

Vision Beautiful

Today we begin a five-week exploration of a collection of Jesus' sayings known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' radical vision of what God's reign on earth might look like is a vision of wholeness for all people. Paul reminds us that God's wisdom is different from worldly wisdom. Micah and the psalmist describe ways to live this vision beautiful.

Focus Scripture: Matthew 5:1–12

After Jesus' baptism, he calls a group of disciples. They travel throughout Galilee teaching and healing, sharing the good news that God's realm is breaking into the world. It is a message that the gospel writer's own community desperately needs to hear. Matthew is written to a group of new Christians after disaster has happened. The temple has been destroyed, the people scattered. Jesus is no longer present in the flesh. What laws will govern the community now? What will the new community look like? What is the good news for those trying to be faithful in a hostile world?

Of the four gospels, Matthew most wants to show that Jesus fulfills Israel's experience. In this gospel, Jesus is shown as the new Moses, teaching from the mountain as Moses did when he gave Israel the law. The gospel writer arranges Jesus' words in five blocks of teaching, reminding readers of the "five books of Moses." Chapters 5 to 7 – the Sermon on the Mount – form the first block.

The Beatitudes begin the Sermon on the Mount. They are a series of sentences beginning with the word *blessed*, or *happy* in some translations. Blessing is God's free gift to humankind, a sign of covenant relationship with God. Such blessing may look very different from the world's idea of happiness. In these sayings, Jesus turns human notions of happiness upside down. What kind of living brings God's blessing? Jesus teaches that the blessed ones are those who are humble of heart ("poor in spirit"), who are gentle, who show mercy, who hunger and thirst for God's ways. Those who mourn will be comforted; those who make peace will be called God's children. Those who are persecuted in the cause of justice will find themselves part of God's transforming reality.

There is urgency in Jesus' teaching. He uses the present tense – this is happening right now. In Jesus' coming, God's love is revealed and made manifest. This teaching is directed to the disciples, the Twelve and the larger group of men and women who accompany Jesus. The Beatitudes describe the way of life for those who commit themselves to follow. For Matthew's community, this vision beautiful is what life should be like.

Living in right relationship with God and neighbour brings blessing – calling out the best in us and others. The other readings spell out this vision of wholeness. **Micah 6:1–8** describes a dramatic confrontation, a lawsuit between God and Israel. What must Israel do to be in a right relationship with God? Verse 8 summarizes: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. **Psalms 15** gives a similar response. The psalmist asks who may come before God in the temple. It is those who do what is right, speak the truth, and do no evil to their neighbours.

In **1 Corinthians 1:18–31**, Paul echoes Matthew's theme of worldly values turned upside down. God's wisdom seems like foolishness to the present age. God overturns the established order. God chooses us to play our part in God's plan. In Christ we are strengthened to bring about God's reign of justice and peace.

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Our experience today is, in many ways, similar to that of Matthew's community. We may not be persecuted for our faith, but the ways of faith often seem foolish compared with the values of society. In what ways do the gospel values challenge contemporary views – turn them upside down? What challenges do you find in trying to live according to the standards expressed in today's readings?



January 30, 2011

Focus Scripture
Matthew 5:1–12

Additional Scriptures
Micah 6:1–8
Psalms 15
1 Corinthians 1:18–31

O God, you turn things upside down, calling the wise to embrace your folly. Help us to grow in acknowledging our need for you. Open us to the vision of your reign on earth, and strengthen us to do our part. Amen.

Check out Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Spirit Sighting are posted weekly prior to the date of use.



The Focus for Adults

Adults suffer many reversals in their lives. Things do not turn out exactly as hoped. Opportunities are missed. The path of life takes a different direction than the one foreseen. And yet, events that at the time seem devastating or foolish can sometimes turn out to be blessings in disguise. What we thought was a disaster has ended up bringing us a different satisfaction than we could have imagined. It often is difficult for adults to see this while they are in the middle of events, but as they look back on their lives, they may be able to see a blessing that has come. The author of Matthew is writing to a persecuted and frightened people, bringing them Jesus' words of encouragement in challenging times: rewards will come, even

if we cannot imagine them now. When have you longed for such a message in your life?

This session we begin a five-week study of the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of Jesus' teachings about how to live in the world as disciples. Matthew's author collected and arranged the sayings in such a way that they spoke to the particular situation of first century Christians. Group discussion during these weeks will provide an opportunity to explore what it means to follow Jesus in our own time – to explore "right action" and determine how to live faithful lives.

Pray by name for each member of the group, that all may grow in understanding what it means to live responsibly and faithfully as a follower of Jesus today.

January 30, 2011



Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's scriptures — Micah 6:1–8, Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, Matthew 5:1–12 — and biblical background material on page 59. Read "Vision Beautiful" (p. 99) and highlight information to share with the group.
- ❑ To access *Spirit Sightings* for connections between current events and the focus passage, visit www.seasonsonline.ca, and click on *Spirit Sightings*.
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 9* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Prepare the worship space *green fabric* and *a candle*.
- ❑ Bring song "Jesus, Face of God" (p. 6 in *Music Section*, also #4 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Engage

- ❑ Bring *copies of "Jesus' Beatitudes,"* one of the resource sheets for this session.

- ❑ Bring *copies of "You're Blessed" resource sheet* (p. 96).

Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Dig deeper: courtroom drama:** *copies of "Court Is in Session,"* one of the resource sheets for this session
- ❑ **Beatitudes today:** no additional materials needed
- ❑ **What is good?:** *current newspapers*

Bless

- ❑ Bring *poster "Word of Light."*
- ❑ Bring *tealights* and *starburst shapes cut from yellow paper*.
- ❑ Bring song "Be God's" (p. 10 in *Music Section*, also #3 on *Seasons Music CD*).
- ❑ Bring *copies of biblical background material for February 6* (p. 65).



Vision Beautiful

Scripture

Matthew 5:1–12

FOCUS To explore Jesus' teaching about the reversals that mark life in God's realm.

1 GATHER

Greet group members by name.

Opening ritual

Gather around the worship space and light the candle. Read aloud together **Psalm 15**. Sing or listen to "Jesus, Face of God" (p. 6 in *Music Section*, also #4 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Moving into the theme

Invite group members to recall a time they joined a new group or organization.

- **What questions did you have when joining this organization? To what extent were your expectations of belonging to this group fulfilled?**

2 ENGAGE

Setting the context

Matthew's gospel was written to new Christians about 40 years after Jesus' death. They had questions about how to live as part of the Christian community. Matthew includes five major sections of Jesus' teachings about living as disciples. The Sermon on the Mount is the first of these sections, and will be the focus of the next five sessions. Share information from "Vision Beautiful" article (p. 99) as is helpful.

Exploring the texts

Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 5:1–2**. Note that Jesus, like Moses, goes up the mountain to teach. Invite members to read aloud **Matthew 5:3–12**.

- **What surprises you about this passage? What is a challenge to believe or to accept?**

Distribute copies of "Jesus' Beatitudes" resource sheet and read the information together.

- **What does this information add to your understanding of Jesus' words?**
- **What in this passage turns commonly held values in society upside down? For whom are these words good news? For whom are they frightening?**

Distribute copies of "You're Blessed" resource sheet (p. 96) and ask a volunteer to read it aloud.

- **What does this version add to your understanding of Jesus' Beatitudes?**

Form pairs and ask each pair to look at two of the Beatitudes – **verses 3 and 5, verses 4 and 6, verses**

7–9, and verses 10–12 – and prepare to share responses to these questions with the group:

- **What virtue is highlighted in each? How might this quality make a difference in the life of the community?**

Many Christians today live in a secular culture that is perhaps more indifferent to religious values than openly hostile.

- **What might Jesus' teachings mean to those living in a culture that is indifferent to religious values? What is challenging about following these teachings in such a context?**

Verses 3 and 10 bookend the Beatitudes with references to the "kingdom of heaven" – God's reign or realm. God's sovereignty is both a present reality – God has revealed this reign through Jesus – and a future hope. Jesus speaks of our active role in bringing this vision to fruition.

- **What signs do you see around you that God's reign is being established? Where do you see examples of Jesus' Beatitudes being played out?**

The prophet Micah also teaches about living as God's people. Ask a member to read aloud **Micah 6:1–8**.

- **What does God require of the people? Who has been an example to you of doing these things?**
- **What similarities do you find between Micah's instruction and Jesus' Beatitudes?**

Paul, in **1 Corinthians 1:18–31**, also addresses the theme of worldly values turned upside down.

- **What does Paul say about wisdom and foolishness?**
- **In what ways does Paul see that God has overturned the established order?**
- **In your experience, when has apparent foolishness and weakness revealed strength and wisdom?**

Making life connections

Jesus says that God’s reign is breaking into human society, turning typical human under-

standing upside down; we are living into the “vision beautiful.”

- **What do you think God is calling you to reverse in your life in order to follow more closely Jesus’ model of life in God’s realm?**
- **What is the vision of wholeness that you want to proclaim? What actions might we take as individuals and communities to bring this vision to reality?**



Digging Deeper into Scripture.

Choose one or two of the following options.

- **Dig deeper: court is in session** The theme of reversals in God’s realm is also present in the Hebrew Scriptures. Distribute copies of “Court Is in Session” resource sheet. Follow the instructions there for reading Micah 6:1–8 as a drama, then discuss the questions together.
- **Beatitudes today** Jesus tells us how life in God’s realm may surprise. Matthew is presenting Jesus’ teaching to a specific community, a small band of Jesus’ followers troubled by harassment from the broader society. Together, discuss what sort of beatitudes might be written today: What are the behaviours and actions that might show to our world the values of God’s reign? Who would we describe as “blessed” or “fortunate”? What kinds of actions might bring God’s gift of bless-

ing? Form pairs to write one or two beatitudes for today. Share these in the whole group. Consider printing them in the church newsletter.

- **What is good?** Life in God’s realm calls us to act in ways that that may be contrary to what society expects. Today’s scripture passages offer a number of insights into “right action.” Take a moment to list insights from **Micah 6:8**, **Psalm 15:2–5**, and **Matthew 5:3–12**. Discuss: What opportunities are there in our community to put some of these ideas into practice? Current newspapers may give you some idea of needs in your area. Together create a list of possible ways in which you might embody the values of God’s realm. Choose one idea and plan how to carry out the project, perhaps involving other groups in the serving.



Gather around the worship space. Invite group members to view the poster *Word of Light* as you read this quote from Bible scholar David Tiede: “The Sermon on the Mount is flashes of light from God’s coming kingdom [reign].” What flashes of light about God’s realm have you glimpsed from today’s readings? Invite each person to write an insight on a yellow starburst shape and place it around the image. Save the starbursts for future sessions.

Invite each member to think of someone who has been an example of living faithfully and doing

what is right in God’s sight. Read **Psalm 15:1** aloud, then invite members to light tealights and place them in the worship area, naming these individuals. Conclude with Psalm 15:5b: “Those who do these things shall never be moved.” Ask for God’s help in walking blamelessly, doing what is right, and speaking the truth.

Sing “Be God’s” (p. 10 in *Music Section*, also #3 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Distribute copies of the biblical background material for February 6 (p. 65).



What has helped you to understand “blessedness” in a new way? How much at ease is your

group in exploring the paradoxes and reversals that appear in scripture?



Jesus' Beatitudes

Beatitude is a noun meaning “very great happiness or blessedness.” The beatitude as a literary form is found in ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew literature. These blessing statements are used to present a brief summary of essential teaching. Consider some other examples of beatitudes in scripture:

☐ **Psalm 1:1–2**

☐ **Ecclesiastes 10:17**

☐ **Luke 6:20–23**

☐ **Proverbs 8:32–34**

☐ **Daniel 12:12**

☐ **Romans 14:22**

There are many words in Jesus' Beatitudes in Matthew 5 that raise questions for modern readers. Here are some suggested definitions to explore. What synonyms can you add?

	Some definitions/synonyms
Blessed	happy wonderful news! fortunate, lucky well-off satisfied
Kingdom of heaven	God's reign God's sovereign rule God's way God's shalom God's perfection
Poor in spirit	humble-hearted those who have given up their possessions to follow Jesus
Meek	gentle lowly non-violent vulnerable humble
Hunger and thirst for righteousness	those who pray that the world will live in God's ways
Merciful	tender with others compassionate filled with care
Pure in heart	worthy to worship God sincere with integrity
Peacemakers	those who strive for God's shalom on earth advocates mediators those who “stand with”
Persecuted	excluded injured betrayed beat up isolated



COURT IS IN SESSION



In scripture, the restoration of justice often fell to a family elder or judge. The motif or theme of a law court sometimes is used in order to point out transgressions against God's law and God's ways and to call for individuals or nations to change their ways in order that all people might experience shalom – God's wholeness and peace.

Read aloud **Micah 6:1–8** with different voices taking each part:

- ❑ **God (verse 1 and verses 3–5)**
 - ❑ **The prophet (verses 2 and 8)**
 - ❑ **The people (verses 6 and 7)**
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- **Why is God bringing the people to court? Where have they gone wrong?**
 - **How good a claim do you think God has against them? What evidence does God bring? (Look at Numbers 22–24 for the story of Balak and Balaam, and Joshua 3–4 for the account of the crossing of the Jordan River.)**
 - **What is the community's response? What questions does the community have?**
 - **What is required to settle this lawsuit?**

The motif of a law court occurs elsewhere in Hebrew Scriptures. For another example, look at Isaiah 43:8–15. Here, God challenges the surrounding nations to bring their gods to trial.

- **What evidence does God bring here to support the claim made?**

Other passages with a courtroom motif include Isaiah 1:1–20 and Jeremiah 2:2–9.

- **Over what might God bring your community to court today? What would be said on each side of the case? What evidence might be brought against you? What defence could you make?**

