



Leader Guide for *Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship* By Martha E. Stortz

About this Guide

This Leader Guide and companion **Participant Handout** offer the tools needed for a one-hour discussion on the theme of Jesus' invitation to be blessed and our response, which are the focus of *Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship* by Martha E. Stortz.

The guide also provides suggestions for expanding the one-hour general discussion of the beatitudes to a series of sessions based on each blessing as discussed in Stortz's book. For a more in-depth study of *Blessed to Follow*, see "Digging Deeper" at the end of this guide.

To get out the word about an upcoming study of *Blessed to Follow*, download the **Publicity Flyer** and customize it to fit your needs.

Pre-Session Preparation

Prior to the session, read *Blessed to Follow* and reflect on the "Key Points" presented in the box at right. Read through the Leader Guide and the Participant Handout and choose options from the materials presented to use with your group. Gather the materials you will need for the study:

- Bibles
- Copies of the Participant Handout (a companion piece available on this website)
- A white board, large pad of paper, or other writing surface (helpful but not essential)
- Name tags, if desired.
- Copies of *Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship*. (Participants will get the most out of the conversation if they have read the book, but the one-hour session is designed so that you can welcome and include guests who haven't done the reading.)

This book and other Lutheran Voices titles may be purchased by calling (800) 328-4648, in Canada: (800) 265-6397, ext. 215. Discounts are available for bulk purchases of as few as five books of a single title.

Key Points

- The first sermon of Jesus' public ministry, as recorded in Matthew, begins with blessing, the beatitudes. As we receive these blessings, following Jesus' example, we become a blessing to others.
- Jesus blesses us by sharing our lot and then reversing it. A faithful response is to count our blessings and praise God.
- The kingdom of heaven reverses fortunes. Those who are generous, rather than grasping at wealth, are free to enjoy God's abundant grace.
- No one wants to mourn, but when we do, God provides comfort in unexpected ways and opens new possibilities.
- A meek person is anchored in and obedient to God's promises. When we humbly serve God, Jesus shares the burden with us.
- God loves us passionately. As we imperfectly practice God's love, sharing food and other blessings, we experience that love.
- God is merciful to us, and we begin to experience mercy as we learn to practice forgiveness.
- When we look for Jesus, as in the breaking of bread, God is revealed to us.
- Peace as God intends involves all of our relationships; baptism makes us witnesses for peace in all the world.
- When we serve others, we serve Christ. Though we suffer and die with Christ, we also rise to new life with Christ.

"The Lutheran Voices series is tapping into the rich resources of the church and bringing us together to talk about issues and ideas that shape our present and future."

Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA

Single-Session Plan

The following ideas suggest how to use the **Participant Handout** in leading a one-hour discussion of *Blessed to Follow: The Beatitudes as a Compass for Discipleship*.

Opening (2 minutes)

Introduce yourself and welcome the participants. Pray the opening prayer together, or invite someone to lead the prayer.

Getting Started (8 minutes)

Invite the participants to briefly introduce themselves and to answer this question: When has someone blessed you? (For example, when has someone shown kindness, encouraged you, helped you out, or made you smile?) If the group is large, have participants introduce themselves and respond to the question within smaller groups of 4-5 people rather than to the entire group.

Points to Ponder (45 minutes)

Use questions from the Participant Handout as a framework for discussion.

- *Introduction (5 minutes)*: Very likely, some members of your group won't be familiar with the term *Beatitudes*, although they may recognize some of the verses or popular expressions such as "The meek will inherit the earth." Take enough time to make sure everyone knows the context of the Sermon on the Mount, which in Matthew comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, following his baptism (3:13-17), temptation (4:1-11), and the calling of the first disciples (4:18-22).
- *Questions 1–2 (5 minutes)*: Before you delve into specific blessings, it may be helpful to develop a greater awareness of this casually used term, *blessed*. Consider that it tells us that good things come from somewhere, that is, from God—not just luck or our own cleverness or industry. Awareness of being blessed can put us in a closer, grateful, trusting relationship with God that frees us from fear and opens us to divinely inspired love and joy. This is different from the often short-lived and shallow joy of "getting stuff."
- *Questions 3–5 (5 minutes)*: These questions further engage the group in considering the context of Jesus' preaching. Invite them to let their imaginations run free. The goal is to open their minds and hearts for reading and hearing the Beatitudes.
- *Questions 6–10 (10 minutes)*: **Options**: Have a different volunteer read each verse. Or have half the group read the "Blessed are" part of the verse together, and the other half read the "for they/theirs" part together. (You might want to type out the verses as a responsive reading.) The questions focus on overall reactions to the Beatitudes. For an in-depth study of each blessing, see the end-of-chapter questions in *Blessed to Follow* and the ideas under Digging Deeper, on the next page.
 - For questions 8 and 9, you might request a show of hands and/or make a tally on the board.
 - For question 10, you might divide into small groups of 3 or 4 to discuss.
- *Questions 11–15 (12 minutes)*: Because Abram and his family relocated to a new land, trusting in God's promise, God could make a great nation, demonstrating divine wisdom, mercy, and love. For Christians, the ultimate outcome was that a descendent of Abraham was Jesus, who blesses us with forgiveness, eternal life, and a place in God's kingdom. God's promise of a savior was also fulfilled when Mary told the angel, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).
- *Questions 16–18 (8 minutes)*: For ideas on counting blessings, see pages 18–19 of *Blessed to Follow*.

Closing (5 minutes)

Give everyone a couple of minutes to identify a blessing to thank God for. If some group members are shy or unused to thinking about blessings, work in pairs to come up with ideas. Then pray the Closing Prayer together, taking turns to name the blessings.

If you plan to continue the discussion of *Blessed to Follow* after this session, announce the place and time for the next meeting. Ask participants to prepare by reading the chapters of *Blessed to Follow* you plan to cover at the next meeting. Suggestions for subsequent discussions are found on the following page, "Digging Deeper."

Digging Deeper

After working your way through the single-session plan, use the following suggestions along with the chapter questions in *Blessed to Follow* to dig deeper into what each beatitude promises and how to respond in faithfulness. These suggestions provide a framework for a chapter-by-chapter discussion of *Blessed to Follow*, though it's your decision as to how many chapters to address each time the group meets. The single session covered chapter 1, so these ideas start with chapter 2.

Each Chapter

- As you study each chapter, look for faithful examples in today's world as well as in the Bible stories. Also consider how Jesus is an example of the qualities each chapter explores.
- Each closing prayer is drawn from the Psalms. You can read the whole passage aloud together, or pray responsively by dividing into two groups, one to read the odd-numbered verses and the other to read the even-numbered verses.

Chapter 2: Poor in Spirit; Rich in Blessing (Matthew 5:3)

- Read Matthew 5:3, and then discuss whom Jesus might mean by people who are "poor in spirit." Ask: Is he talking about people whose spirits are low, who aren't very "spiritual," or who have the spirit of a person who is poor? For ideas, compare this verse with Luke 6:20 and 24. Martha Stortz focuses on an idea consistent with economic poverty and spiritual reward: being poor in spirit in the sense of not hanging on to possessions or putting trust in them, but living generously in confidence that God will provide enough (pp. 21–23). Does this idea add to your group's understanding?
- Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Be prepared to summarize Hannah's situation, described in 1 Samuel 1. Ask: In what ways was Hannah "poor in spirit"? How did God bless her? How did Hannah respond to the blessing?
- Read Luke 1:46-55. Notice the similarities to Hannah's song. Ask: In what ways was Mary "poor in spirit"? Discuss how God blessed her. Ask: In what sense did God give Mary possession of the kingdom of heaven? How was she a blessing to others?
- Brainstorm ways participants can practice generosity as individuals, as a small group, and as part of a congregation.
- Close by praying Psalm 72. Before you start, suggest that participants be open to thinking how we might be leaders in generosity, like the king of this psalm.

Chapter 3: The Country of Mourning (Matthew 5:4)

- Read Matthew 5:4. Divide into groups of two or three, and share experiences of times we have mourned, as well as times we have been comforted. When the whole group reconvenes, offer a chance for sharing insights with the larger group.
- Read Genesis 16:1-16. Ask: What cause did Hagar have for mourning? How was she comforted? Read Genesis 21:9-21. Ask the same questions. Note also Stortz's list of blessings to Hagar on page 31. Invite reactions to these.
- Read John 19:25-27 (starting at "Meanwhile"). Ask: What cause did Mary, Jesus' mother, have for mourning? How was she comforted? Review Stortz's summary of four blessings on page 33. Invite reactions.
- Ask: Did Jesus ever mourn? Read John 11:1-3 and 17-35. Discuss Jesus' behavior: He said, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (v. 25), yet he wept (v. 35)—why? Ask: Is it a blessing to you that Jesus knows sorrow firsthand? Does your own experience with sorrow better equip you to be a blessing to others?
- Note that our experience of mourning can draw us closer to God and to those around us, as well as those we remember who have gone before us. Stortz writes, "When we gather to worship and when we assemble to praise, the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is lifted" (p. 38). Invite reactions to this assertion. Brainstorm ways we can recall the presence of all the saints when we worship.
- Close by praying Psalm 30.

Chapter 4: Following with Tempered Strength (Matthew 5:5)

- Read Matthew 5:5. Discuss how participants understand the word *meek*. Ask: Do you think Jesus wants his disciples to do (a) whatever God wants them to do; (b) whatever everyone else wants them to do; or (c) both? (Note that the second choice—being a "doormat"—would leave a person open to all kinds of misguided, even harmful, behavior to please others.)
- Read Numbers 12:3, noting that "very humble" in the New Revised Standard Version is translated "meek" in the King James Version. Ask: Do you think of Moses as a meek person? Why do you think he is called humble and meek? Before this session, look up the verses about Moses cited on pages 42–45, so you will be prepared to lead a discussion of Moses' character.
- Read Numbers 20:2-12. Explain that Moses acted in a way that put the focus on his own powers, rather than God's. The punishment was severe, but Moses accepted it without question or complaint. Read Deuteronomy 32:48–33:1-2 and 29. Ask: In what ways was Moses blessed? In what ways did he bless others?

- Ask: In what ways was Jesus' life on earth an example of meekness? Read Mark 14:32-42. Ask: Do you think Jesus' willingness to proceed with his crucifixion was an act of weakness or of inner strength? Who was blessed by Jesus' obedience to the Father?
- Discuss whether Jesus' promise that the meek will "inherit the earth" is an idea that participants feel ready to accept. Does the group see evidence of this promise? Do they need a high level of trust in God to claim this promise? In what sense does Jesus "inherit the earth" as a result of his meekness?
- Review Stortz's ideas for applying meekness to conversations among Christians. Ask participants to identify specific situations where they want to try these ideas.
- Close by praying Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40.

Chapter 5: Follow Your Heart and Find the Heart of God (Matthew 5:6)

- Read Matthew 5:6. Divide participants into groups of two or three to discuss what they hunger for the most.
- Read John 3:16. Discuss the intensity of the kind of love described here. Ask whether anyone in the group wants to share experiences of loving strongly without hope of being loved equally in return. Perhaps group members will be willing to acknowledge such experiences, even if they don't want to disclose much.
- Read Song of Solomon 3:1-5 and 4:1-8. Notice qualities of the love described here: that the lover searches diligently for the beloved and that the lover appreciates the beloved specifically and in detail. Invite participants to consider these as qualities of God's love for us—that is, a passionate love of us in particular. Ask: How might we respond to such love? How might it bless us? How might those blessings spill over to others?
- Read John 15:9. Ask: What does Jesus' invitation mean for you? How can we "abide" in God's love? Probe for specifics.
- Martha Stortz suggests the sharing of meals as a way to cultivate loving relationships. Brainstorm ways participants can share love by sharing food with others. For ideas, see pages 61–63.
- Close by praying Psalm 139:1-18. Before you begin, encourage the group to envision God "searching and knowing" from deep love, rather than as a parole office checking for good behavior.

Chapter 6: Mercy Made Real (Matthew 5:7)

- Read Matthew 5:7. Invite group members to share examples of being merciful and receiving mercy. Ask: How did the experience affect you?
- Read Jonah 1:1-3. Note that God is asking Jonah to care about the residents of an Assyrian city that was hated and feared by the Israelites. Ask: How did Jonah respond? Can you relate to this response? Who is equally hard for *you* to care about? Recall what happened next (review the details in Jonah 1:4–3:5): the storm, Jonah swallowed by the fish, his prayer and deliverance, and his preaching in Ninevah. Read Jonah 3:6–4:11. Ask: What does this story teach about God's mercy? How does Jonah's behavior contrast with that mercy? Did Jonah deserve mercy? Did he receive it anyway? (Consider his deliverance from the fish and God's later patience with him.)
- Read Luke 23:33-34. React to Stortz's suggestion (p. 71) that forgiveness was difficult for Jesus at this time, so he turned to the Father for help. Discuss the difficulty of forgiveness and how we can apply Jesus' example to our own need to forgive. Consider also Jesus' teaching to "pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Ask: Can this practice help us forgive?
- Close by praying Psalm 51.

Chapter 7: Pure in Heart; Rich in Vision (Matthew 5:8)

- Read Matthew 5:8. Ask: Is a pure heart something we need to work for in order to earn a sight of God (an achievement)? Or is Jesus describing how we experience God when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts (a gift)? Or both?
- Stortz writes, "People become what they behold" (p. 77). Pass out index cards. Invite the group to think of a typical day and to list the issues, concerns, media, and people they are focused on in the morning, at midday, in the evening, and at bedtime. Invite participants to share their lists. Ask: How often are you focused on God? On your neighbor? On yourself?
- Read John 9:1-38. Either have different participants each read a paragraph, or type out the passage as a script and invite volunteers to take the parts of the blind man, Jesus, the neighbors, the disciples, the narrator, and so on. Ask: What does the blind man focus on? What do the other observers focus on? Who is seeing God?
- Read Mark 8:27-33. Ask: What were people hoping for when they saw Jesus as Elijah, John the Baptist, a prophet, or the Messiah? (For ideas, see pp. 82–83.) What do people hope Jesus will be for them today? What did Jesus promise in verse 31? Why does it take a pure heart to accept such a vision?
- Christians can regularly see Jesus in the breaking of the bread at the Lord's Supper. Discuss how we can share the blessings of that meal with others. If it's hard to invite some people, explore how we might overcome that difficulty. If it's hard to see Jesus, consider how we might become more focused.
- Close by praying Psalm 27.

Chapter 8: Making Peace and Being Peace (Matthew 5:9)

- Read Matthew 5:9. Divide into groups of two or three, and ask everyone to name at least one area of their lives where they would like to see greater peace. When the whole group reconvenes, invite ideas and list them on the board. Then write an asterisk or cross next to each idea where participants think they have a role in making peace.
- Summarize Stortz’s description (pp. 87–88) of the peace of God as more than the absence of war or conflict; it involves restored relationships in which justice is done and the world returns to its original, created harmony of the Garden of Eden. Acknowledging that few participants are likely to see this condition as something individual peacemakers can achieve on their own, ask what role we have in working for peace, beyond waiting for God to deliver it to us.
- Read Ruth 1:1-22. Note that Naomi was a Hebrew woman, and Ruth was a Moabite woman, and the two peoples were generally enemies. When Naomi left “enemy territory” (p. 90) for her homeland, Ruth insisted on going, too. Ask: What was brave about Ruth’s decision? How might it contribute to peace? (For ideas, see pages 92–93.) Read Ruth 2:1-13 and 4:13-17. What blessings did Ruth receive as a result of her commitment to living peacefully and productively in a foreign land? (Note that Boaz’s commitment to justice played a role as well; see Ruth 2:14-16; 3:6-15; 4:2-7.) How did Ruth bless others?
- Read John 20:19-21 and 26. Ask: What did Jesus desire for his disciples? (Peace.) How did Jesus’ presence deliver this blessing of peace?
- Ruth chose to join the family of God; baptism makes us members of the family of God. Stortz writes, “Family values among the children of God are clear: make peace and do justice.” Brainstorm ways to live out those “family values.”
- Close by praying Psalm 85.

Chapter 9: Blessings in the Midst of Suffering (Matthew 5:10-12)

- Read Matthew 5:10. Ask: How were Jesus’ first followers persecuted? How are the followers of righteousness persecuted today?
- Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-21, after noting that Paul is using an ironic tone because he is writing to Christians who have become smug. Why do you think Paul wished the Christians to be like him, when their circumstances sound much more comfortable? How could suffering benefit them? How could it make them a blessing to others?
- Read Matthew 25:31-46. Note that while the beatitudes are Jesus’ first sermon in Matthew, this is his last sermon. Shift the group members’ focus from themselves (are we sheep or goats?) to Jesus. Ask: Where is Jesus in this story? In this story, who are the suffering people who need help? Who is with Jesus in this story? Note that Emmanuel, a title used for Jesus, means “God is with us.” Ask: What blessings can you find in this story?
- Read Matthew 5:11-12, emphasizing the words *you* and *your*. Emphasize that the promises are for “you,” the participants, the disciples of Jesus. Ask: How does that feel? How do you want to respond? Does Jesus’ last sermon give you some ideas?
- Close by praying Psalm 33.



Deeper Still: Further Resources to Explore

We hope you enjoyed your study of *The Bible’s Importance for the Church Today*. The Lutheran Voices series includes over 40 books focused on faithful living, global issues, healing and wholeness, Martin Luther’s teachings, and church revitalization and leadership. Free, downloadable study materials are available for select books. For a complete list of titles, go to www.augsburgfortress.org or call (800) 328-4648, in Canada: (800) 265-6397, ext. 215.