**Lesson 1—Introduction to the Beatitudes**

\*I recommend that the group leader ask each member to read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) two to three times before the first meeting. Since the Beatitudes introduce the Sermon, it makes sense for us to get acquainted with what they’re introducing.

Ask each member to note what recurring themes they see in the Sermon. Also, ask them to note what jumps out to them or what impacts them the most in the Sermon.

***Introductory Comments:***

Jesus' ultimate treatise on kingdom living – read *transformed* living – is the Sermon on the Mount. The counterintuitive, countercultural statements found in Matthew 5-7 show us just how radical Christian living is against the backdrop of a First Century Greco Roman or a Twenty First Century North American culture. Such lofty ideals as praying for your enemy, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, that murder and adultery begin in the heart, and that we are to be perfect as God is perfect, give us a clear picture of the impossible nature of living a kingdom lifestyle without the blessing, anointing, and grace of Jesus.

The Beatitudes (A beatitude is the state or condition of being blessed) are the introductory statements to the Sermon on the Mount. They describe for us how we become kingdom-minded people and how it becomes possible for us to do the things that Jesus calls us to do in the following sermon. The Beatitudes are equally counterintuitive and oxymoronic when read independently. How in the world could someone who is poor in spirit actually be blessed or happy? How is it that those who are meek and gentle actually inherit the earth? How can someone who is pursuing righteousness – an unattainable quality – actually be satisfied?

And yet there stands Jesus calling his disciples and potential followers to embrace the lifestyle of brokenness and mourning before God that would in turn grant them the ability to live the transformed lives he describes so clearly in the Sermon.

***Questions***:

1. Have a group member read Matthew 5:1-10 out loud. Have the reader emphasize the first word—*Blessed*—and the descriptor word that follows. For instance, verse 3 would read: *Blessed* are the *poor in spirit,* for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Read each verse with that type of emphasis.
2. As you listened to the verses, what jumped out at you? What seems curious or even counterintuitive about the statements? Do the statements seem relevant or irrelevant for today’s world?
Now, have a reader read the Beatitudes again with the same emphasis. But this time have the group members imagine they’re there on that hillside with Jesus and his disciples. Have them imagine that they’re living in or around the Palestinian countryside, that they’re agrarian workers and thus basically poor, and that they’re living under the brutal military occupation of their homeland by the Romans.

In that setting or context, how do the Beatitudes read differently? How might they have sounded to Jesus' audience? What emotions, thoughts or reactions might they have had?
3. The word *blessed* used here by Matthew means *happy* or *fortunate*. It certainly wasn’t new to Jesus' listeners. The concepts of blessing or being blessed flow throughout the Hebrew scriptures.

Notice how Jesus flips cultural values upside-down and begins to reveal Kingdom values. In earthly culture, it’s the rich, the powerful, the famous and the elite who are thought to be happy. But in the culture that Jesus was building, it’s the impoverished, the gentle and the peaceful. Even those who suffer are considered favored in Jesus' Kingdom.

What does that tell you about the values of the Kingdom? How does the Kingdom of God move in contrast to a non-Kingdom culture?

1. As you anticipate the coming weeks of study, think about which of the Beatitudes seems most intriguing to you. Which are you most curious about or looking forward to studying? Why?

Given that the Sermon and Beatitudes require transformation, what might God want to transform in you during this study? Which set of values do you think are most at work in our culture right now? God’s Kingdom or something else? What about the Church in America, do you see more of a Kingdom culture or something else?

Ok, and here’s the tough one, what about your life? Would you say that you’re more influenced by Kingdom values or by something else?

***Extra Credit***: What’s the “something else” mentioned in the questions above?