

March 16. Read Matthew 5:1-12. When was the last time you had a great conversation? Some of the best conversations happen when friends get together to talk about the normal stuff of life. That's exactly how Jesus began what's usually called The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Like usual, a crowd had gathered around Jesus, but at first he focused on his closest friends, the twelve disciples. Jesus said God blesses eight times. Sometimes these statements are called The Beatitudes. You could think about them as the "be - attitudes," meaning if you follow Jesus, you should be a person with these attitudes. Today, people mostly use blessed as a hashtag. "Look at all my great stuff! Look at my great life!" For Jesus, blessed was much more than a hashtag. When you read blessed in these verses, substitute happy or fortunate, and be prepared for a surprise. "Happy and fortunate are those who mourn." What does that even mean? How is that even possible? That's exactly what Jesus wanted his friends - and us - to think about. Put "Happy and fortunate to the rest of our passage today. These "attitudes" don't come naturally or easily. But God can change us into be - attitude people. What friends would you pick to have a deep conversation with about the most important things in life? How is it possible to be blessed/fortunate when difficult or challenging things happen in your life? Which one of the attitudes in these verses do you feel like you need in your life now?

March 17. Read Matthew 5:13-16. Jesus said that his followers are salt and light in the world. But what does that mean, exactly? Salt helps bring out the flavor in food. It's also used as a preservative, especially when refrigeration isn't available. In other words, salt prevents decay. It keeps things from wasting away. God wants his followers to keep life fresh and flavorful, and to not let their life waste away. A Christian shouldn't blend into the bland ways of the world but should instead reflect the amazing "flavorful" and vibrant, full life that only Christ can provide. And Jesus-followers must intentionally live for God instead of letting their life go to waste. Now think about light. Imagine all the ways light affects your life. It helps you see things clearly. It illuminates everything it reaches. It often brings warmth. It exposes things that are lost or hidden. Jesus tells his followers to be light in the world, to live in a way that illuminates what life is really about: truth, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and compassion, to name a few things. No matter how dark a room is, even just a small light makes a difference. The same is true of even just one faithful follower of Jesus - that person makes a difference. What kind of spices do you like to add to certain foods? Why does it taste better? Who is an example of a person you know who has been "salt" and "light" in your life? How have they done that? Think about what you will be doing in the next 60 minutes. How could you be "salt and light" to glorify God in your family, community, school, or friend-group?

March 18. Read Matthew 5:17-20. Some people think the Bible is just a collection of rules and commands that can be used like a religious scorecard. If you do the right things, you get points. If you do wrong things, you lose points. But that's not how the Bible works at all. The Bible is a story, from the beginning of time until the end of time that is primarily about God, but also about humans and how they can have a relationship with God and live life with him and for him. One thing we all know about humans is that they like to push boundaries, and sometimes they're tempted to do things that aren't good for them, for the world, or for the other people around them. Long before Jesus was born, God provided some specific laws to help people live rightly, safely, and differently from those around them who worshipped false gods and followed false religions. The Old Testament (the section of the Bible that comes before the birth of Jesus) contains 248 commandments (right things to do) and 365 prohibitions (wrong things to not do). In Jesus' time, the religious leaders known as Pharisees worked very hard to obey everything in the Old Testament and they demanded that other people follow all of these rules, too. When Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of... [the] Pharisees," he didn't mean people should try to get a better "score" than the Pharisees. The point isn't to walk around thinking, "I obeyed 200 commandments out of 248 today. How about you??" Getting a good "score" isn't what makes a person right with God. Jesus took care of that himself when he died on the cross and rose again. Trying to get a perfect score on "following all the rules" is not the key to life. The key to life is knowing Jesus and letting him change us from the inside out. He wants us to obey him out of love, not just follow rules out of fear or pride. The Bible puts it this way: "People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) Keeping religious score is a waste of time. Loving and obeying Jesus is the only thing that counts. What are some of the ways you've tried to keep score with God? What are some of the ways God is changing your heart? In what ways are you learning to obey God more and more?

March 19. Read Matthew 5:21-26. Have you ever struggled with anger? Most people do, and God knows it. That's why he warns about it throughout the Bible, and why Jesus warned about it in these verses. Not all anger is bad. God can have what some people call "righteous anger," especially when his most prized creation, people, hurt other people. Jesus displayed righteous anger one time when he cleared greedy salespeople out of the temple (John 2:13-16). But unlike God and Jesus, our anger is rarely righteous and pure. People often express anger through judgmental name-calling. Calling someone an idiot, or a fool (or worse) comes with some heavy consequences. It grieves and angers God. The words themselves aren't the main problem. But they're evidence of deeper issues that are often grounded in anger. When we speak about someone like this, with anger and hatred in our heart, Jesus said it's as bad as if we'd committed murder. So what are we supposed to do when we get angry? First, don't let anger come out in thoughtless words. As the saying goes, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all – good advice for sure. Next, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-26, go immediately to the person you are angry with and attempt to "be reconciled" or "make peace" with him or her. Jesus also said in Matthew 7:1-5 to look at your own faults before you attack someone else's. When you are angry, ask God in prayer to help you with your thoughts, words, and body language (rolling your eyes, turning away, and more). When we learn to notice and confront our anger in its early stages, we will avoid making things worse in our relationships with others and with God. Think of a time when someone was really angry with you. What happened? How did you feel and respond? Why do you think Jesus instructs people to deal with their anger quickly? How might God use your last (specific) "angry moment" as an opportunity to grow in your relationship with him?

March 20. Read Matthew 5:33-37. Jesus told his followers that they should be people of integrity, which means "undivided" and "a person of your word." Today, we've become so used to fake news and to people saying whatever is going to make them look good that we might have forgotten what honest integrity looks like. It can be hard to trust people in a world like ours. Sometimes people try to convince others they can be trusted by saying things like, "I swear on my mother's grave!" or, "I swear on a stack of Bibles!" Jesus tells us to keep our promises simple. He instructs us to say, "Yes, I will," or "No, I won't." Giving a basic yes or no answer may sound easy enough, but it can be really hard to do in a world that often makes excuses and teaches people to make empty promises. We grow in integrity as we think carefully about each promise we make and work hard to keep our word, even when it is difficult - especially when it is difficult! Think of someone you know who is honest and has integrity. How would you describe them? What do you admire about them? Why do you think people add phrases or extra sayings to their simple "yes" or "no?" What is a promise or commitment you've made that you are finding difficult to keep? How do you think God wants to you handle it?

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