



SCHOOL OF MINISTRY
OF THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NORTH CAROLINA

*Living the Way of Jesus:
Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount*

Some suggestions for facilitators

Welcome to this opportunity for ministry! Serving as a facilitator as people reflect together about matters of faith is a service to the Church. Blessings to you in this role.

Living the Way of Jesus: Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount: Almost everyone knows (or thinks they know!) something about the Sermon on the Mount. If you've spent any time in church, you've probably heard sermons about it or even attended a Sunday school class on it. Even if a person never set foot in a church, that person would hear politicians reference it or characters in books, movies, and plays talk about it. The Sermon on the Mount seems very familiar to most of us. But if we take another look, we may just be surprised to find how much material there is on which to reflect!

The Sermon is found in the Gospel of Matthew in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. There is a shorter, but somewhat similar version found in the Gospel of Luke, known as the Sermon on the Plain (Jesus delivers this sermon on a plain whereas in Matthew he ascends to a mountain top.) The Sermon is an amazingly thorough distillation of Jesus' teachings. It is at times beautiful, at times maddening, at times opaque, at times strikingly simple but always engaging. We could all spend a lifetime exploring it and still find new gems.

Our hope is that through a re-engagement with this scriptural text and the discussions on this DVD, people will find an avenue to explore the Sermon in more depth than they have previously. There is much to comfort us in Jesus' words and even more to challenge us.

There are five programs in the series:

- *God's Dream for the World: Grace and Challenge (10:37)*
- *God's New Possibility: The Law and Judgment (15:37)*
- *Where is our Treasure? On Money and Generosity (10:34)*
- *Overcoming Evil with Good: On Violence and Enemies (16:49)*
- *Hearing the Voice of Jesus: Praying the Sermon on the Mount (12:28)*

The participants in this series are:

- The Rt. Rev. Michael B. Curry, Bishop of North Carolina
- The Rev. Dr. Leon Spencer, Dean of the School of Ministry
- Jenny Beaumont, Christ Church, Charlotte, NC
- David Jones, St. Martin's Church, Charlotte, NC
- William McConnell, St David's, Laurinburg, NC

Suggestions for how to use this material:

This DVD series focuses on five themes found in the Sermon on the Mount: 1) Ideals; 2) Judgment and the Law; 3) Money and Generosity; 4) Violence and Enemies; and 5) Prayer. With the exception of the first two programs, which would best follow one another, the other programs could be used separately or together.

One suggestion would be to use all five programs for a five-week Sunday morning series. Another option would be to use one program for a multi-week series on any of the themes. For example, you could design a three-week series on money, using the program *Where is our Treasure? On Money and Generosity* as the material for one session. Or the program on prayer could be used as one part of a longer series on prayer in general.

Below we have outlined a model series for using the five-programs sequentially but please feel free to use this material in whatever way works best for you. If you follow the program outlined below, you will read the entire Sermon on the Mount (or Matthew 5-7) during the five week series. We would love to hear from you about how we can improve the accessibility of these materials so their potential is realized.

Facilitation: Please refer to *Doing theology: DVDs for parish study – Some suggestions for facilitators*, which is included in the notebook provided each congregation in the Diocese of North Carolina, for general comments about your role as facilitator. (If a copy is not available, contact the School or visit our website, www.episdioncschool.org.)

Conversations: Three general approaches seem important to us: The first is to provide opportunity for a study group to connect with what people said on the DVD to their own lives – “what experiences have *you* had...?” The second is similar, you’re seeking to learn what resonates with them in the DVD – “what particular points made on the film lead you to say *yes!* or *no!*” And the third is to help people engage more deeply in theological reflection about their everyday lives in ways that may seem challenging at first – recognizing that we grow spiritually, at least in part, when we rub up against ways of looking at the world that challenge us.

Summary: In the comments on the five programs below, we encourage you to provide a summary at the end of each session. As we suggest in our general facilitation guide, however, note that we are not suggesting a detailed summary of what everyone said. Rather we find it good to somehow tie the conversation together, commending the group for their contribution, and suggesting that the group has engaged in faithful reflection together.

Session 1: God’s Dream for the World: Grace and Challenge

In preparation:

- ⇒ Make sure that you have suitable equipment to show the DVD, and that you know how to operate it! Make sure, too, that seating arrangements are conducive both for viewing and discussion.
- ⇒ Have Bibles available (and encourage people to bring their own next time).

This first session might look like this:

- *Prayer:* We encourage you to open and close all sessions in prayer. Beginning with a brief period of silence may also help to transition people from their busy lives to a space of reflective listening and sharing. If your group would be open to the following guidance, encourage people to sit comfortably and take a moment to breath deeply and be mindful of the presence of God in your midst. Below is a spoken prayer, which appears in our general DVD facilitation guide and is adapted from *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*, by the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston. You might wish to use this prayer to end the period of silence or just to open the session with, if you prefer not to use silence.

O God, we stand on the border to your Kingdom. We pray that your Holy Spirit will be with us to guide us in our discussions. Grant us an openness to hear you in the words of those around us, and courage to proclaim you in our own words, through the love of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Another spoken prayer you might wish to use is from the Book of Common Prayer:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 236.)

- *Introductions:* In some of our congregations, everyone will know everyone, but for many of our parishes, that may not be the case, and especially newcomers will appreciate a reminder of who folks are. Take a minute or two for basic introductions.
- *The plan for this program:* Provide an overview of what will happen today. This is simply a courtesy to the group to make it clear how you'll proceed and what to expect.
- *The DVD program:* Show the entire first program.
- *Bible Reading:* Read Matthew 5:1-14, which includes the beatitudes.
- *Conversations:* Remember your job is to help people reflect on the material in light of their own lives and to stimulate discussion within the group. Below are some suggested questions. These are not exhaustive and you should feel free to create your own.
 1. What struck you most powerfully in what you just watched (either positive or negative)?
 2. Reflect on what Bishop Curry said about righteousness and justice: that they have to do with rightly ordering the world and our lives in harmony and consistency with God's vision for us. In light of the beatitude "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."
 - a. Have you ever encountered someone you would call "righteous"? What characteristics did this person embody?

- b. Have you ever encountered someone you would call “self-righteous”? What characteristics did this person embody?
 3. Reflect on the discussion about ideals. What do you think about the sentiments expressed in the Sermon on the Mount? Are they meant to be ideals? Why or why not? How do you understand the role ideals play in your own life and in the life of a community?
 4. What is the difference between living toward God’s dream for us vs. being bound by a rigid law? How does it feel to interpret God’s judgment this way?
 5. One participant states we must engage in an honest internal grading of our progress with regard to the sentiments expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. Do you think we are capable of an honest internal grading? Why or why not? What role do other people play in this assessment, if any?
 6. What beatitude stood out for you when they were read aloud? How does this beatitude affirm or rub up against something in your life right now?
- *Summary, reminder of the next program, task for the week, and prayer:* Ask participants to read and reflect upon the rest of Matthew 5 for next week.

One prayer you might wish to use to close this session is adapted from *Good News* by Bishop Charleston. It is as follows:

Dear God, thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit in this conversation. We ask that the Spirit will go with us as we leave this place to be your ministers. Give us grace to be healers of what hurts us and heralds of what makes us whole. In the blessed name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Session 2: God’s New Possibility: The Law and Judgment

In preparation:

⇒ Make sure equipment is set up and seating arrangements are as you wish them to be.

The second session might look like this:

- *Prayer and Silence:* See session 1 for suggestions and a possible text.
- *The plan for this program:* Provide an overview of what will happen today.
- *Bible Reading:* Read Matthew 5:17-37 aloud. (Other appropriate sections for this program would be: Matthew 7:1-5, 7:12, or 7:21-28.)
- *The DVD program:* Show the entire second program on the law and judgment.
- *Conversations:*
 1. Can you think of an example from your own experience in which the spirit of a law – religious or civic- was realized not by rigid adherence to the actual law?
 2. Bishop Curry talks further about righteousness that is not only strict justice but has elements of compassion and mercy. In the example of Joseph, adding these elements helped him to

go beyond the law to its intent. How can this understanding of righteousness help us to hear scripture about God's judgment differently and/or engage life and life's problems in a deeper way?

3. In the Sermon on the Mount, is Jesus calling us to demand righteousness or to embody righteousness? Is there a difference?
 4. Bishop Curry states that we underestimate God by underestimating God's expectation of us. God made us because God loves us and we are capable of more than we think. Connect this idea back to our discussion about ideals during last week's session. How do you know when you are being too hard on yourself, expecting more of yourself than God does? How do you know when you are being too easy on yourself, expecting less of yourself than God does? How do you think God helps you discern the difference at any given moment?
 5. Can you think of a time when judgment seemed like a gift to you? Can you think of an example when you felt oppressed or burdened by judgment? What made these experiences of judgment different?
 6. Do you agree with Bishop Curry that God's judgment tries to get us to see what is important to God rather than worry about who is or isn't getting into heaven? Why or why not?
 7. Re-read Matthew 5:17-37. What strikes you most about this passage? Does anything disturb you? Comfort you?
- *Summary, reminder of the next program, task for the week, and prayer:* Ask participants to read and reflect upon Matthew 6:19-34 during the week. See session 1 for a possible text for the closing prayer.

Session 3: Where is our treasure? On Money and Generosity

In preparation:

⇒ Make sure equipment is set up and seating arrangements are as you wish them to be.

The third session might look like this:

- *Prayer and Silence:* See session 1 for suggestions and a possible text.
- *The plan for this program:* Provide an overview of what will happen today.
- *Bible Reading:* Read Matthew 6:19-34 aloud.
- *The DVD program:* Show the entire third program on money.
- *Conversations:*
 1. Re-read Matthew 6:19-34. What strikes you most about this passage? What challenges you? What comforts you?
 2. One of the participants mentions the challenge of balancing the practicalities of life with the need for devotion, as if our life could be chopped up into two different parts – the faithful part and the mundane part. Often, this is exactly how we may experience our lives. But can life be chopped up so neatly? Is the only way you serve God by doing explicitly

“churchy” things? If not, than what does our “non-church” life look like if we are living it faithfully?

3. Do you think different financial circumstances lead us to read Jesus’ teachings on money and generosity differently? What is your view of generosity?
 4. Do you think difficult circumstances make it more difficult to be as generous? Can you think of any examples from your own experience when this was not true (This need not be your own generosity but could very well be generosity encountered in another)?
 5. Re-read Matthew 5:38-42. This passage seems to call us toward a radical generosity. In the discussion on the DVD about this passage, the participants were insistent that being good stewards of our resources is also important – ie. *Not* giving to everyone who begs from you. But Jesus is not at all concerned in this passage with what the person we give to does with our gift or whether we are made to look foolish in the giving. How do you understand this tension?
 - a. Have you ever witnessed an act of radical generosity, such as Jesus describes here?
 - b. If Jesus does not intend for us to literally give to everyone who begs from us, what might he be pushing us to see about our material possessions and how we relate to them?
 6. “Do not worry” Jesus says. Which do you find harder to live into: 1) the promise that God will care for our material needs or 2) the promise that God will care for our spiritual needs?
- *Summary, reminder of the next program, task for the week, and prayer:* Ask participants to read and reflect upon Matthew 7 during the coming week. See session 1 for a possible text for the closing prayer.

Session 4, Overcoming Evil with Good: On Violence and Enemies:

In preparation:

⇒ Make sure equipment is set up and seating arrangements are as you wish them to be. The fourth session might look like this:

- *Prayer and Silence:* See session 1 for suggestions and a possible text.
- *The plan for this program:* Provide an overview of what will happen today.
- *Bible Reading:* Read Matthew 5:38-48 aloud.
- *The DVD program:* Show the entire fourth program on violence and enemies.
- *Conversations:*
 1. Read Matthew 5:38-48 again. What strikes you the most as you hear this passage again? Does anything challenge you? Comfort you?
 2. Bishop Curry reminds us that “there is a more excellent way” for us to handle conflict. Can you think of an example from your own life when you were able to return love for hate? What about a time when the hurt seemed too great to forgive?
 3. When you hear the beatitudes, what do you hear: an active call or a passive call?

4. As a Christian, what do you think your role is as a peacemaker, in both personal relationships and as a citizen? How can we be peacemakers in the public sphere or must we accept that peace is a rarely realized ideal?
 5. In the DVD, one of the participants tells the story of a woman in Vietnam who was able to forgive despite horrific tragedy. Why do you think it is so difficult to walk the journey of forgiveness this woman walked?
 6. Are there limits to loving our enemies? If so, what are these limits and how do we know when we have reached them?
- *Final summary and closing prayer:* Ask the participants to read Matthew 6:1-18 during the following week. See session 1 for a possible prayer text.

Session 5: Hearing the Voice of Jesus: Praying the Sermon on the Mount

In preparation:

- ⇒ Make sure equipment is set up and seating arrangements are as you wish them to be.
- ⇒ Photocopy the evaluation of this program, which is located after the guide in the notebook.

The fifth and final session might look like this:

- *Prayer and Silence:* See session 1 for a possible prayer text.
- *The plan for this program:* Provide an overview of what will happen today.
- *Bible reading:* Read Matthew 6:5-16 (Another appropriate section would Matthew 7:7-11.)
- *The DVD program:* Show the entire fifth program on prayer.
- *Conversations:*
 1. Bishop Curry describes the context for our prayer as “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” How does this perspective help you to hear differently the passage “ask and you shall receive”?
 2. Now think about this same passage in the context of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, as mentioned by Bishop Curry. Jesus first prays (at least in one version) that the cup of crucifixion be taken away before he asks that God’s will be done. In other words, there is a type of spiritual journey embodied in the prayer itself. First, there is an honest acknowledgement of where he is at that very moment – afraid, not wanting to be nailed to a cross. Then, he can proceed to a place where he can embody God’s desire for what will be. How does this type of spiritual journey resonate with your own prayer life?
 3. Leon Spencer asks Bishop Curry about his own devotional life and the Sermon on the Mount – what about your devotional life? Is there a part of the Sermon that draws you in now in your life?
 4. Think about Bishop Curry’s view that our being blessed calls us to bless the creation. What does it mean to “bless the creation”? How is this an invitation to you?

- *Evaluation:* Encourage participants to complete the evaluation, and provide time for it. Please share the results with us.
- *Final summary and closing prayer:* See session 1 for a possible prayer text.

Additional Resources on the Sermon on the Mount:

The books marked with a “” are only available used.*

Allison, Dale. *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination*. New York: Crossroads, 1999.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. London: SCM, 2001.

Buttrick, David. *Speaking Jesus: Homiletical Theology and the Sermon on the Mount*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Crosby, Michael H. *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew’s Challenge for first World Christians*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981.

* _____ *Thy Will be Done: Praying the Our Father as Subversive Activity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977.

Eberhard, Arnold. *Salt and Light: Living the Sermon on the Mount*. Farmington, PA: Plough Publication House, 1998.

Feister, John and Rohr, Richard. *Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996.

Forest, Jim. *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

Greenman, Jeffrey P., Larsen, Timothy, and Spencer, Stephen R. ed. *The Sermon on the Mount through the Centuries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007.

Stassen, Glenn. *Living the Sermon on the Mount*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.

_____ *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003.

*Tugwell, Simon. *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Traditions*. Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1980.

*Underhill, Evelyn Underhill. *Abba: Meditations based on the Lord’s Prayer*. Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement Publications, 1982.

Wierzbicka, Anna. *What did Jesus mean?: Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Wink, Walter. *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003.

Note that we are able to update our facilitators’ guides on-line, so if you find books that you believe deserve mention here, please contact us.