Session 6 – Responses
Matthew 5: The Bar is Raised by the King

Facilitators: Read these recommended responses to the questions ahead of time to help you prepare to lead the small group discussion.

Participants: Reinforce what you have learned by reviewing these recommended responses after your group discussion and before you go on to the next lesson.

A. Review the Context

Discussion Leaders: Take a brief moment to review the context and what was learned last week. If you like, use the following question to encourage discussion:

- By the end of chapter 4, Jesus is attracting crowds of people from all over Palestine. They are anxious for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. They have gathered to hear him and at the start of Matthew 5 he will sit down to teach. Think about it for a moment: What might you expect him to say?

B. Read the Story

Discussion Leaders: If there is time, have someone read each passage before it is discussed.

C. Take a Deeper Look

The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-11

1. Look up “blessed” in a dictionary. What does it mean? What do you mean when you call someone “blessed”?

   Answers will vary based on the dictionary used. To be blessed is to be highly favored or fortunate; to have good fortune bestowed upon one; to be characterized by happiness and good fortune; enjoying the bliss of heaven. The Hebrew is *ashrey*—“happy” or “blessed”—which denotes a deep satisfaction.

2. Who does Jesus proclaim in the Beatitudes will be the “blessed” of the kingdom?

   According to Jesus, the “blessed” of the kingdom are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

3. a. Ordinarily, beatitude or blessedness would be declared based on one’s good fortune. On what basis does Jesus declare blessing?

   Jesus is declaring blessing based on what we would consider bad fortune: poverty, sorrow, hunger, thirst, and persecution. What a paradox! Taken properly, these do not constitute a curse but can actually be blessing and usher one into the kingdom of heaven.

   b. What point is Jesus making about the kingdom of heaven and happiness/blessedness?
True happiness or blessing is found only in God’s kingdom and in his righteousness, not in the blessings of the world such as pleasure, wealth, achievement, or acceptance. We may think these things will satisfy us, but in the end only God can fulfill the longings of our hearts and meet our very natural desire for happiness. True happiness and blessing are found not by selfish striving and grasping but by giving ourselves away through practicing the virtues of mercy and purity of heart and peacemaking. The kingdom of heaven can’t be gained by birthright, force, or achievement—it belongs to those who are at heart children of God, who long for righteousness and imitate him.

4. The first beatitude, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” lays the groundwork for the rest. Who are the “poor in spirit”? (For help with this question, see Catechism 544.)

The “poor in spirit” are the humble—those who realize their spiritual poverty, who know that of themselves they are nothing, and are convinced of their need for God’s love and mercy.

Salt and Light: Matthew 5:13-16

5. Jesus called his disciples “the salt of the earth” in verse 13. Discuss what it means to be “salt.” Salt has a number of properties and uses that might apply here:

- Salt is pure. As an antiseptic, it is used to purify other things. Even so, Christ’s followers are to be pure in character and free from the contamination of sin.

- Salt is a preservative. To “be salt” in that sense might mean to preserve the faith and pass it on, or to preserve society or those around us from the corruption of sin.

- Salt seasons food and enhances flavor. In a similar way, “salty” Christians can bring out the best in the community.

- Salt produces thirst, and the lives of Christians should produce a thirst for God in those around them.

- Salt is needed to stay alive. Even so, we should be like Jesus, transforming the world around us with his love and bringing new life to those around us.

6. a. In verses 14-16: This is not the first time children of Israel have been called the light of the world. Read Isaiah 42:6-7 and 49:5-6. What was Israel’s God-given mission, and how did Jesus expect his disciples to fulfill it?

In the Old Testament, God called Israel to fulfill a mission for him: To be a light to the nations, to open their eyes and bring them out of darkness into the light of his salvation. Now Jesus calls on his disciples to fulfill the same function: To shine through their good works and to live lives that attract others to God.

b. How does the image of light enhance your understanding of what God calls his children to do?

Without light, we cannot see things as they are. Without light, we cannot find our way. Without light, we can become afraid, make mistakes, stumble, and fall. But light enables us to see clearly, to find our way, and to walk steadily and well. Light also is necessary for life and growth.

People who are without the light of God cannot see truth. By shining the light of God’s Word on
the paths of life, or by reflecting his light into the world by our own attitudes and behaviors and actions, we can do for the world what a light does for a dark room or path.

The Law and the Prophets Matthew 5:17-48

7. Part of living out this new law involves being salt and light in the world. How do we put this into practice? Read Matthew 5:21-48, in which Jesus applies his new covenant understanding to old covenant laws regarding murder, adultery, divorce, swearing falsely, retaliation, and enemies. How would you summarize his basic message?

Jesus is taking examples from the old covenant law ("You have heard that it was said...") and adds a new, interior depth to their meaning. Each time he says "But I say to you," Jesus indicates that his interpretation is the authoritative one. It is not simply the act of murder or adultery that is wrong: Entertaining the kind of thoughts that lead to those actions are wrong as well. Under the new covenant law, you must be ready to go the extra mile: To give more than is demanded; to avoid retaliation; to love your enemies and those who persecute you. Rather than using the law as your ruler and measuring out fair play, use God as your measure and being merciful as he is.

8. Choose one of these laws and explain how Jesus deepens our understanding of the purpose or intent of the original.

Answers will vary and may be personal. Encourage discussion; there are no "right" or "wrong" responses.

9. Think about it: The Catechism tells us that "In Jesus, the same Word of God that had resounded on Mount Sinai to give the written Law to Moses, made itself heard anew on the Mount of the Beatitudes" (581). What similarities and differences do you see between God’s Word in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and God’s Word in the Beatitudes? In what sense do the Beatitudes “fulfill” the Decalogue, or reveal what the earlier Law only pointed to?

The Ten Commandments (or Decalogue) are essentially a list of prohibitions and commands; the Beatitudes are a list of promises and blessings that result from right attitudes. The Decalogue was given to the newly freed children of Israel to teach them to live in freedom, and they describe the way redeemed people live: They worship God alone, revere his Name, take time out each week to worship, and honor their parents. They don’t kill, commit adultery, bear false witness, or covet: Actions that would draw them back into bondage to hatred, greed, etc.—to the false gods of this world. But it is one thing to prescribe good behavior, another thing to attain it. The Beatitudes go deeper and deal with the “heart attitudes” that are necessary to be God’s children: Poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, a spiritual hunger and thirst for righteousness, mercy, purity, peacemaking, a willingness to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The person who these adjectives describe will be blessed by the Father and will receive the kingdom of heaven. Not that the earlier proscriptions no longer need to be followed; someone who possesses these attributes will fulfill the earlier law as a matter of course. The behavior of the Decalogue springs best from the heart described in the Beatitudes.

10. Think about it: In verses 21-26: From Jesus' discussion of anger, what can you conclude about the relationship between worship of God and our relationships with one another? (See also Matthew 6:15.)

When one is offering a gift at the altar, one is presumably there to repent and receive God’s mercy. Yet how can we properly worship and accept God’s forgiveness, without passing it on to others? Later, Jesus will say, “if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive
your trespasses (Matthew 6:15). Before seeking God’s forgiveness, we must seek reconciliation with others and forgive them.

11. **Love of neighbor is one of the two greatest commandments of the Old Testament law.**
   
   a. **How does Jesus expand on the definition of neighbor in verses 43-48?**
   
   Jesus includes gentiles and sinners—even our enemies—as the neighbors we are called to love.
   
   b. **On what basis does Jesus say to love even our enemies?**
   
   Jesus says to love even our enemies on the basis of God’s unconditional, impartial love for all of us. Anyone can love someone who loves them. Christians are to be different, filled with the love and mercy of their heavenly father and imitating it. “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” closes Matthew 5. This is how we show God’s love to the world.

D. **Application**

**Discussion Leaders:** If time allows, have group members share their responses to the following application question and question for further study:

In his words regarding adultery and lust, Jesus calls us to a radical removal of things in our lives that lead us to sin and keep us from living as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. If you’re struggling with a particular sin: What leads you into it? What can you do to “pluck out” the offending member?

**Optional questions for further study:** Read Catechism 1716-1724, “Our Vocation to Beatitude,” then meditate once more on Matthew 5:3-12. Ask God to speak to your heart. What truths are brought to your mind? What changes do the Beatitudes invite you to make in yourself.

As a follow-up to this discussion, listen to or watch Jeff Cavins’ talk on Session 5: Matthew 5, “The Bar is Raised by the King.”