

A FRUITFUL LIFE

DISCOVERING JESUS' INVITATION
IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT



ASHLEY HALES & BRYCE HALES



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INTRODUCTION

AN INVITATION TO FRUITFULNESS

AFTER YEARS OF APARTMENT LIVING, an overseas move, first jobs, two small children, and nearly ten years of marriage, we bought our first house. It was perfect: huge picture windows, original wood floors, a yard for our children to play in, and a front porch where we envisioned sitting outside and chatting with neighbors as they walked by. The only challenge was that it had been a foreclosure and it needed a *ton* of work, especially on the outside. The yard, full of weeds and metal, wasn't quite what we envisioned our toddlers pushing trucks in or where we saw them running through the sprinklers.

In our yard, we dug out broken glass, found too-many-to-count beer-bottle caps, and uprooted years of overgrown bushes. We even let a neighborhood guy take his metal detector around to look for treasures (sadly, none were found!). Bryce recruited friends to help build a fence creating a safe space for kids to play. It took hours of labor, research, and plenty of muscle to begin making this house a home.

We loved sitting on our porch sipping a cold drink and talking with neighbors who expressed gratitude that we'd begun fixing up the house. But change took a whole lot longer than we thought, and it required intention, planning, and work. For the house and yard to become habitable, we needed the help, encouragement, and brawn of our friends to work alongside us too.

The same is true of our spiritual lives. Growth in the Christian life requires being acted on—like the ground being leveled and planted—so that something more life-giving can grow. Growth also requires others who work alongside you, and growth requires you follow a vision for what could be.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' vision of the good life for his disciples (then and now). Such a life is fruitful: oriented to the flourishing of individuals and communities and a visible, tactile example that the kingdom of heaven has come in Jesus. Our lives as Jesus' followers are good new. They are like juicy pieces of fruit that testify to the goodness of life in Christ!

FRUITFULNESS IS GROWING TO LOOK MORE LIKE JESUS—LIVING AND LOVING AS HE DID.

When we talk about *fruitfulness* in this study, we mean “growing to look more like Jesus, living and loving as he did” (a phrase that both Dallas Willard and Steven Garber are fond of using). Toward the end of his most familiar sermon, known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses this same metaphor of fruitfulness and says that its by our fruits that people will be able to recognize us as Jesus’ disciples (Matthew 7:20).

Healthy fruit comes from healthy plants (Matthew 7:17). But how does this happen? In John 15, Jesus uses this same fruit-bearing imagery: he calls himself the vine and says that his disciples (us!) are the branches. The Father is the gardener who prunes and cares for us so that we will bear fruit as we are attached to the vine, as we remain in Jesus. We are dependent on him, and we must remain connected to Jesus to grow. How do we remain *in* Jesus, like branches on a vine? Jesus says we do so by keeping his commands, some of which he lays out for us in the Sermon on the Mount (John 15:10). How can we do that? Through the work of the Spirit!

As we study Jesus’ most famous sermon, and as we put it into practice, we expect that God’s Spirit will work in our lives to grow spiritual fruit. That’s Jesus’ promise! Fruit bearing is evidence of being Jesus’ disciple.

But this doesn’t happen in an instant. Just as fruit trees take time before they produce fruit, growing to look more like Jesus takes time. Just like the transformation of our home, the cultivation of healthy spiritual fruit requires time with a vision, renewed intention, and a plan to get there. Ultimately our fruitfulness isn’t just for us—it spills over so that our communities flourish too.

Fruitfulness also happens in stages. There will be seasons of fruit bearing, seasons when all you feel is God’s pruning, and times of underground germination when all you can do is hope that roots are growing beneath the surface. All of this is normal. Through it all, we practice remaining connected to Jesus and his people.

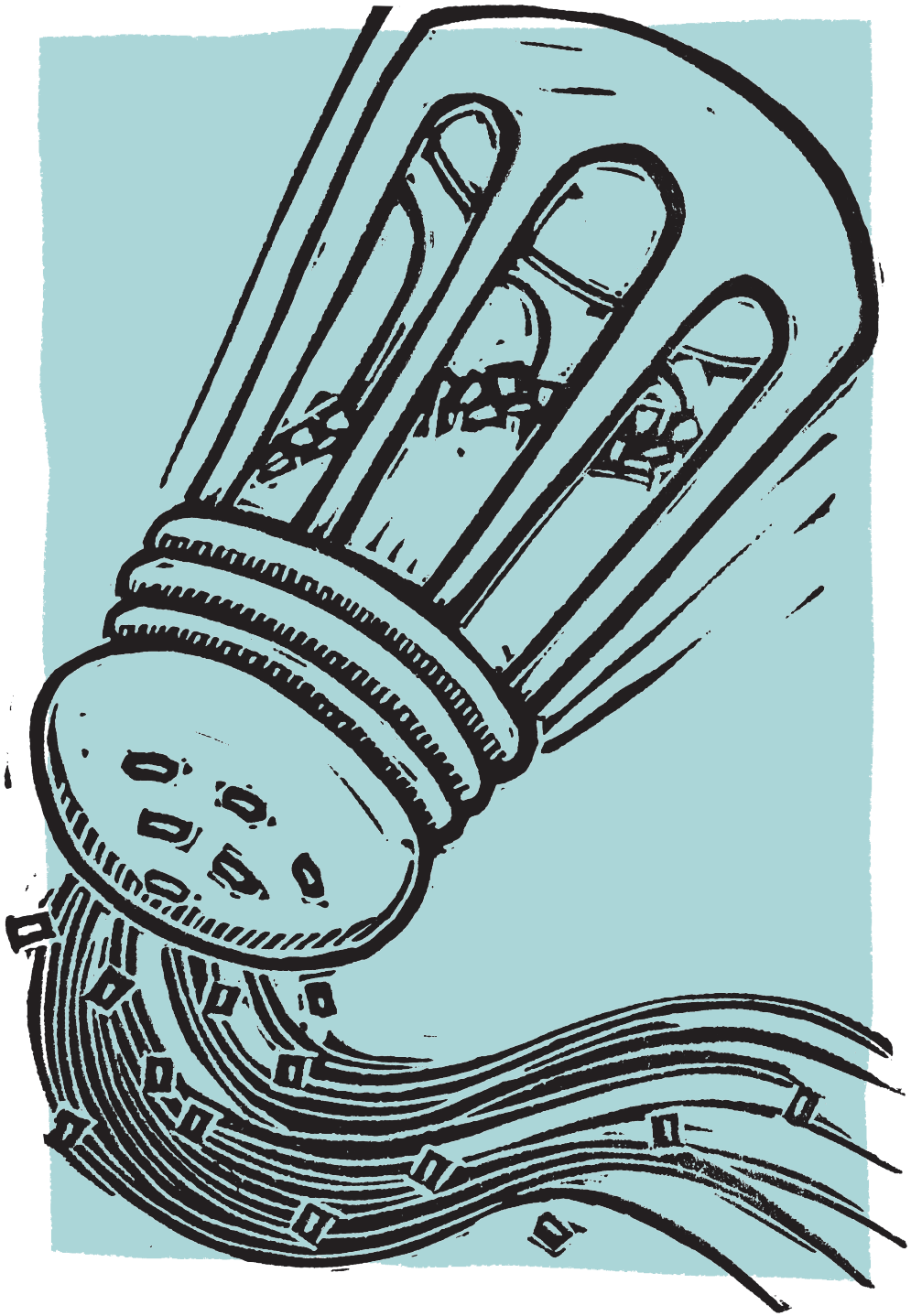
Maybe you haven’t cracked open a Bible in a while, or perhaps you’re muscling through your Christian life but not experiencing growth. Either way, this study is for you. Dallas Willard often said that grace isn’t opposed to effort, but it is opposed to earning. You’ll be encouraged that Jesus fulfills all of what he’s asking of you in himself, and you’ll be challenged to make changes in your day-to-day life. Everything worth doing requires intention and effort. And in the Christian life, you know that the effort you put in flourishes because of the Holy Spirit who comforts, convicts, and promises to be the presence of Jesus with you.

As you begin this journey, take a moment to ask yourself what your hope is for this study. The process we're going to lead you through in this study is not magic. It won't just change you if you don't want to be transformed. Your intention is crucial. We can have initial enthusiasm when we begin something new, but then we falter. As you begin, consider, What are some areas you think you might struggle in? How can your group help support you?

A word about grace here—we will all fail. Our efforts are not about perfectionism or legalism. Jesus promises that his Word will not return void. He promises fruitful growth for healthy disciples. Imagine becoming calmer, gentler, less reactive, and more able to listen to God and others. We're going to be okay with being beginners, even if we know (or don't know!) a lot of Christian content. Let's expect that the Holy Spirit will cultivate us, working through the Word of God.

Each week as we meet together, we'll focus on the vision of the Sermon on the Mount and how Jesus tells us our highest aim and most secure self comes as we align ourselves with the kingdom of God. Here is real life, real fruit!





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WEEK 1

THE FRUITFUL LIFE OF THE KINGDOM

MATTHEW 5:1-16

GROUP SESSION

BEGIN

- **START** with two minutes of silence.
- **PRAY** and invite the Spirit to be present, shaping you as people as you discuss.
- **OPENING QUESTION:** What has been forming you in the past week? (Take a look at your weekly phone usage for starters).

Throughout these weeks as we study the Sermon on the Mount, we will be practicing both individual and corporate times of silence. As this practice is new for many believers, we want to do our best to welcome you into this practice. Practicing silence is not akin to emptying your mind as in Eastern practices of meditation. It isn't prayer time either. It is a practice of slowing your body, mind, and soul to experience the reality and presence of God in a real time and a real place. In the same way that you need time together with a friend, we need unhurried time with God. (Please read the appendix at the end of the study for more information.)

READ

- **READ MATTHEW 5:1-16**

WATCH

- **WATCH** video



DISCUSS

1. What has been your experience or first impression with the Sermon on the Mount? What was new for you in the video?
2. From your own experience, what makes a plant fruitful? What conditions are needed for fruit bearing? What things need to be taken away or added for healthy growth? See if you can make some connections between what you notice and your own life.
3. If you have a goal or dream for your life, or even the next few years, share it with the group. What goals do you have for your own spiritual growth? We want our lives to be effective (like



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salt or light is effective), but often our dreams for living a good life don't look like Jesus' Beatitudes. Why do you think that is?

4. Look over Matthew 5:1-6. As you do, name the characteristics of someone Jesus says is blessed. Who, in your community or church, meets one or some of these characteristics?
5. From reading Matthew 5:13-16 and your own experience, what purpose does salt serve? Why might Jesus use this image of salt to talk about a fruitful disciple?
6. Considering verses 13-16 on salt and light, what characterizes a disciple of Jesus? What do they do and how do they act?
7. Take a look at this passage and notice the characteristics of people who Jesus values. Think about how you value time, attention, and money. What gaps do you notice between what you value and Jesus values?
8. Pick one area of your life in which you'd like to grow (a relationship, a need in your neighborhood, a new personal habit to try on, a new way of thinking, etc.). What's one small step you can take this week to grow in that area? How can your group support you?

CLOSE

Each week we'll remind you that the Sermon on the Mount isn't about doing more or getting it all correct. We will see some stark discrepancies between our desires and dreams and Jesus' model for fruitful discipleship. Finish your study each week in prayer, remembering that Jesus wants us to grow in our fruitfulness and that the way we become more fruitful disciples is by seeing his example, confessing our shortcomings, and loving him more fully for living on our behalf.

Jesus takes the pressure off. We do not need to get it right to be loved. Remind yourselves this week, while we re-evaluate, stretch, and grow, that—like tilling the soil—growing into a fruitful disciple can be hard. It also helps detach our identities from *what* we do to *whose* we are.

We'll also ask each week that you spend some time *praying together*. We've provided a written prayer below as a suggestion to help guide this time together.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we come to study Jesus' famous sermon we find ourselves excited and apprehensive. A fruitful life with you is our desire, and yet we know how great the gap is between the blessed life mentioned here and our own. As we study, reflect, and pray,



would you remind us that the pressure is off—Jesus has accomplished our full redemption already and that the kingdom life he talks about in his sermon is actually the best life we could live? (Spend time here as appropriate praying for your week’s next step.) As we move forward into our weeks, grant us grace and the faith to believe what you say is true and good. We pray in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.

DAY 1

BEATITUDES, PART ONE

READ AND REFLECT

Each day we begin with two minutes of silence. Set a timer. Simply practice being in God's presence. The appendix in the back includes helpful suggestions.

- **READ MATTHEW 5:1-6.** Read the passage slowly to yourself. Then, a second time if you're able, read it out loud.

We can think of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as some nice words, a sort of spiritual fortune cookie. But Jesus actually preached the Sermon on the Mount in a real place, at a real time, among real people—people with questions and hungry bellies, people experiencing familial, economic, or political strife. As we enter into the text, try to remember the embodied reality of this sermon delivered out loud and out in the open to his first disciples on a hillside. Put yourself there.

Jesus' most famous sermon doesn't start with what people *should* do but instead starts with good news. He blesses before he commands. Grace comes before obedience. Jesus is quick to confer mercy on those who lack, who need help and sustenance, and on those who desire justice and righteousness like food and water.

- What words stand out to you when you read the passage? What is the effect of Jesus' repetitive language?

To be "poor in spirit" is to see our need for Jesus. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes in *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* that "poor in spirit" is having a "tremendous awareness of our utter nothingness as we come face to face with God."

- Think of a time when you have seen your utter need for God. What did that look and feel like?



- It's hard to reckon with failure and lack. For what area of your life might the Holy Spirit be allowing you to see your failure as a place not only where Jesus meets you but also how this place is blessed? Write down some initial thoughts.

- In the Beatitudes, there is a promise at the end of each line that follows a need. How does this encourage you?

While we might approach these Beatitudes and see where we fall short, they're also, as Jonathan Pennington notes, funny—the incongruity between what sort of life we're striving for and what Jesus highlights. No one would expect that a meaningful, blessed life comes through lack. As there is humor in the space between expectation and reality, there is also grace in that spot too.

All fruitful faith is a gift.

■ JESUS' SERMON STARTS WITH GOOD NEWS.

PRACTICE

Each daily devotional time includes a practice section, a time to imaginatively engage Scripture and pray for God to grow the fruits of a disciple in your life.

As you read these opening verses again (Matthew 5:1-6), remember these are corporate blessings, given to "you all" and not just individuals. Who around you is mourning? Who is meek? Who is someone in your church or community who hungers after justice and righteousness? Imagine these people around you.



- **IMAGINE** Jesus seated on a hill, teaching his first followers. If you were there, how would you be showing up ready to listen to this teacher? As you imagine yourself and your community listening to Jesus, what do you hope Jesus will say?

- *Poor in spirit. Mourners. The meek. Those desperate for justice and righteousness.* What do these people have in common?

- How does Jesus meet these needs? How has he met these needs for you and your community?

- **PRAY** for a few minutes, bringing your whole self to God. Write down one intention or one impression from today's study to take with you.

DAY 2

BEATITUDES. PART TWO

READ AND REFLECT

- ➔ **START** with two minutes of silence.
- ➔ **READ MATTHEW 5:7-12.** Read the passage slowly to yourself. Then, a second time if you're able, read it out loud.



- As you read these blessings, what questions about God and his kingdom do they bring up?

Often called the “help” Beatitudes, verses 7-9 show us that being in God’s kingdom isn’t just a vertical relationship between us and God, but it’s also a horizontal relationship between us and people—as we show mercy, make peace, and practice discernment.

- Who around you, in your family, neighborhood, or community, needs mercy?

- In the Bible the word *shalom*, which we translate as “peace,” means the wholeness of God. As you consider your neighborhood and church, where do they need God’s wholeness and flourishing?

- Who are the helpers you know? How does helping others show you more of who God is?



- **MAKE A LIST** of the second half of each Beatitude (what comes after “for they shall . . .”). If we gather these promises together, what does it tell you about the experience of those who follow Jesus?

While we think the blessed life may look like ease and endless opportunities, Jesus tells us about hardship. If you feel your lack (as we see in the first few Beatitudes) and yet if you also move toward others (what we see here), persecution is the result (Matthew 5: 10-12). The type of kingdom Jesus brings is entirely different from the kingdoms of this world. Persecution and defeat mark not only Jesus’ disciples but also Jesus himself—but still, there is always a promise of God’s nearness and justice. The arc of redemption moves toward glory and victory, but this always comes on the other side of a cross.

- It doesn’t seem to make sense, but how do you reconcile persecution as the pathway to a blessed life?

- Why do you think Jesus laid it out this way?

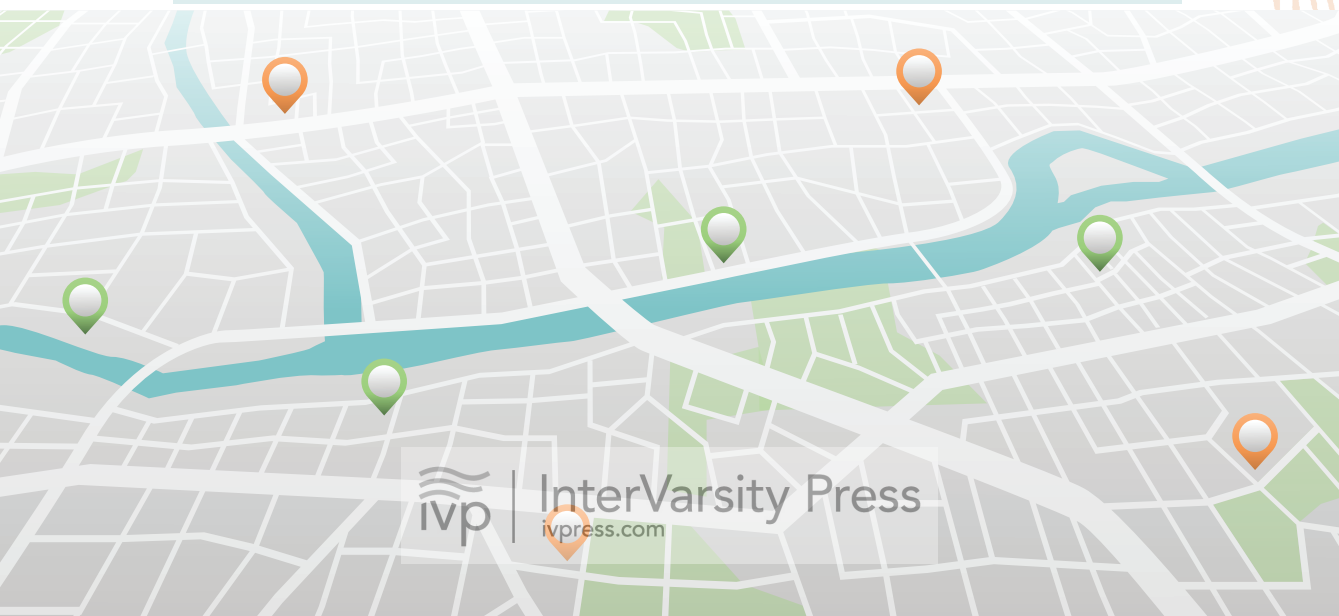
PRACTICE

The following practice is meant to be a way to gently engage these hard questions as you seek to receive God’s grace—which is made clear in the phrases beginning with “you are”—and recognize where you fall short, as well. Before you begin, ask the Holy Spirit to be with you.

Many modern roads began as ancient salt ways. These salt ways were created to bring salt from a body of water inland, both for the health of a people and for economic stability.

If Christians are the salt of the earth, we’re going to consider moments when our flavor has been strong—when we’ve seasoned our places and people and preserved goodness—and when we have lost our flavor.

- Using the map below, in company with the Holy Spirit, write down a few events, memories, or feelings where faith in Jesus was vital, strong, and precious (like valuable salt in the ancient world), and mark these along the waterway at the green markers.
- On the orange markers, write down times, events, or seasons when your saltiness has decreased. Consider, from your current vantage point, whether the less salty times were times of fallowness and growth later resulted, or times you distanced yourself from God.
- **CONSIDER** how these seasons of growth and fallowness are like the growth cycles for a plant. Both are necessary. What patterns do you notice?



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