

The Good Living Guide

Matthew 5:1-12 (The Beatitudes)



**9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

The Good Living Guide

Matthew 5:1-12 (The Beatitudes)

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The Good Living Guide

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How to make the most of these studies

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through each of the Beatitudes, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sightseeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall halfway between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study focuses on a Beatitude, and contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. Interspersed throughout the text are three types of ‘interaction’, each with their own symbol:



For starters

Questions to help you think about society and your own experience, in a way that tunes you in to the issues being raised by the Bible passage.



Investigate

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



Think it through

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

3. Suggestions for individual study

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Beatitudes and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Investigate* and *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

4. Suggestions for group study

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and threesomes. Get together with a friend/s and work through them at your own pace. You don't need the formal structure of 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*For starters*, *Investigate*, and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Beatitudes, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous editions of this Interactive Bible Study have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. So with this new edition of *The Good Living Guide*, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

1

The good living guide

Before we launch into studying the individual Beatitudes, we need to step back and look at the bigger picture. What are the Beatitudes all about? How should we approach them?

(Incidentally, the word ‘Beatitude’ is not in the Bible—it is just a title that some people have given to these verses. It comes from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning ‘blessed’. It has nothing to do with your ‘attitude’.)

1. The rest of the picture

A man sees an odd-shaped piece of animal skin on the ground in front of him. He lashes out at it with his foot and sends it skimming across the open, grassy field on which he’s standing. As a direct consequence of this, several million people around the world experience intense feelings of joy or despair. This sounds crazy—that is, until we fill in the rest of the picture. The rest of the picture is that the open grassy field is a soccer stadium, the man is the finest soccer player of his time, and the scene is the final of the World Cup.

Words and actions taken out of context are often meaningless. And this is one of the main mistakes we make in reading the Bible—we take the words (and the actions they describe) out of their original context. Far too frequently, we read our own concerns back into the Bible, rather than letting it speak for itself in its own setting.

To fill in the rest of the picture surrounding the Beatitudes, we need to look at three different areas.

a. The biblical context

In the context of the whole Bible, the Sermon on the Mount occurs at a time when the fortunes of Israel were at a low ebb.

There had been a time when this was not so—under David and Solomon, Israel had been a safe and prosperous nation. According to his promises to Abraham, God had planted them in the Promised Land, subdued their enemies, and blessed them with prosperity. This was the historical high point of Israel as a nation.

From that point on, things went downhill. Israel was destroyed because of its chronic apostasy and rebellion against God. By the time of the Exile to Babylon in 587 BC, the everlasting kingdom promised to David in 2 Samuel 7 was in ruins (see Ps 89).

But all was not lost. God's promise to Abraham still stood. As Israel's fortunes declined, the prophets emphatically declared that God would restore his kingdom.



Investigate

Read Isaiah 9:1-7.

1. What did the prophet look forward to?

2. What sort of kingdom would 'the child' rule over?

3. Now read Matthew 4:12-17. How does Jesus fulfil Isaiah’s prophecy?

The Old Testament looked forward to a day when the eternal kingdom of God would be established throughout the world, and it would be presided over by “one like a son of man” (Dan 7; see also Isa 11:1-10; Ezek 34:23f; and many other refs).

The message of the New Testament is that this hope was gloriously fulfilled by Jesus. Jesus says as much in our Sermon: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt 5:17).

The Beatitudes, then, come at a pivotal point of God’s plan of salvation. The Messiah has come; the kingdom of God is at hand. However, not all has yet been accomplished. The cross, the resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost—these momentous events are still to come, and we live on the other side of them.

b. The historical context

What was life like at the time of Jesus? What would have been in the minds of his hearers as they listened to his teaching?

No doubt there were many things in their minds, and we can only guess at what they might have been. However, of one thing we can be fairly sure. The Jews of Jesus’ day were sick of being losers. Nearly five centuries had passed since the last of the Old Testament prophets, and during that period, with a few exceptions, Israel had suffered nothing but humiliation at the hands of the Gentiles (first the Greeks and then the Romans). In Jesus’ day, the brutal fact of Roman occupation could not be avoided, and different groups within Israel had ideas about how God was going to bring in his kingdom.

The Pharisees, on the whole, felt that God would not bring in his kingdom until Israel got serious about obeying the Law. They were quite fanatical about keeping God’s commandments in the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as the countless man-made regulations that had accrued over the centuries. However, from what we learn of them in the Gospels, the obedience they taught was external, legalistic and hypocritical. It did not touch the heart.

Other groups, whom we might call the Nationalists, thought that military action was the way to usher in God’s kingdom. They were in favour of overthrowing the Romans by force, and setting up a new nation under God. (In fact, they tried this on a couple of occasions during the first century AD and lost.)

The Jews were a downtrodden people. They inwardly seethed at the humiliation of being governed by Gentiles, and they sorrowed at the sad state into which God’s chosen people had fallen.

However, it must also be said that there were some in Israel who were not so worried about the Romans being in control. The Sadducees, for instance, were the ruling upper-class of Israelite society. They had a cosy political relationship with the Romans and had no real interest in having the situation disturbed. There were other Jews who had made a lot of money under Roman rule and they also were quite happy for things to stay the way they were.

Into this mixed environment of messianic hope strode Jesus, proclaiming that the time had finally come—the kingdom of God was at hand.

c. The context in Matthew

This is something you can look up for yourself.



Investigate

Read Matthew 4:17-5:2, 7:28-29.

words and obey them, even though it may make them completely different from the rest of their society.

This theme of ‘being different’ crops up again and again in the Sermon. Whether talking about the Pharisees or the pagans, Jesus stresses that the kingdom-dweller must give his allegiance to the king. He must abandon the foolish and self-centred attitudes of those around him. It is for this reason that John Stott regards 6:8—“Do not be like them”—as the key text of the Sermon (see his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount in the *Bible Speaks Today* series). Jesus is calling his disciples to a radical set of values that will bring them into conflict with their friends and family and society.

Even though the Sermon is directed primarily at the disciples, the crowds are also listening in. In many ways, the message is the same for them. If they are to enter Jesus’ kingdom, they must seek it wholeheartedly, and be prepared for a complete life-change.

3. The good living guide

If this is the general message of the whole Sermon on the Mount, what is the place of the first twelve verses which we call the Beatitudes?

The Beatitudes outline the good life, the blessed life, the life of one who participates in the kingdom that Jesus brings. They are, in many respects, a good living guide. They describe the person whom God esteems, the one who is to be envied. This is what the word ‘blessing’ means. To be blessed is to receive good things from God.

The eight blessings do not describe eight different people—as if there are some of us who are merciful, and others who are poor in spirit, and others who are peacemakers. They are not eight different classes of people, but the one person—the blessed person, the one who has found real Life.

The Beatitudes present us with two exciting challenges.

The *first* is to understand these very familiar words afresh, to find out what Jesus was really saying all those centuries ago. To do this, we will have to do something that many of us find difficult, but which is absolutely necessary if we are going to understand what Jesus was saying. *We will have to dig back into the Old Testament.*

It is easy to go astray at this point. The Beatitudes themselves

are very short and pithy. They do not provide much explanation. It is tempting to make up for this by picking our way through the New Testament to find what else it teaches (e.g. about mourning or meekness), and then read this back into Matthew 5 to explain what Jesus must have meant.

While this is a correct and worthwhile exercise, it really is coming at the Beatitudes from the wrong direction. The key to unlock the treasures of these well-known verses is found by looking backwards, to what came before, to the Old Testament. For these are not a new set of values. Each of the eight ‘blessings’ echoes the teaching of the Old Testament. Jesus was quite clear on this point: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (5:17).

As you work through this book, you’ll find that we have used this pattern of Old Testament hope and New Testament fulfilment as the basis of the studies. Each study has the following structure, with minor variations:

1. The hope (from the Old Testament)
2. The fulfilment (in Jesus)
3. Good living (how this should affect our lives in Jesus’ kingdom)

The Old Testament looked forward to a time when God would again bless his people. In Jesus, and in these ‘Beatitudes’, we see the fulfilment of that hope.

The *second* challenge is to repent. The Beatitudes have hard things to say to us, things which cut through the comfort and complacency which often mark our Christian lives. As we have already seen, the Sermon on the Mount calls on us to be *different* from those around us. It challenges us to live God’s way, even though that might turn our values and ideas upside-down.

Let us approach these well-known words of Jesus with the attitude expressed in the final chapter of Isaiah:

“All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” (Is 66:2)

