

MATTHEW 5:1-12

# THE GOOD LIVING GUIDE



9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

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*The Good Living Guide*

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## » HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

### 1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God's word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of 'interaction'—interaction with the Bible, with the things we've written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

## 2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- short sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- an ‘Implications’ section that helps you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

## 3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

## 4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

## 5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.



## » STUDY 1

# THE GOOD LIVING GUIDE

## [OVERVIEW]

A MAN SEES AN ODD-SHAPED piece of animal skin on the ground in front of him. He lashes out at it with his foot and sends it skimming across the open, grassy field on which he's standing. As a direct consequence of this, several million people around the world experience intense feelings of joy or despair. This sounds crazy—that is, until we fill in the rest of the picture. The rest of the picture is that the open grassy field is a soccer stadium, the man is the finest soccer player of his time, and the scene is the final of the World Cup.

Words and actions taken out of context are often meaningless. And this is one of the main mistakes we make in reading the Bible—we take the words (and the actions they describe) out of their original context. Far too frequently, we read our own concerns back into the Bible, rather than letting it speak for itself in its own setting.

So before we launch into studying the individual **Beatitudes**, we need to step back and look at the bigger picture. What are the Beatitudes all about? How should we approach them?

To fill in the rest of the picture surrounding the Beatitudes, we need to look at three different areas.

### What's a Beatitude?

Matthew 5:1-12 is traditionally referred to as the 'Beatitudes'. This is not a word that is in the Bible—it is just a title that some people have given to these verses. It comes from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning 'blessed'. It has nothing to do with your 'attitude'.

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## The biblical background

In the context of the whole Bible, the Sermon on the Mount occurs at a time when the fortunes of Israel were at a low ebb.

There had been a time when this was not so—under David and Solomon, Israel had been a safe and prosperous nation. According to his promises to Abraham, God had planted them in the Promised Land, subdued their enemies, and blessed them with prosperity. This was the historical high point of Israel as a nation.

From that point on, things went downhill. Israel was destroyed because of its chronic apostasy and rebellion against God. By the time of the Exile to Babylon in 587 BC, the everlasting kingdom promised to David in 2 Samuel 7 was in ruins (see Ps 89).

But all was not lost. God's promise to Abraham still stood. As Israel's fortunes declined, the prophets emphatically declared that God would restore his kingdom.

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### Read Isaiah 9:1–7.

1. What did the prophet look forward to?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What sort of kingdom would the 'child' rule over?

### Read Matthew 4:12–17.

3. How does Jesus fulfil Isaiah's prophecy?

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THE OLD TESTAMENT LOOKED FORWARD to a day when the eternal kingdom of God would be established throughout the world, and it would be presided over by “one like a son of man” (Dan 7; see also Isa 11:1-10; Ezek 34:23f; and many other references).

The message of the New Testament is that this hope was gloriously fulfilled by Jesus. Jesus says as much in our Sermon: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt 5:17).

The Beatitudes, then, come at a pivotal point of God’s plan of salvation. The Messiah has come; the kingdom of God is at hand. However, not all has yet been accomplished. The cross, the resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost—these momentous events are still to come, and we live on the other side of them.

## The historical background

What was life like at the time of Jesus? What would have been in the minds of his hearers as they listened to his teaching?

No doubt there were many things in their minds, and we can only guess at what they might have been. However, of one thing we can be fairly sure. The Jews of Jesus’ day were sick of being losers. Nearly five centuries had passed since the last of the Old Testament prophets, and during that period, with a few exceptions, Israel had suffered nothing but humiliation at the hands of

the Gentiles (first the Greeks and then the Romans). In Jesus’ day, the brutal fact of Roman occupation could not be avoided, and different groups within Israel had ideas about how God was going to bring in his kingdom.

The Pharisees, on the whole, felt that God would not bring in his kingdom until Israel got serious about obeying the Law. They were quite fanatical about keeping God’s commandments in the Old Testament Scriptures, as well as the countless man-made regulations that had accrued over the centuries. However, from what we learn of them in the Gospels, the obedience they taught was external, legalistic and hypocritical. It did not touch the heart.

Other groups, whom we might call the Nationalists, thought that military action was the way to usher in God’s kingdom. They were in favour of overthrowing the Romans by force, and setting up a new nation under God. (In fact, they tried this on a couple of occasions during the first century AD and lost.)

The Jews were a downtrodden people. They inwardly seethed at the humiliation of being governed by Gentiles, and they sorrowed at the sad state into which God’s chosen people had fallen.

However, it must also be said that there were some in Israel who were not so worried about the Romans being in control. The Sadducees, for instance, were the ruling upper class of Israelite society. They had a cosy political rela-

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tionship with the Romans and had no real interest in having the situation disturbed. There were other Jews who had made a lot of money under Roman rule and they also were quite happy for things to stay the way they were.

Into this mixed environment of messianic hope strode Jesus, proclaiming that the time had finally come—the kingdom of God was at hand.

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## The background in Matthew

This is something you can look up for yourself.

**Read Matthew 4:17-5:2 and 7:28-29.**

4. What did Jesus preach?

5. What did he call his disciples to do?

6. To whom did Jesus preach the Sermon?

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HAVING LOOKED AT THE WIDER picture, the overall message of the Sermon comes into focus. Jesus has commenced his public ministry and called his disciples. He sits down with them and begins to teach them how they are to live as subjects in the long-awaited kingdom of God. He is giving them their first ‘discipleship training’ session.

He tells them that they are a select band, called to be the light of the world, just as he himself has come as a light (cf. 4:15-16). He tells them that if they are even to enter his kingdom, their righteousness must far exceed the external, legalistic acts of the Pharisees. They must have a deep-seated, internal commitment to God that is expressed by doing his will. They must listen to Jesus’ words and obey them, even though it may make them completely different from the rest of their society.

This theme of ‘being different’ crops up again and again in the Sermon. Whether talking about the Pharisees or the pagans, Jesus stresses that the kingdom-dweller must give his allegiance to the king. He must abandon the foolish and self-centred attitudes of those around him. It is for this reason that John Stott regards 6:8—“Do not be like them”—as the key text of the Sermon.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is calling his disciples to a radical set of values that will bring them into conflict with their friends and family and society.

Even though the Sermon is directed primarily at the disciples, the crowds are also listening in. In many ways, the

message is the same for them. If they are to enter Jesus’ kingdom, they must seek it wholeheartedly, and be prepared for a complete life-change.

## The good living guide

If this is the general message of the whole Sermon on the Mount, what is the place of the first twelve verses which we call the Beatitudes?

The Beatitudes outline the good life, the blessed life, the life of one who participates in the kingdom that Jesus brings. They are, in many respects, a good living guide. They describe the person whom God esteems, the one who is to be envied. This is what the word ‘blessing’ means. To be blessed is to receive good things from God.

The eight blessings do not describe eight different people—as if there are some of us who are merciful, and others who are poor in spirit, and others who are peacemakers. They are not eight different classes of people, but the one person—the blessed person, the one who has found real Life.

The Beatitudes present us with two exciting challenges.

The *first* is to understand these very familiar words afresh, to find out what Jesus was really saying all those centuries ago. To do this, we will have to do something that many of us find difficult, but which is absolutely necessary if we are going to understand what Jesus was saying. *We will have to dig back into the Old Testament.*

It is easy to go astray at this point.

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The Beatitudes themselves are very short and pithy. They do not provide much explanation. It is tempting to make up for this by picking our way through the New Testament to find what else it teaches (e.g. about mourning or meekness), and then read this back into Matthew 5 to explain what Jesus must have meant.

While this is a correct and worthwhile exercise, it really is coming at the Beatitudes from the wrong direction. The key to unlock the treasures of these well-known verses is found by looking backwards, to what came before, to the Old Testament. For these are not a new set of values. Each of the eight 'blessings' echoes the teaching of the Old Testament. Jesus was quite clear on this point: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Matt 5:17).

As you work through this book, you'll find that we have used this pattern of Old Testament hope and New Testament fulfilment as the basis of the studies. Each study has the following structure, with minor variations:

1. the hope (from the Old Testament)

2. the fulfilment (in Jesus)
3. good living (how this should affect our lives in Jesus' kingdom).

The Old Testament looked forward to a time when God would again bless his people. In Jesus, and in these 'Beatitudes', we see the fulfilment of that hope.

The *second* challenge is to repent. The Beatitudes have hard things to say to us, things which cut through the comfort and complacency which often mark our Christian lives. As we have already seen, the Sermon on the Mount calls on us to be *different* from those around us. It challenges us to live God's way, even though that might turn our values and ideas upside down.

Let us approach these well-known words of Jesus with the attitude expressed in the final chapter of Isaiah:

"All these things my hand has made,  
and so all these things came to be,  
declares the LORD.

But this is the one to whom I will  
look:  
he who is humble and contrite  
in spirit  
and trembles at my word."

(Isa 66:2)

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## » Implications

- How did Jesus fulfil the expectations of the Old Testament about the One who was to come?
  
- How did he challenge or frustrate the expectations of the Jews of his time?
  
- To finish, read through the Beatitudes. On first reading, how do you think they might challenge our expectations of what it means to be a Christian?

## » Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks for God's amazing plans, and the fulfilment of them in Jesus.
- Pray that God would give you fresh eyes to see what he is saying to you in the Beatitudes, and a humble contrite heart to respond in obedience.

### Endnotes

1. John RW Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today, IVP, Leicester, 1985 (1978).

# THE GOOD LIVING GUIDE



Blessed are the poor in spirit, but can I keep the Mercedes?

Blessed are those who mourn, but what if no-one I know has died lately?

Blessed are the meek ... well, as long as it's okay with the rest of you.

The Beatitudes are among the best-known verses in the Bible, but what do they really mean?

**The Good Living Guide** unlocks the treasures of the Beatitudes by going back to the Old Testament. The Old Testament was Jesus' Bible, and all of the Beatitudes are either direct quotes from it or strongly reflect its teaching.

**The Good Living Guide** will not only help you discover afresh the meaning of Matthew 5:1-12, it will teach you how to understand the New Testament by learning the message of the Old. And most importantly of all, you will have the painful but exhilarating experience of being challenged by the words of Jesus.

An ideal study book for individuals or small groups.

