
Leader's Guide for *The Beatitudes for Today*

These leader helps for James C. Howell's *The Beatitudes for Today* provide a way for you to lead a group study on the book. The lesson plans utilize a variety of interactive methods that have been chosen so that the participants might engage in the learning process.

Encourage each participant to have a copy of *The Beatitudes for Today* and to make a commitment to the group to read the appropriate chapter before each session.

The sessions are planned for one hour, but each group uses its time differently, and some groups may get more involved in the activities than others. As you plan, especially if you have less than one hour for the session, choose the activities that will help your group gain new insights into Jesus' Beatitudes and that will help them grapple with the issues raised by the Beatitudes that are relevant in their lives.

Suggest that the participants commit to the entire study. Of course, there will be unavoidable absences, but it will be better for the group if all participants start at the beginning of the study and stick with the group to the end. Such participation will build a sense of community and will strengthen bonds among the group members.

Leader Preparation

If you will be the leader—or one of the leaders—of each session, *read the whole book before the first session*, if possible. By reading the entire book, you will become familiar with the author's viewpoint, and you will see the connections between the chapters. If the group is sharing leadership and you will be responsible for leading only one session, know the material up to that point and read the session you will lead.

Whether you are leading all sessions or only one, *skim this study guide before you plan*. This is particularly important if several people will be leading; getting a feel for the whole study will help you avoid trampling on others' issues and themes.

Make your plans. Look through this study guide and decide what you will do. You don't have to do everything that is suggested, and it is okay to add your own ideas.

Prepare the room ahead of time. For informal discussion and for ease of sharing, arrange the chairs in a circle or semicircle. Position yourself as one of the group rather than as "the authority."

Obtain the necessary teaching aids. Newsprint, an easel to hold it, and markers always come in handy, as will masking tape when you want to put a piece of newsprint on the wall.

Prepare handouts. If there are handouts, duplicate them for participants.

Keep the key ideas firmly in mind. Plan activities that will point participants toward the key ideas for the session.

Pray. Before the beginning of each session, open with prayer or ask if anyone else would like to. Give participants the opportunity to mention prayer requests or write them on newsprint. Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pray for each participant. Pray for yourself. Pray for the people in the world, the people to whom Jesus is speaking the Beatitudes today. At the end of every session, offer a prayer and include any prayer requests that were made at the beginning of the session. Remind students of the reading for the following week.

What Jesus Didn't Say

Key Ideas

- Jesus turned the world upside down, and the Beatitudes are one example of Jesus' upside-downness.
- There are a number of things Jesus did not say that we might think he said—or wish he would have said. We can learn from what Jesus did not say.

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome the participants. Introduce the subject of this study. If some in the group are unfamiliar with the Beatitudes, explain that they are sayings of Jesus and are considered part of his Sermon on the Mount. Hand out copies of the book *The Beatitudes for Today* by James C. Howell. If participants do not know one another or you, invite each person to introduce himself or herself.

Poppycock

Invite the participants to work in teams of two to come up with one saying that Jesus did not say but that pop religion, and society in general, might think Jesus said. After about five minutes, ask for their ideas and write them on a piece of newsprint.

Reading the Beatitudes

Everyone will need a Bible or a duplicated page of Matthew 5:3–12. Divide the group in two. Invite the participants to read aloud the Beatitudes as a responsive reading, one group reading the odd-numbered verses, beginning with verse 3, and the other group reading the even-numbered verses, beginning with verse 4.

Discussion

Invite someone to read aloud Acts 17:6–7, then invite the groups to discuss some of the questions from the book, along with these additional questions:

- Why were the early Christians considered rabble-rousers and revolutionaries?
- What do you think might be revolutionary about the Beatitudes?

Invite the participants as a total group to talk over what insights they might gain from noticing the things that Jesus did *not* say.

Notes to God

Give each person a sticky note. Invite the participants to think over the session and write a message to God on the sticky note. It might be a question, a comment, a thank you, or whatever comes to each person. Explain that the notes will be put up for everyone to see. At the top of a sheet of newsprint write, “Notes to God.” Invite the participants to place their sticky notes on the newsprint. Encourage the participants to read the notes on the newsprint, and then return to their seats and pray silently. After a few moments, invite participants to speak their prayers aloud, if they are so moved. Close by saying, “Hear our prayers, O God. Amen.”

Closing and Prayer

What Jesus Did Say

Key Ideas

- There are two versions of the Beatitudes in the Bible.
- The Beatitudes are like a ladder.

Welcome and Prayer

Sharing Information

Invite the participants to share what they know about the environment and situation in which Jesus spoke the Beatitudes. They might comment on the politics, economics, or geography. Then ask them to comment on whom they think the audience might have been. Ask: What do you think Jesus' Beatitudes might have meant to the people in that time and place?

Comparing

Invite the participants to group themselves in teams of two to four people to compare the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12 with the passage in Luke 6:20–26. They may use their Bibles or *The Beatitudes for Today* pages 12 and 13–14. Or you may duplicate copies of each passage for participants. Encourage them to look for the similarities and differences between the two texts. Invite them to imagine what Jesus' intent might have been in each case.

Call them back as the total group, and allow a few minutes for the teams to share insights and interesting things they noticed. In the whole group, explore this question: In what ways are we enriched by the two versions of the Beatitudes? (Discussion question 1 in the book.)

Interconnections

Comment that James Howell used the metaphor of a ladder in describing the Beatitudes. Ask:

- What interconnections do you see in the Beatitudes (in Matthew) as each stands in relation to the others? (Discussion question 2 in the book.)
- In what ways did Jesus himself embody each of the Beatitudes? (Discussion question 3 in the book.)

Imagining Possibilities

Invite participants, individually, to imagine for a moment how the Beatitudes could affect our world today. After allowing a brief time to think, invite each person to find a friend with whom to share images.

Closing and Prayer

Why It Matters Who Said These Words

Key Ideas

- Knowing the source of a quote, and its context, is important.
- The Beatitudes are autobiographical.

Welcome and Prayer

Playing with Source and Context

Invite the participants to work in groups of two or three people. Comment that every day we get information from the media, from our friends, and from our families, and we have to evaluate that information for accuracy and relevance. Some bits of information we believe wholeheartedly, some we take with a grain of salt, and other things we know are false. Provide newspapers and news magazines. Ask each group to find a headline or quotable quote and then imagine a different source and/or context so that the meaning of the quote changes or is no longer credible. (For example: “New Planet May Be Hospitable to Life,” says highly respected astronomer. “New Planet May Be Hospitable to Life,” says moviemaker about upcoming film.) After a few minutes, invite the groups to share their ideas.

Process of Evaluation

Invite the participants to discuss how they evaluate information. Ask:

- When a piece of information comes to you, what kinds of things do you need to know about it? (Source, context, and truth may come to mind, but keep going; there are other things to uncover. For example: Is it something I need to pay attention to? Is it something I’m interested in or need to know? Can I ignore it? Is it something to keep in my mind and heart forever? Can I just forget it in five minutes? Do I need to pass it on to someone else?)

- How do you evaluate information?
- Suppose two people are having a dispute, and each one talks to you about it and tells a somewhat different story. It is your job to sort it out. How do you evaluate what the two are telling you?

Authority

Discuss the “credentials” of the Beatitudes and the authority they may or may not have for the participants.

- Do you believe it matters that the Beatitudes were given to us by Jesus and not by someone else? Why or why not? (Discussion question 1 in the book.)
- In what ways do the Beatitudes have “authority” for us because Jesus uttered them? (Discussion question 2 in the book.)

The Beatitudes and Jesus’ Life

Jesus not only talked the Beatitudes, he lived them. (See *The Beatitudes for Today* pages 23–26.) If you have sixteen or more participants, have them form eight small groups. If you have fewer, decide on the groups you will have. To each group assign a beatitude with a Scripture passage(s) to look up.

- Blessed are the poor. Matthew 8:20, Philippians 2:5–9.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst. Matthew 4:4, John 4:13–14, John 4:34.
- Blessed are the pure in heart. Luke 10:38–42, Matthew 26:39.
- Blessed are the merciful. Matthew 18:21–35, 25:31–46, 9:27, John 8:1–11.
- Blessed are the meek. Matthew 11:29, John 13:1–17.
- Blessed are the peacemakers. Matthew 5:23–47, Luke 23:34, John 14:27, Ephesians 2:14.
- Blessed are those who mourn. Luke 19:41, John 11:35.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted. Matthew 27:27–31.

Ask the groups to read the Scripture passage(s) and talk within the group about how their assigned beatitude relates to Jesus’ life. Give

each group a large sheet of paper, markers, and crayons. Ask the groups to draw something that shows Jesus' experience with that beatitude. When they have finished, invite the groups to share what they did with one another.

Life Links

Briefly discuss what difference it makes if we can link Jesus' life with the Beatitudes. Ask the participants why the link would be important to them—or not. Invite them to think during the week of links they may have in their own lives to the Beatitudes.

Closing and Prayer

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Blessed

Key Ideas

- Blessedness is a gift from God.
- The Beatitudes are a way of life.

Welcome and Prayer

Happiness Graffiti

Put up one or more graffiti sheets (depending on the size of the group) around the room. At the top of each sheet write, “Happiness Is. . . .” Comment that Charles Schulz wrote a book, featuring Snoopy, called *Happiness Is a Warm Puppy*. Invite the participants to write their thoughts on the graffiti sheets. Afterward invite one or more people to read what is on the sheets.

What’s in a Word?

Hand out copies of various translations of the Bible, for example *The Good News Bible in Today’s English Version* (TEV), *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (NIV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and *The Message*. Ask those with the Bibles you handed out to read aloud Matthew 5:3–5. If any participants have had experience translating, invite them to talk about the task of trying to find the word in one language that conveys the meaning of a word in another language. As Howell points out in *The Beatitudes for Today*, Jesus spoke the Beatitudes in Aramaic, but the Gospel was written in Greek, and before we could read the words they had to be translated into English. Between Jesus and us there are three languages, at least two cultures, and two thousand years.

Write the Greek word *makarios* at the top of a piece of newsprint. Comment that biblical Greek-English dictionaries define *makarios* as “happy, blessed, fortunate.” Write these words under *makarios*. Comment that while those three words are synonyms, each has a differ-

ence nuance. Ask how the participants distinguish *happy*, *blessed*, and *fortunate*.

Happiness Then and Now

Comment that Howell quotes Robert Wilken as saying that the ancients believed that happiness was a possession of the soul, that it meant “living in accord with nature, in harmony with our deepest aspirations.” Ask the participants to compare the ancient concept of happiness with how they view happiness in our society today.

A Divine Gift

Howell sees blessedness as a divine gift, but in order for him to say this he makes a distinction between happiness and blessedness. Ask: Would you want to make a distinction between these words? Why or why not? Why is it important to see blessedness as a divine gift? (Discussion question 2 in the book.)

A Promise

Invite the participants to work in groups of three. Ask them to discuss the following:

- What difference does it make to see the Beatitudes as “promises” instead of “commandments”? (Discussion question 3 in the book.)
- As you read over the Beatitudes, what do you think the promise is?
- How can you claim the promise?

Catch 22

Remind participants of Howell’s comments that with the Beatitudes “Jesus *is* recommending a way of life, habits we should practice until they are second nature in our lives. And yet the way we think about

this way of life, these habits, is tricky. Subtly I may calculate to behave a certain way to get Jesus *for me!* But ‘whoever would save his life will lose it’ (Mark 8:35).”

Ask the participants to remain in their groups. Suggest that they scan the Beatitudes and then discuss why it is tricky to deliberately set out to model one’s life on them.

Fruits of the Spirit

Invite the participants, still in their groups, to compare the Beatitudes with Paul’s list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Ask: How are they similar? How are they different? How does one list relate to the other?

Blessed Graffiti

Put up one or more graffiti sheets (depending on the size of the group) around the room. At the top of each sheet write, “Blessedness Is. . . .” Invite the participants to write their thoughts on the graffiti sheets. Take down the “Happiness Is” sheets, but keep up the “Blessedness Is” sheets, and encourage people to write on them in other sessions.

Closing and Prayer

Poor in Spirit

Key Ideas

- Blessed are the poor.
- Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Welcome and Prayer

Graphing Our Wealth

Suggest that each participant work alone; participants may want to spread out around the room. Each will need a piece of paper and a pencil or pen. Ask participants to make bar graphs, with the low end of the graph a 1 and the high end a 10. They may want to draw a measuring line with equal segments from 1 to 10 that they can use as a constant when they draw their bars. Invite participants to draw four bars measuring their relative wealth: first, where they rank in comparison with friends and colleagues; second, where they rank in comparison with their community; third, where they rank in comparison with the population of their country; fourth, where they rank in comparison with the population of the world.

Poor in Spirit

Read Matthew 5:3 and Luke 6:20. Invite the participants to arrange themselves in groups of two or three to discuss these questions.

- What do you think Jesus meant by the phrase “poor in spirit”?
- What are some examples of the “spiritual poverty” we all experience? (Discussion question 1 in the book.)
- What might be some connections or disconnects between spiritual poverty and physical poverty?
- What do you think Jesus was trying to tell us?

Dangers and Opportunities

As a total group, discuss these questions:

- How might monetary wealth be hazardous to our spiritual health?
- How might our well-developed spirituality jeopardize our relationship with God?
- How does Howell envision the relationship we (who may not be monetarily poor) might have with those who are poor? What is your vision?

The Kingdom of Heaven

In the total group, discuss these questions:

- How would you describe the kingdom of heaven?
- In what sense is the kingdom of heaven a future reality? a present reality? (Discussion question 3 in the book.)
- Why do you think the poor in spirit get to inherit the kingdom of heaven?

Blessed Graffiti

Give each participant a sticky note, and invite participants to spend a few moments, each with her or his own thoughts, pondering a response to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:3. Participants might respond with a prayer, a commitment, an insight, or something else. Ask them to jot their responses on the sticky notes. Meanwhile put up four sheets of newsprint. Label one "Prayers," another "Commitments," another "Insights," and the last with some catchall phrase such as "Other" or "Whatever," or . . . After participants have had a chance to think, invite them to put their responses on the newsprint. They might simply post the sticky notes, or they can write their responses directly on the newsprint. Save the newsprint to use in other sessions.

Closing and Prayer

Those Who Mourn

Key Ideas

- Blessed are those who mourn.
- They shall be comforted.
- Mourning elicits action or courageous engagement.

Welcome and Prayer

What Do We Mourn?

Invite the participants to arrange themselves in groups of two or three. Ask them to discuss the following:

- What situations and events do we mourn?
- Why do we mourn?

If people want to share their experiences with mourning, they may do so, but no one should feel pressured to share.

Mourning

Working as the whole group, make two lists on newsprint: one of what we mourn and the other of why we mourn. Try to categorize the things that we mourn, for example: the death of loved ones, the loss of family members or friends who are not dead but not with us, our mistakes, our sins, and world situations.

Spend a little time on the *how* of mourning. Ask these questions:

- How do our mourning customs differ from those of other cultures or from those in other times?
- Howell says that in the United States mourners are pressured to get over it and get on with their lives. Why do you think this is so?

- How could Christians respond when caught between a culture that says, “Cursed are the mourners,” and Jesus who says, “Blessed are those who mourn”?

Comforted

Ask the group to discuss the idea of comforting and being comforted.

- How do humans comfort one another? What relationship might you see between comfortable and comforted?
- How does God comfort people?
- Why do you think another name for the Holy Spirit is the Comforter?

Being Open

Comment that Howell quotes Nicholas Wolterstorff who says that Jesus challenges us to “[b]e open to the wounds of the world . . . be wounded by humanity’s wounds, [and] be in agony over humanity’s agony.¹ Write those phrases on a piece of newsprint. Ask:

- How would being open to wounds, wounding, and agony be different from our normal existence?
- Why would Jesus want us to be open in this way?
- If we were open, what would it mean?

Comment that Wolterstorff also says we are challenged to be open to wounds, wounding, and agony “in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.” Ask:

- What does that mean—in good cheer? How can we be in good cheer while being open to wounds, wounding, and agony?
- How can we mourn and be in good cheer at the same time?

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *A Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 85.

Blessed Graffiti

Observe that Howell says that “[m]ourning elicits action, courageous engagement.” Give each participant a sticky note. Invite participants to spend a few moments, individually, pondering how they might turn their own past or present mourning into action or courageous engagement. Ask them to jot their responses on the sticky notes. After participants have had a chance to think, invite them to put their responses on the four sheets of newsprint from the previous session (labeled “Prayers,” “Commitments,” “Insights,” and so on). They might simply post the sticky notes, or they can write their responses directly on the newsprint.

Closing and Prayer

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The Meek

Key Ideas

- Blessed are the meek.
- They shall inherit the earth.
- The meek are open to divine direction.

Welcome and Prayer

Meek?

Invite the group to arrange themselves in groups of three or four to discuss these questions:

- What is *meek*? What synonyms come to mind?
- How does *meek* fit into the image of God? When have we seen God being meek?

After a few minutes call the groups back together as a whole. Ask participants to list positive and negative attributes of the word *meek*. Write their responses on a piece of newsprint.

Then write the Greek word *praiis* on a piece of newsprint. If necessary, remind participants that the New Testament was originally written in Greek. *Praiis* is the word for “meek” in the Greek text. Recall how Howell interprets *praiis*: mild, gentle, unassuming, perhaps a bit obsequious, and unable to take much initiative. Comment that Howell observed that “meekness is frequently forced on you by circumstance.” Ask the group to give examples of people who might be meek because of their circumstance or situation.

The Meeks Will Inherit

Comment that “the meek” implies more than one meek person; it means all of the meek ones. Howell says not to expect Jesus to survey

the earth and assign a plot of land to each meek person; rather, they will share their inheritance, holding the earth in common. Ask the group: why do you think it would work for the meek to share the earth without fences or borders?

Meekness/Humbleness

Invite participants to arrange themselves in groups of four to six people and discuss these questions:

- How are meekness and humbleness related?
- The Christian church has called pride a sin and humbleness a virtue. How is humbleness a positive attribute?
- How have some Christians, at times, used the idea of humbleness as virtue to dominate, oppress, and denigrate other people? When are humbleness and meekness negative attributes?

Implications

Continue the discussion with these questions:

- What are some implications of Luther's saying that: "Faith is the humility that turns its back on its own reason and strength"? (Discussion question 2 in the book.)
- What are some examples you've experienced of the power of those who are "meek"? (Discussion question 3 in the book.)
- If we could ask Jesus to describe what he means by *meek*, what do you think he would say?
- How does meekness open a person to divine direction?
- What will life be like when the meek inherit the earth?

Learnings and Challenges

Invite participants to talk in pairs and share with each other the following:

- How has your perception of *meekness* changed because of this discussion?
- How has this bit of Scripture challenged you?

Closing and Prayer

Hunger and Thirst

Key Ideas

- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- Our dissatisfaction is a longing for God.

Welcome and Prayer

What Do We Want?

Invite the group to toss out ideas quickly on what they think people in our society hope to get out of life. Write the ideas on a piece of newsprint. Give participants a few moments to work individually. Encourage them to think about their own lives, what they hope for in life, and what they are longing for. They may jot down their thoughts, but don't ask them to share.

Righteousness

On a piece of newsprint write the word *righteousness* and these definitions: (1) consistently living in an upright, moral way according to a religious, ethical standard; (2) living in a right relationship with God, a relationship God has established and maintains; (3) "a life lived in conformity to God's will, adhering to God's laws, a life of prayerful holiness" (Howell).

Ask the group:

- What examples do you have of people who are living or have lived righteous lives?
- What is the difference between righteousness and self-righteousness?
- What does Howell mean when he writes, "Righteousness is a gift from God, achieved by Jesus"?

Hungering and Thirsting

Invite the participants to gather in groups of four to discuss these questions:

- What do you see as some similarities between spiritual hungering and thirsting and the hungering and thirsting of consumerism? What are some of the differences?
- Why does Howell say that our dissatisfaction draws us toward righteousness?
- In a world of overwhelming choice, how does being in a relationship with God limit our choices? (Paraphrase of discussion question 1 in the book.)
- Thomas Merton said that persisting in our relationship with God isn't "a matter of getting a bulldog grip on faith and not letting the devil pry us loose from it." Rather it is God "hanging on to us by the hair of the head." What does Merton's image communicate to you?

Why?

Ask the groups one more question:

- Howell says, "Only righteousness, only a relationship with the living Lord can satisfy—but even that satisfaction leaves us hungry for more." Why? Why are we not satisfied in this life?

Blessed Graffiti

Give each participant a sticky note. Invite participants to spend a few moments, individually, pondering the ways in which they hunger and thirst for righteousness. Ask them to jot their responses to this hungering and thirsting on the sticky notes. After participants have had a chance to think and write, invite them to put their responses on the four sheets of newsprint from the previous sessions (labeled "Prayers," "Commitments," "Insights," and so on). They might simply post the

sticky notes, or they can write their responses directly on the newsprint. Some may not want to make their notes public.

Closing and Prayer

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Merciful

Key Ideas

- Blessed are those who are merciful.
- God’s love and mercy are freely given, not something we earn or merit.
- Being merciful frees us from self-centeredness.

Welcome and Prayer

Mercy Memories

Invite the group to pair up to talk about experiences with mercy—given or withheld.

- When is it easy to give mercy?
- When is it hard to give mercy?
- Tell of a time you (or someone you know) gave—or received—mercy or a time when you (or someone you know) did not give—or receive—mercy.

God’s Free Gifts

With the total group together again, write on newsprint “by grace alone (*sola gratia*).” Explain that this phrase was a slogan of the Protestant Reformation. Ask if someone can tell what it means. (It means that we are saved only by God’s grace and not by any action on our part. God is the initiator and the actor; there is nothing we can do to earn, or achieve, God’s grace.) Invite the group to discuss these questions:

- How is God’s love related to God’s grace?
- How is God’s mercy related to grace?

For about five hundred years, Protestants have preached the message that we are saved by grace (not by our work or good deeds), so why are we so often reluctant, as Henri Nouwen says, to “kneel down, and let [our]selves be held by a forgiving God”? Why do we choose instead to be the “outsider looking in”?²

- How does our worldly need for credentials and advertising campaigns drive us away from mercy?

Mercy!

Continue the discussion with these questions:

- Why is it that those who receive mercy are the ones who acted mercifully?
- Howell tells us that the merciful give up their dignity and honor to be merciful, that their only honor is mercy. Why does one have to give up dignity and honor to be merciful?
- If we have to give up dignity and honor, why would anyone want to be merciful?

The Quality of Mercy

Ahead of time, write on newsprint the following quote from *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare (Act 4, Scene 1).

Portia speaks:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest:
It blesseth [the one] that gives and [the one] that takes:
'Tis the mightiest in the mightiest . . .
.....
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

2. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 12.

Invite the participants to discuss these questions:

- What, if anything, is the difference between mercy and tolerance?
- How is mercy a blessing to both the one who gives and the one who receives?
- How does human mercy differ from God’s mercy?

Self-Centeredness

Comment that Howell says, “Mercy frees me from self-centeredness.” Invite the group to discuss the concept.

- How does mercy free one from self-centeredness?
- Does the opposite hold true? Is unmercifulness a self-centered attitude? How?
- What good can come of being freed from self-centeredness?

The Ladder

Remind the group of the idea that the Beatitudes are a ladder. Ask:

- How do the previous rungs on the ladder (those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness) lead us to, or prepare us for, mercy?

Blessed Graffiti

Give each participant a sticky note. Invite participants to spend a few moments, individually, pondering the qualities of mercy and what part mercy plays in their lives. Ask them to form a response and write it on the sticky note. After participants have had a chance to think and write, invite them to put their responses on the four sheets of newsprint from the previous sessions (labeled “Prayers,” “Commitments,” “Insights,” and so on). They might simply post

the sticky notes, or they can write their responses directly on the newsprint. If you are running out of room on the blessing sheets, put up additional ones.

Closing and Prayer

Key Ideas

- Blessed are the pure in heart.
- The pure in heart will (or focus on) one thing: God.
- The pure of heart love.
- The pure of heart will see God.

Welcome and Prayer**Meeting or Avoiding God**

Write Howell's words on newsprint: "The heart is the sphere where we meet God, or avoid meeting God." Invite participants to think individually about how or when they have met God, or how or when they have avoided meeting God. After allowing some thinking time, invite participants to form pairs to share their experiences. Or if sharing experiences is too difficult, the pairs may discuss the meaning of Howell's statement.

Pure in Heart

On a piece of newsprint write the Greek word *katharoi*, the original word for "pure" in the biblical text. Refer to Howell's meaning for the word at the beginning of chapter 10. Write "catharsis" on the newsprint, an English word derived from *katharoi*. Ask participants what catharsis means (if necessary refer to Howell at the beginning of chapter 10). Then discuss:

- What relationship can you see between purity and catharsis?
- The theologian Søren Kierkegaard and Howell tell us that purity of heart is to will one thing: God. What does that mean to you?
- Howell says the pure of heart love. How do you interpret that?

To Will One Thing

Invite the participants to arrange themselves in groups of two or three to discuss these questions:

- In a world that requires us to spend most of our day multi-tasking, how can we will (or focus on) one thing (God)? How is it possible to hold down a job, or care for a family, or engage in the activities of our world if our focus is on God?
- Why is it that impurity often looks better to us than purity? How do we reject the allure of impurity? If we succeed in rejecting impurity, isn't the world going to consider us weird? And if so, how do you feel about that?
- Who do you know that you might characterize as pure in heart? In what ways is that person pure in heart? (Discussion question 2 in the book.)

Psalm 73

With participants still in small groups, invite them to read Psalm 73 and to discuss these questions:

- Do you believe the psalmist's statement in verse 1? Why or why not?
- In what ways do you relate to the psalmist's disgruntlement with the wicked? If you were making the list, as the psalmist did in verses 4–12, what would you include?
- Where in this psalm do you see evidence of the psalmist's pure heart?
- What did the psalmist learn about God?

Seeing God

Invite the participants to gather as the total group to discuss these questions:

- Howell says that what God gives the pure of heart is God's own self. What does that mean?

- Quoting Howell (p. 73): “The pure in heart see, and they see in order to love, and they love to fulfill their eternal vocation of praise.” He goes on to say we can see Jesus in “the poor, hungry, naked, homeless, imprisoned.” How does seeing, loving, and praising lead to seeing Jesus in others?

Blessed Graffiti

Give each participant a sticky note. Remind participants that Howell says the writer of Psalm 73 “went to the temple, the holy place, and somehow by being in that place he caught some glimpse of hope” (p. 71). Invite participants to spend a few moments, individually, thinking about where they catch a glimpse of hope and what it looks like to them. Ask them to form a response and write it on the sticky note. After participants have had a chance to think and write, invite them to put their responses on the four sheets of newsprint from the previous sessions (labeled “Prayers,” “Commitments,” “Insights,” and so on). They might simply post the sticky notes, or they can write their responses directly on the newsprint. If you are running out of room on the blessing sheets, put up additional ones.

Closing and Prayer

Peacemakers

Key Ideas

- Blessed are the peacemakers.
- Peacemakers tell the truth.
- Peacemakers forgive.

Welcome and Prayer

What Do You Think?

Invite participants to arrange themselves in groups of three or four to share ideas about peace.

- What is peace?
- When is it safe or not safe to talk about peace?
- What do peacemakers do? How is peace more than just “passivism” or the absence of war?

Telling the Truth

Invite the total group to discuss these questions:

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that peace could not rest on lies and injustice. Why not?
- What kind of truth telling must peacemakers do in their families? In the workplace? In the church? In the nation?

Shalom

Continuing in the total group, write “*shalom*” on a piece of newsprint. Some may be quite familiar with the concept, but for others, this may be their first encounter with the term. Explain that

shalom, a Hebrew word, is the biblical vision of peace. It encompasses wholeness, well-being—for the individual and society—justice, and righteousness. Write down the key words of the definition as you explain it. Remind participants that Howell explains the biblical concept of justice “is not about fairness to the individual, but rather health to the community.” He goes on to say that if you want to know if a community or nation is just, “ask if the neediest are cared for” (p. 78). Ask:

- Using Howell’s criterion, how would you grade our nation on justice?
- If the grade is less than an A, what might peacemakers need to do?
- If the grade is an A, what did the nation do to earn an A?
- Why is peacemaking difficult?

Forgiveness

Remind the group of Howell’s quote from Bonhoeffer that forgiveness of sins is “the sole ground of all peace.”³ Ask:

- How is the blame game different than truth telling?
- How does forgiveness lay a foundation for peace?

Working for *Shalom*

Invite the participants to arrange themselves in groups of two or three to further the discussion.

- How is forgiveness a behavior that fully restores relationships?
- Howell says unforgiven sin entangles us in “barbed wire that lacerates the soul” (p. 80). If being unforgiving is so damaging to the soul, why is forgiving so difficult to do?
- Forgiveness moves us toward *shalom*. Howell says that when working toward *shalom* it is inevitable that there will have to be “some shift in *power* relationships” (p. 78). Give examples of

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, tr. John Bowden, ed. Edwin Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 168.

when an individual might have to give up some power and accept some “injustice” in order to contribute to the health and well-being of the community.

- What would you be willing to give up for *shalom*?
- How does thinking of peace as *shalom* take us beyond the cessation of war?

Children of God

With the participants still in small groups, have someone read aloud Matthew 5:9: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” Ask the groups to discuss the following questions:

- What does it mean to be children of God? In what ways are God’s people a family?
- How might peacemaking skills learned in the family unit be useful in the larger community?
- How would you characterize the role of the peacemaker in God’s family? Troublemaker? Family oddball? Rescuer? Other? And what is your reasoning?

Blessed Graffiti

Give each participant a sticky note. Invite the participants to spend a few moments, individually, thinking about what they need to do to begin, or continue, to work for *shalom*. They might want to consider working for *shalom* in the home, the community, or the world. Participants may or may not want to write a response on the sticky note. Those who wish to may put their responses on the four sheets of newsprint from the previous sessions (labeled “Prayers,” “Commitments,” “Insights,” and so on). They might simply post the sticky notes, or they can write their responses directly on the newsprint.

Closing and Prayer

Key Ideas

- Blessed are you when you are persecuted and reviled for righteousness' sake.
- Discipleship is costly.

Welcome and Prayer

Personal Reckoning

Comment that when the members of the Second Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence they knew that doing so could be dangerous and could cost them everything they had. The last sentence of the Declaration says, “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

Tell the participants that they will be spending a few minutes with their own private thoughts and that they will not be asked to share those thoughts. Ask them to suppose that all Christian congregations required a costly contribution from each person seeking membership. Invite the participants to think of what their faith means to them and how much they would be willing to give for their faith. Would they pledge their lives? Their fortunes? Their sacred honor? What else?

Persecution

Comment that from the time of Jesus' crucifixion to the present his followers have suffered persecution—and engaged in persecuting others (this study limits itself to the persecution of Christians, not the Christian persecution of others). Invite participants to break into

groups of three or four to quickly list as many instances of persecution against Christians as they can think of. (Howell gives some examples in chapter 12.) As well as thinking of persecution of Christians by non-Christians, encourage participants to think of Christian persecutions of Christians, for example, the church persecuting Galileo for his scientific findings, the church's persecution of Protestant "heretics," the persecution of the Salem "witches," and the persecutions that brought the first English settlers to America looking for religious freedom. If participants seem to be thinking only about the distant past, encourage them to think of more current events. For example, in 2005, extreme Muslims in Indonesia closed Christian churches and beheaded three Christian schoolgirls.

Gather as the whole group and ask for a volunteer group to read its list first. Write its list on newsprint for all to see. As each subsequent group reports, ask it to read only examples from its list that have not already been expressed by a previous group. In other words keep your newsprint list free from duplicates.

On Our Minds?

Have participants stand. Tell them you will ask a question and they will answer by moving to a particular point in the room. Ask: "How often do you worry about being persecuted for your faith?" Designate one corner of the room as "frequently/all the time," another corner as "sometimes," another as "once in a while," and the fourth as "never." More than likely, you will have everyone piled in the "never" corner. However, there may be some in the group who have experienced persecution, for example, immigrants, especially refugees, or participants who were U.S. POWs or U.S. citizens who had been kidnapped and/or held hostage in another country. If any participants have been persecuted, proceed cautiously. Some may be willing to talk to the group about the experience, while others will not want anyone else to know of their persecution. Certain participants may not come to this session fearing it would be too difficult. If you know a participant, or someone else, who was persecuted, contact the person ahead of time and ask if he or she would be willing to tell the group about the experience.

If you can safely assume participants have not been persecuted, ask them to sit down again and discuss the following questions:

- Why is it that we, though we are Christian, do not have to worry about personal persecution?
- Why did Jesus switch from talking in the third person (“Blessed are those . . .”) to speaking to us directly in the second person (“Blessed are you . . .”)?
- If Jesus assumes all his followers will be persecuted, and so many have been, and many still are around the world, what does that say about us? Can we be “real” Christians if we never have to test our faith against the strength of the enemy?

Rejoice and Be Glad

Continuing the discussion, ask:

- Why did Jesus tell his followers to rejoice and be glad when people revile and persecute them? How can one rejoice and be glad in that kind of situation?
- What did Tertullian—a theologian (ca. 155–225) of the early church—mean when he said that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”?⁴ How does our attitude in times of crisis and trouble influence others? How does my attitude influence me?

Cost of Discipleship

Comment that Howell says that if we embody Christ’s words and stick closely to him in the real world, we may suffer. Ask:

- How? Why?
- How do we know whether we are suffering for righteousness’ sake, for conformity to Jesus, or for some other reason of our own making?

4. Tertullian, “Apology,” in *Apologetical Works*, vol. 10, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), 125.

Work and Hope

Invite participants to arrange themselves in groups of three or four. Invite them to have a discussion around these ideas:

- Martin Luther King Jr. said, “If you haven’t discovered something worth dying for, you haven’t found something worth living for.”⁵ What do you think King had that was worth living for?
- Use your imagination: What is something you are not involved with now that might be worth living for? If you got engaged in this imaginary endeavor, what kinds of things might you have to suffer?
- What does having something worth living for have to do with being persecuted for righteousness’ sake?
- How do you make the distinction between hope and optimism?
- Where is there hope in persecution?

Blessed Graffiti

Give each participant a sticky note. Invite participants to spend a few moments, individually, thinking about what they would consider worth dying for. Tell them to not put the answer on the sticky note but keep it in their hearts. Invite participants to put other responses on the sticky note (a prayer, commitment, insight, or something else) and add it to the four sheets of newsprint from the previous sessions. They might simply post the sticky notes, or they can write their responses directly on the newsprint.

Invite the participants to open their books and read responsively the words from the Sisters of Charity on page 93.

Closing and Prayer

5. Quoted by James Cone in *Martyrdom Today*, ed. Johannes Baptist-Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Seabury, 1983), 76.

13 & 14

Saints and Heroes Presence of the Future

Key Ideas

- The Scriptures, like a script, show us how we are to *act*.
- Jesus is the point where present and future meet.

Welcome and Prayer

Saintly Attributes

Invite participants to arrange themselves in groups of three. Ask the groups to define what a saint is and to list attributes of a saintly person. After allowing a few minutes of working time, ask each group to read its definition and attributes. Write the attributes on a piece of newsprint as the group reports. If a group lists an attribute that is the same as one already on your newsprint list, put a check mark by that attribute. Keep the list up where people can see it.

Saints

As a total group, invite the participants to discuss these questions:

- Why do you think Howell devoted a chapter on saints in a book about the Beatitudes?
- Howell credits Nicholas Lash with the idea that the Scripture, like a script, shows us how to act. “Act” in this sense refers to doing, action, living. How can the Beatitudes help Christ’s followers know how to live?
- Who do you know personally that you consider to be a saint? What is that person like? Which of the Beatitudes does that person embody?

Present and Future

Comment that when Howell looked at the verbs in the Beatitudes, he discovered that Jesus didn't stick to just one tense. For example: "Blessed *are* the meek, for they *shall inherit* the earth." Howell then goes on to say "that Jesus is precisely the point where present and future meet" (p. 107). Invite the participants into the discussion.

- Give examples of how we live in two "time zones" simultaneously: the past and the present, or the present and the future. (For example, we might be driving to work, but our mind is reliving some event in the past.)
- In what ways would you describe the Beatitudes as bringing together the "present" and the "future"? (Question 1 in the book)

Saints Like Us

Invite the participants to arrange themselves in groups of three or four. Invite them to discuss the following issues:

- Flip through chapters 13 and 14 in your books (*The Beatitudes for Today*) to remind you of some of the saints. Think of one saint in particular (it can be someone not mentioned in the book). What traits or qualities did that person have that you have too? What was it about this person that made others think of her or him as a saint?
- Describe how saints live at the intersection of the present and the future.
- How would you describe joy? How does it bridge the present and the future?
- What does joy have to do with the Beatitudes?

Remembering

As the groups finish their discussions, invite participants to walk up to the Blessing sheets and read what is on them. After allowing some

reading time, invite volunteers to share their thoughts on these topics or others that may be more pertinent to your group.

- How would you describe the time together as a study group?
- What was one insight you had?
- In what ways might you think or feel differently about the Beatitudes because of this study?

Crossroads

Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine themselves at the intersection of their present and their future. At that intersection they meet Jesus. Invite the participants to relax for a few minutes and imagine the experience.

Closing and Prayer