

[A Devotional Study *on* Growing in Character
from the Beatitudes]

LORD,
Only You
Can
Change Me



KAY ARTHUR

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ONLY YOU CAN
CHANGE ME

A DEVOTIONAL STUDY *on* GROWING
IN CHARACTER *from the* BEATITUDES

K A Y
A R T H U R



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INTRODUCTION

Vou stand and gaze in the mirror, evaluating what you see—the way you will appear before others on the outside. But what about the inside—the character that counts, that enhances what others see and never belies the appearance you give when you are “on display”? What are you like, Beloved, in the inner man? Is it any different from what you once were? Is there a growing, a changing into His image? Is your character being transformed more and more into His likeness? Are you distinguished from those you work with in the world, as well as from those who call Him, “Lord, Lord” but really don’t do the things He tells them to do?

This is a devotional study on character—the character that belongs to those who genuinely belong to God. It will reveal what godly character looks like for you in the home and in the marketplace...in fact, wherever you are. Among many other things, it’s about humility (meekness) and mercy and purity—qualities that we’re so often deficient in and that we want to grow in until finally we “are perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect.” Built into the definition of this word *perfect* is the idea of maturity, attainment—and that is what we are after in this study, Beloved: growth on the inside that far outshines and outweighs our physical appearance and accomplishments.

You are about to immerse yourself in a study of the Beatitudes to help you mine and explore many spiritual gems that will enrich your life, helping you to prosper spiritually in a way that will delight you and be noticed by others. The water of His Word will bring a growth that will be well worth the discipline of daily study.

This is a study you can do alone—it’s used by Christian counselors as part of their counseling. But it is also a study that can be done in groups and even become a ministry for you, Beloved of God, as you desire to reach the hurting of this world and see them healed. If there is

that possibility of your using this as a group study in which you would be a facilitator, then read “Guidelines for Group Use” in the “Study Resources” section at the back of this book, where you’ll find other valuable tools to enhance this study.

For many, the blessing of this study has been enhanced by the companion video and audio teaching tapes. For more information on these, simply call Precept Ministries International at our toll-free number (1-800-763-8280) and let one of our staff members help you. It would be their pleasure. We also provide training if you would like to develop your skills in handling the Word of God more accurately or in leading others in group studies designed to minister to people of all ages at any level of commitment while respecting the restraints on their time. We’re known as “The Inductive Study People: everybody, everywhere, any time, any place, any language, any age. One message: the Bible. One method: inductive.” Please don’t hesitate to call us.

Finally, let me share my vision—it’s the possibility of a new avenue of ministry for you, Beloved of God...

*A new beginning—
An avenue of ministry—
A sense of doing something that has eternal value*

These are three things I think are so important for you and for me. There’s so much to learn, to know, to experience, to do—and we never want to lose sight of that. To do so would be to miss what God has for us. To fall short of the tremendous potential of our lives—a potential that is ours because we are His, because we are children of the Creator of the Universe, indwelt by His divine Spirit and given the mind of Christ. You and I, Beloved, are God’s workmanship gifted by the Spirit of God and created in Christ Jesus unto good works that would absolutely stagger our minds if we were to see them before they ever happened.

And what has God put into your hands? What are you holding and

reading right now? Is it an accident? A coincidence? No! You are holding a devotional study that first and foremost will be the beginning of a new depth of understanding about growing in godly character.

God is going to speak to you because through this book you are going to come face to face with the living Word of God—the Word that not only discerns the thoughts and intentions of your heart, but becomes the means of throwing His light on the direction your life is taking so you can know with absolute confidence where you are headed. If you listen to what He says—and by that I mean ordering your life accordingly—then there is, in a sense, a new beginning...of understanding, of purpose. A new level of Christlikeness is attained. You will be, as Paul would say, pressing on and attaining that for which Jesus Christ laid hold of you.

Which brings me to my next point—an avenue of ministry. What you have learned, God intends for you to share. I have a vision, and you, Beloved, are part of that vision. Our Lord's commission in Matthew 28 was that we make disciples of all men—that we teach them to observe all that He has commanded us. Acts 1 tells us that when we are saved and receive the Holy Spirit we become His witnesses—yet the question is often, “How?”

Here is the how. This “Lord” book contains truths every human being needs to know and to apply to his or her life. These are precepts for life; through them we will gain understanding and, as the psalmist says, “hate every false way” (Psalm 119:104). We hate it because it is false rather than true, and it is truth that sets us apart, sets us free.

So what is my vision for you, my friend? It is that you go to the Lord in prayer and ask Him to direct you to at least one other person—but preferably at least ten—and that you, along with them, study this book together. You may not be a teacher, but you can be the group's facilitator. You can take the questions you'll find at the end of each chapter and use them to stimulate a discussion among those whom the Lord has brought together in answer to your prayer. These are those who will be part of your crown of rejoicing in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. As you

watch them learn and grow in the knowledge of God and of His Word, you will experience the humbling joy of knowing that you have been used of God. That what you have done has eternal value. That your life and God-given gifts have not been wasted. That your work will live on—that the grace of God poured out on you was not poured out in vain, for you have labored in the strength of His grace.

So as you facilitate a group using this book, you need to watch for and encourage others in your group to do as you have done—to take what they have learned and impart it to another as you did with them. Think of the multiplication that will happen! Do you realize, Beloved, that this is the way we can reach our neighborhoods, our communities, our nation, and beyond? Think of the transformation that will take place among all those people today who are so interested in “the spiritual” but won’t step inside a church. Think—just think!—what is going to happen!

The time is now. The hour is short. Stop and pray right now and ask God what He would have you to do. He will show you, because He is God and because such prayers are in accordance with His will. As you step out and begin, just know that if you will step out in faith, God will give you an avenue of ministry, person by person or group by group, that will not only stagger your mind but absolutely delight your soul.

I cannot wait to hear what God does in and through you, my friend.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kay". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "K" and a long, sweeping underline that loops back under the "y".

GETTING BEYOND OUR MASKS

— D A Y O N E —

Maybe you've tried and tried and failed and failed. You find yourself thinking, *There is no way I can change! There's no way I can be the man...the woman...the husband...the wife...the parent...the single person...God wants me to be. The task is too great! The odds are insurmountable!*

Or possibly you look around...maybe among your family and friends, maybe among the members of your church, maybe in the body of Christ in general...and shudder because of all the hypocrisy you see. Or maybe you look within and shudder at your own hypocrisy!

You want heaven, but you're getting hell on earth instead. You find yourself clinging to life—sometimes by your fingernails—in the hope that somehow, someday, somewhere life will change and heaven will come to earth. Or perhaps you've already let go in despair. You've resigned yourself to a living hell.

I understand. Truly, I do. I've been there. And you might be surprised to know how many others have been there too.

It really wasn't all that much different in the days when Jesus walked this earth as a human being. He looked around Him and saw men and women and young people trapped in these same situations. They tried and tried—and they failed and failed. Their religion—the storied, richly tapestried faith of their fathers—just wasn't working. Many of those who seemed “in the know” about God and His Word were rank hypocrites.

But rather than condemning these unhappy, harried people, Jesus had deep compassion on them. To His eyes, they looked “distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). So He went up to a high and beautiful hill beside the Sea of Galilee to set forth the truth from His Father. Overlooking that sea—a sea sometimes peaceful and serene, at other times turbulent and threatening—He sat down with His disciples and told them about the kingdom of heaven. About what belonging to that kingdom would mean in their daily lives. About the changes it would bring. And about the price they would have to pay.

Let’s climb that hill too, my friend. It’s a breathtaking climb...with a breathtaking view. Let’s sit at His feet, high above the restless, changing sea. Let’s drink in His words and ponder His perspective. For we too have been “distressed and downcast,” and we too need the wisdom and guiding hand of our good Shepherd.

That’s your assignment today, Beloved. To sit at His feet and read again His timeless words in Matthew 5–7. Don’t mark or underline a single word today. Simply open your heart and read. But before you do...begin with prayer. Tell the Father you want to hear and understand the words of His Son. Tell Him that you long to have the life they can bring. Then, when you’ve finished your reading, talk to Him again. Talk to Him about what His Son has said. Be honest. Tell Him what you think, what you feel, what you don’t understand, what you *want* to understand. Tell Him what you feel is impossible—and why.

Before you get up from your knees, you might tell Him your desire to commit yourself to this nine-week study. Lift up your voice, and cry out to Him, *Lord, only You can change me. Please do. In Jesus’ name.*

If you have read through the Word of God, you know how God delights to hear and honor the cry of those who call out to Him with sincere hearts. And He not only hears “saints;” he hears the cry of “sinners” as well. He’s heard my cry, and He will hear yours.

I’m going to give you some space to write out your prayer...or perhaps to list those longings of your heart that you’d like to bring before

Him. You don't have to use the space, but you might find it helpful. At the end of this study, you may want to come back and reflect on all He has accomplished in you through these life-transforming weeks.

Now climb that hill! Hear His words. And watch your life begin to change.

— D A Y T W O —

Real Christian life—the genuine article—is never hypocritical.

Authentic Christian life is something higher, brighter, and infinitely more powerful than pale, phony substitutes.

It will take you from the valley of sin to the mount of blessedness.

It will take you from the depths of destitution to the heights of God's approval.


It will lift you from the instability of building on sand to the security of a foundation on rock.

It is a lifestyle that can endure all the torrential storms of life and remain unshaken.

Where can it be found?

It's all in seed form in Matthew 5, 6, and 7—Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Today I want us to think about the main theme of this magnificent message. What is its heartbeat? What point is Jesus making?

Two key words that will help us grasp the theme of the Sermon are

righteousness and *heaven*. Read through the Sermon on the Mount printed at the back of this book and mark every reference you find to *heaven* and *righteousness*, or their synonyms.* You might want to use a blue pen and draw a little cloud shape like this—  —around each reference to heaven. Whatever design you choose, mark the words in a distinctive way so you can spot them easily. Then choose another color and/or special marking to highlight the words *righteous* and *righteousness* in the text. *Heaven* or *heavenly* is used twenty-one times; *righteous* or *righteousness* appears six times.

When you have finished marking each reference, fill in the appropriate spaces that follow. Note the chapter and verse of each mention of these words, and record what you learn in each passage.

HEAVEN

CHAPTER AND VERSE

WHAT I LEARNED

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Matthew 5:3 | It belongs to the poor in spirit. |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |
| 4. | |
| 5. | |
| 6. | |

* See page 259 for section on marking your Bible.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16.

17.

18.

19.

20.

21.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

CHAPTER AND VERSE

WHAT I LEARNED

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

What is the theme of the Sermon on the Mount? It is *the righteous lifestyle of those who belong to the kingdom of heaven*. We will look more closely at this theme tomorrow. But before we close...would you allow me one question? What did you learn today that you didn't know before? Write it out.

— D A Y T H R E E —

From looking at the words *heaven* and *righteousness* you may have noticed that those who will enter the kingdom of heaven fulfill four basic requirements. Let's summarize them.

Those who enter the kingdom of heaven

1. are poor in spirit (5:3);
2. are persecuted for righteousness' sake (5:10);
3. have a righteousness that even surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20);
4. obey God's will (7:21).

The bottom line of Jesus' message? Righteousness is an absolute necessity for those who are going to enter the kingdom of heaven! For this reason, I believe the *key verse* for the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5:20: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Was it any wonder the multitudes were amazed at Jesus' teaching! A righteousness that *exceeded* the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? How could it ever be? These were the great religious leaders of the day. None were more respected than they! How then could such a righteousness be attained by ordinary people—fishermen and carpenters and housewives and passionate young people and children? What could He have meant by those bewildering words?

Understanding the scribes and Pharisees will help you answer these questions and give you deeper insight into Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Old Testament documents the existence of scribes long before the Pharisees entered the stage of history. But they really did not come into prominence until Judah was restored to its land following the Babylonian captivity. The office of scribe came out of the priesthood. Scribes were experts in the Law of Moses whose responsibilities fell into two general categories: preserving the Law and teaching the Law.

The scribes may have been the originators of the synagogues, which came into being as a result of the Babylonian exile. Cut off from the ruined temple of Jerusalem, the Jews created the synagogue as a place where God's people could gather to worship and be instructed in the Law.

By the time of Jesus' birth, the synagogue was one of Judaism's most important institutions. It was in these synagogues that the scribes and Pharisees exercised their considerable authority. They taught the Law, yes. But they taught their own *traditions* and *interpretations* of the Law as well. The man or woman on the street did not own a copy of the Law but depended solely upon the teachings of these religious leaders.

The Pharisees were a religious party which came into being during the four-hundred-year period between the Old and New Testaments. By Jesus' time, they had supreme influence among the people. They believed in the resurrection, angels, spirits, and the coming of the Messiah, but their forte was the Law of God! As a matter of fact, they had reduced God's Law to a code of 365 negative commandments and 250 positive commandments—which included many of their own interpretations of God's Word. They claimed that these expansions came from direct inspiration and were God-given interpretations of the Law. As a result, when the people heard the Word, they heard a distorted version of it. This is why Jesus took the scribes and Pharisees to task so sternly. Their traditions and so-called interpretations often directly contradicted God's intentions. Listen to Jesus' comments.

And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

“THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.
BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.”

“Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” He was also saying to them, “You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition...thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.” (Mark 7:6-9,13)

As a result of the scribes' and Pharisees' interpretation of the Law, sin had become only an external act, rather than a matter of the heart. Something was declared right or wrong because an external condition was absent or present. For instance, if a Jew gave alms to the poor on the Sabbath, he could do so only if the beggar put his hand through the door to receive the alms. If the Jew extended his hand out the door to give alms to the beggar, he was considered to have broken the Sabbath.

Knowing this, you may better understand what Jesus means in Matthew 5 when He says, "You have heard...*but I say to you*" (verses 21-22). They had heard a distortion of the Law from the scribes and Pharisees' teaching in the synagogues, but they didn't know any better because they didn't know God's Word! (No wonder they were so distressed and downcast!)

And isn't that the way it is today? Sometimes I find myself shuddering as I watch "Christian" television. I shudder because I know that thousands upon thousands of untaught Christians are lapping up teachings which are simply not biblical. Yet they don't know better because they don't know God's Word! And they will *never* know it in its purity and authority and true transforming power until they study it for themselves. This is why I have such an intense longing to teach men, women, boys, and girls throughout the world how to study God's Word for themselves—inductively!

Take a moment now, as this day's study ends, and read Mark 7:1-16. Are there any traditions you're holding to which are not truly biblical? What might they be? List them below.

Now ask the Lord to root your life ever deeper by the sure-flowing stream of His eternal Word.

– D A Y F O U R –

“We live in a time when many who claim to know Christ undermine the Gospel by short-circuiting the radical implications of a life of discipleship as set forth by Jesus the Christ.” When I read this statement in Robert Guelich’s commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, I thought, *How true that is, and how typical!*

We want heaven, life, eternity! Who doesn’t? We hear the good news about eternal life through Jesus Christ. It’s free, so we take it, tuck it under our arm, and walk away. We’re relieved. No hell now; heaven’s our home. Then, since we “have that problem settled,” we imagine we can get back to living our lives as we please.

But can we?

Does true Christianity allow us to go back to living *our own lives*?

I would like to switch on a worldwide intercom at this point and shout one loud, resounding NO! You cannot belong to God and live any way you please! True Christianity is discipleship. It’s the willingness to turn around, to leave everything, and to let Jesus Christ be all in all. It’s the willingness to follow Him wherever He leads and to do whatever He says. True Christianity is a total commitment of oneself to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Some of you may disagree. That’s fine. Just don’t stop studying until you see what the Sermon on the Mount has to say—lest you short-circuit the radical implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Read Matthew 7:13-29. Then, from what you have read, answer the questions that follow.

▶ MATTHEW 7:13–29

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is

small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall.”

The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

1. Describe the way that leads to life.

2. Whose words are you reading in this passage? If you have trouble answering this, look at Matthew 5:1-2 and 7:28-29.

3. According to Jesus, how many are there who find the way to life?

4. Who is going to enter the kingdom of heaven?

5. How do those who are going to heaven respond to Jesus' words?

6. Why do you think the people were amazed at Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5-7?

7. According to what you have just read, do you think a person can live any way he pleases and still go to heaven? Explain your answer.

8. Now, let's get personal. How do *you* live?

— D A Y F I V E —

Hypocrisy is an age-old problem. And it was as common in Jesus' day as it is today. Jesus used the word frequently, particularly in reference to two groups of people. Take a few minutes and read Matthew 23. As you do, it would be good to color or mark each occurrence of the word *hypocrites* in a distinctive way. Then write in the following space whom Jesus called "hypocrites" and why He called them that.

Hypocrite was the word used for a stage actor. In Greek and Roman theater, actors customarily wore large masks to indicate a particular mood or emotion. No matter how the actor himself might feel, the mask was what everyone saw. A hypocrite, then, is an actor, or one who habitually wears a mask.

From your reading of Matthew 23, why do you think Jesus used the term *hypocrites* to describe the scribes and Pharisees? What were they doing that prompted Him to say what He did? Write out your answer below.

Now, stop and think. Are you a hypocrite in any way? Do you ever find yourself “acting”? Do you ever find yourself slipping on a mask to hide the way you truly feel? Do you speak words that your life does not back up? For instance, when you sing in church “I surrender all...,” have you really surrendered all?

When you pray the Lord’s Prayer and say, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...,” do you really desire to stay away from temptation? When you pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...,” are you really willing to forgive others—from the heart—as God has forgiven you? Do you pray at prayer meetings to be seen by others, but not at home when you are alone with God?

What about masks? Do you behave one way at church and another way at home or in your business? Does your attitude toward your mate or your children change when you get out of the car in the church parking lot? Do you slip a smiling-face mask over an angry scowl? Do you pull on an I-really-care-about-you mask when you talk to people, while underneath you really don’t care at all?

Do you see what I am saying? It was the *religious* ones whom Jesus called hypocrites. They were the ones who claimed to know God—not the prostitutes, drunks, thieves, liars, and adulterers.

Perhaps at this point you are asking: “Is it possible *not* to be a hypocrite? Doesn’t everyone wear a mask now and then? Is it realistic to think my heart can match what I portray on the outside? Can I truly be righteous—inside and out?”

Yes! Yes you can!

You can...or Jesus would have never required it of us. Just remember, what He demands, He supplies. How? By coming to live inside you. By giving you His Holy Spirit who will lead you into all righteousness. Be patient, Beloved. It will all become more clear as this study unfolds in the weeks that follow.

Philip Keller in his autobiography, *Wonder O’ the Wind*, wrote:

It was not that we neglected the church, the Word of God, or our daily devotions. We did not. Quite the contrary. Like other millions of modern-day Christians, we went through the regular routine of religious rituals, but they were dry as the dust in my sheep corrals, and just about as barren.

Almost by default I concluded subconsciously that my joy in life could come from the earth and need not come from Christ.

Yet the strange irony of my inner spiritual stagnation was that deep down within my spirit there was an intense hunger to really know God. There persisted an insatiable thirst to commune with Christ. But how?

How? We will see how in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is not a new law or an impossible standard to be reached for but never obtained until the Lord's return. Rather, it is a teaching given by Jesus Himself on the new relationship with Him that is ours through the New Covenant.

The first seven beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-9) show the *character* of those who enter into this relationship. The next two beatitudes (verses 10-12) show the *conflict* that such character brings in a world that does not recognize Jesus' lordship. The remainder of the Sermon (5:13-7:27) shows the *conduct* of those who belong to Jesus. This conduct shows forth the shining presence of God's sovereign rulership in the life of His son or daughter.

So, what is our outline of the Sermon on the Mount?

THE RIGHTEOUS LIFESTYLE OF THOSE
WHO BELONG TO THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Matthew 5:1-2:	Prologue
Matthew 5:3-9:	Their Character
Matthew 5:10-12:	Their Conflict
Matthew 5:13-7:27:	Their Conduct
Matthew 7:28-29:	Epilogue

The Sermon on the Mount is only an impossible lifestyle for those who have not bowed their knees to the King nor yielded up the throne of their hearts to His right to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords!

But if you will but bow—
if you will yield—
the kingdom of heaven,
in all its fullness and joy
will be yours.

It will be yours because God Himself will change you and fit you for the kingdom of heaven. It's the very reason He came among us.

MEMORY VERSE

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

MATTHEW 5:20

SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As you read the Sermon on the Mount, what made the most significant impression on your mind?
2. What did you learn about righteousness?
3. What did you learn about the kingdom of heaven?
4. According to the Sermon on the Mount, who is going to heaven? What are the four basic requirements of those who will enter the kingdom of heaven?
5. What is the meaning of the word *hypocrite*? How does hypocrisy manifest itself?

6. Is hypocrisy in any form demonstrated in your life? What would others see if they really knew you? Try to be honest, vulnerable, and willing to grow.
7. Is your Christianity working? If not, in which areas are you failing?
8. What, if anything, needs to change in order for your life to become a true mirror image of what is inside?
9. Review the outline of the Sermon on the Mount with its chapter and verse divisions, as given on page 15.



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