

THE JOURNEY

BECOMING MORE LIKE JESUS



UNIT FIVE – TO BE BLESSED BY HIM

LEADER'S GUIDE

THE JOURNEY

DEAR LEADER,

Thank you for your willingness to invest in the discipleship of your people. We hope that The Journey will be a valuable resource for you. Just a reminder, we need your feedback to help make improvements. Please submit your feedback to thejourney@iphc.org.

In this document, you will find:

1. Unit 5 Commitment Forms

- Hold your people accountable to their commitments to show up, participate, and care for others in the group.

2. Eight lessons of Unit 5: To Be Blessed By Him

- Each lesson contains scripture, discussion, content, conversation starters, and At-Home scriptures and exercises.
- We suggest devoting 15-20 minutes to teaching the content, which allows for 20-25 minutes of discussion among the group. The conversation starters will be great at the end of class.
- For some of the discussions, we included possible answers that may help you start the conversation. Otherwise, scan the content of that section for helpful leads.
- In each lesson, there are At-Home scriptures and exercises. These are included to help participants carry the lesson into their week.
- Some of these exercises are simple and some may require more thoughtful scheduling, but please encourage your people to commit to the At-Home section. It is during this time At-Home that you will see the greatest growth in their lives with Jesus.
- Don't feel obligated to use all of the At-Home exercises. These are suggestions. You know your group and what they need better than we do. If these exercises fit your needs then please use them.
- With any of the content or At-Home components, please feel free to alter,

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add to, and take away what doesn't fit your particular group.

4. At-Home Exercise worksheets and description sheets
 - At the end of this document, there are supporting documents for the At-Home component.
 - The worksheet can be completed each week. This allows the participants to make commitments and hold each other accountable.
 - Some of the At-Home exercises teach spiritual disciplines which might need more explanation. For those, we have included printable description sheets and worksheets.
5. Be sure to also download the Participant Guides for your group as well!
 - The Participant Guide is a simplified front-and-back document that allows your people to stay engaged in the lesson, while also providing them with a take-home component.
 - Encourage them to bring a notebook and a Bible.
6. For additional resources, check out our website at iphc.org/thejourney

We want to help you in any way that we can. If you have questions, feel free to contact us. We want you to have success in discipling your people. Our prayer is that The Journey can play a small part in that.

In Christ,

YOUR DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES FAMILY

Email us: thejourney@iphc.org

Call us: 405-792-7171

BEFORE YOU CAN START A JOURNEY

IT'S ALWAYS BEST TO KNOW WHERE YOU ARE

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AS A STARTING
POINT FOR YOUR JOURNEY.

HOW OFTEN ARE YOU CONSCIOUSLY AWARE OF GOD IN THESE SETTINGS?

RANK YOUR ANSWERS ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 10.

WORK	HOME	CHURCH	RELATIONSHIPS
_____	_____	_____	_____

WHERE DO YOU MISS GOD THE MOST IN YOUR LIFE? WHY?

MY COMMITMENT

- 1) Will you commit to participating in The Journey the next eight weeks to continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18)? _____
- 2) Will you commit to set aside time so that you can do the At-Home Exercises? _____
- 3) Will you commit to check on a friend in the group each week to see how they are doing with The Journey? _____ Who will it be?

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Please sign and date and hand in to your Journey leader.

MY COMMITMENT

- 1) Will you commit to participating in The Journey the next eight weeks to continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18)? _____
- 2) Will you commit to set aside time so that you can do the At-Home Exercises? _____
- 3) Will you commit to check on a friend in the group each week to see how they are doing with The Journey? _____ Who will it be?

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Please sign and date and hand in to your Journey leader.

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DEAR FELLOW TRAVELER,

Welcome to The Journey. We are so glad you are here. We believe that discipleship is a journey of becoming more like Jesus, and we want to come alongside you on this adventure. Perhaps you are new to following Jesus. Or maybe you've been following Him for many years. Regardless of your place on the path, we believe The Journey is for you.

The Journey is a versatile resource designed with the church and home in mind. The content will contain foundational, biblical teaching presented in an interactive format. It's intended for use in community with other believers. We also have built At-Home Exercises into the content for you to engage in at home throughout the week. We hope that these exercises help to strengthen your understanding of Jesus and hold you accountable for meeting with Jesus daily.

Our lives are radically changed by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through salvation, but our journey with the Lord shouldn't stop at our salvation experience. We must then embark on a journey of growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. By digging deeper into this relationship, The Journey will help you extend discipleship beyond Sundays. By immersing yourself into God's Word, prayer, and worship, you will fall more in love with the One who loves you most. Remember, there is always more to learn, still room to grow, and always support available for you on the journey.

We have been praying for you. We have had you in mind as we have been preparing this study. Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit would work mightily in your life as you commit to this personal and communal discipleship journey with the Lord.

With you on The Journey,

YOUR DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES FAMILY

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3. Dr. Terry Tramel
4. Jon and Erica Campbell
5. David Richardson
6. Summer Sneed
7. Jamie Cain
8. Chris Maxwell

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Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT BIBLE TRANSLATION ARE YOU USING?

All scriptures used in The Journey will be the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

HOW IS THE JOURNEY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER BIBLE STUDIES?

The Journey is an invitation to say yes to Jesus in every part of your life. Centered around weekly class experiences, the focus of The Journey is on the 6 days you aren't with your group. We want you to grow in knowledge, as all Bible studies do, but we also want you to be transformed by the power of God and become more like Jesus. By connecting, growing in knowledge, daily intimacy with Jesus, and participation in community, we hope that you will experience transformation.

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH DISCUSSION?

We believe that the discussion of the lesson with one another is a vital part of learning. It teaches us to think critically about what we are hearing, to be dependent on one another (someone else may have an insight that we need to hear), and to build trust and relationships in the group.

DOES THIS WORK FOR SMALL AND LARGE GROUPS?

Yes! We believe that the flexibility of this resource allows it to function in both settings. It can be easily adapted to fit the needs of any sized group!

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LESSON ONE:

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION: If someone asked you to explain the Gospel, what would you say? Do the words roll off your tongue? Does the message of the Gospel pour out of you? Or would you have to sit and think before answering?

The Gospel is the cornerstone of our faith. It differentiates us from our Jewish ancestors and all other religions. If you are a Christian, then you believed and experienced the Gospel when you came to faith. And yet, we don't "graduate" from the Gospel. We believe and experience it over and over again every day. It is our spiritual "daily bread."


To understand and articulate the Gospel we must look at Jesus, the One who gave us this gift. We also look to His teachings. One of the most concise descriptions He gave of the Gospel is found in the Beatitudes, which introduce the Sermon on the Mount.

Over the next eight lessons, we'll explore the Beatitudes. As we do, we will be challenged to slow down and savor what this passage says about who God is and who we are. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand and see, perhaps for the first time, how countercultural Jesus and His Gospel really are.

I. THE GOSPEL TELLS US WHO WE ARE

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.





DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): Even though God isn't directly mentioned in Matthew 5:3, what can we infer about Him from this passage? Why would He want us to be "poor in spirit"?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In this one verse, Jesus explains the Gospel. This sentence also provides a foundation for the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and all of His subsequent teachings. Since so much hangs on this verse, let's begin by exploring that first phrase, "poor in spirit."

This "poor in spirit" language might be unfamiliar, and because of that, it can create lots of questions. After all, shouldn't we be "rich" in spirit? Don't we want to be "full" of the Spirit? Absolutely! And it's important to know that Jesus is not calling for a spiritual (or even physical) poverty. Instead He calls us to an "abundant life" (John 10:10). Furthermore, in Matthew 6:21, Christ urges us to seek spiritual treasure or wealth. We were made to flourish.

What, then, does it mean? Billy Graham once said that if you trade the word humble for poor, you'll be on the road to understanding the first Beatitude. To be "poor in spirit" means to humbly realize that you have nothing to offer apart from Christ. True humility means we are conscious of our constant dependence on God, and Isaiah 64:6 challenges us to see that without God even our very best is like "filthy rags."

This state of being "poor in spirit" is true of all of us. Ever since the Fall (see Genesis 3), every person is born with a sinful nature. Because of that, we are incapable of being "good enough" on our own and without some kind of supernatural intervention, we will be lost, now and forever.

But, thank God, we did have an intervention. God, the Father, sent His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, to take on our sin and give us His righteousness. Our responsibility is to believe this truth and respond in faith. Our consistent acknowledgement that we are "poor in spirit" enables us to come to Christ humbly for salvation and sanctification. This is what it means to be "poor in spirit," and that is what it means to understand the Gospel.



II. THE GOSPEL SHOWS US HOW TO FIND THE KINGDOM


READ ALOUD: Mark 9:17-27: Then one of the crowd answered and said, "Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not. He answered him and said, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me." Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth. So He asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us. Jesus said to him, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief! When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!" Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose."

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): After reading Mark 9:17-27, what do you find interesting about this father? Do you identify with him? Why or why not?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): How does being "poor in spirit" give us the "Kingdom life"? Here's the thing, we live in Christ's Kingdom the same way we entered: by intentionally pursuing an understanding that we need Him, that our way is wrong, that our heart is deceitful, and that His way is the only way in everything. End of story. We believe not just for our initial salvation; we believe for our life. The believer's story is one that starts with "I need you, Jesus," and continues every day with "I need you, Jesus." It's a story of growing surrender.

Living the Gospel is a daily surrender. It's a continual handing over of our desires for God's perfect desire because the temptation to think we know





better than God is a battle Satan will challenge us with until we reach heaven. It is the same struggle (to go our own way) Adam and Eve faced in the Garden.

In what areas of your life are you seeking your own way? Are you turning ALL that you are and have to God? Will you let Him lead how you spend your money and time, how you love your children and spouse, and how you accept life when it isn't going as you planned? What are you attempting to handle your own way? Is your faith a "Jesus plus _____ (you fill in the blank) faith"? If so, you're not just missing out on the blessings God has for you. You are missing the Gospel.

We all deal with the pull to follow our sinful heart's desires. That's why this first Beatitude sends such a critical message, and Satan will do everything he can to keep you from surrendering. So, how do we begin?

Mark 9 gives a picture of how to go deeper with Christ as a desperate father comes to Him for help for his child. If you're a parent, you can sense what it was like for this man as he watched his son being tormented and attacked for years (even to the point of death). This man felt helpless, so he came to Jesus.

This father was "poor in spirit." Consequently, he reached out to Jesus, hoping things could be different. And what was Jesus' response? "If you believe, all things are possible to him who believes."

Belief: that's where it always starts. Belief triggers behavior. We will never truly turn to Jesus without that crucial acknowledgment that our way does not work.

So, how did the father handle Jesus' challenge? We know he had some level of belief because he was seeking Jesus' help. He knew his insufficiency, and we can almost feel his ache as he cried: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (v. 24). This man, broken by the pain of his child's condition, gave all he had to Jesus, knowing it wasn't enough, and so he boldly asked for more. He



asked for health for his son and more faith for himself. The story ends with Jesus' compassionate response: He healed the boy.

Repeating this father's honest, desperate prayer is a tangible way we can begin to live in the Kingdom—or live in the Gospel. If you're going through this study, you probably know at some level that satisfaction is found only in Christ. Yet, if you are like me, you are pulled repeatedly to a "comfortable faith," a "Jesus plus _____ faith." So like this man, let's ask for more. Let's return to the feet of Jesus and pray, "Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief." Help us know and believe that we are "poor in spirit."

III. THE GOSPEL DEFINES THE BLESSED LIFE

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): How would you define "blessed"?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Until we understand and believe the enormity of this phrase, "kingdom of heaven," it will not be compelling enough to warrant our surrender. After all, many things tempt us with their Siren calls.

Yet, Christ calls us to something better. He blesses us with an invitation to join Him at His table—the King's table. This is where we experience full contentment, joy, and peace, or "blessedness." Surrendering our desires and following His will grants us membership in His Kingdom (see Galatians 5:16-26).

We get better at Kingdom living as we intentionally focus on the eternal. God understands how easy it is to get distracted and take our eyes off Him, so He encourages us "not to lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:1), and He gives us brief glimpses of the fuller Kingdom. We taste His Kingdom in worship services when the air is thick with God's presence, yet also in the times we ache with pain but still know His overarching peace. We experienced a taste

of His Kingdom when we heard God's call for the first time and answered because we knew He was real.

Let us recognize those moments as the gifts they are. Yet, we understand they are drops in the bucket compared to the joy we will experience in heaven. And so we hold on with hope, believing we can experience the real "blessed life," even as we wait for something far greater (1 Corinthians 13:12).

CONCLUSION: Attaining the Kingdom (and living in the Gospel) is about belief. Do you believe? Not just for your salvation, but do you believe that you desperately need Jesus as much today as you did the day you became a Christian? Do you lean on Him for understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6)? Can you honestly say you are willing to choose His way over your own (Isaiah 55:8-9)? Are you ready to embrace "poor in spirit"? If so, it's yours. The Kingdom is yours.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- 1) What attitudes, actions, or mindsets prevent us from being "poor in spirit"?
- 2) How does being poor in spirit lead to being rich in the Kingdom of God?
- 3) Discuss how being poor in spirit is difficult in our culture?
- 4) Do you see being poor in spirit as a blessing? How so?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURE: Psalm 1

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

- 1) Use the Bible Study Handout and Worksheet to study Psalm 1. Bible study is an essential part of your life with God. Paying close attention to the verses you read offers the greatest opportunity of hearing God's Word speak to your life. Don't rush as you read. Take your time.
- 2) A Christian writer once said, "Only those who admit their spiritual poverty are willing to learn." One way we can experience poverty of spirit is

through the discipline of fasting. Fasting (voluntarily giving up something we are dependent on so that we can listen and walk more closely in tune with God) causes us to lean into our weaknesses and rely on God more fully. This weakness is the foundation of our spiritual poverty. Fast one day this week. You could fast all meals (check with your doctor first), a single meal, or you might fast technology or social media. Spend your fasting time in prayer. After you finish, reflect on your experience.

3) Being poor in spirit often leads to putting others before ourselves. Think of three ways that you can actively practice putting others before yourself. During this week, put these acts of selflessness to work. Was it difficult to stop focusing on yourself? What did you learn?

4) What is the Gospel? Spend some time writing down your understanding of the Gospel. Try to find Bible verses to give you the language or words you need.



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LESSON TWO:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

INTRODUCTION: In the 1962 film adaptation of *The Music Man*, the Buffalo Bills perform a rendition of the song, "Sincere." Two lines, in particular, stand out: Where is the good in "goodbye"? What can be fair in "farewell"? If you have ever parted with a loved one, whether through death, departure, or dissolution, you may have asked the same questions. A life coming to an end. A relationship coming to a close. A day lived in a world flawed by sin. We question how there could be anything good or fair in these melancholy moments that break our hearts.

Matthew 5 through 7 contains what is now known as "The Sermon the on Mount." Over these three chapters, Jesus teaches massive crowds about the Kingdom of God. His Kingdom is upside down to any kingdom man has ever known. From the onset in chapter 5, He lays out what seems to be a series of oxymorons, contradicting the culture of this world. These oxymorons define the culture of the Kingdom. Today, we know them as the Beatitudes. Nestled within these is the focus of this lesson, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).


As members of the Kingdom of God, we are fortunate amidst our mourning because we have the promise of being comforted by the Holy Spirit. The comfort we find amidst the mourning is not based on our feelings or emotions but rather on the goodness of God.

I. BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Mark 6:34-37: When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion





on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): With what situations do we typically associate mourning? What does it mean to mourn?

Possible answers: The loss of a loved one. The end of a marriage or significant relationship. A tragic event that changes the course of life [diagnosis, national tragedy, etc.] Sadness. Grief. Disbelief. Memories.

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Beyond sadness and grief, mourning is more than an emotion. It is a verb. It takes on physical aspects. Whether it is deep sobs shaking us to our core or sitting silently still feeling grief’s full weight. Be it tears that roll like a waterfall or a single streak across a heated cheek. Perhaps it is a combination of anger and confusion rising from the depth of your soul unleashed in a scream or of sorrow and disbelief sitting heavy like an elephant on your chest. Mourning, no matter what shape it takes, carries weight and sticks with you for a while.

Mourning comes with more than the death of a loved one. Mourning sits with us in any form of loss. A marriage ended. A friendship severed. A child far from home. A life season abruptly brought to a close. A world tainted by decay, distortion, disease, discrimination, destruction, and death.

Esau McCauley writes: “To mourn involves being saddened by the state of the world. To mourn is to care.” Mourning indicates we have an emotional investment in that which was lost. It triggers something within us: compassion. Compassion should then be a catalyst to action. McCauley goes on to say: “A theology of mourning never allows us the privilege of apathy... Mourning is intuition that things are not right—that more is possible.” Jesus models this for us in the passage from Mark’s Gospel.

The Mark 6 passage falls during a time when Jesus is mourning the murder of His cousin, John the Baptist. He tells His disciples that He wants to go



across the Sea of Galilee to withdraw and rest for a while. As they go, the crowds follow Him. Upon seeing the crowds on the shore, rather than becoming frustrated that work “followed Him home,” Jesus is moved to compassion. He mourns the fact that they are like sheep without a shepherd.

What does that mean? Sheep without a shepherd are unprotected, confused, unkempt. Sheep without a shepherd are hungry and thirsty. Sheep without a shepherd hardly stand a chance. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, realizes this, and His heart is struck deeply. Instead of ignoring them, compassion catalyzed Him into action.

He took the time to give the sheep instruction and ensure they knew the Shepherd was there for their protection. After tending to their souls, He tended to their bellies. He made sure the hungry sheep had a good meal. He gave them a safe place to eat without fear of attack. The Good Shepherd cared.

II. THEY WILL BE COMFORTED

READ ALOUD: John 14:25-27: “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): Do you recall a situation in which you have been comforted? What did that look like? In the passage we just read, Jesus promises that God the Father will send us a Helper. In the situations you mentioned, what comparisons or contrasts do you see to what the Helper is promised to do?

Possible Answers: Having someone sit with you for a while. A phone call. Cards or flowers being sent. Physical touch (holding your hand, giving you a hug, being near). Giving you wisdom on how to move forward. Being reminded you are not alone. Wisdom being offered from the Word of God. Peace of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): The Greek word for comfort that appears in Matthew's Beatitudes is *parakaleo*. It means to call to one's side, exhort, encourage, console. From this root word comes the term *parakletos*, the same word used in John for "The Helper," the Holy Spirit. This means we are promised a Helper and Comforter in the person of the Holy Spirit.

This passage occurs during the Upper Room Discourse, where Jesus takes the time to give His disciples the last bit of instruction needed to prepare them for His crucifixion and beyond. Stretching from John 13 through 17, Jesus speaks of leaving this world to go to the Father, preparing a place in Heaven for the disciples, and charging them to tell others about Him.

Amidst all of this, He pauses to assure them they will not go about this assignment alone. The Father will send a Helper. This Helper will be a Teacher to them just as Jesus was. He will remind them of all Jesus' words to them. Finally, as we see at the end of the passage, He is going to be the bearer of peace and comfort.

III. MOURNING AND MISSION

READ ALOUD: John 14:25-27: "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): In John 14:25-27, Jesus gave several reasons the disciples would be able to carry out the mission He assigned them. How do you think the disciples felt knowing the mission would include mourning, but also that they had the promise of abiding presence of the Holy Spirit?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): The disciples would be continuing the Kingdom mission of the Good Shepherd. They would learn, following Jesus's death, resurrection, ascension, and the Day of Pentecost, that their hearts would become more like the Good Shepherd's heart. They were to

carry the Good News of the Kingdom to the world in search of the lost sheep.

As they encountered the deaf, diseased, dying, and disenchanting, their hearts would feel the weight. Compassion would compel them to share the Kingdom. Some lost sheep would come home, causing the disciples to rejoice. Some would continue to wander in darkness on their own, to which they would mourn the loss. Here they must lean into the promise of the Comforter and the Helper.

As Christ's disciples today, it is our responsibility to carry on the Kingdom's mission. Our marching orders are to take the antidote of the Gospel to a world diseased and dying of sin. In seeing the defiling effects of sin on our world, it is only natural to mourn just how far it has fallen. It would be worrisome if we did not. The good news is that in our mourning and our mission, we have a Helper.

In the mission, our Helper enlightens us as we read the Word of God. He aids us as we commit it to memory. He prompts us in our living it out. As we submit to His leading, He is the great evangelist, and we are His instrument. We can be comforted, knowing the work does not depend solely on us.

In mourning, our Comforter consoles our weary hearts as we fight the good fight, and the results seem sparing. The Comforter once again reminds us that the work is not dependent solely upon us. If we planted the seed, He is able to tend it beyond what we can see or do.

The Comforter has a good plan, in which we have the opportunity to play a small part. When we feel as if all is lost, the Comforter reminds us that He has overcome the world. For that, we can rest assured. Finally, the Comforter reminds us that although we serve as shepherds alongside the Good Shepherd, we are still sheep. He brings us back to those still waters and green pastures, restoring our souls.

CONCLUSION: In the economy of the Kingdom, our mourning is not for



nothing. It brings the realization there must be something more. As members of the Kingdom, we know that “something more” is creation completely, eternally reconciled to God through Christ. On this side of eternity, it means bringing the Kingdom to earth. Therefore, we embrace the weight of mourning, allow the compassion of the Good Shepherd to stir us, and then act accordingly.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- 1) We all experience times of mourning. What do you find most difficult in these seasons?
- 2) In what ways have you seen yourself blessed during mourning?
- 3) How does knowing Jesus was moved with compassion for others during His own mourning impact how you approach similar seasons of life?
- 4) How does having the Holy Spirit, a comforter, help us to journey through mourning?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

- 1) Develop the habit, if you have not already done so, of reading the Word of God daily. Establish a consistent time, place, and pattern. Make this habit a high priority this week.
- 2) Ask the Good Shepherd to open your eyes and soften your heart to become more like His heart as you go about this week. Be watchful for Him.
- 3) Take the time to inventory what causes your heart to feel heavy or to mourn. Is it something you see on the news or in a social media feed? Is it a story you hear from a friend? Is it passing someone on the street corner? Ask the Holy Spirit, as your Helper, how you can respond in compassion moving forward; and ask your Comforter how to trust Him in the situations beyond your control.

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LESSON THREE:

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

INTRODUCTION: The Beatitudes spoken by Jesus are not to be thought of as independent sayings that could have been uttered in any order. Instead, we should see and hear them as rungs of a ladder, leading us ever upward into the likeness of Christ. The statements expressed previously must be experienced before the present teaching about meekness may be realized. The first steps in Christ's kingdom lift His followers to a "poverty in spirit" (Matthew 5:3), which leads to a "mourning" over the bankrupt condition of their souls (5:4). Self-righteous people never touch these initial rungs of the ladder; consequently, it is impossible for them to become truly meek.


Additionally, the first two beatitudes—"blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"—reflect a personal lament because something is lacking. However, here in verse five, we see the supply of something added to the human heart. The first two beatitudes were inward-focused, while the spotlight on meekness looks outward, extending to our relationships with others. Truly meek Christ-followers have surrendered all their presumed "rights" before the Judge of the earth. Gentleness towards others becomes their response to God's grace toward them.

I. WHAT IS MEEKNESS?

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): Do you think most people view meekness as a positive or negative trait? How does Jesus' approval of this disposition change the usual way the expression is used?





CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): The Greek word *praus* is rendered as “gentle, meek, or mild.” The term carries the idea of a powerful stallion being broken and becoming gentle enough to be ridden. Peter used this word as a description of the inner beauty that Christ-followers should manifest, which he says is a great value in His sight (1 Peter 3:4).

The word meek also carries the idea of being humble or considerate of others. It speaks of people who keep their anger in check and place the interests of others above their own. Meekness is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The Apostle Paul echoed this teaching of Jesus throughout his letters (Ephesians 4:1-2; Colossians 3:12; 2 Timothy 2:24; Titus 3:1-2).

From these Scriptures, we clearly see that “meekness is not weakness.” Nor is the term synonymous with cowardice, timidity, or shyness. Neither is it a sign of indecisiveness or absence of confidence. Sometimes the culture has branded meek persons with derogatory terms such as “wimp, a doormat, milquetoast, spineless, or yellow.” These mistaken descriptions perceive their targets to be lacking in courage.

On the contrary, Jesus portrayed meekness as quality of strength. Those who genuinely possess this attribute exercise restraint from crushing others with their words or their actions. Wisdom literature from the Old Testament also affirms meekness as a powerful possession: “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

READ ALOUD: Matthew 11:29-30: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): Jesus invites us to a lifestyle with Him that is lived in close communion with His gentle heart. He claims such a yoke is “easy,” and His burden is “light.” Do you believe life is easier for those who are meek than for those who are self-exalting and harsh toward others?



CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): The greatest example of meekness in human history is seen in Jesus Christ Himself. He not only practiced what He preached, but He also preached what He practiced. The Master Teacher described His own nature as being “gentle and lowly in heart.” In the previous verse, He invited the laborers who were “heavy laden” to come to Him for a different kind of lifestyle (Matthew 11:28). It is impossible to be yoked up with Jesus, unless one is willing to learn gentleness and humility (11:29).

Furthermore, at His Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus fulfilled the prophet Zechariah’s words: “See, your King comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:5). The Jewish people missed their Messiah because they were not looking for a man of meekness to reign over them. Another prophet had declared that “a bruised reed He would not break” (Isaiah 42:3). Yet no one could ever make a valid accusation that Jesus was ever weak.

He demonstrated bold and holy anger when He drove the moneychangers out of the temple (Matthew 21:13; John 2:14-15), yet when it came to broken and bruised humanity, He showed incomparable grace and meekness. Jesus never retaliated to those who inflicted Him with harm (1 Peter 2:21-23). Thus, meekness is indeed a powerful surrender to God’s control.

Another example of meekness may be viewed in the heroic figure of Moses in the Old Testament. “Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). Again, this leader displayed valiant courage many times, including when he destroyed the golden calf the people had made to worship instead of God (Exodus 32:20).

How could Jesus and Moses both receive distinct recognition for their meekness? Clearly, Jesus (always) and Moses (most of the time) were angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time. What is the difference? It is never permissible to be angry for any insult or injury directed to oneself. Yet, anger may indeed be the right response toward improper action directed to God or others. Selfish anger is a sin; selfless anger may be holy.



III. THE REWARD OF MEEKNESS

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:5: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): When do you believe the meek will inherit the earth? Is it only in the ages to come in the afterlife, or does this promise extend to our present time?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): The latter clause of this third Beatitude reveals the reward for gentleness. It seems that a twofold promise is offered here. First, in a very real sense, those who are truly meek own the earth now. Second, there will be a future fulfillment when this becomes a visible reality in Christ’s coming kingdom. Jesus seems to be indicating that the meek (and they alone) are the ones who are enjoying life as it was meant to be lived now. In addition, in the ages to come, they will still be receiving the “exceeding riches of His grace” (Ephesians 2:7).

The meek gladly trust Christ with their present and future circumstances. It is as if they give their Savior a blank check and happily ask Him to fill in the blank as He chooses. These persons possess contentment that brings satisfaction. Even if they appear to have nothing, they possess all things (2 Corinthians 6:10). This repeats what Paul was saying in his earlier letter to the Corinthians: “All things are yours,” including “things to come” (1 Corinthians 3:22).

The future aspect of the promise is best seen in Romans, where Paul wrote: “We are children, and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). The Psalmist declared that “the earth is the Lord’s and all its fulness” (Psalm 24:1). Yet those who are in relationship with Him will share in this wondrous inheritance. Jesus’ own words summarized this ultimate outcome: “He who humbles Himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

The promise to “inherit the earth” surely includes a literal component. This may refer to the millennial kingdom of Christ when He will reign for a thousand years on the earth (Revelation 20:1-6). It certainly includes the re-created and restored New Heavens and New Earth to come (Revelation 21-22).

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- 1) What is your response to humility being both a pre-requisite to being saved, as well as a sign that a person is saved?
- 2) Is meekness necessary to be a faithful witness for Christ?
- 3) When do you find it most difficult to walk in meekness? When does it come naturally?
- 4) Meekness is the ability to control yourself when you want to show others how much you can control. What areas of your life do you want to “prove” your power or exert your control?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURES: Psalm 149; James 1:12-27

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

- 1) Use the Bible Study Handout and Worksheet to study this week’s scriptures: Psalm 149 and James 1:12-27. Bible study is an essential part of your life with God. Paying close attention to the verses you read offers the greatest opportunity of hearing God’s Word speak to your life. Don’t rush as you read. Take your time.
- 2) We should acknowledge that even at our best, a gentle and meek spirit may be “imperfectly present” in our hearts. Here are some warning signs to be aware of lest we lose the blessedness of meekness:
 - Harshness: (If you treat others mean—an absence of gentleness)
 - Grasping: (If you must always have yours first—caring little how your actions affect others)
 - Vengeful: (If you are known as someone no one should ever cross)
 - Uncontrolled: (If rage fills your soul, so life becomes a series of explosions that boil over)
- 3) An essential part of meekness is the inward recognition and choice to do God’s will, not my will. Prayerfully consider the areas of your life that you tend to choose your own will over God’s. Ask the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of meekness in your heart.

THE JOURNEY

LESSON FOUR: BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

INTRODUCTION: Hunger and thirst are basic and beautiful.

Basic? Every human body urges every human being to eat and drink every single day. We don't just want to; we must. It's instinct. Instinct naturally urges us to satisfy these two basic needs. We have no choice. If we don't, we die.

Beautiful? Most of us rarely eat and drink to survive. Usually, we eat and drink for pleasure. This is where appetite takes over. Appetite is instinct empowered by options. It's the "want to" part of the "have to" impulse. With appetite, we have choices to make. What do I want to eat/drink? When do I want to eat/drink? How much do I want to eat/drink?

With instinct, we have no choice. With appetite, we do. And our physical health is determined by how we manage both instinct and appetite. Need and desire.

It's the same with spiritual health. Becoming a disciple of Jesus means we inherit a new spiritual instinct and appetite. New spiritual needs. New spiritual desires.

Our new spiritual instinct makes us aware of our need for God. It urges us to pursue Him and His righteousness daily because our spiritual life depends on it. When we fill ourselves with God regularly, we live. When we neglect this new instinct, we starve spiritually. We need His righteousness, the way our bodies need food and water.



The problem is, we typically continue to desire the old, harmful stuff we wanted before we became His disciples. Following Jesus doesn't mean old cravings for harmful things disappear magically. It just means your desire for the new things of God intensifies and begins to war against your desire for old things that pull you away from Him. It's what the Bible calls the war between "flesh and Spirit" (Galatians 5:16-25). And it's why Jesus uses this metaphor: hunger and thirst for righteousness—you'll be blessed if you do!

I. BLESSED BY RIGHTEOUSNESS

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled."

Philippians 3:7-9: But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): What did Jesus mean when He said we would be blessed by righteousness? How is the Garden of Eden involved?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Let's start with the words, blessed and righteousness.

For blessed, we can say this: to be blessed is to be living in a state of inner wholeness. It's a deep, powerful, pervasive, joy-filled contentment that blossoms from things being as they should be.

However, this is not to say that blessedness is a purely emotional or circumstantial state. It often affects our emotions and circumstances, but blessedness exists independently of blissfulness. Circumstances sour and sweeten. Feelings writhe and shift. Suffering, pain, and loss happen. Yet, a person can be blessed. That's because the Beatitudes teach us that

blessedness is produced by something that transcends the temporary. In this case, a life spent pursuing righteousness.

We can say this for righteousness: righteousness is the sum total of everything God wants for us, AND the way God designed for us to access it. It's a "what" and a "how" concept. Let's start with the how, which immediately presents a challenge.


Unfortunately, we tend to focus on the how part of righteousness. In other words, we make it all about how we should live. The things we should or shouldn't do; the thoughts we shouldn't think; the naughty words we shouldn't say; the music we shouldn't listen to; the good deeds we should do; the political issues we should support. Before you know it, righteousness—a thoroughly beautiful and holistic and life-giving concept—has been watered down to some pitiful formula for "how-to-get-on-Santa-Jesus'-nice-list."

When we obsess over the "how" part, we vacuum the heart out of this Beatitude. We forget what God wanted us to begin with and why righteousness is so crucial and beautiful. What God wants is unbroken communion with us in the magnificent world He fashioned for us.

Two places in Scripture most accurately portray God's deepest desires for humanity: Eden (before the Fall) and Heaven (upon Christ's return). In both places, communion with God and harmony with His world are the defining characteristics of human existence. In Eden, God took daily strolls with Adam and Eve through the paradise He'd created for them. In Heaven—also known among Bible scholars as the "New Eden"—God again shares endless communion with humanity in a paradise remade. This is what God wants most for us.

II. RIGHTEOUSNESS DEFINED

READ ALOUD: Ephesians 2:8: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.



DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): How does righteousness relate to external behavior? Is righteousness a behavior? Lifestyle? Moral code?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): The answer is yes and no. Perhaps it's more helpful to say that righteousness includes those things the way baseball includes baseball rules and the way playing guitar includes chord charts. Baseball rules help the game happen correctly. Chord charts help guitar playing happen correctly. But you've not played baseball if you've sat down and just read the rules. Nor have you made music if you've just stared at the chord charts.

Moral codes and behaviors function like rules and chord charts—they help righteous life happen correctly. But they don't necessarily equal righteousness.

You've not experienced the beauty and the blessedness of righteousness just because you've done enough good behaviors to avoid Santa's naughty list. Jesus' clash with the religious leaders of His day was precisely because of this misconception. They were pious. They followed behavioral codes. (In fact, they made extra laws to ensure they followed the original codes even better.) But they were far from righteous.

Because righteousness, as we've said, is bigger and better than mere external conformity to codes. It is a gift bestowed on us through Jesus, based on His own merit. Therefore, righteousness for us is primarily relational and only secondarily behavioral.

The gift of righteousness certainly generates new behaviors, lifestyles, and moral codes. And Jesus absolutely intends for us to prioritize and pursue "righteous" things, like discipline and biblical morality. Make no mistake: our effort is essential—the choices we make matter. Following Christ's example in real-life matters. Real disciples don't move through life whimsically disregarding biblical commands and wisdom. Doing so abuses grace and mocks Christ. Jesus wants to retrain our spiritual appetites to crave and consume things that bless rather than grieve Him.



But Jesus wants us to pursue those things—not so that we can impress Him or wow other people with our “piety”—but because they protect and enhance our relationship with Him and our connection to His kingdom.

Ultimately we can't produce our own righteousness. Only our relational harmony with Jesus does that.

III. THE APPETITE CYCLE

READ ALOUD: Isaiah 55:1-2: Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase: “Appetite Cycle”?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Ever tried dieting or known someone who has? If so, you know dieting is universally unpleasant. That's because switching to healthy eating involves killing old habits and training new ones. It takes time and sustained effort. And it's incredibly unpleasant and uncomfortable...at least at first.

While it's typically rough at first, once you break into a groove, healthy eating becomes easier, bit by bit. Eventually, it becomes satisfying in greater dimension than unhealthy eating ever was. That coke + supersize fry + cheeseburger combo hits your gut and your conscience differently after a few steady weeks on homecooked leans-n-greens + H2O. The grease that once comforted you now threatens to send you straight into the endless regret-filled land of food-coma. In a wild turn of events, the discomfort switched directions on you.

That's because of something called the “Appetite Cycle.” Here's what we mean by the “Appetite Cycle:” You eat most what you want most because



you want most what you eat most. Yin meet Yang.

As you feed the cycle, you'll keep wanting what you keep eating. And then you'll keep eating what you keep wanting. And on and on. Over time, the cycle takes over and solidifies behaviors and choices into habits, making change less and less likely. What's important to realize about the Appetite Cycle is that it's unbiased. It's a force you can use for good or for bad.

So, eating good things makes eating good things easier over time. And vice versa. Our appetite is highly impressionable. We shape it as we go. Because this happens, our choices determine whether or not our Appetite Cycle fights for us or against us.

You guessed it: you also have a spiritual Appetite Cycle, and Jesus wants to retrain that unbiased force to fight for you and His kingdom. He knows your spirit naturally will crave what you feed it regularly. He knows we're born craving and consuming the very things that rip us away from Him.

So, when we pursue righteousness, we are pursuing relationship. And as we pursue that relationship, more and greater righteous realities bloom in us. New righteous appetites are trained up to replace old sinful ones. Those good things we begin consuming and doing then cycle back around to help further protect and enhance our relationship. And on and on the heavenly, paradoxical cycle goes.

Jesus' encouragement is simple: "hunger and thirst for righteousness." Eat and drink your fill! Jesus knows that as you do, you'll want more and more of His kingdom and less and less of your old kingdom. More of the old passes away. More of the new takes over.

The most seasoned, lifelong disciples are those whose lives have been marked by this self-replenishing paradox. Through the years, their hearts come to say, "He is enough for me! Yet, I'll never have enough of Him!" These men and women have cooperated with the Holy Spirit to kill old cravings and train new ones by consistently choosing righteousness.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- 1) How would you define righteousness?
- 2) In what ways can our righteousness become more about actions instead of a posture of the heart?
- 3) What can you do to help foster a healthy “appetite cycle” of righteousness in your own life?
- 4) We all know and experience physical hunger pains. Do you ever experience spiritual hunger pains? What are they?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURE: John 4:1-26

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

- 1) Use the Bible Study Handout and Worksheet to study John 4:1-26. Bible study is an essential part of your life with God. Paying close attention to the verses you read offers the greatest opportunity of hearing God’s Word speak to your life. Don’t rush as you read. Take your time.
- 2) Meditating on scripture is another way that we can grow spiritually. Meditating on a text allows the words of each verse to gently fill our minds. When reading a text this way, choose a shorter passage and read it several times rather than reading once and moving on. The purpose of meditation is to hear the words of scripture and begin to prepare our hearts to obey in our lives. It is hearing and responding (see Matthew 7:24). Set aside some time to try this out this week.
- 3) What kinds of appetites define your life? Spend some time this week performing an appetite assessment. What do you spend your time doing? What most often catches your attention? What kinds of things satisfy you? What is one area that you can open up to the influence of Jesus?

THE JOURNEY

LESSON FIVE:

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

INTRODUCTION: One constant about humanity's nature is that we tend to focus and judge life based on what will make our own lives easier. Much of life is geared toward making ourselves "happy." Yet, the kingdom of God operates and functions differently.

As Jesus introduces the kingdom of God, He delineates a difference in character and attitude from that of an inward-focused system. In His Kingdom, the subjects think and act differently than they did before. And blessed, even happy, are they to share with others what they have received: mercy.

I. MERCY SHOWS ACTIVE COMPASSION

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): What does it mean to be merciful? What does that look like on a daily basis?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): You may have heard the statements: Grace is receiving what you DO NOT deserve, while mercy withholds what you DO deserve. While those simple statements are true, the biblical concept of mercy is much more than that.

When mercy is given, the punishment or retaliation for some sin, wrong, or offense is withheld. If that is all that we emphasize, we lend ourselves to seeing just one facet of what mercy entails for those who are followers of Christ.



At the risk of sounding simplistic, although, in reality, that is not the case, to be merciful is to be FULL of mercy. So, what does that mean?

Mercy is an action word. The Greek word *eleemon* means actively compassionate or merciful. Its root word, *eleos*, is human or divine compassion that is active; it is a tender mercy that is given and displayed toward someone who does not deserve or merit it.

When Jesus says that the citizens of the kingdom of God are blessed because they are merciful, He is turning our instincts upside down. Our instincts, and even our world's systems, urge us to take care of "number 1." It encourages us to make sure we have what we need to better ourselves, improve ourselves, and improve our state of being.

While it is admirable to improve our skills and take care of ourselves, the danger comes when our behavior is self-centered. Mercy doesn't do that. It is active compassion that moves beyond the mirror into the lives of others.

II. MERCY IS SENSITIVE TO OTHERS' NEEDS

READ ALOUD: 1 Corinthians 13:4-5: Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself; is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;

Psalm 145:8: The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): In 1 Corinthians 13:5, the Apostle Paul wrote that love "does not seek its own." In light of the understanding that mercy does not focus on one's self, how is it related to what Paul says here about love?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): As Paul writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13, he makes a statement that describes one of the characteristics of biblical mercy. In verse 5, he says that love "does not seek its own." In contrast to the earthly kingdom, the kingdom of God is

characterized by love and mercy that is sensitive to others' needs. In that regard, mercy is an expression of love. You might say it is love in action. It is sensitive to and sees the needs of others ahead of its own.

The Psalmist describes the Lord as being great in mercy. "But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth" (Psalm 86:15, KJV). So, you see, mercy is one of the attributes and characteristics of the nature of God. He is full of mercy. Jesus' life mirrored those attributes and He was characterized as a merciful person.

A beautiful example of this "love in action" is seen in chapter 8 of John's Gospel. A woman who had been caught in the very act of adultery was presented for judgment before Jesus. Those who brought her were testing Jesus and said that the law commanded that she be stoned to death. After writing an unidentified message in the sand, Jesus' responded by saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first."

One by one, each of the woman's accusers left. Jesus then asked the woman where they had gone. She said no one accused her, and Jesus, although under the Jewish law He had every right to accuse her and punish her, had mercy on her. She knew she was guilty, but Jesus looked at her greater need for forgiveness and opened His heart of mercy.

III. MERCY SEEKS WAYS TO EXPRESS ITSELF

READ ALOUD: Matthew 25:31-40: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger

and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): If mercy is active compassion, sensitive to the needs of others, then what are the implications for those who want to follow Christ?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): As we have learned, mercy is not just a noun. Biblically it is a verb. It is active compassion. It is compassion that is in motion.

For the believer that is growing in faith, part of that growth is moving beyond personal needs and desires and seeing others’ needs. Not only is mercy sensitive to others’ needs, but it also goes beyond that. It intentionally looks for ways to express itself to others.

In the above passage (Matthew 25:40), Jesus makes the point that those who minister mercy in the kingdom of God to the “least of these” do the same to Him. The inverse is also true. When we as believers do not mercifully minister to the least of these, we are withholding that form of worship from the Lord.

Mercy, as a part of the believer’s life, continually looks outside of itself to see where the love of the Lord could be given. It reminds us of the words of E. H. Chapin, “Mercy, that is the gospel. The whole of it in one word.” And the result of extending mercy is that it will be returned to us in good measure.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- 1) Have you ever thought of mercy as “active compassion”? Does this meaning inspire you?
- 2) Talk about a time you experienced mercy. Why was it important to you?

3) "When we as believers do not mercifully minister to "the least of these," we are withholding that form of worship from the Lord." How does this statement challenge you?

4) What are two ways that you can extend mercy in someone's life this week?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 13:1-17

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

1) Use the Bible Study Handout and Worksheet to study Hebrews 13:1-17. Bible study is an essential part of your life with God. Paying close attention to the verses you read offers the greatest opportunity of hearing God's Word speak to your life. Don't rush as you read. Take your time.

2. "Mercy is not self-centered. It is active compassion that moves beyond the mirror of self into the lives of others." This week, ask the Lord to open your eyes to needs that are around you. Seek to move beyond your personal prayer needs and pray for those whom the Lord brings to your mind. Be mindful of the times your prayers have centered solely upon yourself.

3. "Mercy continually looks outside of itself to see where the love of the Lord could be given." Do something intentional this week to express mercy to someone's life. We all feel sympathy at times but put action to your concerns. Serve at a relief center for the homeless, visit with a shut-in, write a card of encouragement to someone who is struggling. Put your love into action this week.

4) To become a person of mercy and active compassion requires us to see and know the needs of those around us. That requires us to listen and pay attention. This week, when you are waiting for school pickup or standing in line at the store, don't let yourself become distracted by impatience or technology. Instead, listen and watch those around you. Let God begin to show you the needs of others. Be brave and respond.



THE JOURNEY

LESSON SIX:

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

INTRODUCTION: Purity is a quality that is greatly desired in various substances. There is a global interest in developing strategies to maintain and preserve clean air and water. Most people understand and appreciate the value of precious metals in their purest form and strive to possess them.

Sadly, however, the pursuit of maintaining and possessing pure hearts is often neglected and even belittled. Yet, Jesus taught that to be truly blessed, one must have an untainted heart.

I. A PURE HEART IS GOD'S DWELLING PLACE

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Exodus 25:17-18, 22: Make an atonement cover of pure gold...and make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you.

Psalms 24:3-4a: Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.

Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect; therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): Do you have a favorite room or space in your home? Describe what you like about the place?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Seeing God, or having unlimited access to His presence, is a widely-accepted concept among believers today. But to



the Jewish audience Jesus taught, the idea of seeing God was something unattainable and unbelievable. Even one of their greatest leaders, Moses, who experienced the closest encounter with God, had only been allowed to see God's back with the warning, "no one may see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Access to God's presence in Judaism was limited to one person, the high priest, one specific day each year, and only after he had completed certain purification rituals.

During the time that Jesus spoke these words, God's presence only dwelled on earth in one location: the Holy of Holies. This small room in the temple, barricaded by a large veil or curtain, was where God met with the consecrated high priest. His presence descended and rested between the wings of two gold cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was a large vessel made mostly from acacia wood and overlaid with gold. But it is interesting to note from Exodus 25 that the place where God's presence dwelled on the Ark was not merely covered in gold; it was made of pure gold.

The surprising statement Jesus makes in Matthew 5:8 was communicating a change in God's choice for His dwelling place. God was revealing His desire to inhabit the hearts of His children instead of being restricted to a room in the temple.

Jesus' bold declaration, however, was not communicating a shift in God's standard for that location. As Jesus continues teaching in Matthew 5, He echoes the Old Testament mandate given in Leviticus 11. He makes it clear that the new dwelling place of our hearts must also be purified to enjoy the blessing of experiencing God's presence. The idea that the pure in heart will see God is not simply a future vision of Him in Heaven; it's an identification of those who are qualified and enabled to dwell in the presence of God here on earth.

II. HOW TO ACHIEVE A PURE HEART

READ ALOUD: Matthew 23:25-28: "You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind, Pharisees, first clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will also be

clean. You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside, you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

1 Samuel 16:7: The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

Isaiah 29:13: The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): Have you ever encountered someone who flattered you, but you sensed they were not genuine? Have you ever realized someone did a favor for you only because they were expecting something in return? How does that make you feel?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): During the time of Jesus, a Jewish sect called the Pharisees were considered by many to be the holiest and purest in Jewish society. They made great efforts to follow all of God’s Law. Some of them even believed that if just one of them could live perfectly for only one day, the promised Messiah would come. The Pharisees thought they were the most likely candidates to see God because of their tireless efforts at good works.

Eventually, the Pharisees became so consumed and obsessed with the Law’s outward works that they missed the heart of God behind His commands. They became blind to their legalistic hearts’ true condition and failed to recognize the Messiah when He arrived.

Jesus saw the internal motivations for their external behavior, and He consistently exposed them during His ministry. He compared their spiritual state to dirty dishes and occupied tombs. Jesus can also see our hearts and motivations. How would He describe them? We, like the Pharisees, can falsely believe that by working hard enough at doing good deeds, we will earn God’s love and approval. We also can be tempted to rely solely on outward behavior as the ultimate indication for purity. It’s important to remember that Jesus did not say, “Blessed are those who do good deeds, for they shall see God.”



III. A PURE HEART PRODUCES GOOD WORKS

READ ALOUD: Proverbs 4:23: Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

Matthew 7:16-18: “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”

Jeremiah 17:9-10: The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.

Proverbs 20:9: Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin.”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): We have all heard the old adage, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Why is this important? How do we apply this to ourselves and other believers?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Purity is a matter of the heart, but it is not limited exclusively to the heart. Our good works could never produce a pure heart within us, yet we will eventually and consistently produce good works and pure actions if we have a pure heart.

An often-misquoted and shared Scripture from Matthew 7 is, “Do not judge.” However, in the same chapter, Jesus indicates that we should examine the external fruit of a person’s life. Jesus made it clear during the rest of His teaching in Matthew 5 that His intent was not to reject or discard the standard of the Law, but, rather, to clarify it.

He illustrates this point by making several “You-have-heard-it-said...but-I-say” statements highlighting certain behaviors mentioned in the Law. Jesus reminds them what the Law says about those behaviors and then takes it a step further to reveal what a pure heart should produce. The Law instructed one not to kill another person. Jesus taught that one should not even entertain angry feelings or speak insulting words towards another person.

The Law prohibited the act of adultery. Jesus explained that one must not allow lustful thoughts to linger. The Law provided instruction on retribution for enemies. Jesus insisted that enemies must be loved. God does not want simply to change our behavior. He wants to transform and purify our hearts.

Jesus' declaration that God could be seen by anyone with a pure heart must have caused the listening crowds to wonder in disbelief. For Jews, the pursuit of purity came by following the Law. It consumed every part and every day of their lives, and it was still insufficient. Following the Law and making endless animal sacrifices failed to open the way for Jewish people to see God fully. Just one person, the High Priest, could enter the Holy of Holies and experience God's presence only one day each year.

Jesus' statement must have caused His audience to ask, "How is this possible?" Jesus answered that question when He became the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. The purpose of His sacrifice and death was revealed the moment after He took His last breath—the veil barricading the Holy of Holies was torn supernaturally by the hand of God. This indicated that access to God was no longer limited to one person, or even one group of people, because of Christ's work on the cross.

Many Jews had died before Jesus, and some even died on crosses, but only Jesus' sacrificial death accomplished salvation. Salvation was possible not only because He shed His blood, but because His actions were the product of a truly pure heart. Now, hearts made pure by the blood of Christ produce Christ-like character and actions.

Thus, the primary concern for those who want to see God is to trust in Christ rather than strive for good behavior. We can't purify our hearts. Relying on our good deeds will never be enough. But as we trust and follow Jesus, He purifies our hearts and transforms them from dirty tombs to holy places. Our lives become a reflection of our hearts, and because of Jesus, it is possible to see God.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1) Is it possible to do the right things for the wrong reasons? Have you



ever discerned or discovered someone doing this? Should we call this commendable or deceptive?

2) Do you ever take for granted the access you have to God's presence through salvation?

3) If our actions can't produce a pure heart, how do you avoid the temptation of finding pride in your good deeds?

4). What are the kinds of things that the Lord loves—things that the Spirit of God is specifically telling you—that He wants you to love?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURES: Ephesians 5:1-21: Psalm 51

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

1) Use the Bible Study Handout and Worksheet to study Ephesians 5:1-21 or Psalm 51. Bible study is an essential part of your life with God. Paying close attention to the verses you read offers the greatest opportunity of hearing God's Word speak to your life. Don't rush as you read. Take your time.

2) "We can be tempted to rely solely on outward behavior as the ultimate indication for purity...But God does not want simply to change our behavior. He wants to transform and purify our hearts." This week, spend time considering the purity of your life. Have you found yourself relying on good works to confirm your purity? Or do you lean into the finished work of Jesus? Allow the conviction and assurance of the Holy Spirit to renew your heart.

3) Being pure in heart requires us to confess when we have fallen short. Spend time each day in prayer confessing any known sinful attitudes and actions and asking for forgiveness. Having confessed and asked for forgiveness, we have God's assurance that He has forgiven us. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

THE JOURNEY

LESSON SEVEN:

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

INTRODUCTION: In 1953, the United Nations and North Korea signed a cease-fire, effectively ending the three-year Korean Conflict and creating a “demilitarized zone,” or DMZ, between North and South Korea. One might say that the South and the North had made peace. There was only one problem: South Korea never signed the agreement. While the North and South may not be in active conflict, which creates a perception of peace, we cannot say they’ve made peace. That fact will become clearer as we consider God’s peace and the kind of peacemaking Jesus calls blessed.

By the time we arrive at verse 9 of Matthew 5, where Jesus declares the blessedness of peacemakers, we should have a deep understanding of what Jesus is doing. He is inviting us to live according to the laws of the kingdom of the heavens. These beatitudes don’t point to some future reality, some unattainable goodness we may enjoy if we’re good enough. No, Jesus is declaring that the kingdom of God is at hand, and these beatitudes are His invitation to pledge allegiance to a new King and His Kingdom.

So now we ask: what kind of peace do God’s children make, and how do they make it?

I. GOD’S CHILDREN DON’T MAKE NICE

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:9: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): Peace was Jesus’ parting gift to His



disciples (see John 14:27). Is peace a “nothing:” the absence of conflict or trouble? Or is peace a “something”? Is there a difference between peacemaking and peacekeeping?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): We might confuse peacemaking with peace-possession, but Jesus doesn't consider those who have inner peace or contentment blessed. While contentment is certainly a Kingdom value (see 1 Timothy 6:6), peacemakers aren't pursuing a stoic calm amid chaos. The peace we enjoy and proclaim is rooted in the Old Testament ideal of peace, shalom. Shalom was a gift of God, included in the Aaronic Blessing regularly pronounced by the high priest upon Israel's people (Numbers 6:25-27).

Jesus also doesn't bless the “peaceable,” the kind of person who avoids quarrels and keeps to himself. That results in a false peace, pretending no conflict exists. This is conflict avoidance, applying the kindergarten wisdom to “play nice” and “if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.” Making peace doesn't involve manipulating others or ourselves into believing everything is fine. This approach often leads to more significant damage on an emotional and spiritual level than confrontation would have.

A related kind of peaceableness is the willingness to compromise, to appease those with whom we have a conflict. Being peaceable this way says, “Fine, you can have it your way. I don't want to fight.” This kind of peace arises from a lack of courage in convictions. While there may be wisdom in this approach when the stakes are low, this can't be the kind of peace we make. In other words, we might encounter occasions where this is ultimately the most acceptable course of action, but it's not a wise or biblical first option.

Finally, peacemaking is different from peacekeeping. Peacekeepers enforce an agreed-upon peace; they prevent strife between warring factions. The United Nations deploys soldiers to keep the peace when the parties are unable to do so. These peacekeepers aim for a very large target: no hostile actions between the peoples. But peacemakers are after the hearts and minds of those who have been at war. They imagine the adversaries seated at a table together, laying their hatred of one another to rest and embracing a

shared future. Not surprisingly, this kind of peace is exceedingly rare.

Even from a spiritual perspective, God's commitment to peace in Jesus Christ is absolute. We who are beneficiaries of this peace, who enjoy God's fellowship and friendship as a result of Jesus' sacrifice, cannot keep it perfectly. Our sanctification is an ongoing peacemaking on our behalf with a perfectly peaceful God.

II. WE MAKE THE KIND OF PEACE GOD MAKES


READ ALOUD: Hebrews 9:11-15: But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason, He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): How does this passage relate to peacemaking? After reading it, how would you describe Jesus' way of making peace? Can you think of examples of peacemaking from Jesus' ministry?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): When he was small, my oldest son enjoyed pushing a toy vacuum cleaner around the living room. My daughter loves to join my wife or me in cooking supper. Children love to imitate their parents' work—at least, until they realize it is work!

Similarly, Jesus the Son makes His imitation of the Father a recurring theme in John's Gospel, telling especially His critics that He does the same works the Father does (see John 5:17). Thus, all the beatitudes are an invitation to





participate in the divine life that Jesus announces. With this beatitude, then, Jesus invites us to join Him in imitating the Father's peacemaking.

Let's begin by trying to understand what God's way of peace looks like, and then we'll discuss how we can practice our Father's style of peacemaking in our world.

First, God's idea of peace is far richer than our own. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, suggests a deep sense of wholeness and safety. It became the standard Hebrew greeting and farewell because it contains a strong hope for a person's well-being. The prophets picked this word to capture God's ultimate promise to deliver Israel from its enemies and return them to a renewed homeland under the "Prince of *shalom*" (Isaiah 9:6-7). *Shalom* can also apply personally, as when Isaiah promises complete peace to the person who fixes his mind on God (Isaiah 26:3). In the New Testament, Paul uses peace (in Greek, *eiréne*) to suggest the wholeness and safety we enjoy because of Jesus' sacrifice.

Second, the peace that comes through Jesus, as the passage from Hebrews illustrates, is costly and complete, as opposed to cheap and incomplete.

God's peace is costly. In the Old Testament, peace with God was possible only through regular sacrifices. Leviticus contains a whole category of "peace offerings:" with specific guidelines for the kind of sacrifice required, the time it was to be offered, and even the method of sacrifice.

But God makes a different sort of peace in the New Testament, upping both the ante and the reward. In the drama of redemption, Jesus Christ assumes the dual role of High Priest and final sacrifice. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, Jesus is "a High Priest...who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself" (Hebrews 7:26-27). We cannot fully comprehend the fullness of this cost to both Father and Son.

The peace of God is not only costly but complete. Again, as the writer to the



Hebrews puts it: “Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12). In other words, we don’t need any more regular sacrifices to atone for our sins, known or unknown. Instead, Jesus invites us into a lifestyle of repentance, where we don’t have to look to our strength to secure our salvation. We enjoy the completed peace purchased by the once-for-all sacrifice of our great Savior.


Peacemakers in God’s kingdom pursue this sort of peace. They are not content to “live and let live.” Instead, they are willing to sacrifice time and treasure to see peace realized. It is gospel peace, certainly, but it’s far more than that.

III. WE MAKE PEACE LIKE JESUS

READ ALOUD: Ephesians 2:11-17: Therefore, remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): How does Jesus make peace? What actions do you see mentioned or suggested in the read-aloud passage?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” We are not the Son of God, but the New Testament makes it clear that we are to be like Jesus. “He is the image of



the invisible God,” as Paul writes to the Colossians, and the way we can understand what God is like and how He behaves. So what can we say about Jesus’ way of making peace?

Peacemaking takes courage. We mentioned above the great cost of God’s peace, and Paul says it here to the Ephesians. “The blood of Christ” is God’s instrument of peace, and blood isn’t shed without pain. Jesus’ willingness to move to the battlefield and shed His own blood to end the conflict illustrates the courage that peacemaking requires. So peacemakers do not stand idly by as conflict destroys those at war. They step into the fray and extend an ear and a hand to both sides. And they often take blows from both sides. They are accused of compromise and cowardice because they are not afraid to approach and understand all parties. It takes courage to bear these wounds, as Jesus well knew.

Peacemaking requires conviction. Contrary to popular opinion, peacemaking doesn’t demand compromise. True peacemakers love peace and harmony and unity but never abandon their allegiance to Jesus and His Word. They can hold in tension their deep love for God and their love for others (Jesus’ first and second commandments).

While we look with hope toward a final, eternal peace, sometimes we cannot achieve temporal peace. Paul certainly saw that in his ministry. In the end, as he writes in Romans 12:18, we can finally pursue peace only as far as it depends on us. We cannot force peace on people or situations outside of our control. Sometimes our opponents remain bitter and recalcitrant. Sometimes peace and purity are at odds, and compromise would make things worse. Sometimes peace and truth are at odds, and we dare not sacrifice truth on the altar of peace.

Peacemaking aims for communion, not compromise. Notice in Ephesians that God isn’t content with a cease-fire. He brings near, one might even say embraces, His former enemies. But that reconciliation is as much a beginning as it is an end. That is complete peace, peace that is more than the absence of conflict.



CONCLUSION: When it comes to peacemaking, God has not settled for a spiritual DMZ, one where He has decided to “live and let live.” Instead, He chose a path for Jesus Christ that meant “die and make alive.” And that’s not even the end of God’s peacemaking, for He didn’t settle for a mere alliance with us, His former enemies, but chose to adopt us into the family. Jesus’ sacrifice brings us into the family business, and the work of making peace with the far off and the near, inviting both to the table, now belongs to us. And when we make peace in this way, in His way, the world will see in us an unmistakable family resemblance.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- 1) How is peacemaking costly? What does it require from us?
- 2) What practical things can we do to encourage peace?
- 3) What do we do when other individuals do not reciprocate our efforts at peacemaking?
- 4) Have you ever experienced a conflict that required you to actively build peace? What did you do?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURE: Romans 5

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

- 1) Use the Bible Study Handout and Worksheet to study this week’s At-Home Scripture: Romans 5. Bible study is an essential part of your life with God. Paying close attention to the verses you read offers the greatest opportunity of hearing God’s Word speak to your life. Don’t rush as you read. Take your time.
- 2) Begin memorizing the Beatitudes this week. This keeps their words firmly planted in your heart.
- 3) Pray. Prepare your heart. Reach out to a friend or family member that you often experience conflict with and have a conversation with them. Pray for God’s blessing to overflow into their life. Seek reconciliation and unity.

THE JOURNEY

LESSON EIGHT:

BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED

INTRODUCTION: “I guess we are blessed by God since we are facing so much persecution these days,” a man said to his friends at the restaurant. They all nodded while enjoying lunch after church. Others began telling stories of how they felt mistreated, and even persecuted, because of their faith.

One man sat silent, listening, then asked, “I know times might be changing for us, but this doesn’t seem to be persecution. Yes, folks disagree with our beliefs and state hateful remarks, but look at what Jesus and Paul experienced. We don’t have it that bad. People in other countries face much worse persecution.”

His friends knew he was right. They realized ridicule does not equal persecution. A lady at the table joined the conversation. “Instead of acting rude to the people who dislike us, the best response is to become more like Jesus.”

They ended lunch agreeing to intercede more often for Christ-followers around the world who were facing physical persecution and death and to love and pray for those who disagree with them.

I. EXAMPLES OF PERSECUTION

READ ALOUD: Matthew 5:10-12 (NIV): Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for, in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



DISCUSSION(TALK ABOUT IT): What is your response to the following facts?

- Every day, eight Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith.
- Every week, 182 churches or Christian buildings are attacked.
- Every month, 309 Christians are imprisoned unjustly.

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT):

Matthew 5:10 highlights a powerful and often misunderstood statement. Continuing what is called the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged His audience by declaring a different perspective of those facing difficult times. Jesus didn't want Christians to hope for opposition. He wasn't inviting His followers to chase rejection or live with self-pity. He provided a viewpoint on the possibility that following Him might lead to insults and punishment, but the persecuted ones can rejoice because their eternal reward is great.

Stories like Amber's make His remarks feel real. Amber and her parents were missionaries in Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire). When she was fourteen, the country began experiencing civil unrest. The violence became worse, so Amber's family started having conversations about whether to stay in the country if it meant something bad could happen. "We talked about God's calling on our family," Amber recalls. "We specifically discussed 1 Chronicles 21:24 and talked about what it meant to 'count the cost' when following God's call on our lives." They decided to stay, believing God's will for them was to remain missionaries there despite the risk.

Eventually, their campus was robbed at gunpoint. Amber and her sister were home alone when it happened; they turned off the lights and hid. "One of our guards was shot and killed, and our school treasurer was taken hostage," says Amber.

War erupted. Their campus was used as a shield between the government and rebel troops, so they were literally caught in the crossfire. "With only an hour's notice," Amber recalls, "we were evacuated by the French military to the capital, where everyone was dispersed to his or her family. We eventually relocated, continuing mission work in another country."

II. ATTITUDES DURING PERSECUTION

READ ALOUD: 2 Timothy 3:12-13 (NIV): In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): What are your feelings regarding the opening conversation with the church friends? What are your feelings about Amber's story? What has been your attitude toward persecution? What are your thoughts when you hear Jesus' comments about persecution and Paul's remarks in 2 Timothy 3:12-13?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Amber, her husband, and their children still serve as missionaries in another country. She refused to allow frightening experiences from her past to prohibit her from serving globally. When she reads Christ's words about "blessed are the persecuted," she might feel it more personally, but she also believes God has blessed her.

She decided to have the right attitude. Instead of hating her haters or seeking to harm those who sought to harm her, she chose instead to live a godly life.

What can you learn from her story? Though you might feel rejected or ridiculed because of your faith, how can you choose to live a godly life?

III. OUTCOMES OF PERSECUTION

READ ALOUD: 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 (NIV): Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

DISCUSSION (TALK ABOUT IT): How do we often let struggles or persecution influence our relationship with Jesus? What can we learn from Paul's perspective to bring better outcomes?

CONTENT (THINK ABOUT IT): Larry often talks about his decades of missionary endeavors, but he rarely tells stories about the various forms of persecution he faced. But once, knowing his close friends would pray for him, Larry realized talking about his experiences helped him deal with them properly. He told of the dangers he faced after refusing to pay certain amounts of money to bribe those in authority. He told of mobs circling the people he had gathered for a time of worship. He told of gangs stopping him as he drove toward town. He told of dear friends who did not survive attacks. Larry cried, remembering many experiences that could have been his last on earth.

What did Larry learn from these situations? That he was in God's hands. Though he was persecuted and still faced pain from his experiences, Larry could smile, knowing he was blessed by God's protection and provision. Through a Christlike attitude, regardless of how he was treated, Larry planted over 2,000 churches. Some of his worst foes eventually became followers of Christ because of Larry's approach of love. He was blessed as he blessed others—no matter how they treated him.

CONCLUSION:

How many people have been persecuted throughout history because of their faith? Are people still actually being persecuted today? As we look at church persecution stats to answer those questions, think about more than numbers. Remember that each number has a name and a face; each life has a story.

Historical Christian Persecution Statistics:

- More than 70 million Christians have been martyred in the course of history. More than half were martyred in the 20th century under communist and fascist governments (Gordon-Conwell Resources).
- Thus far in the 21st century, roughly 100,000 to 160,000 Christians are killed each year (Gordon-Conwell Resources and World Christian

Database, respectively).

- Roughly 1,093,000 Christians were martyred worldwide between 2000 and 2010 (World Christian Database).

Modern, Global Church Persecution Statistics

- 322 Christians are killed for their faith every month (Open Doors).
- 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed every month (Open Doors).
- 772 forms of violence (beatings, kidnappings, rape, arrest, etc.) are committed against Christians every month (Open Doors).

Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or neighbors because of their faith (United States Department of State). At least 7,100 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons in 2015, up from at least 4,344 in 2014 (Open Doors).

The numbers alarm us as we see what many Christ-followers have tolerated and still face during our times. How can we respond?

We can learn from their examples, choosing to live with the right attitudes in hopes of positive outcomes. Our relationships with Christ can be strengthened as we learn how others serve Him. Prayers for others can become more intentional. And we can remember that the apparent “blessings” of this world are not always the same as “blessings” in the kingdom of God.

To learn more about the persecution of Christians around the world, check out these resources:

<http://theestherproject.com/statistics/>

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/>



CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- 1) Can we have attitudes like Larry, regardless of the level of persecution we face?
- 2) What can we do to remind us of persecution throughout church history and in the present?
- 3) How can we intentionally pray for the persecuted church?
- 4) What specific ways can we support ministries that are structured to assist those being persecuted?

AT-HOME SCRIPTURES: 1 Peter 3:1-4:6; 2 Corinthians 13:11

AT-HOME EXERCISES:

- 1) Glance at an image of planet earth—on your phone, computer, or a physical globe. Pray for people around the world who need to know of God's love.
- 2) Look again at the statistics of persecution. Pray for those being persecuted.
- 3) After Jesus spoke on the beatitudes, He encouraged His audience to let their lights shine, so others would notice their good works and give glory to God (Matthew 5:16). How can followers of Christ be shining lights in a world of darkness? How can persecution, ridicule, rejection, and mockery motivate God's children to show kindness instead of hate?
- 4) What five areas of your life can you display the light of Christ better? What five people do you know (who are not followers of Christ) you can intentionally show more of His love toward? What five nations should you begin praying for daily? What five missionaries can you support in some way?

AT-HOME EXERCISES

WEEKLY WORKSHEET

COMMITMENT: Setting an expectation and commitment will help in holding yourself accountable to follow through on The Journey. Share this with someone else in the group.

- I commit to do an At-Home Exercise _____ days this week for _____ minutes.
The best time of the day for me to do this is: (circle one) **Morning Noon Night**
- I commit to check on _____ to see how they are doing and to share about my own experiences.

1ST DAY: _____

- I have completed my commitment for this day.
- Describe what your experience was like today.

- What takeaway do you have from today?

2ND DAY: _____

- I have completed my commitment for this day.
- Describe what your experience was like today.

- What takeaway do you have from today?

3RD DAY: _____

- I have completed my commitment for this day.
- Describe what your experience was like today.

- What takeaway do you have from today?

AT-HOME EXERCISES

WEEKLY WORKSHEET

4TH DAY: _____

- I have completed my commitment for this day.
- Describe what your experience was like today.

- What takeaway do you have from today?

5TH DAY: _____

- I have completed my commitment for this day.
- Describe what your experience was like today.

- What takeaway do you have from today?

6TH DAY: _____

- I have completed my commitment for this day.
- Describe what your experience was like today.

- What takeaway do you have from today?

7TH DAY: _____

- I have completed my commitment for this day.
- Describe what your experience was like today.

- What takeaway do you have from today?

AT-HOME EXERCISES

BIBLE STUDY DESCRIPTION

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12

S.O.A.P. METHOD OF BIBLE STUDY:

S.O.A.P. stands for Scripture, Observation, Application, and Prayer.

FOUR STEPS:

1) SCRIPTURE

Choose a passage of scripture to do a focused reading of. Start by reading the passage and by physically writing it out. This simple act adds to your focus on the passage. As you write, ask the Lord to speak to you through His Word. Pay attention to anything that catches your eye.

2) OBSERVATION

Write down what you see in the verses. Who is the audience? Is there any repetition in the passage? What words stand out to you?

3) APPLICATION

This is when God's Word becomes life-giving and alive in our lives. Ask yourself, "What is God saying to me today? How can I apply what I just read to my personal life? What is Jesus asking me to change or give up? Is there an action I need to take?"

4) PRAYER

Pray God's Word back to Him. If you sense that God is speaking to you or has revealed something to you, take this time to pray about it. Ask Him to keep it on your mind throughout the day. Humble yourself and confess anything that needs to be confessed.

When we study God's Word with a focused approach like the S.O.A.P method, it can take as little or as long as you have time to give. You may notice that some days take a shorter time while others take a longer time. The most important thing is that you are consistently exposing yourself to the truth of God's Word with humility and surrender.

AT-HOME EXERCISES

BIBLE STUDY DESCRIPTION

FOUR STEPS

Bible Study works best if you intentionally carve out time to be alone with God. It's important to find a place that is quiet, comfortable, and free from distractions. Then, begin by asking God to speak to you through His Word and to help you notice what He has for you in this moment. Don't forget to use the Bible Study description sheet for help with the S.O.A.P. method.

1) SCRIPTURE

- Write down the passage you will be reading: _____
 - Start with silence. Quiet your thoughts and wait patiently to let distractions go by. Ask Jesus (The WORD) to speak to you in His written Word.
 - Read the passage. Don't forget to read a few verses before and after for context.
 - Write the verses down as you read.
 - Pause here. Think about what you just read. Did anything jump out at you?

2) OBSERVATION

- Ask yourself these questions:
 - What do you see in these verses?
 - Who is the audience?
 - Is there any repetition?
 - What word(s) stand out to you?
 - What do I learn about God in these verses?
- Making a bullet-point list is also a good way to write down your observations.

3) APPLICATION

- After you have reflected on the passage, prayerfully respond to what God has shown you in His Word.
- Ask yourself these questions:
 - What is God saying to me today in His Word?
 - What is the Holy Spirit inviting me to pray after what I've just read?
 - How can I apply what I just read to my personal life?
 - What secrets of my heart has this passage exposed? Is Jesus asking me to give something up?
 - Are there any actions I am being called to take?

4) PRAYER

- Give yourself a few moments to sit with what you just read.
- Pray God's Word back to Him.
- Thank God for speaking to you in His Word.
- Ask God to keep these truths in your mind throughout the day.
- Confess what needs to be confessed.

Don't forget to complete the At-Home Exercises Worksheet as well!

AT-HOME EXERCISES

BIBLE MEMORIZATION DESCRIPTION

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105

While it's common to think of scripture memory as something reserved for children, the book of Psalms gives all of us a compelling reason to make this practice a personal habit: "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you...I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word" (See Psalm 119:11-16).

When we take the time to memorize scripture, we are filling our minds and our hearts with God's truth. When we need encouragement, these memorized passages will come back to us as a source of strength. Storing God's truth in our hearts will boost our confidence in God, help us follow Him more closely, and draw us closer to His Son. Memorized scripture can also be used to evangelize and disciple others around us. This is truly being a ready witness.

HOW TO MEMORIZE SCRIPTURE:

1. Select a passage.
2. Give yourself a time frame to memorize it.
 - a. It's a good idea to have someone you can share your memory practice with.
3. Choose the method that works best for you.
 - a. Not everyone memorizes things the same way. It's important to use what works for you!
 - b. There are many Bible memory apps and websites.
 - c. Use a dry erase marker, and write it on your bathroom mirror.
 - d. Write the verse(s) on notecards and stick it in various places around your house, job, and car for easy practice.
 - f. Repetition will be helpful.
4. Once you have memorized your scripture passage, try to use it often. As much work as it takes to remember things, it's far easier to forget them.

Don't forget to complete the Weekly At-Home Exercises Worksheet as well!