

A Christian's Character (Part 1)***Matthew 5:1–12***

Everybody who has ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth, and knows anything at all of his teaching, must surely be familiar with the beatitudes. Their simplicity of word and profundity of thought have attracted each fresh generation of Christians, and many others besides. The more we explore their implications, the more seems to remain unexplored. Their wealth is inexhaustible. We cannot plumb their depths. Truly, “we are near heaven here.”

1. What types of people do we normally consider blessed or fortunate?
 2. Read Matthew 5:1–12. How does our normal description of the blessed or fortunate person compare with those whom Jesus considers blessed (Matthew 5:1–12)?
 3. To be “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3) is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, our bankruptcy before God. Why is this an indispensable condition for receiving the Kingdom of heaven?
- Why is it so difficult for us to admit our spiritual poverty?
4. Why would those who are poor in spirit feel a need to mourn (Matthew 5:4)?
 5. Those who mourn feel sorrow not only for their own sin but also for the sin they see around them. What have you heard in the news lately that causes you to mourn?
 6. How do you think those who mourn will be comforted (Matthew 5:4)?

- 7.** How would a true estimate of ourselves (Matthew 5:3–4) lead us to be “meek”—to have a humble and gentle attitude to others (Matthew 5:5)?
- 8.** From the world’s point of view, why is it surprising that the meek will inherit the earth?
- 9.** What has Jesus said so far that might lead us to hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6)?
- 10.** Biblical righteousness has three aspects: legal, moral and social. What does it mean to hunger and thirst for each of these?
- 11.** Jesus promises that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (Matthew 5:6). What can you do cultivate a healthy, hearty spiritual appetite?
- 12.** Ask God to satisfy some of your hunger and thirst as you study the Sermon on the Mount.

A Christian's Character (Part 2)

Matthew 5:1–12

The beatitudes set forth the balanced and multifaceted character of Christians. These are not eight separate and distinct groups of disciples, some of whom are meek, while others are merciful and yet others are called to endure persecution. They are rather eight qualities of the same group, who at one and the same time are meek and merciful, poor in spirit and pure in heart.

Further, the group exhibiting these marks is not an elitist set, a small spiritual aristocracy remote from common Christians. On the contrary, the beatitudes are Christ's own specification of what every Christian ought to be. All of these qualities are to characterize all his followers. They describe his ideal for us as citizens of God's Kingdom.

1. Why do you think the beatitudes have such universal appeal?
2. Read Matthew 5:1–12. How would you define *mercy* (Matthew 5:7)?
3. Jesus says the merciful will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7). Why do you think our treatment of others will affect God's treatment of us?
4. What opportunities has God given you to show mercy to those in need?
5. The "pure in heart" (Matthew 5:8) are not just inwardly pure, they are "utterly sincere" (J. B. Phillips). Their whole life, public and private, is transparent before God and others. Why is it difficult to live this way?
6. Why would the promise of seeing God (Matthew 5:8) be reserved for those who are pure in heart?

7. Why is it fitting that “the peacemakers” will be called sons of God (Matthew 5:9)?

8. How can we be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) in our homes, in our churches and in society?

9. How is being a peacemaker different from settling for “peace at any price”?

10. In spite of our efforts at peacemaking, what does Jesus say we will experience (Matthew 5:10–12)?

Why should this cause us to rejoice?

11. Why would the world hate the kind of people described in the beatitudes?

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed by the Nazis because of his faith, wrote: “With every beatitude the gulf is widened between the disciples and the people.” How have the beatitudes challenged you to be different?

A Christian's Influence***Matthew 5:13–16***

What possible influence could the people described in the beatitudes exert in this hard, tough world? What lasting good can the poor and the meek do, the mourners and the merciful—those who seek peace and not war? Would they not be overwhelmed by the flood tide of evil? What can they accomplish—whose only passion is righteousness, and whose only weapon is purity of heart? Are not such people too feeble to achieve anything? Jesus does not share this skepticism, as this passage demonstrates. He expects us to have a profound influence on those around us.

1. In what ways have Christians had a positive influence on society?
2. Read Matthew 5:13–16. Before refrigeration, salt was used to keep meat from rotting. What then does Jesus' statement "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13) tell us about society and the church's role in it?
3. What has been in the news lately that indicates society is rotting and decaying?
4. What are some practical ways we can function as salt where we live and work (Matthew 5:13)?
5. What might cause Christians to lose their saltiness (Matthew 5:13)?
6. Jesus' second statement is "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). As salt we prevent decay, the spread of evil. How does the church's role as light complement its role as salt?

7. How can we positively promote the spread of truth in the world?
8. Why might we be tempted to hide our light (Matthew 5:15)?
9. What is the result, according to Jesus, of people seeing our good deeds (Matthew 5:16)?
10. What examples can you think of where the work of Christians has brought people closer to God?
11. What relationship do you see between the beatitudes and our role as salt and light in society?
12. What is one way you can begin having a stronger influence as salt and as light?

A Christian's Righteousness

Christ, the Christian and the Law

Matthew 5:17–20

So far Jesus has spoken of the character of Christians. He has also emphasized the influence we will have in the world if we exhibit this character and if our character bears fruit in “good deeds.” In Matthew 5:17–20 he proceeds to define further this character and these good deeds in terms of righteousness. This passage is of great importance not only for its definition of Christian righteousness but also for the light it throws on the relation between the New Testament and the Old Testament, between the gospel and the law.

1. In your opinion, what are some of the benefits and difficulties of reading the Old Testament?
2. Read Matthew 5:17–20. This passage naturally divides into two parts, Matthew 5:17–18 and Matthew 5:19–20. What does each part emphasize?
3. Why might some people have thought that Jesus came to abolish the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17)?
4. The Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) consist of doctrine, prophecy and ethical precepts. In what sense has Jesus fulfilled each of these (Matthew 5:17)?
5. How does Jesus emphasize his high view of Old Testament Scripture (Matthew 5:17–18)?

How can Jesus' words strengthen our confidence in Scripture?

6. How will our response to the Law determine our status in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19)?
7. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were zealous about observing the Law. How can our righteousness possibly surpass theirs (Matthew 5:20)?
8. Jesus states that only those who have this surpassing righteousness will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). How can this be harmonized with his statement about the poor in spirit (those who admit their spiritual bankruptcy) entering the kingdom (Matthew 5:3)?
9. Some people claim that Jesus abolished the category of law for the Christian and that we are only responsible for obeying the “law of love.” Respond to this view in light of Jesus’ words in this passage.
10. How has this passage affected your attitude toward the Old Testament?
11. How can you make your study and application of the Old Testament a higher priority?

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A Christian's Righteousness

Avoiding Anger & Lust

Matthew 5:21–30

The scribes and Pharisees calculated that the law contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions. But they were better at arithmetic than obedience. So they tried to make the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seeks to reverse this tendency. He came to deepen not destroy the law's demands. In this passage he explains the true meaning of the sixth and seventh commandments, the prohibitions against murder and adultery.

1. Have you ever slowed down your car because you saw a police officer? What did your action indicate about your attitude toward the law?
2. Read Matthew 5:21–30. The NIV translates the sixth commandment as “Do not murder” rather than “Do not kill.” Why is this an important distinction?
3. In Matthew 5:21–22 Jesus places murder and unrighteous anger in the same category. How are they related?
4. A. B. Bruce writes: “*Raca* expresses contempt for a man's head = you stupid!; [*fool*] expresses contempt for his heart and character = you scoundrel!” Why do you think these thoughts and words would be murder in God's sight (Matthew 5:22)?
5. What do Matthew 5:23–26 teach us about broken relationships?

When we have offended someone, why is it so important that we go to him or her *immediately*?

6. What, according to Jesus, is the full meaning of the seventh commandment: “Do not commit adultery” (Matthew 5:27–28)?

7. Some Christians have taken Matthew 5:29–30 literally and have mutilated their bodies. How do you think Jesus intends us to understand his warnings?

8. In what situations might we need to “gouge out an eye” or “cut off a hand”?

How might this spiritual surgery differ from person to person?

9. Throughout this passage, how has Jesus challenged a superficial view of righteousness?

10. In what specific areas do you feel the need for a deeper righteousness?

11. Ask God to help you rid your life of anything that causes you to sin. Pray that you will be able to obey him in your attitudes as well as your actions.

A Christian's Righteousness

In Marriage & Speech

Matthew 5:31–37; 19:3–9

Divorce is a controversial and complex subject which touches people's emotions at a deep level. There is almost no unhappiness so painful as that of an unhappy marriage. And there is almost no tragedy so great as when a relationship God meant for love and fulfillment degenerates into a non-relationship of bitterness, discord and despair. Yet in spite of the painfulness of the subject, I am convinced that the teaching of Jesus on this and every subject is good—intrinsically good for individuals and for society. In this passage Jesus calls us to faithfulness in marriage and honesty in speech.

1. Why do you think divorce is such a problem today?

2. Read Matthew 5:31–32 and Matthew 19:3–9. Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was permitted only in extreme cases. Rabbi Hillel taught that it was permitted for any and every reason. How does this help us to understand the Pharisees' "test" question (Matthew 19:3)?

3. How does Jesus' reply contrast with the Pharisees' question (Matthew 19:4–6)?

4. Jesus points back to the first marriage in Genesis. What does it teach us about God's original design for marriage (Matthew 19:4–6)?

5. The Pharisees refer to Moses' instructions about divorce as a "command" (Matthew 19:7). What does Jesus' reply teach us about divorce (Matthew 19:8)?

In what ways might divorce reveal the hardness of our hearts?

6. What similarities and differences are there between Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:31–32?

How do these verses stress the seriousness of divorce?

7. How does Jesus' teaching contrast with today's views on marriage and divorce?

8. Read Matthew 5:33–37. How might the issue of oaths and vows be connected to the topic of marriage and divorce?

9. The Pharisees had elaborate formulas for oaths, with some being binding and some not (see Matthew 23:16–22). Why is Jesus opposed to oaths?

10. Does this mean, for example, that we should refuse to give evidence under oath in a court of law? Explain.

11. Why should oaths be unnecessary for Jesus' followers?

12. Ask God to help you resist the pressures to compromise in marriage and in speech.

A Christian's Righteousness

Loving Our Enemies

Matthew 5:38–48

This passage brings us to the highest point of the Sermon on the Mount. Christ's words here are both most admired and most resented. He calls us to show our attitude of total love toward an "evil person" (Matthew 5:39) and our "enemies" (Matthew 5:44). Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon greater. Nowhere is the distinctness of the Christian counterculture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) more compelling.

1. A friend keeps borrowing things from you but either fails to return them or returns them damaged. Confrontation has done no good. Do you (a) make the friend pay for anything lost or damaged, (b) refuse to loan anything else to your friend or (c) continue to loan anything he or she asks for? Explain.
2. Read Matthew 5:38–48. Jesus' quotation of "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" comes from Exodus 21:24. How would this instruction to Israel's judges clarify the meaning of justice?

How would it also limit the extent of revenge?

3. The Pharisees evidently extended this principle from the law courts (where it belonged) to the realm of personal relationships (where it did not belong). What consequences might have resulted?
4. Looking at Matthew 5:39–42, how would you contrast our natural responses in such situations with the responses Jesus expects of us?
5. What is accomplished by turning the other cheek or going a second mile?

6. In what situations might Christ's commands apply today?
7. How can we reconcile Christ's call to nonretaliation with the state's duty to punish evildoers (see Romans 13:1–5)?
8. According to Jesus, how are we to treat our enemies and why (Matthew 5:44–45)?
9. In what ways is Jesus' command extraordinary (Matthew 5:46–48)?
10. Does all this mean that Christians are to be doormats for the world to walk on? Explain.
11. How was Jesus himself an example of the principles "Do not resist an evil person" and "Love your enemies"?
12. How might you reflect your Father's character when you are mistreated?

A Christian's Religion***Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18***

Not conforming to the world is a familiar New Testament concept. But it is not so well known that Jesus also called us not to conform to the *religious* establishment. He saw (and foresaw) the worldliness of the nominal church and commanded the Christian community to be truly distinct from it in our life and practice. In this passage Jesus shifts his focus from our moral righteousness to our “religious” righteousness.

1. Why do you think ministers and religious people are often portrayed so negatively in movies and on television?

2. Read Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18. In Matthew 6:1 Jesus commands us “not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.” Yet in Matthew 5:16 he said, “Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good deeds.” Is there a contradiction here? Explain.

3. Jesus illustrates the principle of Matthew 6:1 by focusing on three religious practices: giving, praying and fasting. What images come to mind when you read about the hypocrites in Matthew 6:2?

4. What does Jesus mean when he says, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3)?

Why is this important (Matthew 6:2, 4)?

5. In what ways are we tempted to be hypocritical in our giving?

6. What was wrong with the way hypocrites prayed in Jesus' day (Matthew 6:5)?

7. In what ways do hypocrites pray today?

8. Why and how is our praying to be different (Matthew 6:6)?

9. How do you think the reward the Father will give us (Matthew 6:6) differs from the reward we receive from others (Matthew 6:5)?

10. In Matthew 6:16 Jesus assumes Christians will fast (although few of us do). Why and how should we fast (Matthew 6:16–18)?

11. In what other areas are we tempted to seek the approval of people rather than of God?

12. How can this passage help to purify our motives?

A Christian's Prayer

Matthew 6:7–15

The fundamental difference between various kinds of prayer is the fundamentally different images of God which lie behind them. The “Lord’s Prayer” was given by Jesus as a model of what genuine Christian prayer should be like. According to Matthew he gave it as a pattern to copy (“This is how you should pray”), according to Luke as an actual prayer (“When you pray, say ...”). We are not obliged to choose, however, for we can both use the prayer as it stands and also model our own praying upon it. Either way, Jesus not only teaches us about prayer but also gives us a greater vision of the God we call “Our Father.”

1. Imagine that your prayers, like those in the Psalms, were recorded for others to read. What would people learn about your image of God?

2. Read Matthew 6:7–15. How do pagan prayers (Matthew 6:7) differ from the persistent prayers Jesus himself offered (Matthew 26:44)?

3. In what ways might we be guilty of mindless, meaningless prayers today?

4. If, as Jesus says in Matthew 6:8, God already knows what we need, why should Christians pray?

5. What two natural divisions do you observe in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13)?

What is the focus of each?

6. What does the phrase “Our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9) tell us about God?

7. What does it mean to hallow God's name (Matthew 6:9)?
8. God is already King. In what sense are his kingdom and perfect will still future (Matthew 6:10)?
9. In our self-centered culture we are often preoccupied with our own little name, empire and will rather than God's. How can we combat this tendency?
10. Some early commentators allegorized the word *bread* (Matthew 6:11), assuming that Jesus could not be referring to something as mundane as our physical needs. Why is it perfectly appropriate to pray for actual "daily bread"?
11. How is our heavenly Father's forgiveness related to our forgiving others (Matthew 6:12, 14–15)?
12. If God cannot tempt us and trials are beneficial (James 1:2, 13), then what is the meaning of Matthew 6:13?
13. In what ways do your prayers need to more closely resemble this model prayer?
14. Take time now to pray, using the Lord's Prayer as your model.

A Christian's Ambition***Matthew 6:19–34***

Everyone is ambitious to be or to do something. Childhood ambitions tend to follow certain stereotypes—to be an athlete, astronaut or movie star. Adults have their own narrow stereotypes too—to be wealthy, famous or powerful. But what should our Christian ambition be? In this passage Jesus helps us to choose well. He points out the folly of the wrong way and the wisdom of the right. Then he invites us to compare them and decide for ourselves.

1. When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? Explain why.

2. Read Matthew 6:19–34. Why should we store up heavenly treasures rather than earthly ones (Matthew 6:19–21)?

- Does this mean that we cannot have personal property, savings accounts or insurance policies? Explain.

3. Practically speaking, how can we store up treasure in heaven?

4. How are physical and spiritual sight (or blindness) similar (Matthew 6:22–23)?

5. Many people hold two jobs and are able to satisfy two bosses. So why would Jesus say that it is impossible to serve two masters—God and Money (Matthew 6:24)?

6. How will the crucial choices we make in Matthew 6:19–24 affect our ability to live free from worry (Matthew 6:25)?

7. According to Jesus, why are we foolish to worry about our physical and material needs (Matthew 6:25–30)?
8. How does worry also reveal a lack of faith (Matthew 6:30)?
9. If God promises to feed and clothe his children, then why are many of them ill-clad and undernourished (see Matthew 25:41–45)?
10. Give examples of how people today “run after all these things” that Jesus mentions (Matthew 6:31).
11. Why and how are our ambitions to be different from those of non-Christians (Matthew 6:32–34)?
12. How has this passage challenged you to re-examine your goals and ambitions?

A Christian's Relationships

Within God's Family

Matthew 7:1–12

The Christian community is a family, God's family. We need a strong awareness, therefore, of God as our Father and of our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters through Christ. At the same time we can never forget our responsibility to those outside the family, whom we long to see brought in. In Matthew 7:1–12 Jesus introduces us to these basic relationships.

1. Why are family relationships special?
2. Read Matthew 7:1–12. *Our relationship with our brother*: Why does Jesus tell us not to judge others (Matthew 7:1–2)?

How do these verses expand on Jesus' statement about the merciful (Matthew 5:7)?

3. According to Jesus, why are we often unfit to be judges (Matthew 7:3–4)?
4. Some have assumed that Jesus was forbidding *all* judgment, even in law courts. How would you respond to this suggestion?
5. What steps must we take to truly help a brother or sister (Matthew 7:5)?
6. *Our relationship with "dogs" and "pigs"*: This is startling language from the lips of Jesus. What kinds of people do you think he refers to as "dogs" and "pigs" (Matthew 7:6)?

Why is it futile, even dangerous, to talk with such people about the gospel?

7. *Our relationship with our heavenly Father:* What encouragement does Jesus give those who *ask, seek* and *knock* (Matthew 7:7–8)?

How can we be assured of these promises (Matthew 7:9–11)?

8. *Our relationship with all people:* The Jewish Talmud stated: “What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else.” Likewise, Confucius told his followers: “Do not to others what you would not wish done to you.” How does the golden rule (Matthew 7:12) go beyond these commands?

9. In what sense does this rule sum up the Law and the Prophets?

10. Think of a relationship that is presently strained or broken. How can this passage help to mend that relationship?

A Christian's Relationships

To False Prophets

Matthew 7:13–20

The history of the Christian church has been a long and dreary story of controversy with false teachers. Their value, in the overruling providence of God, is that they have presented the church with a challenge to think out and define truth. But they have also caused much damage. Jesus' warning "Watch out for false prophets" (Matthew 7:15) is addressed to us all. If the church had heeded his warning and applied the tests in this passage, it would not be in the perilous state of theological and moral confusion in which it finds itself today.

1. Why are people likely to follow popular leaders or celebrities?
2. Read Matthew 7:13–20. How are the two gates different (Matthew 7:13–14)?
3. In what sense is the gate of Christianity small and the road narrow?
4. Why do you think many people dislike the notion that there is only one true gate, road and destination?
5. Why is it significant that Jesus' warning about false prophets (Matthew 7:15–20) comes immediately after his discussion of the narrow and wide gates?
6. Jesus says that false prophets "come to you *in sheep's clothing*" (Matthew 7:15)? What disguises might they wear today (see Matthew 7:21–23)?
7. In what sense are these false prophets like ferocious wolves?

8. Jesus also says, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:16). What kind of fruit does he have in mind?

How can the quality of the fruit reveal the quality of the tree?

9. How can we keep from becoming “witch hunters” as we seek to recognize false prophets?

10. “*Every* tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 7:19). How can this warning to false prophets also keep us from becoming complacent as Christians?

A Christian's Commitment***Matthew 7:21–29***

The Sermon on the Mount ends on the same note of radical choice we have been aware of throughout. Repeatedly Jesus has called his people to be different from everybody else. Our righteousness is to be deeper because it reaches even our hearts. Our love is to be broader because it embraces even our enemies. We have been confronted with two treasures, two masters, two ambitions, two gates and two roads. Now the moment of decision has come. Will we follow the crowd or follow our Father in heaven? Will we be swayed by the winds of public opinion or be ruled by God's Word, the revelation of his character and will? In this final passage, as throughout the Sermon, Jesus' overriding purpose is to present us with the inescapable necessity of choice.

1. We usually think of Bible reading as beneficial. How might reading the Bible also be dangerous?
2. Read Matthew 7:21–29. On the surface, what might we admire about those described in Matthew 7:21–23?
3. In spite of their admirable statements or actions, why does Jesus condemn such people?
4. How were the two houses similar and different (Matthew 7:24–27)?
5. Why is it often difficult to tell the difference between genuine Christians and counterfeit ones?
6. How did the storms reveal what was previously unseen?

7. What kinds of storms might we face as Christians?

Why do they often reveal the quality of our lives?

8. The crowds were amazed at Jesus teaching, because he taught as one who had authority (Matthew 7:28–29). In what ways was Jesus’ authority demonstrated in his Sermon?

9. Why should Jesus’ authority motivate us to obey him?

10. How do Matthew 7:21–29 provide a fitting conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount?

11. What are some of the “words” of Jesus you have heard in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:24)?

12. Think of one teaching from the Sermon that has challenged you most. How can you begin putting it into practice?

13. Ask the Lord to help you submit to his authority, especially in those areas where you feel disobedient or hypocritical.