



The Blessed Way

DAILY DEVOTIONS ON THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

30-DAY STUDY

CT



herefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock,” Jesus said in Matthew 7:24 as he concluded his discourse known as the Sermon on the Mount. Yet “these words” of Jesus confront us at almost every level, upending our desires for self-preservation and pleasure and attention, challenging our reactions and our relationships, and defying our notions of warm-fuzzy, comfortable faith. Even as he upends our misguided religiosity and self-centered instincts, Jesus *reorients* us. He reorients us to life in his upside-down kingdom, inviting us to live guided by

his values, and showing us what *blessing* really means.

This 30-day devotional will guide you through a study of the entire Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–7:29). You can use this resource for your own **individual reflection**, integrating prayer, daily reflection questions, and Scripture contemplation as you interact with these devotional readings. Or you can use this resource with your **small group**. The Small Group Discussion Guide on pp. 59 to 60 provides a framework for utilizing *The Blessed Way* as a six-week Bible study.

Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount confronts us—sentence after sentence strikes home with precision and conviction. For it is the confrontation we need. As we receive it, as we live by it, we become like a house with our “foundation on the rock” (Matt. 7:25), unwavering even in the fiercest deluge.

Join us on this 30-day study of the Sermon on the Mount. Reoriented by the words of Jesus, guided by the compass of his kingdom values, may we journey together along the narrow way.

KELLI B. TRUJILLO Editor, CT Women

Grace for the Pharisee

*Do not think that I have
come to abolish the Law
or the Prophets; I have
not come to abolish
them but to fulfill them.*

MATTHEW 5:17

For most of my life, I have been a consummate rule-follower. As a child, I delighted to please my parents, my teachers, and any other authority figure in my life. I cherished my identity as a “good girl,” and it shaped the way I approached my faith. God was the ultimate authority figure, and I existed to please him too.

In view of my pristine track record, I struggled to grasp the beauty and freedom of grace. I wasn’t captured by it because I wasn’t convinced I needed it, and that is a consequence of legalism: It has the appearance of obedience to the law, when it is instead a rebellion against grace.

In many ways, the Sermon on the Mount is a direct affront to this mentality. Jesus affirms obedience to the Law (v. 17), but he spends the rest of the Sermon offering an exponentially more rigorous interpretation of it. Biblical scholar John P. Meier called it a “radical interiorization, a total obedience to God . . . that carries the ethical thrust of the Law to its God-willed conclusion.” Or rather, *perfection*.

In short, the Sermon on the Mount sets an impossible standard, underscored by Jesus’ warning, “unless your

righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 20). Surprising words from a Savior who later declared, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30).

This impossible standard renders our “goodness” and rule-following utterly hopeless, a reality which would have been devastating to hear, had Jesus not also promised to “fulfill” the Law himself (v. 17). That’s because the word “fulfill” entails more than simply a reinterpretation of the Law. As theologian W. D. Davies put it, Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount “point beyond themselves to himself.” Jesus raises the bar beyond any human capacity and then attains it on our behalf.

This is how we are to read the entire Sermon on the Mount. It is our standard, and we will surely fail, and that is actually good news. It’s a paradox of grace for rule-followers like me. We need to know we’re not enough, so that we turn to him who is.

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READ

Matthew 5:17-20. The Sermon on the Mount was delivered to the disciples, not the Pharisees. Why do you think Jesus included a lesson about Pharisees to a non-Pharisee audience?

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Hungry for Home

When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen.

MATTHEW 6:17-18

I was reared by my aunt, a professional caterer, who trained me to savor good meals, so I'm thankful for the healthy enjoyment of food. Whether celebratory feasts or the communal table, Scripture shows God's people sharing food with glad and generous hearts. God welcomes prayers for daily bread—yet he also expects periods of fasting. Jesus' earlier warnings are repeated in Matthew 6:16–18 as he cautions against pretentious fasting. Yet he also affirms the value of a fast shaped by close intimacy with God. The word *when* (v. 16) communicates expectation. Christians are directed to fast in the same way they are called to give and pray.

But fasting can seem miles apart from giving and praying. Voluntary abstinence from food (or other enjoyments) can sound bizarre to a self-serving culture. "One reason many fear fasting is the belief that it will make us appear unnecessarily strange," observes Donald Whitney in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Yet Christian peculiarity lies at the root of godly fasting.

If Matthew 6:16-18 directs Christian fasting, then Matthew 9:14-15 offers a compelling reason for it. Explaining why his first disciples did not fast, Jesus says: "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast." Our Bridegroom's kingdom has come, but not fully. Our Communion meals anticipate a future feasting. Until then, the sting of sin makes us yearn for the consummation of Christ's kingdom. We fast before the God of daily bread because our hunger for home surpasses the pleasure of the tastiest meal on earth.

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Love God, Not Stuff

When I first read this passage on my own, probably in middle school, I wrote it off quickly as inapplicable to me. *Phew . . . This is one area I get right*, I thought. Those lovers of money—the slick-haired Wall Street moguls, the ladies who dangle those fancy brand-name handbags at church, the kids who care about being first to get the hot new toy—they better take heed. God's talking to them here. Other passages, sure; I need those. Patience, self-control, anger—this is where I need all the help I can get. But I'm not materialistic. *God, thanks for not making me like those other people.*

Two decades later, I'm humbled by how often I'm faced with my need to cling to temporal things even if they have nothing to do with name brands or big houses. What does it look like to be tempted by a desire for things? By financial security? By stuff that will one day turn to dust? For me, it looks like giving cookies to the new neighbor, but in a chipped, rundown dish I'd soon enough take to the thrift store. It's giving to the current global emergency need, but in the smallest way possible that won't affect my savings buffer. It's taking on more and more work projects in the name of making a respectable pile of money, although it'll mean a bedraggled, stressed wife and mom for my family.

We can't have two masters—full stop. We can either serve God, or we can serve money. We can spend our currency based on the values of an upside-down kingdom, where treasures will never collect moth-driven holes, or we'll prioritize it on the here-and-now. We can choose to trust God wildly with our daily bread, or we can hoard our crumbs. Either/or. Jesus invites us to choose.

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For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

MATTHEW 6:21

MEDITATE

on Matthew 6:19–24. Ask God about your treasure (v. 21). What form does it take? Where might God be asking you to spend it?

For Small Groups

The *Blessed Way* can be used as a six-week Bible study for your small group. Simply have participants spend time in devotional reflection Monday through Friday, following this schedule:

Week 1 Matthew 5:1–13 (pp. 8–13)

Week 2 Matthew 5:14–30 (pp. 14–21)

Week 3 Matthew 5:31–48 (pp. 23–30)

Week 4 Matthew 6:1–18 (pp. 31–39)

Week 5 Matthew 6:19–7:8 (pp. 41–48)

Week 6 Matthew 7:9–29 (pp. 49–54)

EACH WEEK, USE THIS FORMAT:

- Optional: Use the week's icebreaker question to get discussion started.
- In a spirit of prayerful listening, read the week's passage aloud.
- Select and discuss two to four of the reflection questions from the week's devotions.
- Then discuss:
 - What does this section of the Sermon on the Mount show us about Jesus and what he is like? Explain.**
 - What does this passage reveal about the kingdom of God and what God values? Why is this significant?**
 - Based on this passage, what does it look like to follow Jesus? How does it most challenge you as a disciple of Jesus?**
- Select one or more of these application questions to discuss:
 - How can this passage enable us to develop deeper intimacy with God?**

How does this section of the Sermon on the Mount call us to grow spiritually? What spiritual practice might help us live out the ideas in passage?

How can we embody the ideas and values of this passage in our relationships with our family or with our broader community?

- Conclude with prayer, seeking God's help as you apply his Word to your lives.

ICEBREAKER QUESTIONS:

WEEK 1 Reflect on the qualities Jesus names in the Beatitudes. Who is someone you admire who embodies one of these traits (such as mercy, peacemaking, and so on)? Why?

WEEK 2 On page 16, Sharon Hodde Miller talks about being a rule-follower. When it comes to your personality, would you describe yourself more as a rule-follower or a rule-breaker? Why?

WEEK 3 Before diving into Jesus' challenging teachings about love, share one of the biggest challenges you've taken on in your life. (It could be anything, from tackling a fear or breaking a habit to hiking a mountain or delivering a baby!)

WEEK 4 This week's passage relates to fasting. Imagine a hypothetical scenario in which you had to give up a favorite food for the rest of your life. What food would be the hardest for you to go without?

WEEK 5 In Matthew 7, Jesus zeroes in on our instinct to judge others. We're all prone not just to judgement but also to irritation and aggravation. Kick things off with some light-hearted honesty: What's one of your biggest pet peeves?

WEEK 6 This week's passage begins by comparing God to a father who gives good gifts. Think back to your childhood and tell the group about a memorable gift you received from a family member or friend.