash, wear your everyday clothes, comb your hair, put on your regular make-up. When giving aid to other people, don't even let your friends know. It is psychologically and neurologically

impossible for your right hand to do something your left hand is not aware of, but being as quiet as possible is what's called for.

Conclusion:

From the very beginning, the Gospel according to Matthew is making it obvious that the kingdom of God (Matthew says "Kingdom of Heaven") is an upside-down kingdom in comparison to political units with which most people are familiar. We see it from how well we follow God's word to alter our plans for the future, to how we describe happiness or blessedness, to what value we put on the general public's view of our importance either in terms of what we do, or what influence we exhibit. As disciples of Jesus, the lesson for this week deals with two independent issues, but mutually important: what we do in private to deepen our relationship with God through Christ; and what the living out of that relationship looks and sounds like to the people around us. In our private life with Jesus, let us become as close a friend to him as possible. And in the living out our faith, may we be his humble servants, both knowing his will and ready to do it at all times.