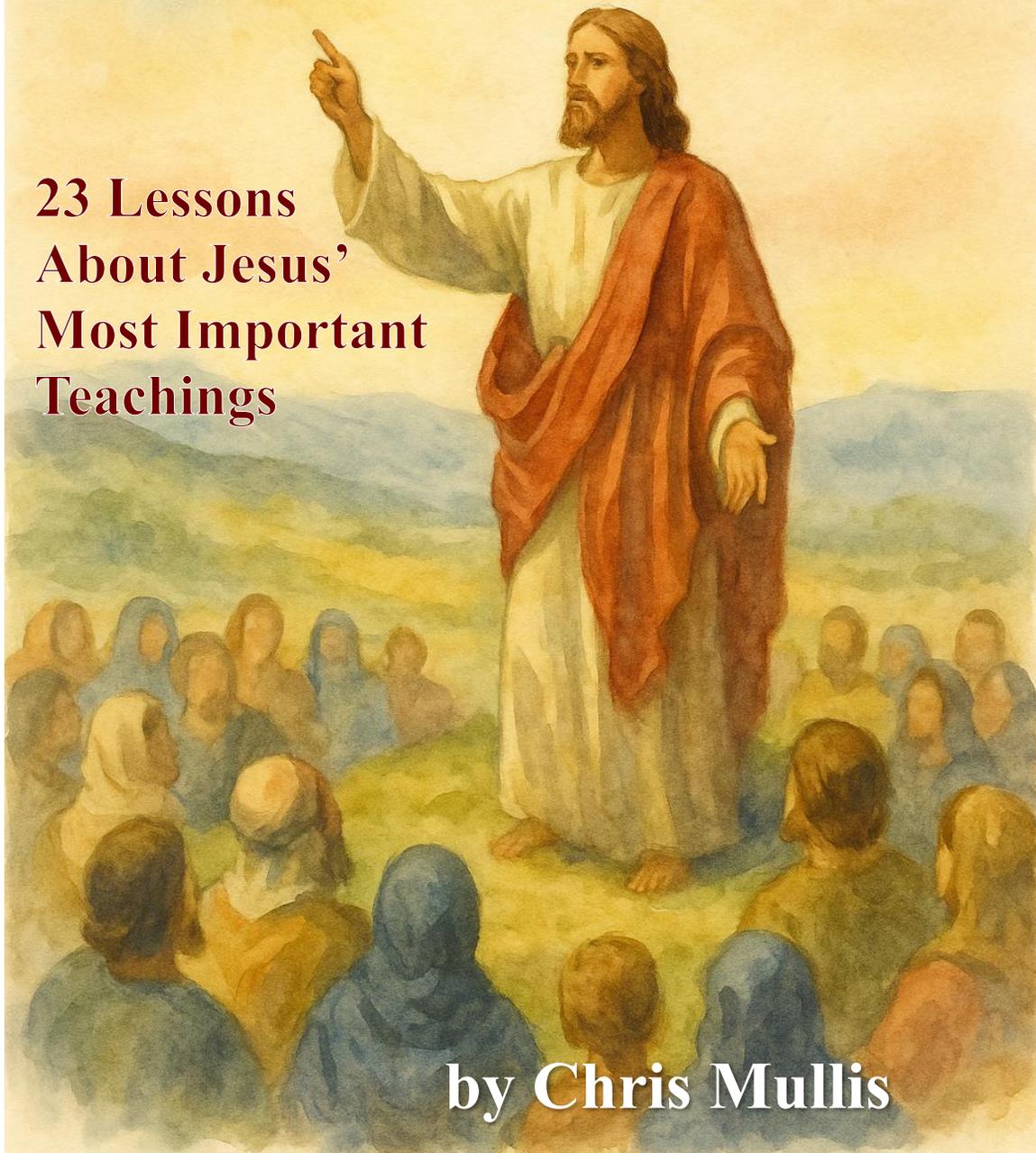


The Sermon on the Mount

**23 Lessons
About Jesus'
Most Important
Teachings**



by Chris Mullis

The Sermon on the Mount

23 Lessons About Jesus' Most Important Teachings

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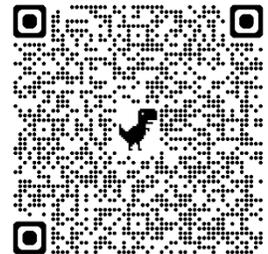
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Additional Resources

You can listen or watch the lessons in this series for free.

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Introduction: The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is the most famous collection of Jesus’ teachings. Spoken from a hillside to His followers, it serves as a powerful introduction to life in God’s Kingdom. In just three chapters, Jesus lays out a radical vision of what it means to follow Him—not just in word, but in heart, motive, and daily action.

This 23-session study walks through the Sermon on the Mount, one teaching at a time, helping us listen carefully to Jesus’ words and consider how to apply them in real life. We’ll begin with the Beatitudes—those strange, upside-down blessings that challenge our understanding of success and happiness. Then we’ll hear Jesus call us to a deeper righteousness, not based on outward appearances, but on a transformed heart.

Along the way, we’ll explore prayer, fasting, money, anxiety, judgment, relationships, obedience, and more. Each lesson will include a sermon to read, a Scripture passage to reflect on, and a group discussion to help us grow together.

Jesus ends His sermon with a choice: Will we be like the wise person who builds on rock—or the foolish one who builds on sand? This study is an invitation to dig deep, build well, and become true disciples who live out the words of Christ in every part of life.

Let’s open our hearts, listen carefully, and walk the narrow path together—step by step, word by word, with Jesus as our teacher and guide.

Blessings,

Rev. Chris Mullis

May 14, 2025



Suggested Format for this Study

The following format is a suggestion that has worked well for me, but feel free to adapt it to your teaching style and the resources available. Each lesson can easily be adjusted to last between one hour to an hour and a half.

Pre-Study Preparation

I recommend providing participants with a schedule, which can be created using the “Schedule Template” document. This helps keep everyone informed of the material to be covered in each session. Additionally, you might consider starting with an “Orientation” session. This will give you a chance to introduce yourself, get to know the participants, distribute study materials, explain the study format, and answer any questions they may have.

It can also encourage community to offer light refreshments at the beginning of each session. Participants can sign up to take turns providing simple snacks, such as coffee and cookies. This not only helps set a relaxed tone but also gives participants a sense of ownership in the study. They can sign up for refreshments in the "notes" section of the “Schedule Template.”

Weekly Materials

Each week, participants will receive a sermon to read in preparation for the following session. I suggest distributing one sermon at a time to help participants stay focused and not read ahead. However, feel free to provide all the sermons at once if that works better for your group.

General Session Format

Below is a general format for each small group session:

1. **Welcome and Opening Prayer (5-10 minutes)**
 - Begin by welcoming participants and offering an opening prayer.
2. **Group Discussion (20-30 minutes)**
 - After the introduction, guide the group through the activities and discussions in the “Leader’s Guide” at the end of each sermon.
 - Your role as the facilitator is not to have all the answers but to guide and encourage meaningful conversation. The provided questions are a starting point—feel free to adapt or ask follow-up questions based on the group's thoughts and interests.
 - While some discussions may naturally stray from the topic, it’s important to discern whether these tangents are worth exploring or if it’s time to steer the group back to the main topic.
3. **Intercessory Prayer (5-10 minutes)**
 - End each session with a time of prayer. Allow participants to share any praises or concerns, and then pray over them as a group.
 - It can be helpful to keep a list of these requests to follow up on them in future sessions.

Optional 3-Part Study

This full study may also be broken up into three shorter modules. This can be helpful for groups that prefer or need shorter series of lessons to fit into their schedule. It may also be less intimidating for new students to commit 5 to 9 weeks to studying a series than a full 23 week course. If that would work better for your group, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount lends itself to a 3-part series because His sermon can be divided into 3 major parts as follows:

Part 1 – A 9-week study that covers Jesus' teaching about foundations of God's Kingdom & Jesus' fulfillment of the law in Matthew chapter 5. This is sessions 1-9 of the full study.

Part 2 – A 5-week study that covers Jesus' teachings about practices that build a relationship with God. This is sessions 10-15 of the full study.

Part 3 – A 7-week study that covers Jesus' teachings about living with wisdom and authenticity in God's Kingdom. This is sessions 16-23 of the full study.

Perhaps it is most helpful go through the modules in order, because each part of Jesus' sermon builds off the previous part. However, each part can stand on its own and can be used independently or as a series of connected modules. Whether your group chooses to study all 23 sessions or just one section at a time, you'll be engaging with Jesus' most powerful teachings—and discovering what it truly means to follow Him. It can be

The Sermon on the Mount Study Schedule

Date	Session/Topic	Scriptures	Notes:
	Optional Orientation Session		
	1 The Beatitudes	Matthew 5:1-12	
	2 Salt and Light	Matthew 5:13-16	
	3 Jesus & OT Law	Matthew 5:17-20	
	4 Anger & Conflict	Matthew 5:21-26	
	5 Adultery & Lust	Matthew 5:27-30	
	6 Divorce	Matthew 5:31-32	
	7 Vows	Matthew 5:33-37	
	8 Vengeance	Matthew 5:38-41	
	9 Love Your Enemies	Matthew 5:43-48	
	10 Giving to the Needy	Matthew 6:1-4	
	11 How to Pray	Matthew 6:5-8	
	12 The Lord's Prayer	Matthew 6:9-15	
	13 Fasting	Matthew 6:16-18	
	14 Money & Possessions	Matthew 6:19-24	
	15 Don't Worry, Seek God	Matthew 6:25-34	
	16 Don't Judge	Matthew 7:1-5	
	17 Pigs and Pearls	Matthew 7:6	
	18 Ask, Seek, Knock	Matthew 7:7-11	
	19 The Golden Rule	Matthew 7:12	
	20 The Narrow vs. Wide Gate	Matthew 7:13-14	
	21 False Prophets vs. Good Fruit	Matthew 7:15-20	
	22 A True Disciple	Matthew 7:21-23	
	23 A Solid Foundation	Matthew 7:24-29	
	Optional Makeup Day		



The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5-7, is one of the most well-known and powerful teachings of Jesus. Delivered on a mountainside to His followers, it outlines the values and principles of God's Kingdom, offering a radical shift from worldly thinking. In this sermon, Jesus addresses topics like humility, mercy, forgiveness, and love for enemies, emphasizing the importance of inner transformation over outward appearances.

Through the Beatitudes, teachings on prayer, and instructions on living righteously, Jesus reveals what it means to truly follow Him. The Sermon on the Mount challenges believers to embody a life of grace, integrity, and trust in God, shaping the foundation of Christian discipleship and calling us to live with a heart aligned to God's will.

Join us as we read through, study, and discuss each of the 23 lessons in the Sermon on the Mount.

An Outline of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

Part 1

The Foundations of God's Kingdom – Matthew 5:1-16

1. The Values of God's Kingdom (The Beatitudes) – 5:1-12
2. The Purpose of God's People (Salt and Light) – 5:13-16

Jesus Fulfills the Law Because We Can't – Matthew 5:17-48

3. Jesus is the fulfilment of God's Law – 5:17-20
4. 1st example of our failure: Murder – 5:21-26
5. 2nd example of our failure: Adultery – 5:27-30
6. 3rd example of our failure: Divorce – 5:30-32
7. 4th example of our failure: Honesty – 5:33-37
8. 5th example of our failure: Vengeance – 5:38-41
9. 6th example of our failure: Love – 5:42-48

Part 2

Practices that Build a Relationship with God – Matthew 6:1-34

1. Giving to the needy the right way – 6:1-4
2. Authentic prayer – 6:5-15
3. Sincere fasting – 6:16-18
4. A generous heart – 6:19-24
5. Trusting God – 6:25-34

Part 3

Living with Wisdom and Authenticity in God's Kingdom – Matthew 7:1-29

1. Don't be judgmental – 7:1-5
2. Treasure Christ's Teachings – 7:6
3. Seek God's Kingdom wholeheartedly – 7:7-11
4. Love is the guiding principle – 7:12
5. It's so hard, we better take it serious – 7:13-14
6. Evaluating authenticity – 7:15-23
7. Living out Jesus' teachings – 7:24-29



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 1

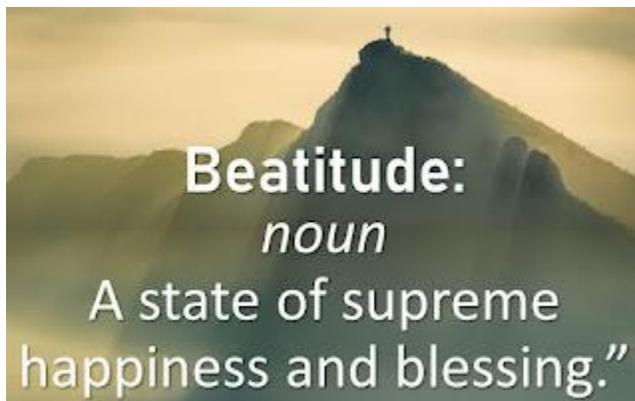
The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-2

¹ One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, ² and he began to teach them.

Introduction

Today, we begin a study of Matthew chapters 5-7, what are known as Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount." The sermon gets its name from the big hill (or mount) where Jesus shared these teachings. Many consider these to be Jesus' central teachings about how to live as His disciple. The Sermon is only three chapters long, but it is packed full of wisdom that challenges us to be a better follower of Christ. So, we will take it slowly, lesson by lesson, until we work all the way through.



We start with Matthew 5:3-12, what is commonly called the beatitudes.

Beatitude is a fancy word that means "A state of supreme happiness and blessing." People will often say, "I am blessed!" If you ask how they are doing, they might respond, "I am blessed!"

What do you think of when you think of being blessed? Does it mean life is good, all is well, you're happy and content? Well, Jesus' definition of Beatitude—supremely blessed—may surprise you. Let's take a look at what He says about being truly blessed. Let's go through the blessings one by one.

Matthew 5:3

³ "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Right off the bat, we get a clue Jesus is going to turn our ideas of blessings upside down. Do you honestly think you are blessed when you are poor? Does anyone actually go around saying (without sarcasm): "Yep, I'm so broke I can't afford to put gas in my car. My rent is passed due, and I have no money to buy food. I'm truly blessed!"

Most of the folks Jesus ministered to *were* that kind of poor. But Jesus said they were blessed, because He knew it gave them an advantage over rich people because they knew they must depend on God. When we have money, it's easy to forget how much we need God. Why do you

need God? You can take care of yourself. Or at least we think we can take care of ourselves. We have a false sense of security. Let me remind you: your money cannot save you.

But most Bible translations render this verse to say, “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” And that is important, because Jesus isn’t just talking about your finances. There are people—in Jesus’ day and in our own—who feel as though they are spiritually safe and secure. They say to themselves: “I’m a good person. I treat people fairly. I live the right way. Therefore, God will be good to me.” This was the basic philosophy of the Pharisees in Jesus time. And it’s the way many people think today. But God doesn’t owe you anything. Our so-called righteous deeds are but filthy rags in the sight of a pure, perfect, and holy God. And so, Jesus says, “You are truly blessed if you really know you are *poor in spirit* and realize you desperately need God to save you.” It isn’t those who think they are good; it is those who know they are not good and rely completely on the mercy of God that He welcomes into His Kingdom. And Jesus goes on, smashing our preconceived notions of what it is to be truly blessed:

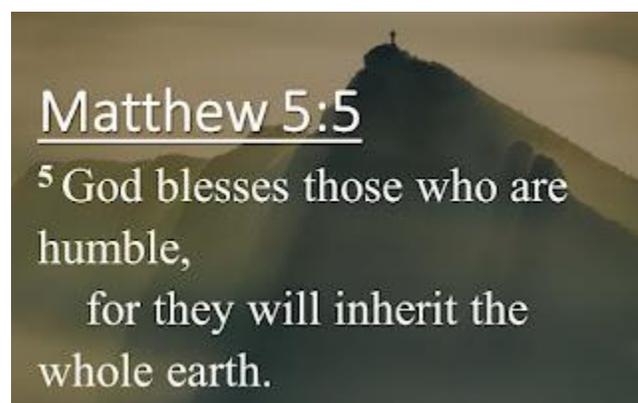
Matthew 5:4

⁴ God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

We’ve had a lot of deaths in our community lately. It seems like the last few months have been particularly hard. Our bereavement committee has been working overtime to provide meals for the families. According to Jesus, that means we are truly blessed. Does it feel like it? Do you feel blessed when someone you love dies?

Jesus is pulling from Old Testament Scripture in Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 where it says: “Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies—so the living should take this to heart. ³ Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. ⁴ A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time.”

We live in a culture where we want to avoid pain at all cost. And yet the cliché really is true. No pain. No gain. We live in a broken world. Things are not as they are supposed to be. We are not as we’re supposed to be. If we never realize this (and *feel* this), we are missing out on something really important.



Matthew 5:5

⁵ God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.

This beatitude is a difficult one to translate. The NIV says: Blessed are the meek. The NASB says: Blessed are the gently. The NLT uses the word humble. The Greek word is *praus*, which means mild of disposition, gentle of spirit.

In Jesus day, the Romans were the ones who possessed the Holy Land. They were the powerful and proud ones. They used violence to subdue the Jews and anyone who resisted them. Some in Israel wanted to use violence to rise up and overthrow the Romans. Jesus says, “No.” It is not the violent or proud or powerful who will possess the land. It is the humble, the gently, the meek. These are the kind of people who will possess the Holy Land. In fact, they will possess the whole earth when God's Kingdom comes on earth. So, you are blessed if you are humble, gentle, and meek.

Psalm 37:7-9 – “Be still in the presence of the Lord, and wait patiently for him to act. Don’t worry about evil people who prosper or fret about their wicked schemes. Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper—it only leads to harm. For the wicked will be destroyed, but those who trust in the Lord will possess the land.”

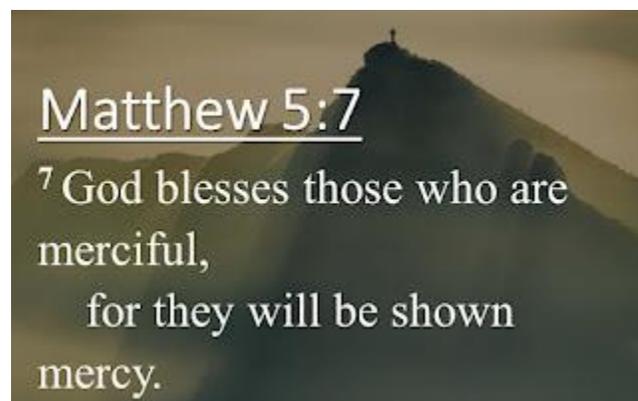


Matthew 5:6

6 God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.

Most people know what it’s like to be really hungry. Can you remember the last time you were famished? Or what about a time you were truly parched?

One day, some are going to be truly satisfied—like a starving man who finally gets food; like someone dying of thirst who finally gets cool, refreshing water. Those who hunger and thirst for justice—for all that is wrong in the world to be made right—will finally be full and satisfied because God will make it all right.



Matthew 5:7

7 God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

This one goes right down into the core of Christianity. We say it every time we pray the Lord’s prayer. “Forgive us our trespasses, *as we* forgive those who trespass against us.”

There are so many offences in this life that just cannot be repaid. If we demand every wrong done is repaid in full, it will make our life (and everyone else’s) a living hell. And at the end of it all, we will not be satisfied, because some debts cannot be repaid; they can only be forgiven. So, you are blessed when you show mercy, because you will receive mercy too. Do you want to be angry and full of pain and resentment all your life? Or do you want to be at peace with God and yourself and the world around you? You

don't forgive for the sake of the one who wronged you; you forgive for the sake of your own peace of mind.



Matthew 5:8

⁸ God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

If I were to put this in my own words, I would say it this way: “You’re blessed if you’re totally sincere, because you will actually see God.”

When you’re your thoughts are pure, when your motives are pure, when you are totally

sincere,

then you will see God. Most of us have a long way to go on this. Often, we don’t even know the impurities that lie within us. We need God’s help to root them out. The Christian journey is walking alongside Christ every day, allowing Him to reveal the impurities within us until we are totally sincere and blessed to actually see God, face to face.

Matthew 5:9

⁹ God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.



Most people agree a little more peace in the world would be nice. Then we wouldn’t have wars and fighting. The problem is: you want things your way and I want things mine. And this country wants this, and that country wants that. And it seems like the only way to settle it is to fight and see who comes out on top. Of course, the one that comes out on top can’t stay on top forever.

The biggest, baddest bully grows old and weak and someone takes their place. Even the strongest empires rise and eventually fall. It *always* happens--always has, always will.

Jesus came to end all that. He came to bring true peace. It’s not a peace where the weakest people must submit to the strongest rulers. It’s a peace where we all finally live in a right relationship with our loving Creator God—as we were originally intended to live.

God's true children spend their lives working to bring this kind of peace on earth, more and more.



Matthew 5:10

¹⁰ God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Living for God and doing the right thing may make you blessed in God's Heavenly Kingdom, but it may not feel much like it in this world. In fact, it may make you a lot of enemies in this world. Those who want to

remain in darkness will fight to keep your light from exposing them. Even if you aren't overly calling them out on their wrong behavior, your righteous life exposes their unrighteousness. So, if you are truly living for Jesus, people who aren't will mock you, persecute you, lie about you, and say all sorts of evil things because you follow Jesus. But don't worry about it, because you are blessed. The Kingdom of Heaven is yours. And Jesus said in Matthew 5:11-12:

Matthew 5:11-12

¹¹ "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.



The Kingdom of God is Not of this World

As we review what Jesus said about who is truly blessed—supremely blessed and happy—we can clearly see Jesus' definitions are not at all the same as the world's.

You can strive to be blessed according to this world's definitions. You can strive for: wealth, comfort, power, prosperity, and selfish fulfillment. But this world and what

it stands for is passing away. At most, you may have 100 years to scrape and scratch and fight to hold onto the things of this world. But the end will come. You will have to stand before God and give an account for your life. And then you will have all eternity to answer for it.

But those who repent and turn to Jesus, turn their back on this world and its values. They become children of God and royal priests in the Kingdom of God. And Jesus atones for all their sins. They are made pure and righteous before God. They offer mercy and receive mercy from God. And theirs is the glorious Kingdom of God, in which they will dwell for all eternity in everlasting life--where there will be no more sin or sickness or suffering or sorrow or death.

Which Kingdom do you choose? The kingdoms of this world *or* the Kingdom of God?

Closing

If you choose God's Kingdom, pray to Him today. Ask Him to forgive you. Promise to follow Jesus from this day forward. Thank Him and receive His Holy Spirit to lead you and guide you and empower you to live for Jesus every day.

Session 1 Leader's Guide – The Beatitudes

Goal: Understand the heart of Jesus' teaching on what it means to be truly blessed and how it contrasts with worldly views.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: "When someone says they are 'blessed,' what comes to mind? How do you personally define being blessed?"

Read Matthew 5:1-12

Brief Overview:

- Explain the context of the Sermon on the Mount.
- Define "Beatitude" – a state of supreme happiness or blessing.
- Emphasize how Jesus' teachings often turn worldly perspectives upside down.

Blessed are the poor in spirit (v.3)

Key Point: Recognizing our spiritual need brings us closer to God.

- Why might spiritual humility lead to blessing?

Blessed are those who mourn (v.4)

Key Point: Grief brings us into deeper dependence on God.

- Can you think of a time when grief drew you closer to God?
- How does mourning refine and shape our faith?

Blessed are the humble (v.5)

Key Point: True strength lies in humility, not pride or power.

- How is humility a strength rather than a weakness?
- Why does God promise that the meek will inherit the earth?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (v.6)

Key Point: A deep desire for justice and righteousness will lead to fulfillment.

- What does it look like to hunger for righteousness in daily life?
- How can we develop a deeper thirst for justice in our communities?

Blessed are the merciful (v.7)

Key Point: Extending mercy opens the door to receiving mercy.

- Why is showing mercy often difficult?
- How does showing mercy reflect God's character?

Blessed are the pure in heart (v.8)

Key Point: Sincerity and purity of heart allow us to see God.

- How does a pure heart affect our relationship with God and others?

Blessed are the peacemakers (v.9)

Key Point: Those who strive for peace reflect God's nature and are called His children.

- How can we be peacemakers in our families, workplaces, and communities?
- What obstacles keep us from pursuing peace?

Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness (v.10-12)

Key Point: Facing opposition for following Jesus is a mark of true discipleship.

- Why does righteousness sometimes lead to persecution?

Closing

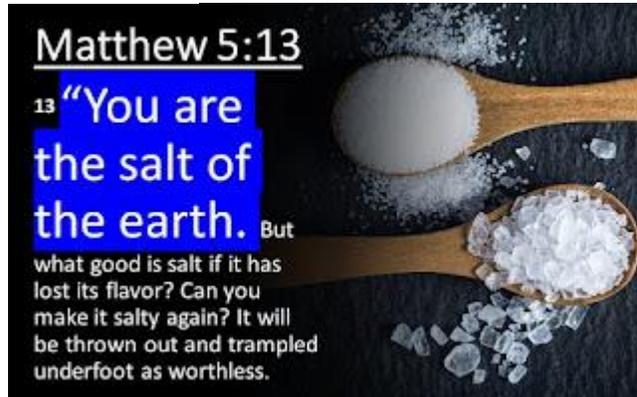
- Revisit the overall theme: Jesus' vision of blessing stands in contrast to worldly measures of success and happiness.
- **Reflection Question:**
"Which of the Beatitudes resonates most with you right now? How can you live it out this week?"
- Close in prayer, asking God to cultivate these qualities in the hearts of participants and praying for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 2

Salt and Light



Introduction

Have you ever heard the expression: “That guy ain’t worth his salt!” What does that mean? It means they aren’t worth their pay. There’s a reason someone is or isn’t worth his salt. In the ancient world, salt was sometimes used as currency—the Greeks, Romans, and Spanish Moors all used salt for money in certain situations. In fact, our modern word “salary” comes from the

ancient Roman word *salarium*, which was the salt sometimes paid to soldiers (instead of Roman coins). Salt in the ancient world was rare and as valuable as money. That brings us to today’s lesson from Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:13

¹³“You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.

You are the salt of the earth

If you are Christian, a follower of Jesus, you are the salt of the earth. Christians provide something essential this world needs.

We’re a bit spoiled in our modern world and we take salt for granted. Usually, we consume too much salt, but a certain amount of salt is essential in your diet. If you don’t have enough, it can lead to muscle cramps, nausea, vomiting and dizziness. Eventually, lack of salt can lead to shock, coma and death.

Have you ever noticed the slightly salty flavor of Gatorade or Powerade sports drinks? That’s because they put sodium in the drinks (one of the minerals found in salt). Intense sweating during strenuous exercise can flush sodium out of your body—leaving you lethargic, even when you drink enough water. The sodium in Gatorade puts it back.

In biblical times, salt was expensive and hard to come by, but salt was also essential. In addition to being required in a person’s diet, salt was essential for preserving meat before refrigeration. In case you didn’t know, modern refrigerators didn’t become common until the 1930s (less than 100 years ago). Before that, one of the most common and reliable ways to

preserve meat was with salt. If you pack enough salt around a big hunk of pork, you get a perfectly preserved and delicious ham—something that can be slaughtered in November and enjoyed for Easter dinner 4-5 months later.

Not only does salt preserve meat and provide an essential mineral in your diet, salt also brings out the flavor of our food. Can you imagine how bland your food would be without any added salt? Can you imagine how a potato chip would be without any salt?

So, when Jesus says His followers are “the salt of the earth”, He is making a bold statement. Christians are incredibly valuable and essential—like the right amount of salt in your diet, without it you cannot live. And Christians are a preservative in this decaying world. Without our preserving influence, evil would completely take over and consume this world—causing it to rot and completely spoil.

And when Christians faithfully follow Christ, we bring out the flavor of life. True Christians are not boring—as the world often claims. We are full of life and joy and love. Jesus and His New Testament followers were never accused of living dull lives. It was the opposite. Their detractors accused them of spending too much time feasting and drinking with sinners and having a good time.



Losing Our Saltiness

Now, this second part of verse 13 confuses people. How can salt lose its flavor? The salt in your saltshaker doesn't really have an expiration date. It doesn't lose its saltiness. However, in Jesus' day in Israel, they mined salt from the Dead Sea. The concentration of salt in the dead sea is about 33%--10 times as salty as the ocean. Salt water can be collected into shallow pools

until the sun evaporates the water leaving behind the salt. Then, the salt was stored in a cave or barn—usually right on the ground. Over time, the salt on the bottom of the pile would leach into the dirt on the ground and some of the dirt would get in the salt too. This “bottom salt” was too dirty and nasty to eat. And the dirt was too salty to use in a garden—the high salt content would kill the plants. So this salt that had lost its flavor was only good for one thing—to be thrown on the walkways where it would kill weeds and anything else growing and people could walk on and a barren path where nothing would grow.

Now what does that have to do with you? If you follow Jesus, you are the salt of the earth—adding flavor and essential things to this world, preserving a broken world from spiritual decay. But being *salty* for Jesus inevitably means being *different* from the world. Most people

don't want to be different. There's something in our DNA that we want to fit in. We don't want to feel like outsiders or outcasts who are different. We want to be part of the group.

Well, God designed us to be social creatures. There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting to fit in. That's just part of being human. Unfortunately, sin takes that natural desire inside us and twists it all out of wack until we are willing to do anything just to fit in with the group. We may even adopt attitudes and behaviors God says are sinful because society says it's fine. At the same time, we may turn our backs on holy living because the worldly people all around us live unholy lives.

What good, though, is salt that has lost its saltiness? What good is a Christian who lives an unholy life?

Not only have you lost your flavor and preserving power, somehow your unholiness now poisons the world like salty dirt thrown into a garden. There's nothing more bitter in this world than Christians who know they're supposed to live for Jesus, but who are still caught up trying to live for the world. They can't be happy living for Jesus because they still want to sin, but they can't be happy sinning because they feel guilty for not being faithful to Jesus. So, they live divided lives, pulled completely in two by these competed convictions.

It's OK To be salty, to shine bright, to stand out. Don't be afraid to be different. That's the definition of Holy—when you're set apart from everything else by God as different.



We take salt for granted. We also take light for granted in our modern world. Of course, we have just as much sunlight today as people in ancient times. What's different now is what happens when the sun goes down. We can just turn on a light today but in Bible times, you had to burn up expensive oil in a lamp or wax candles. And the amount of light these gave was roughly 100 times less than an electric light we use today.

That's why looking up at the trillions of stars in the night sky in ancient times was so dazzling. King David said in Psalm 8:3-4, "When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you set in place—what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?"



And when Jesus and his disciple were camping on the outskirts of Jerusalem, they would look across the valley and see the shining city on Mount Zion, shining like twinkling jewel—with thousands of oil lamps flickering from afar, contrasted against the utter darkness of the night. And with the glow a campfire shining on their faces, Jesus could say something like:

Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

We are called to be different—to be salty, to shine brightly. When Christians truly live the way Jesus calls us to live—when we love others the way He loves us—it shines out for all to see. You don’t even necessarily have to say anything. Sometimes your actions speak volumes.

On the other hand, when Jesus is Your Lord, you can’t help but say His name and talk about how He’s saved you and changed you and how He’s filling your life with His light and love. People will see His light in you and you need to be ready to explain it when they ask: “Why are you so different? What is this light that shines inside you?” Be ready to tell them “so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” Don’t hide your lamp under a basket. Place it up high on a stand, where it gives light for everyone to see. And like a moth is drawn to a light, people will be drawn to the Lord.

Closing

Some of you may say, “My life’s so messed up. There’s no light there to see.” I get it. Sometimes we go through dark trials and it can feel like there’s nothing good there to talk about. But what you don’t realize is everyone’s going through something. It’s not about having a perfect, bright and sunny life all the time. It’s about seeing a perfect God pulling you up out of your brokenness and filling you with His wonderful light. You don’t have to lie and tell everyone your life’s perfect. Tell the truth. Share your struggles. But also have faith to see how Jesus is there with you in the midst of your darkness. He hasn’t left you. He is there. You just have to recognize Jesus is there and share how you’re trusting Him to save you. God is the light in your story. So don’t you hide it under a basket. Let your light shine and be salty!

Session 2 Leader's Guide – Salt and Light

Goal: Understand Jesus' call to be salt and light in the world and how it shapes the way we live and interact with others.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: "If someone described you as 'the salt of the earth' or 'a light in the darkness,' what do you think they would mean?"

Read Matthew 5: 13-16 aloud.

Brief Overview:

- Share about the significance of salt and light in biblical times: salt as valuable for preservation, flavor, and essential minerals; light as a precious resource before electricity.
- Explain the metaphor of Christians being "salt" (preserving good, adding flavor) and "light" (illuminating truth, exposing darkness).
- **Key Point:** Salt is essential, preserving what is good and adding value. Christians bring God's truth and love into the world.

Read Matthew 5:13 again and discuss:

- What does it mean to be "the salt of the earth"?
- How do Christians preserve goodness in a world prone to spiritual decay?
- What happens when we lose our "saltiness"? How can we avoid becoming ineffective in our faith?
 - Jesus' audience understood salt's value for preserving food and its risk of becoming contaminated.
 - Reflect on how being "different" as a Christian is part of staying salty.

Read Matthew 5:14-16 again and discuss:

- What does it mean to be a light "on a hill"?
- Why do some people hide their light "under a basket"? How can we ensure we don't do the same?
- How can our good deeds point others to God instead of drawing attention to ourselves?
- **Key Point:** Light exposes truth, offers hope, and provides guidance. Christians reflect Christ's light in a dark world.
 - Jesus likely referenced Jerusalem as "a city on a hill," visible at night due to its lamps.
 - Encourage participants to consider how their actions and words shine light into the lives of others.

Brainstorm ways to live as salt and light in everyday life. Examples:

- Standing up for truth with grace.
- Offering help to those in need.
- Speaking about Jesus with authenticity and love.

Reflection Question: "What specific action can you take this week to bring light or preserve good in your family, workplace, or community?"

Closing

- Summarize the main idea: As followers of Jesus, we are called to live distinctly, preserving goodness and shining His light.
- **Pray:** Ask God to help each participant live as salt and light, reflecting His love and truth in their daily lives and praying for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 3 Jesus and the Old Testament



Introduction

Jesus is the most amazing person who ever lived. His teachings are revered by people all over the world—even by those of other, non-Christian, world religions. We find His core teachings in chapters 5-7 of Matthew, what is called the Sermon on the Mount.

In this message series, we are working our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, lesson by lesson. Today, we come to

Matthew 5:17-20 where Jesus explains His relationship with the Old Testament.

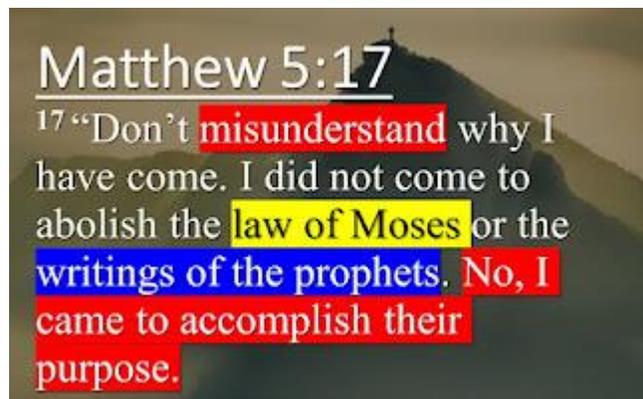
Matthew 5:17

¹⁷“Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose.

What is Jesus talking about here? What is the Law of Moses and the prophets? The “Law of Moses” is the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The “prophets” (sometimes called “the writings”) were all the other sacred Scriptures—which included historical, liturgical, and prophetic writings urging the people of Israel to be faithful to God by obeying the Law of Moses. Together the Law of Moses and the prophets make up the collection of books Christians call the “Old Testament”.

Some people in Jesus day (as well as some people today) believed Jesus was so radically different that He would throw out the Old Testament all together and make something completely new. But Jesus definitively clears up that misconception right here. “No. I came to accomplish their purpose.”

Jesus did not abolish or throw out the requirements of the Old Testament. He accomplish them. Now, if that’s true, the question people today always ask is, “Then why don’t we still follow all those crazy rules in the Old Testament law? Why do Christians eat pork and shellfish? Why don’t Christians still stone people to death for certain crimes as the Old Testament Law commands?”

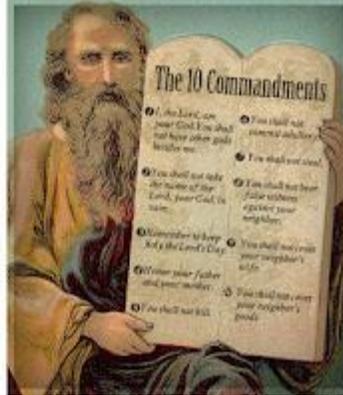


Types of Old Testament Law

Civil Law

Ceremonial Law

Moral Law



Types of Old Testament Law

Part of the reason people misunderstand is they don't understand the Old Testament Law. We can put Old Testament law into three broad categories. Now these are modern ways of categorizing; the lines were more blurry for the ancients. But I believe these categories can be useful to help *us* consider the ancient Law and how it applies to Christians today.

First of all, there were civil laws. These are laws to help maintain order in civil society. We have civil laws today. We have traffic laws like the speed limit that help keep us safe on the roads. We have property laws about trespassing. We have laws about contracts that help protect us in our business dealings.

And we also have some laws that have become irrelevant. On the books today in Georgia, there is still a law that says, you can't keep a donkey in a bath tub. Now I don't know why in the world we need a law that says that. I don't know anyone today who is keeping a donkey in a bathtub. But apparently, at one point in our history, that was a problem so they made a law about it.

Residents in Acworth, Georgia are legally required to own a rake. I suppose at some point in history, maybe there was a problem with people having untidy lawns in Acworth in the fall. So they made a law that if you were going to move to Acworth, you have to own a rake.

In Gainesville, Georgia, they made a law that you must eat fried chicken with your hands. Don't be all fancy trying to eat your fried chicken with fork and knife. Just pick that greasy goodness up with your hands! Now, there's a reason for that law. Gainesville has a big chicken industry and they wanted to pull a publicity stunt (I guess to promote the down homeliness of eating fried chicken) and so they made a law that says you have to eat your fried chicken in Gainesville with your hands.

Israel was a civil society that needed rules to live together in an orderly, peaceful manner. Plus, they had a purpose. Israel was supposed to represent God to the whole world. They were to be a royal and holy priesthood set apart as different from all the other nations around them. So Israel had rules about even minor details of civil life which included: how to dress, what to eat, how to punish criminals, and even how to treat strangers, foreigners, orphans, and widows.

So why don't most Christians feel obligated to abstain from eating pork and dress like ancient Israelites? Because we don't live in the ancient kingdom of Israel. That kingdom no longer exists. Some might say, "Well, Israel still exists." Yes, but even that modern country *is not* the ancient kingdom of Israel. That do not have the same purpose and mandate from God.

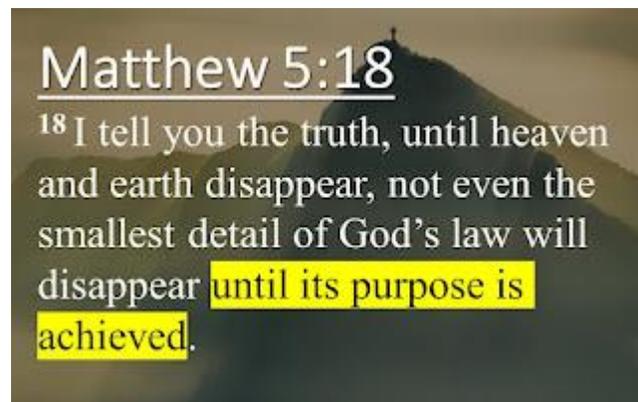
Then there are ceremonial laws. These were laws about religious rites and festivals for ancient Israel. How and when to sacrifice a goat. How to ordain a priest. How to heal a leper. And

there's also a reason Christians aren't obligated to follow the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. We believe Jesus fulfilled everything that those laws required. In simple terms, those laws no longer apply because Jesus achieved everything those laws foreshadowed. For instance, we don't have to sacrifice a lamb to celebrate Passover because Jesus is THE Passover Lamb and His blood shed on the cross covers our sin once and for all.

Finally, there are moral laws. These are laws about right and wrong, good and bad behavior. In this category we could put the laws found in The 10 Commandments--do not murder, do not steal, do not worship idols. We could also include rules about sexual immorality and prohibitions against the exploitation of widows and orphans.

Now these moral laws are universal. They apply equally for all humanity regardless of where you live and when you live. It doesn't matter if you live in America, Africa, Iran, Russia, or China, it's still wrong to murder (and everyone knows it). It doesn't matter if you're living in the 1st century with Jesus, the 18th century with John Wesley, or the 21st century in Whitfield County, it's always wrong to steal, to bear false witness, or to commit adultery (at least according to God's way of living spelled out in the Bible).

So these moral laws we find in the Old Testament, that Jesus lived by and taught his Disciples to follow, still apply to us today. That is why we believe there's nothing wrong with eat pork, but we still believe sexual perversion is an abomination to God and harmful to human society and degrades human beings who were made in the sacred image of God.



Matthew 5:18-19

18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. 19 So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus Fulfills the Law

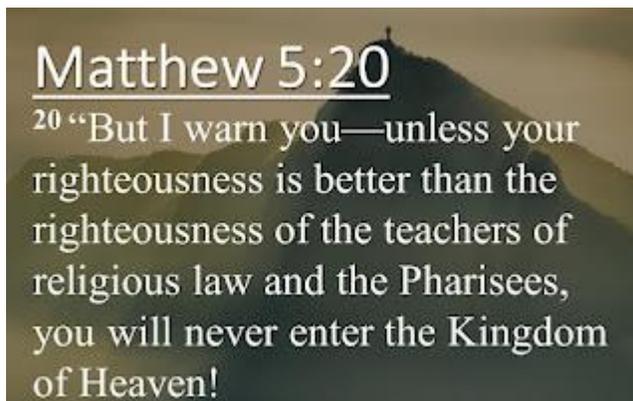
Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets. He came to satisfy the demands of the Old testament and he fulfills everything it pointed to.

The purpose of the ancient kingdom of Israel was to be a royal priesthood to bring all nations back to God. That was their real purpose. I'm not making that up. It's spelled out throughout the Old Testament—time and time again. I don't have time to spell out all the Scriptures. Let me just share a couple. Isaiah 49:6 spells out God's hope that it won't just be the people of Israel who are reconciled to God, but Israel will be a "light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." Another example is the Book of Jonah. God sent Jonah to

preach to the Ninevites—an evil and violent people—to call them to repent. You see, God wanted everyone—not just the Israelites—to be *His people*.

Israel was supposed to be a holy nation set apart to represent God to the whole world and to invite everyone everywhere to turn away from sin and let God be Lord of their life. Yet Israel was self-absorbed and full of sinful pride—thinking God loved *them* more than everyone else. All they wanted to do was enjoy their status as *the chosen people* without ever obeying the Law to actually *live* as a people chosen by God to reconcile the world to God.

Although Israel failed in that mission because they constantly turned away from God and broke God's Law, Jesus fulfilled everything the Law said, including the purpose the Law was given. Jesus is the only person who ever lived who never sinned, never broke a single commandment, never violated the spiritual purpose of the Law. Jesus life, death, resurrection, and ascension is the fulfillment of even the smallest details of God's Law. Everything the Law pointed to, Jesus accomplished.



Matthew 5:20

²⁰ “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!

Jesus ends with a stern warning that's meant to make us realize how desperately we need Him to save us. Think about it. Unless *you* are more righteous than the

Pharisees in the Bible, you can never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The Pharisees strived to be absolutely obedient to every single letter of the Law. When the Law says, “Don't work on the Sabbath Day,” they wanted to know exactly what that meant. So they determined you could walk no further than $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile on the Sabbath. And they had rules like this for all 613 of the laws in the Old Testament. And they had them all memorized to help them obey all the laws completely. They were considered the holiest, most perfect people in Israel.

And Jesus says, unless you are *better* than them, you will never enter to Heaven. What!?!? Here's the point: Jesus is pointing out it's impossible. You can't do it.

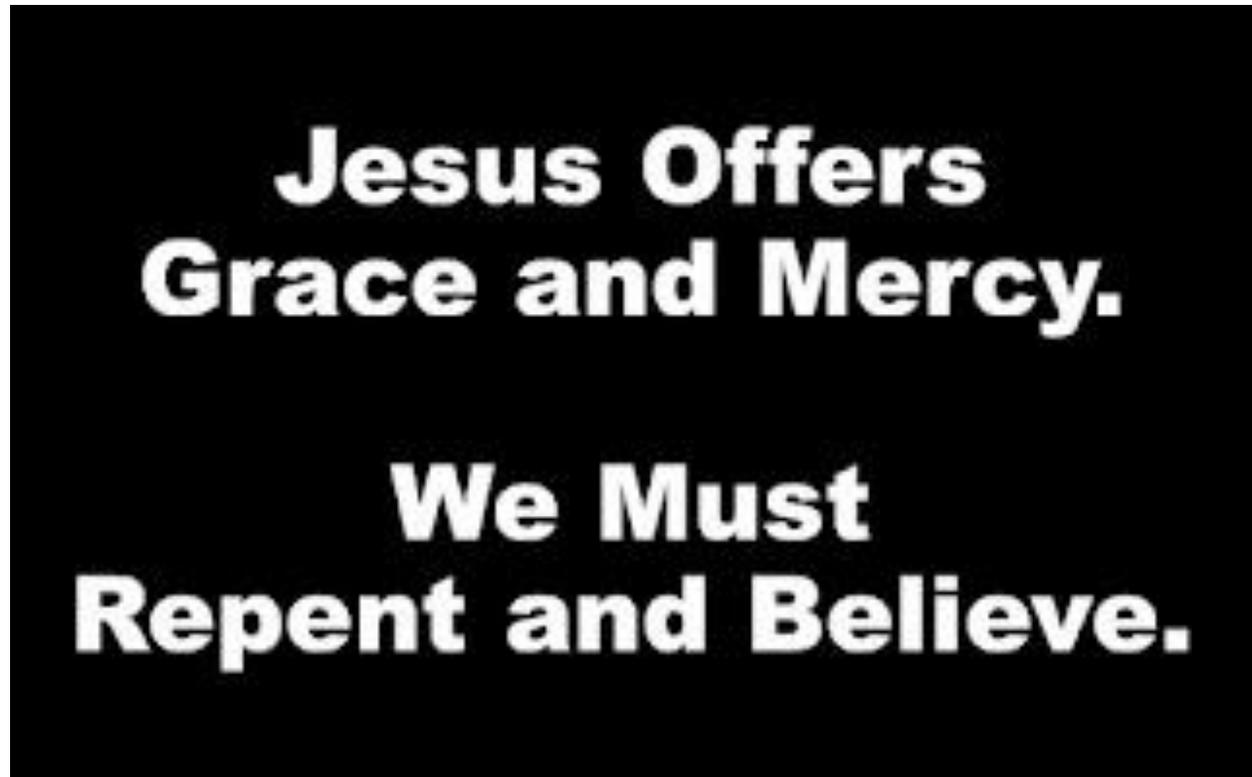
Conclusion

You can't do it. But Jesus can. And Jesus did. Jesus fulfills the Law. And Jesus paid the penalty for your failure to keep the law. Jesus offers you grace and mercy. All He asks is that you repent of your sin and believe in Him.

To repent means to turn away from your sin. It means to turn away from your rejection of God. It means to stop living however *you* want to live and start living the way God wants you to live.

Believing Jesus means trusting Him. It's not just believing it with your head. It means trust Jesus following Him—living the way He teaches you to live.

So I plead with you, repent of your sin and believe in Jesus today.



Session 3 Leader's Guide – Jesus and the OT

Goal: Understand Jesus' relationship to the OT Law, why it still matters, and how He fulfills it.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: "Can you think of a rule or law that used to be important but no longer applies today? Why do some rules change over time?"

Read Matthew 5:17-20 aloud.

Overview: Jesus was often misunderstood—some thought He came to get rid of the Old Testament Law. Instead, Jesus explains that He came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it. Understanding how Christians relate to the Old Testament Law helps us live faithfully today.

Key Point: The OT Law can be divided into three categories—civil, ceremonial, and moral.

Civil Laws: Laws for Israel as a nation (e.g., property laws, dietary restrictions).

- Why did ancient Israel need specific civil laws?
- How does this compare to modern laws that become outdated (like old city ordinances)?

Ceremonial Laws: Laws about worship, sacrifices, and religious rituals.

- Why did Israel have such detailed religious rules?
- How does Jesus' sacrifice fulfill these laws?

Moral Laws: Universal right and wrong (e.g., Ten Commandments).

- Why do moral laws still apply to Christians today?
- How does Jesus' teaching deepen our understanding of right and wrong?

Key Point: Jesus is the only person who perfectly obeyed God's Law, and He fulfills everything it pointed to.

Read Matthew 5:18-19.

- What does it mean that Jesus "fulfills" the Law?
- Why does Jesus say the Law will not disappear "until its purpose is achieved"?
- How should we respond to God's moral law in our daily lives?

Read Matthew 5:20.

- The Pharisees were known for strict obedience to the Law. Why does Jesus say our righteousness must exceed theirs?
- What does this tell us about our need for Jesus?
- How can we honor God's Law in a grace-filled way?

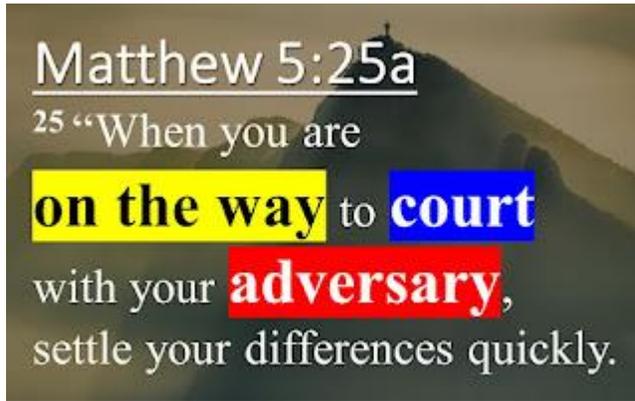
Closing

- Summarize the main idea: Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, but God's moral law still guides us today.
- **Pray:** Thank God for His Law, for Jesus fulfilling it, and for His grace when we fall short and pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 4 Anger and Judgement



Introduction and Review

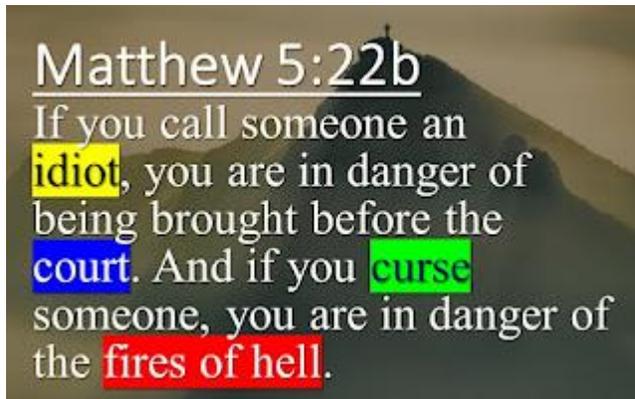
Last Sunday, we learned that Jesus didn't come to do away with the Old Testament Law, but to fulfill it. He said that unless you follow the Law more perfectly than the Pharisees, you can never enter into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said, unless you follow the Law better than the Pharisees, you can never enter the

Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:20). Now the Pharisees were the holiest people in Jesus' day. Everyone looked up to them and respected them. And Jesus' followers would have thought it quite impossible to be more righteous than the Pharisees. And that was the point. Jesus was saying, "You can't do it. The Pharisees can't earn their way into Heaven and neither can you!"

That's why Jesus came. Since *we* can't fulfill the requirements of the law, Jesus came to fulfill it for us. Since the penalty of sin is death (and we've all sinned and fallen short of God's glorious standard), Jesus came and paid the penalty of our sin by dying on the cross for us. His death atones for our sin and makes us right with God.

But to prove His point that *we* cannot follow the law perfectly (and so we desperately need Jesus' help), Jesus give some real life examples to point out some of the ways we fall short. The first example is about anger ad comes in Matthew 5:21-26. (We'll see some more examples in future blogs.)

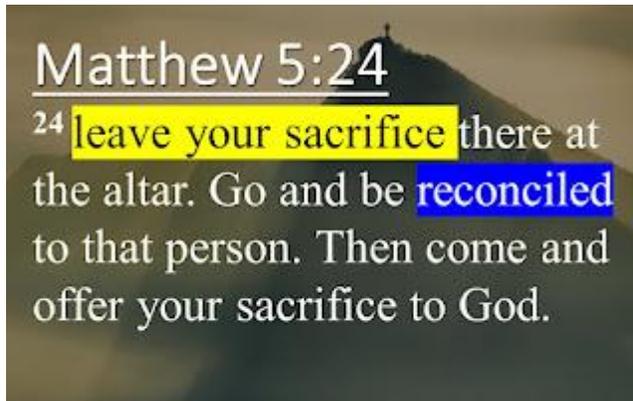


Matthew 5:21-22

²¹ "You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' ²² But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

Jesus shows how incredible demanding is God's perfect Law. Of course, we can understand that we should not murder. But lest we boast that we have never murdered, Jesus points out that the spirit of the Law requires more. If you are

angry at someone, you've broken the Law. If you are driving down Cleveland Hwy and someone cuts in front of you and almost causes a wreck and you say, "You idiot!", you will face judgment. And if you curse at someone, you are dangling precariously over the fires of hell and it's only a matter of time before you fall into it! The perfect Law of God is that demanding. And Jesus goes on.



Matthew 5:23-24

²³ "So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

Here, Jesus is showing forgiveness and reconciliation is the most important act for God's people. In the Jewish religion of

Jesus' day, sacrifice in the Temple was very important. People would travel for hundreds of miles (on foot) to visit the Temple to make a religious sacrifice. It was a high and holy event. But Jesus says there's something even more important. Even though your sacrifice was very expensive and you traveled many miles to offer it as the Temple that is held up as the most important place on earth, forgiveness and reconciliation is more important. It is so important, in fact, that Jesus left the glory of Heaven to come down to our broken world, and to die on a cross for our sins so we can be reconciled to God and each other.

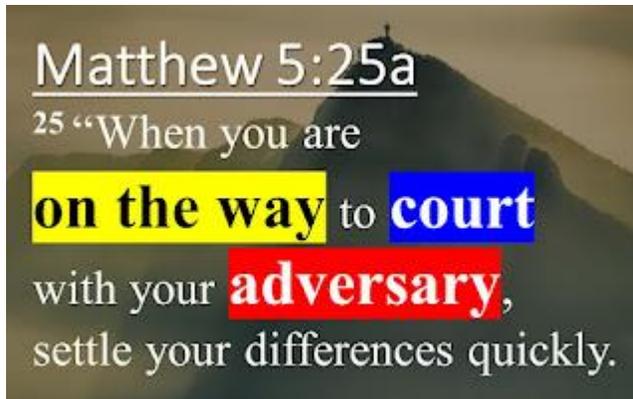


Matthew 5:25-26

²⁵ "When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ And if that happens, you surely won't be free again until you have paid the last penny.

This last part is often seen as Jesus' practical advice for people in a lawsuit. It makes sense. If someone has a suit against you (and you are in the wrong, or maybe even just partly in the wrong), settle it out of court if you can. You never know how it's going to go in court. Plus, honest people ought to be able to work out a fair agreement among themselves. (Sadly, that's not always the case since we are too broken by sin.)

But the Lord revealed something to me as I prepared for this message (and I checked it out and found there is another way of understanding this passage that gets at what Jesus is really saying). This is more than just practical advice. Jesus is using a metaphor about eternal judgement.



Matthew 5:25a

“When you are on the way to court with your adversary...” We are all involved in a divine “lawsuit”. You see, God’s Law is perfect. And we have all broken it. And the Bible often says the Devil is our accuser and adversary. Satan is the prosecuting attorney who brings the case against sinful people to God. Our great enemy, the Devil, shows all the evidence of our sinfulness to the Heavenly Court and points His accusing

finger at our face, “He is guilty! She is guilty! And the penalty is death and eternal damnation!”

And what will you say when you find yourself on the judgment seat in the court of Heaven? We have no defense. We are indeed guilty. As Jesus shows, we are guilty even if we’ve only ever been angry or called someone an idiot.

And so Jesus says, “Don’t wait until the Day of Judgment! Then it will be too late. Settle this matter now, while you’re still on the way to that Heavenly Court. Here’s your chance.”

Here’s your chance, people. Jesus is here now. He came to offer grace. He came to offer reconciliation with God and your fellow man. It’s more important than worship or sacrifice. It’s THE most important thing.

Reconcile with God through Jesus

So first off, we need to get our hearts right with God. That starts when we turn to Jesus and repent of our sin. We say, “Jesus, I will follow You as the Lord of my life. I am no longer in charge. You are. I will follow You. Please, forgive me for my sins and save me.”

When we do this, Jesus’ death on the cross washes away all our sin. When the Devil tries to accuse you before God, there will be nothing left to find you guilty. Your sins are gone. You are innocent and holy before God. But there’s more.

Now, we are called to live like Jesus in this broken world. We are ambassadors of peace and reconciliation. Jesus forgives our trespasses and so we forgive those who have trespassed against us. And we are healed and there is healing in our world and the Kingdom of Heaven comes on earth.



No. It is not easy to forgive people who hurt us. It was not easy for Jesus to die on the cross, but He did it. And Jesus said in Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.” And so just as Jesus forgave us, we must forgive others.

Closing

As we close, I want to first invite you to be reconciled to God. Turn away from your sin and turn to Jesus. Believe in Him and trust Him and follow Him as Lord and receive the grace and mercy and forgiveness He freely gives. He will wash you clean of your sin so you are holy before God. The Devil will have nothing of which to accuse you. You will be innocent.

Second, I invite you to do the hard work of forgiving others. Just as Christ forgave you, freely forgive those who have wronged you. Do not be angry, for anger leads to wrath. Instead, leave the judgment to God, for He is the only one qualified to judge. As for you, be an ambassador of peace and reconciliations as is fitting for those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Session 4 Leader's Guide – Anger and Judgment

Goal: Understand Jesus' teaching on anger, judgment, and reconciliation, and how they apply to our daily lives as His followers.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: "Have you ever been so angry that you later regretted your words or actions? What did you learn from that experience?"

Read Matthew 5: 21-26 aloud.

Overview: Jesus expands on the Old Testament commandment, "Do not murder," revealing that anger and harsh words can be just as dangerous to our souls. He shifts the focus from external actions (murder) to internal attitudes (anger, resentment, and judgment). The urgency of reconciliation—Jesus teaches that it is more important than religious rituals.

Matthew 5:21-22 – Key Point: Jesus teaches that anger and insults can bring spiritual consequences just as severe as murder.

- Why do you think Jesus equates anger and insulting others with murder?
- What are some ways anger can lead to actions or words we later regret?
- Jesus warns against calling someone a fool or cursing them. How does our speech reflect our heart condition?

Matthew 5:23-24 – Key Point: Jesus prioritizes reconciliation over religious duties and calls us to make things right with others before coming to God.

- What does it mean that reconciliation is more important than making an offering at the temple?
- Why is it sometimes difficult to seek reconciliation with someone we have wronged (or who has wronged us)?
- How does forgiving others reflect God's forgiveness toward us?
- What steps can we take toward reconciliation when emotions are still high?

Matthew 5:25-26 – Key Point: Jesus warns that delaying reconciliation can lead to severe consequences, both spiritually and relationally.

- What does Jesus mean when He says to settle disputes quickly?
- How might unresolved anger lead to greater conflict or broken relationships?
- How can this passage also serve as a metaphor for our standing before God in judgment?

60 Seconds of Personal Reflection: "Is there anyone in your life you need to reconcile with? What steps can you take this week to work toward peace?"

Closing

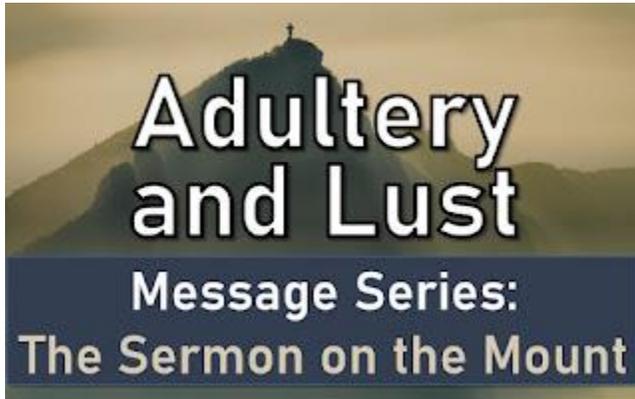
- Summarize the main idea: Jesus calls us to guard our hearts against anger, seek reconciliation quickly, and leave judgment to God.
- **Pray:** Ask God for a heart of patience, humility, and forgiveness. Pray for wisdom and courage to seek reconciliation where needed. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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Sermon on the Mount Session 5

Adultery and Lust



Introduction

In the 10 commandments, God said, “Do not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14). Adultery is a serious crime against God and humanity. It wrecks marriages, tears apart families, and fills people with hurt, anger, and resentment. Adultery is a sin of betrayal that destroys the peace and harmony of

communities. It compromises our integrity, corrupts our character, and mars the sacred image of God within us.

That is why God takes adultery seriously. In the civil law for Israel in the Old Testament, the punishment for adultery was death. Deuteronomy 22:22 – “If a man is discovered committing adultery, both he and the woman must die. In this way, you will purge Israel of such evil.”

That may seem to be too harsh of a penalty to us who live in the modern era. But if you’ve ever been betrayed by an adulterous spouse, you may wish the OT penalty was still in effect. Adultery is evil and destructive, not just to the spouse. It harms families and society.

While infidelity may have become more common in civilian life, the military continues to enforce strict prohibitions against adultery. It is still illegal for married military personnel to engage in adultery. It is a military crime that can be prosecuted, because the military understands adultery is a distraction that leads to the loss of trust and morale, and a decline in fighting efficiency. If convicted of adultery, a soldier can face up to a year of jailtime, dishonorable discharge, and forfeiture of all pay and allowances.

Hopefully, you have never cheated on your spouse. However, statistics indicate that there are some here who probably have. I’ve read research that says anywhere from 10-20% of married couples cheat. If that’s true, there’s probably several people

reading this today who have cheated on their spouse. But for those of who haven't, we need not be too proud of ourselves. Jesus has a few words to say about adultery in the sermon on the mount. His words challenge all of us.

Matthew 5:27-30

²⁷“You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.



Heart Lust

The holiness God demands of His people is tremendous. Those tremendous demands are spelled out in the Old Testament Law by the extreme penalties for adultery. Those who committed adultery were to be put to death. But Jesus points out that the demands of God's Holy Law go even

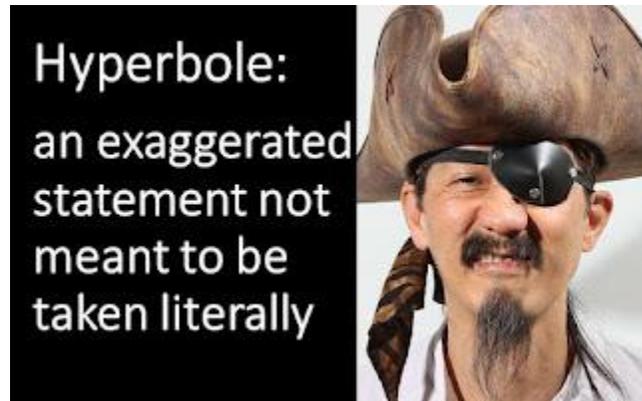
deeper than what happens outwardly. Jesus says it goes all the way down into a person's heart. So, if you even desire sensual intimacy with someone other than your spouse, you have committed adultery in your heart.

A study of the University of California^[1] interviewed 676 men and women, whose average age was 25, on the intensity and frequency with which they experienced sexual desire. Almost all those interviewed—97.3%—reported having experienced lustful feelings, with men only slightly more likely to feel sexual desire (98.8%) than women (95.9%).

These statistics may or may not be representative of the wider population. But I know we live in an over-sexualized society. People today in Dalton, GA are certainly more infatuated with sex than the socially conservative people to whom Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount 2,000 years ago. Their culture required modest clothing whereas our culture prefers to accentuate and advertise the desirability of a human body. The conversations of 1st century Jews carefully avoided sexually provocative

language while in our time we crave sexually explicit lyrics in songs and readily portray nudity and sensuality on TV while exploiting sexuality to sell products in commercials.

There is no doubt we are more obsessed with sex than the people who first heard Jesus words: “anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The point: We are all guilty.

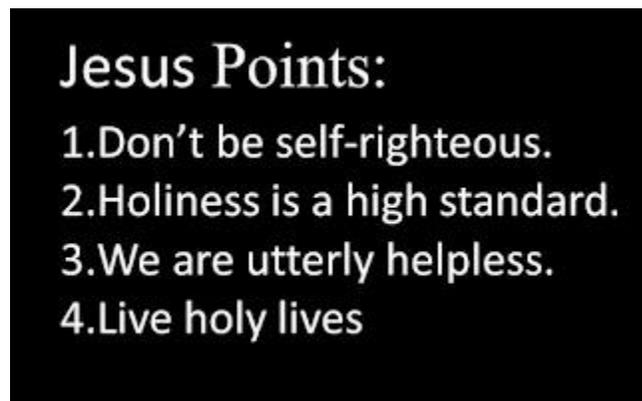


Jesus said, “So, if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away.” One might wonder why we aren’t all walking around like pirates with an eye patch.

It’s important here to point out Jesus was using hyperbole. There’s a fancy word: Hyperbole.

Hyperbole is an exaggerated statement not meant to be taken literally. We might say, “I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse!” even though we really wouldn’t eat a horse. And we may say, “My feet are killing me!” even though our feet aren’t literally killing us; they just hurt.

So, Jesus wasn’t actually instructing His followers to pluck out their eyes to keep from lusting. Blind men lust too. Nor did Jesus want His disciples to actually cut off their hands to keep them from stealing. These were exaggerations Jesus used to make some serious points.



First of all, don’t be self-righteous just because you never cheated on your spouse. Romans 3:23 spells it out clearly, “For all have sinned and fall short of God’s glorious standard.” Don’t judge someone else because they sin differently than you. James 2:10 tells us, “For the person who keeps all of the laws except

one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God’s laws.” That puts us all on equal footing, at least in terms of God’s perfect and righteous judgment.

Second, Jesus points out God’s incredible standard of holiness. It goes way beyond just our physical actions. God even cares about the motives of our hearts. And since our hearts are corrupt, we have a serious problem. We need a new heart.

Third, Jesus shows our utter helplessness in regard to sin and holiness. Romans 6:23 puts it this way, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” So the consequences of our sin is death—not just our sinful actions, but even the inner motives of our sinful heart. So we are all guilty and deserving of death. That’s why Jesus came; to free us from the curse of sin. He paid the penalty for our sin and He also offers us a remedy for our sinful hearts. Through Jesus, we can have a new and perfect heart—one the Holy Spirit can shape and form to be godly, Christ centered, and full of love.

Hebrews 10:16

“This is the new covenant I will make with my people on that day, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

Jesus satisfied the demands of the Law. He paid the penalty for our sins. And Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies about God’s New Covenant with His people, such as Ezekiel 36:26, which says, “And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a

tender, responsive heart.” And Hebrews 10:16 says, "This is the new covenant I will make with my people on that day, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

So now, we can make a fresh start with God. When we repent of our sins, Jesus begins to change our hearts so that we actually want to live the way God wants us to live. Not just because we are following the rules, but because we love God and we love our neighbor and want to do the right thing for the right reasons.

Fourth, Jesus calls His followers to live holy lives. Jesus exaggerated statements about plucking out eyes and cutting off hands—though symbolic—also have practical meanings. If your eye causes you to sin, then don’t look. Act as though you had plucked out your eyes and were blind. What I mean is, be extremely careful what you look at. Guard your eyes so they don't lead your into temptation that causes you to sin.

And when Jesus says, “Cut off your hand”, take his advice and don’t put your hands near things that cause you to sin. With a little thoughtful prayer, we can recognize the kinds of things that tempt us. We can learn ways to steer clear of them. The practical ways this plays out may be different for different people. If you are an alcoholic, don’t hang out at a bar. In fact, you would do well to avoid being around alcohol altogether. That doesn’t mean alcohol is bad for *all* people (even Jesus drank wine with His disciples). But use some common sense. Avoid being around those things that lead you into temptation and cause you to sin.

Conclusion

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you today? Which of these 4 points hits you right where you are? Maybe today, you need to repent of your sin, turn to Jesus to save you, and start living the holy life He calls and enables His followers to live. Maybe today, you need to consider practical ways you can avoid looking at or handling things that lead you to sin. What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?

[1] https://www.forbes.com/2005/06/02/cx_0602health.html?sh=23141d7a2cc6

Session 5 Leader's Guide – Adultery and Lust

Goal: Understand Jesus' teaching on adultery and lust, the seriousness of sin, and practical ways to pursue holiness.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: "In what ways does our culture today normalize or downplay the seriousness of lust and infidelity?"

Read Matthew 5:27-30 aloud.

Overview: Jesus expands on the commandment "Do not commit adultery," revealing that sin begins in the heart. He emphasizes that even lustful thoughts violate God's standard of holiness. Jesus uses hyperbolic language (gouging out an eye, cutting off a hand) to stress the seriousness of sin.

Key Point: Sin is not just about outward actions but also internal thoughts and desires.

- Why does Jesus equate lustful thoughts with adultery?
- How does lust impact relationships, marriages, and society?
- Why do you think sexual sin is so destructive?
- What are some common excuses people use to justify lust or infidelity?

Key Point: Jesus uses extreme imagery to highlight the need to take serious action against sin.

- Why does Jesus use such strong language about cutting off a hand or gouging out an eye?
- What practical steps can we take to "cut off" the things that lead us into temptation?
- How can we guard our hearts and minds against lustful thoughts?
- What role does accountability play in overcoming struggles with lust?

Matthew 5:25-26 – Key Point: Jesus warns that delaying reconciliation can lead to severe consequences, both spiritually and relationally.

- What does Jesus mean when He says to settle disputes quickly?
- How might unresolved anger lead to greater conflict or broken relationships?
- How can this passage also serve as a metaphor for our standing before God in judgment?

Practical Application

- Brainstorm ways to cultivate purity in a culture that promotes sexual temptation.
- Discuss habits that help guard against lust (e.g., avoiding certain media, setting boundaries, prayer).

Closing

- **Summarize the main idea:** Jesus calls His followers to pursue holiness, not just in actions but in thoughts and desires.
- **Pray:** Ask God for strength to resist temptation, purity of heart, and wisdom to set boundaries. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 6

Jesus & Divorce



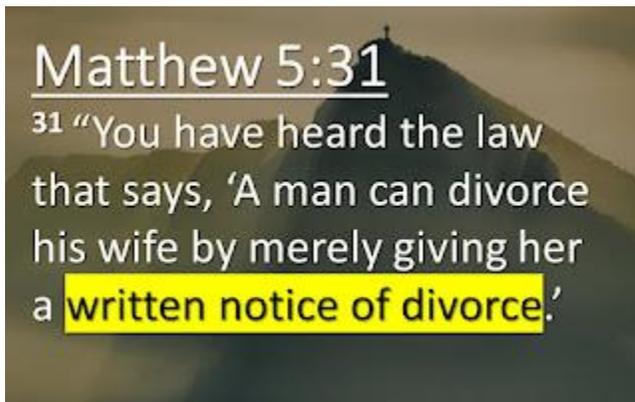
Introduction

We are working our way through Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew chapters 5-7. Today our subject is a sensitive one: divorce. The experience of divorce is described by many as one of the most painful experiences of life. It is something that affects not only the divorced couple, but also their children, families, and friends. And just based on statistics, it’s likely half of the people reading this have

been through a divorce or will sometime in their lifetime.

Jesus had some important things to say about marriage and divorce. He spoke the Truth with genuine love. Please know upfront that is my intention too—to speak the truth in love. I’m not here to judge anyone. I think if we really have an understanding of what Jesus said about divorce and how it should be interpreted in our world today, we will find an incredible amount of God’s grace and love as well as Truth that can change our lives forever for the better.

So what did Jesus say? It is found in Matthew 5:31-32.



Matthew 5:31

³¹“You have heard the law that says, ‘A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.’”

Jesus is talking about an Old Testament law in Deuteronomy 24 that says, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him *because he finds something **indecent** about her...*” he can give her a written certificate of divorce and send

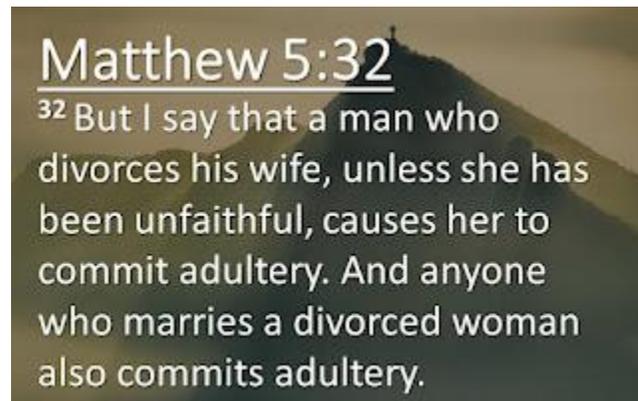
her away.

The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus day debated a specific clause in that statement quite a bit: “if he finds something **indecent** about her.” What does it mean to be indecent? There were two popular interpretations in Jesus’ day. A famous rabbi named **Shammai** said the only *indecency* that could lead to divorce was a serious transgression. For example, if a woman was stealing her husband’s money or flirting with her neighbors or walking around exposing

herself in public, this was serious indecent behavior that were grounds for divorce. Another famous rabbi, rabbi **Hillel** said a man could divorce his wife simply because she burned his toast!

So the religious Jews of Jesus day generally grouped themselves into one or the other school of thought about divorce. One said you can divorce your wife for almost any reason at all and a stricter belief that it had to be a serious offence. I should point out here that it would not be necessary to divorce your wife if she cheated on you, because the Old Testament penalty for adultery was death. So, if your wife cheated and was put to death, no divorce is necessary.

But Jesus, who is God, says:



Matthew 5:32

³² But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.

People have often used this passage to prove Jesus forbids Christians to divorce or to remarry after a divorce. On the surface, that's what it seems like Jesus is saying. But if you only read the passage this way, you

are misunderstanding the point Jesus makes. Throughout this chapter, Jesus uses real-life examples to show people are utterly helpless to fulfill God's perfect and holy Law. Remember what Jesus said in the passage last week about lust and adultery? If you even look at someone else and lust in your heart you've already committed adultery in your heart and broken God's law. And since hardly anyone can honestly say they haven't ever lusted, we are guilty.

The Jewish religious leaders knew how hard it was for people to stay married to the same person their whole life. So, they were always looking for exceptions. One group said, "if she burns your toast, you can divorce her." Another group said, "No. It has something serious." Jesus said, it was never God's intention that anyone get divorced, and if you do you are breaking God's law (see Matthew 19). The point is, once again, Jesus is saying we are unable to fulfill God's Law. That's why Jesus came to fulfill the Law for us, to die on the cross to pay our penalty, and offer us God's grace and mercy to restore our broken relationship with Him. This passage is not directly about divorce. It's about how Jesus came to save us from our sin. He's using a practical example from life to show how helpless we are.



But What About Divorce?

Well, that's a fine biblical theology lesson. However, what we all still want to know: Is it OK for Christians to divorce and remarry. I get it. Divorce is heart wrenching. And genuine Christians who want to be faithful really struggle when it comes to divorce.

Methodists accept that divorce is sometimes necessary. This is true of the two largest

Methodist denominations—United Methodist Church and the Global Methodist Church. And as far as I know, divorce is allowed by all the other major Methodist traditions of which I'm aware. However, I want to state clearly that we believe this not *in spite of what Jesus and the Bible says* but because of what Jesus and the Bible says. How can that be when Jesus clearly seems to prohibit divorce?

The Bible's laws about divorce, laws that Jesus confirmed, were specifically designed to protect women in the ancient world against abandonment. Since most women in Jesus' day could not work to provide a living for themselves (unless they turned to prostitution), God did not want women to be abandoned. So, God gave strict laws to forbid divorce so women could not be cast out and left destitute.

In a perfect world the way God intended it to be, divorce would not be necessary. A man and woman would be faithful and loving to each other their whole lives. But we all know we don't live in a perfect world. Sometimes divorce is necessary. Sometimes, in our modern world, divorce *is the way* to protect women (and also men).

Look at an example: What if a man is abusing his wife? There is no way in the world Jesus would tell that woman she must stay with her abusive husband. Jesus' teaching about divorce was there to *protect* women, not hurt them. And this goes for mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse as well as physical abuse. Jesus wants more than anything to protect the vulnerable.

And it also goes both ways—for both men and women—because Jesus wants to protect men too. In our modern world where women *can* leave their husbands and make it on their own, men need protection from abusive relationships too. Sometimes divorce is the only way out of an abusive marriage *for a husband*. And if Jesus was here today speaking to you, He would say the same thing. So don't let anyone twist what Jesus said to protect women 2,000 year ago into something to hurt women (or men) today. God's Law and Jesus' teaching is meant to protect the vulnerable from abuse.

Now, that is not to say Christians should take marriage lightly or use divorce as an excuse not to work through tough marital issues. Marriage takes a lot of work and faithful spouses should be committed to do everything possible to stay together if they can. The truth is, divorce is so difficult and expensive and painful, I don't think too many people out there taking it lightly. Our goal should be to marry for life. And I think two faithful people who are truly committed to each

other and to Jesus can find a way to be together for life. But it takes both the husband and the wife to make that happen. And if it can't happen and staying married is more harmful than good, then divorce is permissible—maybe even advisable.

In first Corinthians 7, the Apostle Paul also taught about divorce. He said if your spouse is determined to leave, you should let them go. You aren't bound to try and force them to stay.

There is much more that could be said about marriage and divorce than we can address in a general message like this. Marriage and divorce are complex and every case is unique. If you are struggling in your marriage or contemplating divorce, come talk with me (or find a good pastor or marriage counselor to talk to.) Many times, marriage problems that seem too big to be worked out can be overcome with a little help from a counselor. And if your problems truly justify separation or divorce, a wise counselor can help you determine that too and you will have the peace of mind knowing you did everything you could to save your marriage.



We Live In A Broken World

We live in a broken world. The Bible tells us our spiritual ancestors, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and brought sin into the world. All of creation has suffered the consequences. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of God's glorious standard." We see the results all around us. There is sickness. There is war. There is famine. Even our marriages fail because the world is not the way God intended it or

wants it to be.

That's why Jesus came. He came to fulfill the requirements of the Law when we couldn't. Jesus gave His life on the cross to atone for our sins. Jesus rose from the grave to prove God's promise of reconciliation and eternal life for all who repent and call on the name of Jesus to be saved. So, remember what Jesus did for us and follow Him as Lord and He will strengthen you to live for Him until we realize the healing and restoration of the coming Kingdom of Heaven.

Session 6 Leader's Guide – Jesus and Divorce

Goal: Understand Jesus' teaching on divorce in the context of biblical law, grace, and the reality of brokenness in the world.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: "What are some common cultural views on marriage and divorce today? How do they compare to biblical perspectives?"

Read Matthew 5: 31-32 aloud.

Overview: Divorce was a debated topic among Jewish religious leaders in Jesus' time. Some believed divorce was only permissible for serious transgressions, while others allowed divorce for trivial reasons. Jesus challenges this debate, calling people back to God's original design for marriage. His teaching is not about condemning those who have experienced divorce, but about revealing the depth of our need for grace.

Key Point: Jesus affirms that divorce was never God's intention but acknowledges human brokenness.

- Why do you think Jesus addressed divorce in the Sermon on the Mount?
- How does Jesus' teaching contrast with the cultural attitudes toward divorce in His time?
- How should we balance the biblical ideal of lifelong marriage with the reality that some marriages fail?
- What does Jesus' teaching reveal about God's desire for faithfulness and commitment in relationships?

Key Point: Jesus' teaching does not exist to condemn but to call us to God's grace and restoration.

- How does Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce reflect God's grace?
- How should the church support people who have been through divorce?
- In what ways can we reflect both truth and grace when discussing divorce?

Practical Application – What can we do to uphold God's design for marriage while also showing grace to those who have experienced divorce?

- Identify ways to encourage strong, Christ-centered marriages.
- Discuss ways the church can be a place of healing for those affected by divorce.

Closing

Summarize the main idea: Jesus calls us to faithfulness in marriage but also extends grace to those who experience its brokenness.

Pray: Pray for those struggling in marriage, those who have been affected by divorce, and for the church to be a place of truth and healing. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 7

Vows & Honesty



Introduction

The Jewish people of the New Testament were commanded by God to be honest. The 9th of the 10 commandments says, “Do not false witness against your neighbor.” (Exodus 20:16) And throughout the Scriptures, God instructs people to be honest. Just as God does not lie, we should not lie.

And yet, how could Jews live under the oppression of the all Romans, and not lie? Think about it. Suppose you were in their shoes and some Romans soldiers came to arrest and execute your brother, who was hiding in your basement. And they demanded, “Where is your brother?” And you say, “I don’t know! He isn’t here.” Your lie may save his life. And yet, in lying, you broke God’s command not to lie.

The Romans weren’t stupid. They knew the Jews would lie for each other; who wouldn’t in that situation? But they also knew the Jews were religious and they feared God who told them not to lie. So they might make the Jews swear a vow. “Swear to God you don’t know where your brother is?”

An oath or vow like this was a very serious business to ancient people—especially the Jews. Jews believed more than any other people that God was real and all powerful and all knowing. Lying to God was a serious offense and He would punish you. The Jews believed that wholeheartedly.

Now that’s a problem if you live in occupied territory. What were the Jews supposed to do? Well, Jewish religious leaders came up with some work arounds so Jews could lie to the Romans and not offend God. We can deduce some of these from Matthew 23:16-22. They could make a vow “by God’s Temple” as long as they didn’t make the vow on the “gold of the Temple”. Or they could make a vow “by heaven” as long as it was not “by God in heaven”. So these were ways Jews could use a vow to *sound* honest but actually lie.

That’s convenient. If we found ourselves in their shoes, we could probably all appreciate the practicality of being able to lie to the enemy like that. Kids who live in abusive households often learn to lie for very similar reasons. In order to avoid abuse and unfair punishment, they learn really quick it’s easier to lie and cover up than to be beaten. It’s a coping mechanism and it often works.

The problem for many kids who learned to lie because they're abused is they grow into adults who are habitual liars. Even though they are no longer in an abusive situation, they are still in

the habit of lying because it's more convenient. Sometimes it's just easier to lie than explain the truth.

The unfortunate Jews who lived under Roman occupation learned to be good liars. They even learned to feel good about lying by using vows to cover it up with religious language. But what was to stop them from using religious language to now lying to each other? Nothing.

And into this world of lies and deception, Jesus speaks the Truth in His Sermon on the Mount.



Matthew 5:33-37

³³“You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the LORD.’ ³⁴But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. ³⁵And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. ³⁶Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for

you can’t turn one hair white or black. ³⁷Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

On Earth as it is in Heaven

Jesus came to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. His preaching often started with words like Matthew 3:2, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” Now the people to who He preached (just like us) lived in the real world. The real world is a place where people lie and cheat and steal. The real world is a place where we must look at all the bad options available and pick the least evil one. Right? You know what I mean. We live in the real world, not some fantasy.



It's ironic that we call the broken world we live in “The Real World”. It's real to us, because it's all we've ever known. But Jesus came to show us this isn't the way the world is supposed to be. He met our broken world head on and challenged all its broken people and broken systems. And Jesus refused to bow down to the way things work in our broken world. It may be one of the main things that annoyed the religious and political leaders most about Jesus—that He refused to get with the program about the way things work in the “real world”. And so, when Jesus refused to cave in and play along by the rules of the “real world”, they arrested and executed Him. They said, see, this is what happens to people who don't play by our rules, you die in shame and agony on a cross.

But then an amazing thing happened. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day because He is Lord! You see, in the “real world” honesty and integrity may get you rejected and killed. But in the Kingdom of Heaven, those who follow Jesus rise to new life—eternal life. And we all have to decide which is really the “real world”. Is it this broken world of lies or is it the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus preached?

Jesus challenged all His followers, “Pray like this: Our Father in Heaven... Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven...” (Matthew 6:8-10) Jesus came to overthrow our broken world and He calls all His believers to have faith to live as though His Kingdom is the true reality and this so called “real world” which we believe is reality is really a corruption and a lie that is passing away. God’s Kingdom is coming, and we are called to live by the Kingdom’s principles.

And in God’s Kingdom, there’s no reason to lie. There is no sin or abuse. There is no Enemy. We are called to live with honesty and integrity. We’ve got to let go of our habits of lying. We should be such honest people we no longer need vows to prove we’re telling the truth. So the person who says, “Yes” is just as believable to as the person who says, “I swear to God, yes!” In fact, the person who says yes may be *more* believable than the person who makes a vow. Because why would you even need to say, “I swear to God...”? If you have to swear to prove you’re telling the truth then it almost implies the possibility that you may have lied at other times when you didn’t swear to God. In the Kingdom of Heaven, where Jesus is King, people are always honest. Yes means yes and no means no.



Can Christians Make Vows or Swear Oaths?

Some Christian denominations interpret Jesus words about vows to mean Christians should not make vows or take oaths of any kind. For instance, Quakers, Mennonites, and the Amish interpret Jesus’ words in Scripture to mean they should not make vows or swear oaths of any kind. In fact, George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement (officially called the Religious

Society of Friends), was put in prison because he refused to swear on the Bible to tell the truth. Ironically, Fox was a deeply religious man and argued the very Bible he was being compelled to swear upon required him not to swear an oath.

Was George Fox right? Does the Bible forbid Christians from making vows or swearing oaths? No. I don’t believe it does. That’s not the point of what Jesus is saying. Besides, Jesus was involved in a trial where an oath were used. When Jesus was on trial before the Jerusalem High Council (Matthew 26:63-64), the high priest said, “I demand *in the name of the living God*—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus replied, “You have said it.” That’s not much different than when the judge asks you in court, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” and you respond “I do.”

Other Christian denomination may see it differently, but Methodists (and the vast majority of Christian denominations throughout history) have allowed and even encouraged Christians to make vows in certain situations—like when you get married and say, “I do” or when you become a Christian and join a church and are asked, “Do you confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord?” and you respond, “I do.” So the point is not to prohibit vows. The point is to uphold the high value of honesty and integrity in God’s people in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Conclusion

Jesus reveals once again that the demands of holiness in the Kingdom of Heaven are beyond the reach of our sinful hands. We fall so far short of God’s glorious standards. We’re so accustomed to living in a broken and sinful world, we don’t even realize how much we sin. Jesus points out our sin—not to shame us, but—to wake us up to our desperate need of salvation.



Do you struggle with honesty? Are you a liar? Before you deny it, reflect honestly and deeply. Some of you learned to lie when you were in an abusive situation—maybe an abusive relationship or marriage, maybe even as a child who could not be honest with your parents and still survive. Now you are free of that abuse, but you still cling to your habit of lying. Maybe it’s just easier to lie than tell the truth. Isn’t it time to ask God to heal you so you can start to value honesty as Jesus does?

Some of you think you are honest. You may even be proud of how honest you are. But think about it.

Did you ever laugh at someone’s joke when everyone else laughed even though it wasn’t funny? That was dishonest. Why did you lie? Were you trying not to look foolish? We’re you just being polite?

Have you every smiled and pretended understand someone when you couldn’t really hear or understand them? Have you ever covered up your physical flaws to make yourself look better than you really do? Maybe put on a little makeup or dye in your hair or wore clothing that covered up your flaws. Isn’t that in some sense dishonest?

Friends, we’ve all lied. If we’re honest about it, we can all see it and admit it. It may be a small thing to us, but we’re talking about the absolutely perfect and holy standards of God. You see? We can’t fulfill it. And when we’re proud of our honesty, we can see even our pride is misplaced and sinful. We’ve nothing to be proud of. Even our so-called righteousness is but filthy rags.

But with Jesus there is mercy and grace and forgiveness. With Jesus, there is salvation. We must lay down our false righteousness and throw ourselves upon the mercy of Christ. Repent and turn to Him today and seek to live by the principles of His Kingdom.

For we all must decided what is *real*. Is this world we see around us, with all its corrupt rules and customs, the “real world”? Or is the **real world** the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus taught about and showed us with His life? You must decide. Make your choice today, right now, this very moment.

Session 7 Leader's Guide – Vows and Honesty

Goal: Understand Jesus' teaching on honesty, integrity, and the importance of being people of truth in a broken world.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever been in a situation where telling the truth was difficult? What made it hard?

Read Matthew 5: 33-37 aloud.

Overview: In Jesus' time, people used vows to appear truthful while still being deceptive. Jesus challenges His followers to be so honest that their words stand on their own—without needing to swear by anything. The Kingdom of Heaven calls us to radical integrity, where our “yes” truly means yes, and our “no” truly means no.

Key Point: Jesus calls us to be people of truth in all aspects of life.

- Why do people sometimes feel the need to swear an oath or make a vow to prove their honesty?
- How does dishonesty damage relationships and trust?
- In what ways do we justify small lies in everyday life?
- What does it mean to be a person whose word is trustworthy?

Key Point: The Kingdom of Heaven is built on truth, and as followers of Christ, we must reflect that truth in our words and actions.

- Jesus says anything beyond a simple “yes” or “no” is from the evil one. What does this mean?
- How can we practice truthfulness even when it is inconvenient?
- Why do people sometimes make empty promises or say things they don't mean?
- How can living with integrity make us better witnesses for Christ?

Practical Application – Is there an area of your life where you struggle with complete honesty? What steps can you take to change that?

- Brainstorm real-life examples where honesty and integrity are especially challenging (e.g., workplace, social settings, family).
- Discuss practical ways to cultivate a habit of truthfulness.

Closing

Jesus calls His followers to be people of truth, where our words reflect the honesty and integrity of God's Kingdom.

Pray: Ask God for the courage to live with honesty, wisdom to speak truth in love, and the strength to resist deception. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 8

Vengeance



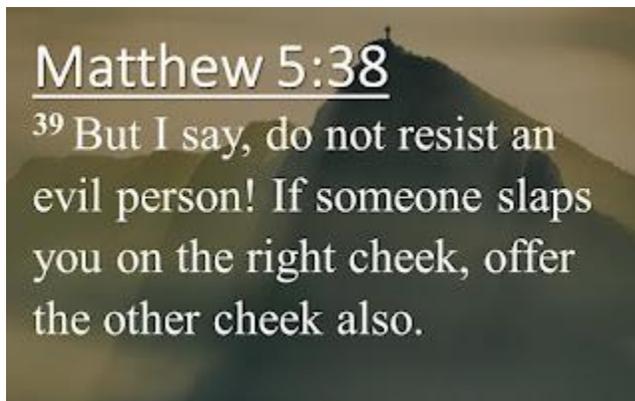
Introduction

I have a difficult and challenging words to share from Jesus today. We've been working our way through Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus preached how He came to completely fulfill God's perfect Law. Then Jesus used specific examples from the Old Testament Law to show how perfect God's standards are and how completely unable we are to fulfill God's Law as sinful human beings. When we are proud because we have never murdered,

Jesus said if you've ever been angry or insulted someone, you've broken God's Law by murdering in your heart. If we're proud because we've never committed adultery, Jesus says you've committed adultery in your heart and broken God's Law if you've even lusted after someone. And Jesus points out that if you've ever lied, stretched the truth, or misled someone in even the slightest way, you've broken God's Law. That's why Jesus came—to fulfill the Law when we could not.

Jesus gave up His divine rights as God, came down to earth and humbled Himself as if He were a slave, was completely obedient to God, and died *for us* on a cross as if He were a criminal even though He was completely innocent. Thus, Jesus paid our penalty, making it possible for us to be reconciled to God. (See Philippians 2:1-11)

It's important to keep all this context in mind (as well as the historical situation of the Jews when Jesus preached) as we listen to Jesus preach in this next section from His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-42.



Matthew 5:38

³⁸ “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’

Here, Jesus reminds His listeners of the Old Testament Law that is spelled out in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21. The laws says, “The punishment must match the injury: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand,

a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise.” Today, many think this is an argument for harsher penalties for criminals. But the original intent was to restrain people from overzealous vengeance.

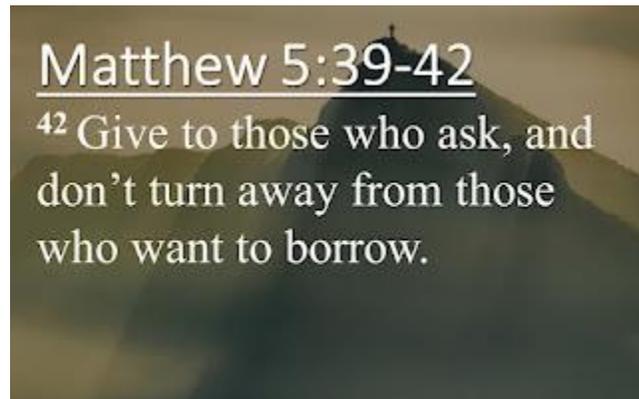
In the brutal tribal ways of the ancient world, if you gouged out a person's eye, they very likely would respond by gathering up a war party and murdering you and your whole family. Unrestrained human vengeance can be a terrible and ugly thing. When someone hurts and insults us, we don't just want the wrong to be made right; we want to make the offender pay!

God gave the ancient Israelites a Law to restrain their vengeance. He said, the punishment must match the crime. If they gouge out your eye, you can only gouge out theirs. If they take a life, you can take their life (but not their whole family's).

But there's another principle at work in the Old Testament Law. An individual can't be a vigilante. They can't exact retribution on their own. They must take the offender to the authorities and prove their case. Then the officials will judge if the offender is guilty and make a judgment about the appropriate punishment. This is always important. You need a judge, who is unbiased, to hear the case and determine a punishment that matches the crime.

The problem for the Jews living in Jesus' day was they were living under the occupation of the Romans. And the Romans were quite often guilty of abusing and committing atrocities against the Jews in Israel. Many in Israel felt they were justified to murder Romans. "After all," their thinking went, "these Romans are nothing more than human animals. And we should treat them as animals." Many Israelites thought they could feel justified murdering Romans in cold blood, because their religious law said, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life..." However, this was a corruption of the spirit of God's Law. Where does it all end? Human vengeance only begets more vengeance and never leads to peace or justice or reconciliation. Jesus speaks Truth:

Matthew 5:39-42



³⁹ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. ⁴¹ If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. ⁴² Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

Jesus names 3 offences: a slap on the cheek, losing your shirt in court, and carrying a soldier's gear for a mile. You should also

notice that every one of these is something personal. That's important. What follows is about our own personal rights and selfish pride. It's not about laws or policies for the government or society as a whole. This is about personal behavior. So often we point religion at others. But Jesus points it toward our personal attitudes and behavior. Let's look at each one of the situations Jesus mentions.



Turn the Other Cheek

The first is Jesus' famous teaching to "turn the other cheek," which has raised a lot of eyebrows over the years. Some even misunderstand and think Jesus rejects fighting back for any reason. That's not what Jesus said. First of all, Jesus' original listeners knew turning the other cheek was about trading insults, not self-defense. One of the worst insults a Jew could give in the 1st century was a backhanded slap. Notice,

Jesus said, "If someone slaps you on the right cheek." In order for a right-handed person to slap someone on the right cheek (and 90% of the population is right handed), you would have to give a backhanded slap.

A back handed slap was very insulting to 1st century Jews (it still is throughout the Middle East today). A Jew in the 1st century could sue someone for slapping them. The suit wasn't about the violence, but the insult (similar to a libel case today where one person sues another for defamation of character). The financial penalty for a backhanded slap was twice as expensive for a regular slap.

With this in mind, realize Jesus is talking about a threat to a person's life or limb here. Jesus is addressing insults.

What do you do when insulted? Well, it may depend. You may react differently if you are insulted by an immature kid or by an adult colleague. If you have a big ego and the insult hurts your pride, you may feel like you need to defend yourself or take the other person down a notch. If you're insecure, you may feel the need to fight back; I mean you're already feeling inadequate. You can't just stand by and let someone take you down even further.

But what if you have no ego? What if you really don't care what people say about you, because you don't care about their lies? What if you already know God loves you and you are secure in yourself and you only care about what God thinks, not what people think?

Jesus, the Son of God, had way more reason than anyone to have a big ego and demand people respect Him. I mean, He is literally God's gift to the world! However, Jesus left the glory of Heaven and His divine privileges, and humbled Himself to come down to our broken world. He bore physical and verbal abuse, knowing these did not change who He really was. He turned the other cheek and bore people's insults and He calls His followers to take up their cross and follow His example.



The Shirt Off My Back

The second offence Jesus mentions is losing your shirt in court. Think of it. You are so poor all you have for someone to take from you in court is the shirt off your back. And the person suing is so mean they would even take your clothes. And Jesus says, "Give it to them and give them your coat too!" Have you ever felt like even the government, the legal system, and courts are so corrupt and they are abusing you? The Jews in Jesus day

certainly did. The Roman occupiers were corrupt and their own government leaders and court system were corrupt. But Jesus says, "That's still not an excuse to take matters into your own hands and seek personal vengeance."



Go the Extra Mile

Lastly, Jesus points out a real-life situation Jews faced regularly. There was a law in Jesus' day that required any Jew over the age of 12 to carry a Roman soldier's gear for up to a mile if asked. Jesus is obviously pointing to this despised Roman law with His statement in verse 41, "If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles." Here is where we get the common modern encouragement to "go the extra mile" meaning go above and beyond what's

required of you. But would you really be excited about going above and beyond in fulfilling a mean-spirited law made to benefit your enemy while shaming you?

Jesus' way of living is radical. He tells His followers not to seek vengeance and even to set aside their personal rights for the sake of God's Kingdom, trusting God to be the judge and take care of them. And Jesus goes even further. Jesus doesn't want His followers to resent these sacrifices. No, Jesus wants His people to go above and beyond in their willingness to set aside their ego and pride and their personal rights. Put it all in God's hands as the ultimate judge. Vengeance is the Lords, not yours.



Conclusion

If you feel overwhelmed or like this way of living is impossible, you're not wrong. That's part of the point. As with His previous arguments, Jesus is showing that we really aren't capable of living up to God's glorious standards. When we think we are good enough, the Law shows we all fall short. We need a Savior—not only to save us from our sin, but also to enable us to live the way Jesus challenges us to live.

It is a difficult path to follow, but the Lord gives His Disciples the Holy Spirit to help us. Let us obey Christ and seek to go the extra mile in this endeavor.

Session 8 Leader's Guide – Vengeance

Goal: Understand Jesus' teaching on vengeance, personal rights, and the radical call to respond to wrongdoing with grace and humility.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever been wronged or insulted? How did you react? Looking back, would you respond differently?

Read Matthew 5:38-42 aloud.

Overview: The Old Testament law of “*an eye for an eye*” (Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20) was meant to limit vengeance, not encourage retaliation. By Jesus' time, some had twisted this principle into a justification for personal revenge. Jesus calls His followers to a radically different response—one that reflects God's grace rather than the world's instinct for payback.

Key Point: The original intent of this law was justice, not personal revenge.

- How does vengeance escalate conflict rather than resolve it?
- Why do people often feel justified in seeking personal revenge?
- How does Jesus challenge our natural desire for payback?

Key Point: Jesus calls us to selflessness, humility, and trust in God's justice rather than personal retaliation.

- What does it mean to “turn the other cheek”? Does this mean we allow abuse?
- How do we balance standing up for what is right with Jesus' command to not seek revenge?
- What does “going the extra mile” teach us about humility and service?
- How can trusting God's justice free us from bitterness and resentment?

Practical Application – Is there someone in your life you need to forgive or a situation where you need to ‘turn the other cheek’?

- Identify real-life situations where responding with grace instead of revenge could make a difference (e.g., workplace conflicts, family disagreements).
- Discuss practical ways to let go of the desire for vengeance and respond as Jesus taught.

Closing

Jesus calls His followers to reject vengeance and instead show love, patience, and trust in God's justice.

Pray: Ask God for the strength to let go of resentment, the wisdom to respond to conflict with grace, and the trust to leave justice in His hands. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 9

Love Your Enemies

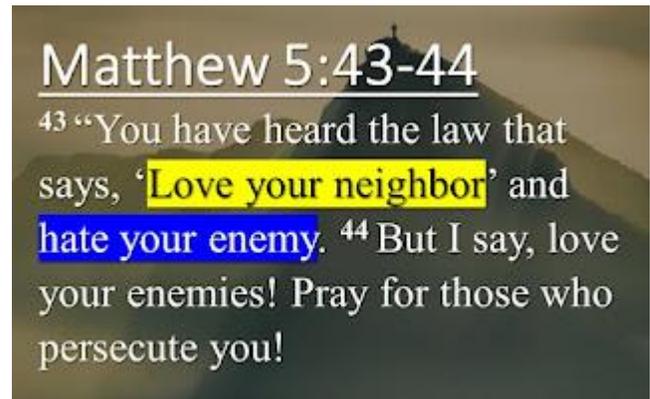


Introduction

We are working our way through Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount from Matthew chapters 5-7. His words have been challenging. Today, we will find they are even more challenging. Today, Jesus commands His followers, "Love your enemies."

Matthew 5:43-44

⁴³ "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!



Throughout His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows He is the fulfillment of the Law. In fact, He specifically said in Matthew 5:17, "I did not come to abolish the law... No, I came to accomplish their purpose."

The Old Testament Law is quite clear that we are to love our neighbors. Leviticus 19:18 says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." But nowhere in the Old Testament does it say to: "Hate your enemy." However, the Jews of Jesus' day lived under the hostile occupation of the Roman empire. They had many enemies and they resented and resisted their Roman oppressors. Many Jewish leaders therefore misinterpreted the Scriptures to say: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy."

It's human nature to love people who are good to you and hate your enemies, but God's Holy Law in the Old Testament holds human nature in check. We find several places where the Old Testament teaches people to do good to their enemies. Such as

Exodus 23:4-5

⁴“If you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey that has strayed away, take it back to its owner. ⁵If you see that the donkey of someone who hates you has collapsed under its load, do not walk by. Instead, stop and help.

Proverbs 25:21 – If your enemies are hungry, give them food to eat. If they are thirsty, give them water to drink.

So we see, Jesus upholds the spirit of God’s Law in the Old Testament while challenging the Jewish religious leaders misinterpretation of it. Notice how the Old Testament teaches to do good to your enemies (and the emphasis is on *doing* good rather than on a loving *feeling*).

Exodus 23:4-5 – ⁴“If you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey that has strayed away, take it back to its owner. ⁵If you see that the donkey of someone who hates you has collapsed under its load, do not walk by. Instead, stop and help.

Proverbs 25:21

If your enemies are hungry, give them food to eat.
If they are thirsty, give them water to drink.

Matthew 5:44-45

⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!

Matthew 5:44-45

⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

evil people that He gives to good people. Why, if God were fair, wouldn’t He reserve good things for good people and give wicked people only the evil they deserve?

It’s troubling to think God gives sunlight and rain to both the evil and the good. In other words, God gives the same good things to

Perhaps that’s the kind of world you long for—a world where evil people are punished and good people get rewards. Is that what you want?

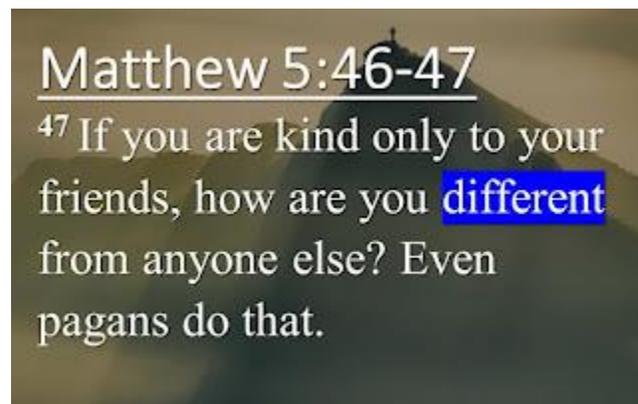
I can understand that. However, the problem is we would all be punished and none of us would get a reward because none of us is good. We have all acted like enemies of God. Listen to what Romans 3:10-12 says: “No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one.” And Romans 3:23 sums it up: “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.”

What that means is every one of us is evil. We have all been enemies of God who “actively opposed or were hostile to God.” Rather than obeying God, we chased our own selfish

ambitions. Rather than surrender to God's will, we wanted to do things our way. In sinful pride, we boasted "God is on our side." But in fact, we were trying to use God's for our own selfish purposes.

If God truly punished His enemies and only gave good to those who deserved it, everyone one of us would be living in Hell and there would be no one left for God to reward—no one except Jesus.

But as it is, God has given "his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike." I am thankful. Aren't you?



Matthew 5:46-47

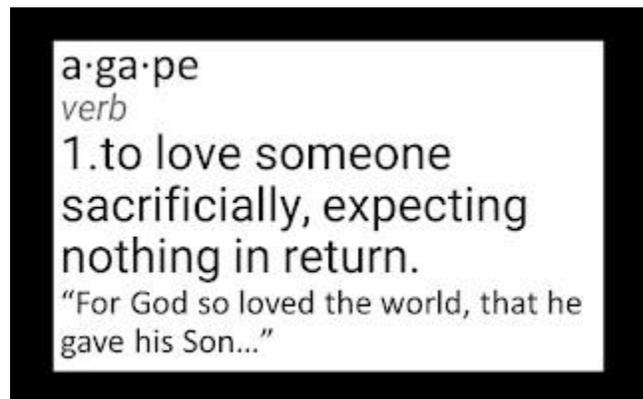
⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that.

Jesus calls His disciples to be different than worldly people. If you only ever love people who love you and are good to you, then you are no better than a worldly pagan. A

pagan—in biblical terms—is a heathen, an ungodly person, anyone who doesn't worship the one true and living God of the Bible. If you only love people who love you and are good to you, then you are no different than the ungodly, immoral, corrupt enemies of God all over this world. Jesus wants us to be *different*. Jesus wants us to be like Him. Jesus wants us to **love** our enemies.

A·ga·pe

Now, it's important to clear up what it means to love—according to Jesus. We often have immature notions about love. Biblical love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling of affection. Jesus isn't telling us to find pleasure in our enemies or their bad behavior. The love Jesus commands us to give is a specific kind of love. The Greek word Jesus uses is Agape, which is the "sacrificial love of God". Agape is not a feeling; it is a *verb*. In other words, it's a love you give. Agape is to love someone sacrificially, expecting nothing in return. It's the way God loved us when He sent His one and only Son to die for us on the cross—not because we deserved it, but because God loves us sacrificially.



Agape love is what Jesus did when He allowed His hands and feet to be nailed to the cross, because Jesus knew His death would make our salvation possible. So, when Jesus says, "Love

your enemies...” He isn’t telling us to have warm fuzzy feelings. Jesus wants His followers to love their enemies sacrificially, expecting nothing in return.

It’s nearly impossible to live like this. But Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of God’s law. Jesus loved perfectly. He even loved His enemies—even when they:
Twisted God’s words for their own evil schemes,
Told lies about Jesus and His Disciples,
When they spat curses at Him and beat Him and mocked Him,
And even when they cruelly drove nails through His hands and feet and displayed Him on a cross to die while all His enemies watched and gloated.

Rather than cursing them or getting revenge, Jesus prayed and said: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus’ prayer wasn’t just for those standing at the foot of the cross. He was also praying for you and me. Remember, in one way or another, we have all been enemies of God. Every time we were dishonest, or were angry, or lusted in our heart, or were unfaithful, or sinned in any way, we were responsible for driving the nails through Jesus’ hands and feet. It was our sin that put Christ on the cross.

But rather than seeking revenge or punishment, Jesus loved His enemies—us. He perfectly represented the will of His Father in heaven. And Jesus challenges us to do the same.

Matthew 5:48

⁴⁸ But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

We were created in the image of God. We are to follow in the footsteps of Christ—to represent God, just as Jesus represented Him to us. Just as Christ loved us, we are to love everyone else—even our enemies. We are to be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect.



But how can we possibly be perfect? No one is perfect. That is true. Humanly speaking, it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

One of the distinctive teachings of Methodism is the belief in Christian perfection. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, taught Christians should strive to be **perfect in love**. And Wesley taught that Christians—with the help of the Holy Spirit—can grow, over the course of a lifetime, to become perfect in love.

Methodists believe Christians cannot make the excuse, “Oh, we’re only human. We’re not perfect.” It is true, that we will make many mistakes—even after we decide to follow Jesus—because indeed, “We are only human.” However, there is one way we can be perfect (with the help of God’s Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit can help us grow to a place where everything we do

is motivated by love. And so, with God's help, if we cooperate, we can be perfect in love—even as our Father in heaven is perfect. But we cannot do this on our own. We need God's help.

Conclusion

God will help you if we seek Him with all your heart. You must first surrender to God through Jesus Christ. You must recognize you are helpless to save yourself. Nor can you stop sinning simply by sheer willpower. You need God to save you. So, you must repent and beg God for mercy. Jesus will save you, but you must trust Jesus to save you. And you must stop trying to do things your own way and let Jesus be Lord.

Then, you must follow Christ as a Disciple. Jesus said if anyone wants to be His disciple, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily. A cross is a symbol of suffering and self-denial. Furthermore, you must cooperate with the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit of God who created the universe comes to live inside you when you become a Christian. That Holy Spirit can enable you to do anything the Spirit wants you to do, but you have to go along with the Spirit and do what He says. And then, the Holy Spirit of God will enable you to truly love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. And the same Spirit will also enable you to love your enemies.

Session 9 Leader's Guide – Love Your Enemies

Goal: Understand Jesus' radical command to love our enemies and explore how we can live this out with God's help.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever had someone you considered an 'enemy'? How did you feel about them, and how did you respond to them?

Read Matthew 5:43-48 aloud.

Overview:

The Old Testament commands us to love our neighbors (Leviticus 19:18), but the command to "hate your enemy" was a misinterpretation of Scripture. Jesus calls His followers to a higher standard—not just loving those who are easy to love, but loving even those who oppose and mistreat us. Biblical love (*agape*) is not about feelings but about sacrificial action.

Key Point: Jesus challenges us to love as God loves—sacrificially and without expecting anything in return.

- How does Jesus redefine the meaning of love (*agape*) in this passage?
- What does it mean to love someone who has hurt you?
- Why does Jesus tell us to pray for those who persecute us? How can prayer change our hearts toward our enemies?

Key Point: God demonstrates love even to those who don't deserve it, and we are called to do the same.

- Jesus says God "gives sunlight and rain to both the evil and the good." What does this teach us about God's love?
- How does realizing we were once enemies of God (Romans 3:10-12, 23) change our perspective on loving others?
- How does loving our enemies set us apart as followers of Christ?

Key Point: Jesus calls us to be "perfect" in love, growing in spiritual maturity through the Holy Spirit.

- Can we truly love our enemies on our own strength? How does the Holy Spirit help us?
- What steps can we take to grow in Christlike love for others, including our enemies?

Practical Application – Who in your life do you struggle to love? How can you begin to love them as Jesus commands? Brainstorm specific ways we can respond to difficult people with love instead of retaliation.

Closing

Jesus calls us to love not just our friends but even those who oppose us, reflecting God's mercy and grace.

Pray: Ask God for the strength to love others as He loves us, even when it's difficult. Pray for enemies by name, asking God to bless and change both them and our own hearts. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 10 Giving to the Needy



Are You Acting Like A Hypocrite?

Introduction

I think it's obvious to everyone who knows us, that my family loves dressing up for Halloween. Although, if I'm being totally transparent, after so many years of doing it—and with the expectation every year that we must have a great costume because it's expected—the pressure of having a great costume is a bit stressful every year. And with 2 kids now grown and out of the house, and Abigail being a full-fledged teenager

who may or may not want to be part of the family tradition, some of the joy we had in the past has gone out of it.

Still, we do love to dress up. The hardest part is coming up with an idea—something that's new and different, that we haven't seen overdone, but also something people will recognize. And something that's doable (because we like to make our own costumes as much as possible.



Once we find the right idea, we may even research the characters a little bit to understand them.

A few years ago when we dressed up as Popeye and Olive Oil, we spent several evenings together watching old cartoons of Popeye. And I got curious: why did Popeye love spinach so much? I found out the original cartoon's creator wanted to encourage kids to eat healthier. So, he made spinach the miraculous source of Popeye's super-strength. It worked. Some data shows kids' consumption of spinach increased by as 1/3 at the cartoon's most popular period.

Of course, we all know the characters we dress up as during Halloween are just make-believe. No matter how much we delve into it, when we take off the masks, we become ourselves again. Halloween is just pretend.



2014 Scooby Doo Crew

But what we do during Halloween—pretending to be someone else for the night—is a great example of a mystery of human behavior Jesus warned about often. Jesus warned His followers not to be like the hypocrites.

You know what a hypocrite is. It’s become a churchy word. Sometimes we use it in the church and sometimes people outside the church like to call people who go to church

hypocrites. In Jesus day, hypocrite was a Greek word that came from the Greek culture. In Greece, people loved to watch plays in the theater. And the actors in the play were known as hypocrites.

The actors in the plays would put on costumes or masks and pretend to be character from Greek mythology. And then the actors would act out the great

Hypocrite

1. Someone who pretends to have certain beliefs but behaves in ways that show it isn't true
2. An Ancient Greek actor or stage player



mythological stories of Greece. Hypocrites pretended to be other people in order to tell the story. That’s fine if you are an actor in a play (or if you’re dressing up for Halloween), but we shouldn’t be like hypocrites in real life.

This is a theme Jesus touches on again and again throughout the 6th chapter of Matthew in His Sermon on the Mount. Today, we read Matthew 6:1-4.

Matthew 6:2

² When you give to someone in need...

Matthew 6:1-4

¹ “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. ² When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. ³ But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand

know what your right hand is doing. ⁴ Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

When You Give...

The people of Jesus’ day, as do Christians today, inherently knew that righteous people do good deeds—including giving charity to people in need. Throughout the Old Testament, God instructed people to give to help people in need.

And it’s important to point out, Jesus assumed His followers *would* give to the needy. Jesus didn’t say, “*If* you give to the needy...” He said, “*When* you give to the needy...”



Tooting Your Own Horn

Important and wealthy people of Jesus day—both Romans and Jews in Israel—made big displays of when they gave money to the poor. Roman officials would often erect monuments to commemorate their giving. One Roman official I learned about recently had a record of all the money he had given and all good deeds he had done carved onto a wall in the city where he governed. The record of his “righteousness”

is still preserved in ancient ruins to this day.

Sometimes, wealthy religious leaders in Israel would stand on a street corner and have trumpets blown to get everyone’s attention while they handed our charity to the poor. Everyone in the neighborhood would hear the trumpets and know that person was a righteous and generous person.

But Jesus said, “Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven.” It feels good to be admired by others. And a fact of life in our modern world is: Sometimes you do have to toot your own horn. In order to succeed as a business or and individual, you have to “market” yourself.

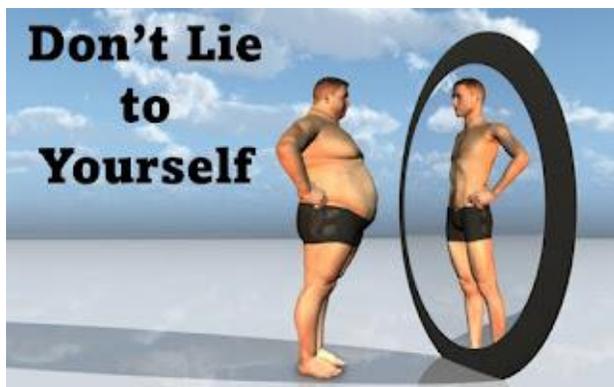
If you've ever made a resume in order to get a job, if you've ever gone to a job interview, you know you have to show your potential employer that you are worthy of the position. You may be competing against other candidates and you have to show your next boss that you're the best choice for the job. So, you sort of have to "toot your own horn" in some sense in some situations. There's nothing wrong with that. And Jesus also said, "Let your good deeds shine forth before people so they will glorify your Father in Heaven." (See Matthew 5:16).

What Jesus is saying in Matthew chapter 6 is: don't pretend you're someone you're not. Don't pretend to be righteous and holy like the religious leaders on the street corners blowing horns so everyone will look at them and think, "Now there is a truly godly, righteous person. You know God them! Look how good they are!"

You see the Pharisee and Sadducees, the religious leaders in Israel where Jesus lived, were hypocrites. They pretended to be righteous. They did such a good job of acting, they fooled everyone. People believed they were truly holy and righteous. They looked good on the outside, but they were rotten and evil on the inside. They cared more about what people thought of them than what God thought. Their charitable giving was done to win people's favor. This helped them stay in power and protected their positions of authority and their income.

In fact, when the Son of God, Jesus, came to the religious leaders of Israel, they rejected Him. They didn't care about God. They didn't care about the people. They only cared about themselves.

What was worse, not only did they lie to the people and make them believe they were holy, they also lied to themselves and believed their own lie. They believed they were holy and God must love them more than anyone else. They were so blind they didn't recognize when the Son of God Himself came to them. They crucified Jesus.



Don't Lie to Yourself

We have to be very careful, because we want to believe we are good people who are holy. We want to believe we deserve God's blessings. We should know better, because if we look inside our hearts, we can easily see we are often selfish and petty and sinful. Even so, we want to believe we deserve some kind of divine reward because we're so good.

When we believe our own lies, when we believe we are good, we are blinded to our desperate need of God's salvation and merciful grace. Jesus wants us to do good and give to the needy to glorify God, but Jesus doesn't want these habits to be a way we lie to ourselves and others.

Be very careful, because when you make a big show of doing good or giving to the needy, you could become like an actor (a hypocrite) who is putting on a show, pretending to be good. Impurity in your heart can sneak in and poison your motives to where you don't even care

about the person you're helping. You're just show off for others to see—wearing a mask, pretending to be someone you're not.

Protecting Yourself From Yourself

- Realize you're a sinner who needs God's grace
- Give anonymous sometimes



Protecting Yourself From Yourself

Since we are prone to believe our own lies that we are good and deserve God's favor and people should look up to us, we need a way to protect ourselves from ourselves. First of all, realize you are not good. Realize you are sinner who desperately needs God's grace. You don't deserve anything from God. Every good blessing you have received is a gift given by God *in spite* of your sin.

Second, give anonymously *sometimes*. Now, I'm not saying you always have to give anonymously. It's ok to get a receipt of your charitable giving. It's even ok to get credit for which you're eligible. But don't make a habit of making a big show of your giving. Make sure you're giving for the right reasons—to help the needy, to show compassion, and to glorify God, not in order to show how awesome *you* are. Do it for the glory of God and to help people in need. And I challenge you to at least *sometimes* (maybe even often) to give absolutely anonymously. As Jesus said, "don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

Session 10 Leader's Guide – Giving to the Needy

Goal: Understand Jesus' teaching on giving with sincerity, avoiding hypocrisy, and glorifying God rather than seeking human recognition.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Can you think of a time when you saw or heard about someone giving generously? What stood out about their actions?

Read Matthew 6:1-4 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus warns against performing good deeds for the sake of public recognition. He criticizes religious leaders who make a show of their charity to gain admiration. True generosity should be motivated by love for God and others, not personal glory.

Key Point: Jesus assumes His followers will give to the needy, but He emphasizes the importance of pure motives.

- What does Jesus mean when He says, *“Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others”*?
- Why do people sometimes feel the need to be recognized for their generosity?
- What are the dangers of giving in a way that seeks admiration?
- How can we check our motives when giving to others?

Key Point: Jesus calls out hypocrisy—acting generous for appearance's sake rather than from a sincere heart.

- What does Jesus mean when He says, *“Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”*?
- How does anonymous giving protect us from pride?
- Why do you think God rewards those who give in secret?
- What are some practical ways to give without seeking recognition?

Practical Application – Is there an area of your life where you struggle with the desire for recognition? How can you shift your focus to glorifying God instead?

- Brainstorm ways to cultivate a heart of generosity that glorifies God rather than ourselves.
- Discuss ways to help those in need without drawing attention to ourselves.

Closing

Jesus calls us to give with sincerity, expecting nothing in return except God's approval.

Pray: Ask God for a heart of humility in giving and the wisdom to recognize when pride is creeping in. Pray for opportunities to give in ways that truly honor God and bless others. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 11

How to Pray



Introduction

I have odd question to ask. It is an especially odd way to start a sermon on what Jesus said about how to pray. Here’s the question: Is there anyone here who is an expert on Kenny Rogers?

I am not an expert on Kenny Rogers, nor have I ever met him. I have never even been to a Rogers concert. I only know 2 or 3 songs Kenny Rogers sang, but I did dress up like Kenny Rogers once. But do you think

that qualifies me as a Dolly Parton “expert”? Absolutely not!

Well, what does this have to do with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and prayer.

I’m glad you asked! Part of the fun of Halloween is being able to dress up like a character and pretend to be something or someone you’re not. The reason I mention this is pretending to be something you are not is also the definition of a hypocrite.

Matthew 6:5

⁵ “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get.

Matthew 6:5

⁵ “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get.

Actors and actresses portray characters—sometimes so believable it’s amazing! But just because an actor plays a doctor on TV, that doesn’t mean you should take his medical advice! An actor takes the stage to

play a role to entertain. Their reward is the crowd’s applause.

In Jesus day, the religious leaders liked to put on a show by praying out loud in public. It was a great honor to be asked to pray in meetings at the synagogues. Everyone would see you and know you were a respected member of society. But you didn’t have to wait until the Sabbath to be show off your amazing prayer skills. Jews in the New Testament prayed three times a day—

in the morning, the afternoon, and the evening. Many religious leaders would show up to public places and pray out loud so everyone could see just how spiritual they were.

However, Jesus warned us not to put on a show when it comes to our relationship with God and prayer. He said, “Don’t be like the hypocrites...” In ancient Greece, hypocrite was the word for an actor who performed in a theater. Jesus said our relationship with God is to be real, not pretend and certainly not an act we put on to convince others we’re something we are not. If your goal is to impress others or earn their admiration when you pray, then that is the only reward you will get. And the praise and admiration of people is cheap and fleeting. Ask a real actor or actress and they will tell you—one day you’re a star and the next day you are forgotten.



Matthew 6:6

6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Matthew 6:6

6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

When You Pray...

Jesus’ instructions for prayer are very simple. Go away by yourself, shut the door, and pray to you Father in private. Notice that Jesus said, “When you pray...” That

means Jesus expected His followers to pray. It’s not *if* you pray. It’s *when* you pray.

Prayer is essential in a relationship with God. It is how we connect with God. Prayer keeps us focused. Prayer takes our attention off ourselves and our problems and plugs us into the divine source of all life.

I saw a video recently that is a wonderful illustration of prayer. Some construction workers were using a corded circular saw to cut some boards on a worksite. Unfortunately, the cord was not long enough to reach from the outlet over to the saw horses where they were cutting the lumber (and they didn't have an extension cord). They thought they were geniuses because they figured out a solution. They would plug the saw into the outlet and rev the saw up to full speed. Then they would unplug it and run across the room and let the residual spinning of the blade cut a little bit on the saw. So little by little, they could cut through the board. But when I saw it, I thought,

When You Pray...



"why not just move the sawhorses closer to the outlet so you can keep the saw plugged into the power source?"

That is how prayer is for so many of us. We do not have the power within us to be all we need to. God is our source of life and prayer keeps us plugged into The Source of True Life. Unfortunately, we often are like those construction workers. We plug into God through prayer and get revved up, but then we unplug and run away to live life. We run down so fast. So, we run back to our source of power to rev up again and unplug to go live life. Why don't we just move closer to God through prayer and stay plugged in? That is what prayer is supposed to be.

And Jesus assumed His followers would pray. So, he said, "When you pray, do it privately."



Do It Privately...

Jesus is very clear. Don't use prayer as a means to impress others or win honor. If you do, that's all the reward you will ever get. For some, looking good to others may seem pretty valuable. Is that what you want? If it is, then go ahead and pretend. But the applause of people is a very cheap and short-sighted reward. We are meant for so much more.

Now, does that mean we shouldn't pray in public at all? If that's the case, I'm in big trouble because as a pastor, I prayed in public quite frequently. A public prayer like a pastor prays at the beginning of a worship service is a different kind of prayer. The pastor is praying on behalf of the whole community. The pastor is trying to put *the whole congregations'* hopes and concerns into words and speak to God. That is something appropriate to do in a worship service or other public gatherings.

Our public prayers are part of a communal experience we share once a week in communal worship or at other public gatherings that celebrate what should be happening privately in each of our lives every day. But if we aren't praying privately on a day-to-day basis when no one can see, then our public prayers become hypocritical acts performed only for show that have no real substance. Jesus said, don't be like that. he said, when you pray, do it privately, to your Father...

When You Pray...

Do It Privately...

To Your Father...

To Your Father...

Jesus gives a very powerful clue to reveal the most important element of authentic Christian prayer. He said, "When you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your *Father*." There's no magic formula. You just talk to God the way you would talk to your Father.

How would you talk to your earthly father? Many are blessed to have great

fathers that are easy to talk to. Some of you love to talk with your father. Others had a great father, but he has passed away and you miss the meaningful conversations you had with him. You understand how wonderful it can be to talk to a loving father. That is how you talk to God.

Not all fathers are easy to talk to. I understand. Mine wasn't. But that's because earthly fathers are imperfect humans and sometimes selfish or broken. Some people struggle with the image of God as a Father because they never had a good father. I didn't have a good father, but it never kept me from relating to God as a Father, because I simply know that God is the perfect Father. So, I imagine what it would be like to talk to my Dad if all his shortcomings and failings were taken away and he was made perfect in every way.

So, when you pray, imagine the ideal father, the perfect father. He would be easy to talk to. He would always be kind and patient. He would be slow to get angry. He would always have time for you and always wants to talk with you. He wouldn't be self-absorbed and always wanting to talk about Himself. Instead, He would be keenly interested in you always wanting what's best for you. He would love you unconditionally and help you in every way He could. He wouldn't try to bribe you by giving you everything you ask for but instead would give you the things you really need and guide you to grow as an individual to reach your full potential. That is what God is like. He's the perfect Father.

And how would you talk to this perfect Father? There's no magic formula. You just talk. And sometimes you would have a long conversation about something really deep. Other times you might make a joke about some silly thing you did that day or some irony you encountered. Sometimes you might just send him a text message on his cellphone to check in or to pass along a bit of information or to ask a quick question. Sometimes you may call in desperation and say, "Help! I'm out of gas!" or "I've got a flat tire! What do I do?" Sometimes you might just call and say, "I love you, Dad."

Prayer isn't hard. If you talk you can pray. And we communicate all day long in many ways to many people. You do the same thing with prayer—only you are doing it with God, who is your Father.

Matthew 6:7

7 “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.

Matthew 6:7-8

7 “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. **8** Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

As far as I know, all religions include some form of prayer. And there are often elaborate formulas for how to pray. Many religions

have prayers that are chanted over and over again--the idea being the gods will eventually be worn down by the incessant prayers of the supplicants. It’s sort of like the 4-year-old child who bombards his mom with the endless request: “Can I have a cookie? Can I have a cookie? Can I have a cookie? Can I have a cookie?”

Jesus says, don’t be like that. God cannot be worn down by our incessant chanting, but He does care about you and wants to help you with what you really need. He knows what you need. In fact, Jesus says, your Father already knows what you need even before you ask!

Some people ask, “Well if God already knows what I need, why do I have to pray.” Well, for one thing, because we need to talk to God. He’s the source of Life. Prayer is how we plug in.

Another reason is prayer changes *us*. Sometimes we start out praying for one thing, but through the process of praying we realize we’re asking for the wrong thing. So, we grow through prayer.

I can think of another reason. The spiritual forces of darkness cannot stand to hear our prayers. You cannot see it, but Scripture says we are engaged in a spiritual battle. Demons are all around wanting to trip us up and lead us astray. Our prayers to God are a loud shrill that pierces their ears and drives them insane until they flee away. So, pray. Pray, pray, pray! It doesn’t have to be some fancy prayer. You just have to talk to your Heavenly Father and the Enemy flees away.

We will talk more about prayer next week when we consider Jesus’ instruction about the Lord’s prayer. But I challenge you to focus on prayer this week. Establish a specific time each day when you will spend time in prayer. And then also pray short prayers throughout your day.

You can study all kinds of materials and formulas about how to pray, but the best way to learn is simply to pray. So, get out there this week and practice! Just pray!

Session 11 Leader's Guide – How to Pray

Goal: Understand Jesus' teaching on authentic prayer, avoiding hypocrisy, and developing a personal, sincere relationship with God.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: What is the most common way you pray? Silent prayer? Out loud? Written prayers? Spontaneous prayers?

Read Matthew 6:5-8 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus warns against praying for show, as the hypocrites did. True prayer is about a real relationship with God, not impressing others. God knows our needs even before we ask, but prayer keeps us connected to Him.

Key Point: Prayer should be about a sincere relationship with God, not a performance for others.

- Why did Jesus criticize those who prayed in public for attention?
- How can we sometimes fall into the trap of “performing” in our prayers?
- What does it mean to have an authentic relationship with God in prayer?
- How can we keep our prayer life focused on God rather than on how we appear to others?

Key Point: Jesus encourages us to pray in private, showing that prayer is about connecting with God, not impressing people.

- Why does Jesus instruct us to pray in private?
- What are some distractions that can get in the way of meaningful prayer?
- What does it look like to have a personal prayer life that isn't just about public settings like church?
- How does consistent private prayer strengthen our relationship with God?

Key Point: Prayer isn't about mindless repetition but genuine communication with our Heavenly Father.

- What does Jesus mean by “don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do”?
- Why do you think some people feel the need to use elaborate words or long-winded prayers?
- How does knowing that “your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask Him” change the way we approach prayer?
- What are some simple, heartfelt ways we can pray that align with Jesus' teaching?

Practical Application – How can you deepen your personal prayer life this week?

- Brainstorm ways to make prayer a more natural, daily habit.
- Discuss different types of prayer: thanksgiving, confession, petition, intercession, listening.

Closing – Jesus calls us to authentic, private, and sincere prayer, focused on our relationship with God rather than impressing others.

Pray: Ask God to help participants develop a meaningful prayer life, to remove any pride or distractions, and to grow in closeness with Him through regular conversation. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 12

The Lord's Prayer



Introduction

Last week, we studied Jesus simple instructions on how to pray. He said don't try to put a show to impress others when you pray and don't babble on and on over and over again like heathens. Instead, he said, "go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private." (Matthew 6:6)

In today's message, we're going to study the example Jesus gave of an appropriate prayer. The example Jesus gave is what we call "The Lord's Prayer." We say this prayer together in worship almost every week. Now, Jesus wasn't saying this is the only prayer you can pray. Rather, Jesus gave us this prayer as an example of both the attitude and tone we should have when we pray, as well as being an example of some of the things we should pray about.

Let's first look at the traditional prayer my congregation says each week in worship during the Pastoral Prayer.

The Traditional Words of The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine in the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Now let's go through the prayer line by line from Jesus' sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:9-15. You'll notice the words of Scripture are different from what you're used to. That's because I'm reading from the New Living Translation, which puts the Scripture in modern, easier to understand language.

Matthew 6:9

⁹ Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
may your name
be kept holy.

Matthew 6:9

⁹ Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.

Remember, people who follow Christ Jesus are praying to *our* Father. God is Jesus' Father. He is your Father too (if you follow Christ). A good father cares about his kids. He loves them unconditionally. He sacrifices for them. He provides for them and gives them what they need. Sometimes a

good father withholds things from His children—not because He's mean or doesn't care, but precisely because He does care. He knows what His children really need and also when what they want won't be good for them. So when we pray, we simply talk to God like He is our Father, because He is.

But God is not just any father, God is our *Heavenly* Father. That means God is better than our biological father. God doesn't have the character flaws and limitations of you dad. If you had an issue with your dad, you can be thankful God is the Father you always wish you had. And even if your earthly father was wonderful, you can marvel in the knowledge God is infinitely better than your earthly father when he was at his very best.

When we recite the traditional prayer, we say "Hallowed be Thy Name". Hallowed is a fancy old word we don't use any more. The closest we come is Halloween--which means All Hollows Eve. Hallowed is the old English word for holy and sacred. But we even take the words holy and sacred for granted in modern times. We use them in church, but what do they really mean? To be holy and sacred is to be different and special—set apart from all the other common things. God is not like all the other common things around us. He is special and unique. He's different.

And it's not just God's name that is different. When we say, "Your name is Holy" or "Hallowed be Thy Name", we're talking about God's reputation. That's what a name is—it's verbal reputation of who you are. If you tell someone you go to Pleasant Grove Methodist Church, it says something. We have a reputation that people know us by. What do they know about us? What is our reputation? When I'm out in the community and people find out I pastor Pleasant Grove Methodist Church, they might say things like:

- "Oh! That's the church that does trunk or treat every year! My kids love that! We can really tell y'all are full of love."
- "Oh! That's the church that gave my friend \$1,000 to help put a roof on her house!"
- "Oh! That's the church where my friend started going and it turned his life around!"
- "Oh! That's the church where I take all my Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes!"

You see, we have a reputation. People know our church by our name and what we do. And when we pray to God our Father, we know Him by what He has done. When you pray, think of all God has done that is recorded in the Bible. Remember all God has done for your friends and

family or for you personally: how He has cared for you and put people in your life to love you, how He has forgiven your sins and saved you. Think of all the ways God has been there for you.

One year ago, my church was following the North Georgia Annual Conference of the UMC's rules for disaffiliation. On December 28th (while everyone was on vacation and 2 days before Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson was scheduled to leave our conference to be reappointed to Virginia), the bishop "paused" our disaffiliation. Her "pause" was effectively an edict denying over 186 churches their legitimate right to withdraw from the UMC because of the deadlines involved. We were at a loss as to what to do. Thousands of United Methodists across our conference were at a loss. It caught us all off guard and there seemed to be nothing we could do.

People from my church kept asking, "What can we do?" I didn't know the answer, but I said, let's pray and be patient and wait on the Lord's direction. So, we prayed. We prayed to *our Father*, who is in *Heaven* and has the power to do anything. And against all odds, God made a way. I won't list all the details and steps that took us from despair in January to victory in November. However, on November 18th, 2023, our church was granted disaffiliation along with 261 other churches. God used all the extra time to increase the number of churches committed to following His Word.

There were 4 churches who didn't make it out. They were not approved. Was that because they didn't pray hard enough? No. They are still not defeated. Either God had other plans for them or God will take their defeat and turn it into a victory! That is the mysterious way God works sometimes. Sometimes He doesn't answer our prayers the way we want, but we have faith He always answers our prayers in the right way. We will just have to trust God and wait and see what He does.

If you ever despair because God doesn't answer your prayers the way you want, think of Jesus. Jesus did not want to die on the cross. What did He pray? He prayed, "Lord, if there's any way it's possible, let this cup of suffering pass from me." You see, Jesus didn't want to endure the agony and shame of dying on the cross. He prayed for the cup to pass from Him. But He also prayed, "But not my will, but Yours be done." And Jesus died on the cross. But God also took Jesus' death and turned it into the greatest victory that's ever been one. Jesus died on the cross but rose on the third day. And through His resurrection, the whole world can be saved! So, if you ever despair because God doesn't answer your prayers, you are in good company--the company of God's own Son. And God will turn your unanswered prayer into a victory. Have faith!

Matthew 6:10

May **your** Kingdom
come soon.

May **your will be done**
on earth, as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6:10

May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

This should be a Christians number one hope and number one prayer. It's not about us. Ultimately, we want God's to come and His will to be done because our faith says that's what we really need. Yes, we have our own hopes and dreams about how we want our lives to turn out. But our faith tells us

loud and clear, God's plans are always better than our hopes and dreams. Therefore, we must be like the heroes of faith in the Bible who were always willing to turn their backs on everything they'd ever known and to go where God led them.

Are you ready and willing to surrender your hopes and dreams and truly ask God our Father, "May *Your* will (not mine) be done on earth, as it is in heaven"? When you are ready to surrender completely to the will of God, then you are ready to pray about your basic needs.

Matthew 6:11

Give us **today** the **food** we
need,

Matthew 6:11

"Give us today the food we need,"

We have basic needs. We ask God to take care of them. The struggles of daily life and prayer are opportunities to practice trusting God. We sinful humans are incredibly prone

to think we can take care of ourselves. Do we really need God? Oh sure, we realize we need God at certain moments in our lives—like when we get diagnosed with cancer, or when the church we've grown up in and love is in jeopardy. When we are scared or at our wits end, we go to God and beg for help. And that's fine. God hears us. But it is far better for our spiritual health if we recognize every day, every moment we desperately need God. We cannot do life on our own. We cannot even tie our shoelaces without God's help! We need God even for something as basic as food. So, we ask, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Just like the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness, who God gave manna from heaven. God gave them enough for *one day*. He said, "Don't collect more than one day's supply. *Trust me*. I'll give you more tomorrow." So, we ask God to give us the food and basic needs we need today. And we trust Him. God will take care of us.

Matthew 6:12

...and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us.

Isn't it interesting that right next to Jesus' instruction to pray for daily bread is His instruction about praying for forgiveness? Don't miss this. Forgiveness is as important to your health and wellbeing as is the basic necessity of food. Let me say that again: Forgiveness **is as important to your health and wellbeing as is the basic necessity of food.**

This is something our church needs to remember *and practice* very intentionally during this season. We have been in a hard and bitter fight. The Lord has brought us through. We have won the right to disaffiliate from the UMC and pursue the future we believe God wants our church to work for. But we also still feel the pain and anxiety from the long fight. There may even be hard feelings between some in our community or even in our own church. And we need to forgive one another so we can move on and heal. And we need to pray, “Father, forgive *us* our trespasses, *as we forgive* those who have trespassed against us.”

Matthew 6:13

And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.

Here is the reminder of who the enemy really is. Who is the enemy? It is the evil one, the Devil. The enemy is not the Bishop or conference leaders who tried to sidetrack our church. The enemy is not that person at work who told lies about you and hurt your reputation. You see, your real enemy is not the people or things of this world. We are engaged in a spiritual battle. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.”

So don't give into the temptation to blame your problems on God, thinking He doesn't care. And don't give into the temptation to blame people on earth who oppress you. It is the Evil One and the forces of darkness in an unseen world who are twisting things up against you. Therefore, turn away from temptation and not feed the Devil's influence in your life. Turn to God in prayer.

Matthew 6:14-15

¹⁴“If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

I don't know how Jesus can make it any plainer than this. We must forgive or we cannot be forgiven. Forgiveness is hard. It's not some glib thing. But it is essential. We must forgive. Forgiveness is what God has done for us. And it cost Jesus His life. Jesus died cruelly on the cross so we can be forgiven and so we can forgive others.

We all need forgiveness and God is gracious to forgive. But we, in turn, must forgive others. So, when you pray, pray like this.

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine in the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Session 12 Leader's Guide – The Lord's Prayer

Goal: Explore the Lord's Prayer not as a formula, but as a model for connecting with God as our Father, aligning our hearts with His will, and cultivating humility, trust, and forgiveness.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: What's your earliest memory of the Lord's Prayer? Did it feel meaningful or routine?

Read Matthew 6:9-15 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus provides this prayer as a guide, not as a rigid script. It covers worship, surrender, daily needs, forgiveness, and spiritual protection. Each line teaches us how to relate to God and live out our faith daily.

Key Point: We pray to a perfect Father who is holy and loving.

- What does it mean to call God "our Father"?
- How is God different from even the best earthly father?
- What does "hallowed be your name" tell us about the way we approach God?

Key Point: Prayer aligns us with God's will and purposes, not just our own desires.

- What does it mean to pray for God's Kingdom to come?
- How do we know we're truly seeking His will and not our own?
- Share a time when surrendering to God's will was hard but necessary.

Key Point: We rely on God for every need—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

- What does "daily bread" mean in your life today?
- Why do we struggle to trust God daily instead of stockpiling for tomorrow?

Key Point: Receiving and extending forgiveness is essential to spiritual health.

- Why is forgiveness as vital as physical nourishment?
- How can forgiving others open us up to deeper freedom and healing?
- Are there people you still need to forgive? What's holding you back?

Key Point: We are in a spiritual battle and need God's protection.

- What temptations are most present in your life right now?
- Why is it important to recognize the enemy as Satan—not people?
- How do you ask God for help in times of spiritual struggle?

Practical Application – Challenge participants to pray the Lord's Prayer each day this week—not as a ritual, but as a meaningful conversation with your Father in Heaven. Reflect each day on one line, and journal how God speaks to you through it.

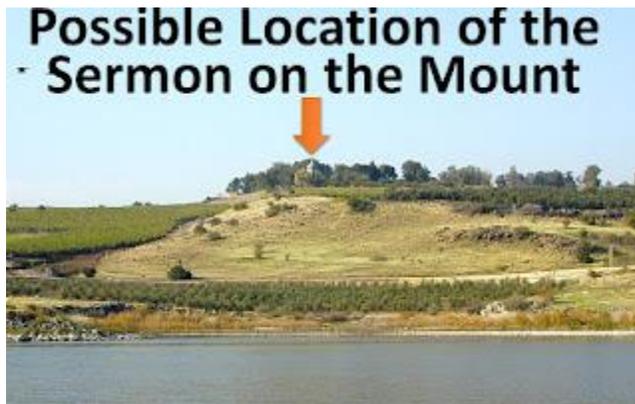
Closing Prayer: Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 13

Fasting



they are and how they live.



faith.

However, Jesus was clear that when His followers give, pray, and fast, they shouldn't be like hypocrites. A hypocrite is an actor who puts on a show for people. Jesus says, "Don't be like that. Because if you practice your religion to impress people, that's the only reward you will ever get." Instead, Jesus said to give, pray, and fast privately. That way only God will know what you're doing and He will reward you.

Today, I want to read Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus said:

Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶“And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. ¹⁷But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸Then no

Introduction

We've been studying Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount for the last 12 weeks or so. It's called the Sermon on the *Mount* because Jesus went up on top of a mount to teach these lessons.

Notice in the picture here: The water is the Sea of Galilee. The church on top of the "Mount" may be the place Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus lays out His vision for God's people—who

There were 3 common practices for Jews of Jesus day. They gave, they prayed, & they fasted. In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus addressed each one. He assumed His followers would give, pray, and fast. Each time in His sermon, He said, "When you give...

When you pray... When you fast..." It was not "If you give... pray... fast..." It was *when* not *if*. So, if we follow Jesus, we should also practice these 3 pillars of

one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

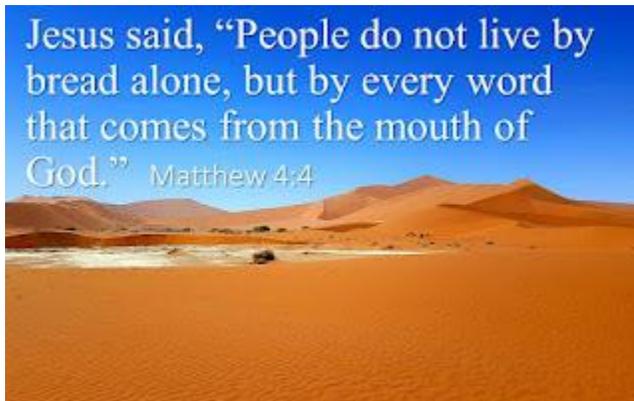


So, What is Fasting?

Fasting is going without food for a set period of time. Sometimes people fast if they have a medical procedure—like a colonoscopy or an annual checkup where they do blood work. But the kind of fast Jesus is talking about is a religious fast. It is a fast done out of devotion to God.

And I need to be clear, a religious fast is not a way to lose weight or get ready for the doctor...

We know Jesus fasted for at least two reasons. First of all, Jesus was an obedient Jew who followed the Jewish Law prescribed in the Old Testament. And the Law commands all Jews to fast at least once a year for the religious holiday Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement. So, we know Jesus would have observed this annual fast for the Day of Atonement. But the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell how Jesus—at the very beginning of His ministry—went into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days. 40 days is an extreme fast that Jesus was able to complete as a miracle. It's not something that we should attempt to duplicate.



During the fast, Jesus was tempted by the Devil to turn rocks into bread. Jesus' reply reveals one of the reasons Christians fast. Jesus told the Devil in Matthew 4:4, "People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

If done with the right attitude, fasting can remind us of our utter dependence on God. We need God even more than we need

food. You may think, "I already know that; I don't need to go without food to realize it." That may be true. But it is one thing to know something in your head, intellectually. It is another thing to know it in reality—to have your stomach grumbling and every physical fiber of your hungry body screaming: "Give me food to eat!" and to remain spiritually disciplined to say, "No. I'm not eating today because I need God more than I need food." When we fast, it can change the spiritual chemistry of our physical body. It's something that goes deeper than your conscious thoughts, something that reaches down into your unconsciousness. When you fast, your hunger becomes a form of continuous prayer. Every groan of your stomach is a cry to God for spiritual sustenance.

Although typically, fasting means going without food, there are other ways to fast as well. You can give up something else besides food that is very important to you. Such as going without coffee, not watching TV, abstaining from social media, not listening to music, or spending time alone without any social interaction. The point is to give up something that is as important to you as food (and that could be different for each different person depending on your personality).

When Should/Could You Fast?



When should you fast?

Jesus said, “When you fast...” So, when should you fast? (Or when could you fast?) First of all, I should say Christians have freedom. We are not slaves to laws and rules and traditions. God grants us grace. So, if and when we fast, it is for our benefit and not to fulfill some obligation. But fasting can be a great spiritual benefit.

You can fast anytime. There are no hard and fast rules about it. I have found that consistency is better than extremity. What I mean is it is better to fast a little bit regularly and consistently than to do one big, long extreme fast. It's kind of like physical exercise. It is better to exercise 30 minutes a day, every day for a year than to exercise for 12 hours only once a month. Consistency is the key to exercising and fasting.

When Should/Could You Fast?

- Day of Atonement (Yum Kippor)
- During Advent or Lent
- Before a big event or decision
- On behalf of others

But if you are looking for some ideas about when you can fast, I will share a few. Jews today fasted once a year on the Day of Atonement, the holiday they call Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is celebrated in September or October, and it would be a great time for you to fast as you meditate on God's forgiveness and the atonement that comes through Christ.

Christians have two seasons when fasting is very appropriate. The season of Lent (the 40 days prior to Easter) is an excellent time for a fast as we prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Another season when fasting is very appropriate is the season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas and prepare for the Second coming of Christ.

Fasting can be very helpful before you make a big decision or start something new. Jesus fasted before He started His public ministry. If it was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for you. Fasting can help clear your mind, align you with the Holy Spirit, and give you clarity as you start a new job, move to a new home, or make a big life decision.

You can also fast on behalf of others. People have become accustomed to saying and hearing, “I’ll pray for you.” What if you said instead in some very important situations, “I’ll be fasting for you while I’m praying.” Now that tells someone, you are really committed to seeking divine help for them.



Warnings:

- Don’t try to impress people
- Don’t look miserable
- Do it privately

Warnings

In closing, I want to remind you of the warnings Jesus gave about fasting. He said in Matthew 6:16, “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting.”

So, Jesus gave at least 3 warnings. Don’t try to impress people. If you do, that’s the only benefit your fast will bring (and what a

cheap reward that is). Second, don’t look miserable as you fast. That’s just a way to get sympathy from people or try to impress them. So, don’t do that. Do your fast in private. Don’t even let others know you’re doing it. That way, God in heaven (who see what you do in secret) will reward you.

Session 13 Leader's Guide – Fasting

Goal: Understand the spiritual purpose of fasting, how it connects us more deeply to God, and how to practice it in the way Jesus taught—with sincerity, humility, and a desire to grow.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever fasted—either for spiritual, medical, or personal reasons? What was your experience like?

Read Matthew 6:16-18 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus assumes His followers will fast, saying “*When you fast...*” not “*If.*” Like giving and praying, fasting is to be done privately and sincerely—not to impress others. Fasting helps us develop spiritual discipline and reminds us that our deepest needs are met in God, not food or worldly comforts.

Key Point: Fasting is giving up something important—usually food—for a set time to focus on God and grow spiritually.

- Why do you think fasting was such a regular part of spiritual life in Jesus' time?
- What are some modern distractions or comforts we might fast from today?
- How is fasting different from dieting or abstaining for health reasons?

Key Point: Fasting can deepen prayer, sharpen focus, and increase dependence on God.

- What does it mean to say we need God more than we need food?
- Have you ever experienced clarity or closeness to God during a time of self-denial?
- How can physical hunger become a form of spiritual prayer?

Key Point: Jesus warns against using fasting to seek attention. God blesses what is done in humility.

- What are some subtle ways people “show off” their spiritual practices today?
- Why is it important to keep our fasting private and between us and God?
- What rewards do you think God gives for faithful fasting?

Closing

Summarize the main idea: Fasting is not about appearing spiritual but about connecting deeply with God and being formed by Him.

Closing Question: What is one thing you learned about fasting today that you didn't know or hadn't thought about before?

Pray: Ask God to help us grow in our desire for Him, to learn discipline through fasting, and to remember that He is our true sustenance. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 14

Money and Possessions



Introduction

2,000 years ago in a small village called Bethlehem, a baby was born to two poor parents, Mary and Joseph. Jesus was born right as Joseph arrived in Bethlehem to pay taxes to the Roman Empire who was occupying Israel, forcing them to pay tribute. The Jesus we celebrate at Christmas, who was born King of the Jews and later revealed to be Lord of all, was born into poverty. He lived among oppressed people who got by on very little.

Jesus understood the value of money. He also knew firsthand the struggle of going without. Jesus' father was a carpenter—a blue collar worker who probably lived paycheck to paycheck. We also know, According to Mark 6:3, that Jesus had four younger brothers and two younger sisters. That's a lot of mouths to feed for a man who makes his living by manual labor. At some point after Jesus turned 12, Joseph died—leaving Mary and Jesus (who was now the “man” of the house) responsible for taking care of everyone. You can imagine that money was always tight. Jesus understood the real value of money and how it could affect people.



Perhaps that is why when Jesus started His public ministry at the age of 30 (Luke 3:23), money and possessions were one of His most frequent sermon topics. We see one of His lessons in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:19-24.

Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹“Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

Matthew 16:23

“When your eye is unhealthy, your whole body is filled with darkness.”

cannot serve God and be enslaved to money.”

Matthew 16:19-24 Outline

19-21 – **Earthly vs Heavenly Treasure**

22-23 – **Eyes, Light, & Darkness**

24 – **You Can't Serve 2 Masters**

²²“Your eye is like a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is filled with light. ²³ But when your eye is unhealthy, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!

²⁴“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You

An Outline for Matthew 16:19-24

We can break Jesus' teaching into 3 main precepts. Verses 19-21 are pretty straight forward. Jesus says to concentrate on heavenly treasure instead of earthly treasures. Now, remember this was coming from a man who grew up in poverty. Poverty can have a very real effect on people.

Jesus reminds us: you can't take anything with you. You were born into this world naked and you aren't going to have anything with you when you leave it. However, you can send some things ahead of you, so they'll be waiting in heaven when you arrive. You can't use UPS to send money and possessions to heaven. But you can invest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

How? By investing in people here on earth. How many people are going to be in heaven because of the way you lived on earth? And how is this world right here and now better because of the way you serve Jesus? You see the things you do and the difference you make in this life are investments in the eternal Kingdom of God. They are the treasure you store up in Heaven—where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Well, that's not too hard to understand, is it?

Good and Bad Eyes

But what about this weird part where Jesus starts talking about eyes? What's that all about? He says in verse 22-23, “Your eye is like a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is unhealthy, your whole body is filled with darkness.”

People back then believed eyes were windows that let goodness and light into the body. Not actually pretty true if you think about it (but maybe not in the same way the ancients thought about it). We now know that the eyes do indeed let light into the body so we can see. And seeing is a good thing—usually. And this is really what Jesus is saying. Be careful how you look at the world and see things.



Have You Got Double Vision?

Jesus is talking about keeping your eyes focused on the right things (or the right One), rather than letting them wander all over the place coveting material possessions. The Greek word English Bible's translate as "healthy" or "good" eye actually means "single". You know when you have bad eyesight, things get fuzzy and unfocused. You may even have double vision—where you see 2 images. Jesus is

using a play on words. He's saying if you're trying to focus on God *and* on material possessions, you've got double vision. You're not going to be able to see either one clearly.

A healthy view of material things will result in a healthy spiritual life; but an unhealthy view—where you're coveting money and possession—means your eyes are letting darkness and not light into your soul. If this is something you struggle with, you better pray to God for help and you better listen to Him when He tells you how to treat the sickness.

The fact is, we all struggle with it. Materialism isn't something most people are immune from. It's something most people struggle with. And it seems like the more affluent we are, the

Matthew 16:19-24 Outline

19-21 – Earthly vs Heavenly
Treasure

22-23 – Eyes, Light, & Darkness

24 – You Can't Serve 2 Masters

more we struggle with it. Why do you think Jesus said in Matthew 19:24, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"

Two Masters

And then we come to the final precept in Jesus' teaching about money and possessions—verse 24. "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and

despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money."

What more do I need to say? Jesus is pretty clear.

You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money.

I like the way the NLT puts Jesus' words. You cannot *serve* God and be *enslaved* to money. Most of us don't think about being *enslaved* to money.

Probably most of us think it would be great to have a little *more* money. It would solve a lot of our problems. Right? Well... Not according to Jesus. You need to be careful. Money will make you it's slave—*especially* if you're thinking money is what is going to fix things in your life, make you happier, fill some void in your life, etc. Money can't do that. Jesus is the Savior. He's the one who does the saving. Jesus is Lord. He's the one we absolutely must put first. Because you can't serve 2 masters.

Treasures on earth or
Heaven?
Good eyes or double
vision?
Serving two master?



Conclusion

This Christmas Eve, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ—the Lord and Savior of the world—spend some time praying and meditating on your attitudes about money and possessions.

Are you storing up treasures on earth or in Heaven? Do you have good eyes that focus on Christ or double vision because you covet? Have you been trying to serve two masters?

Session 14 Leader's Guide – Money and Possessions

Goal: To help participants examine their attitudes toward money and possessions, and to understand Jesus' teaching on the importance of focusing our hearts and eyes on God's Kingdom instead of material wealth.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: If someone looked at your spending habits, what might they assume you treasure most?

Read Matthew 6:19-24 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus teaches that our hearts follow our treasure. He uses three illustrations: 1) Earthly vs. Heavenly treasure, 2) good vs. bad eyes, and 3) two masters: God vs. money. The way we relate to money reveals who or what we serve.

Key Point: We are called to invest in eternal things—people, God's work, and Kingdom living—not possessions that fade away.

Why do you think fasting was such a regular part of spiritual life in Jesus' time?

- What are some common ways people try to “store up treasures on earth”?
- How can we store up treasure in heaven?
- Share a time when you felt the joy of investing in something eternal (e.g., helping someone, giving sacrificially).

Key Point: The “eye” represents our spiritual focus. If it is single and fixed on God, we will be filled with light.

- What do you think Jesus means by a “healthy eye” or an “unhealthy eye”?
- How can materialism distort our spiritual vision?
- How might focusing on Jesus help clarify how we use money and view possessions?

Key Point: We cannot truly serve both God and money—our ultimate loyalty must go to one or the other.

- What are some signs someone might be “enslaved” to money?
- Why do you think Jesus is so clear and absolute in this statement?
- What helps you keep God as your first priority instead of material wealth?

Closing

Summarize the main idea: Jesus teaches us to treasure heavenly things, focus our spiritual sight, and serve only one true Master.

Closing Question: What is one change you can make this week to realign your heart toward Kingdom treasure?

Pray: Ask God to help us break free from materialism, to develop clear spiritual focus, and to serve Him alone with our whole hearts. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 15 Don't Worry, Seek the Kingdom



Introduction

On the last day of 2023, it's a good idea to reflect on where we've been and consider where we are going. What a crazy year it's been! Do you remember what you were doing this time last year? I do. I was still in shock from a terrible and unfair decision by the North Georgia UMC bishop's decision to cancel the disaffiliations of nearly 200 churches in our conference. We didn't know

what to do or if there was anything we could do. But here we are one year later and God is good. He has opened doors we thought couldn't be opened. And December 31st, 2023 is the last day my church and I belong to the UMC. On January 1st, we will be free and will be Global Methodist! Praise be to God!

Can I just be honest with you for a minute? I need to confess something this morning. You see, I thought I had really done something 23 years ago when I answered the call to ministry. I thought I was really trusting God with BIG faith. I walked away from a promising career as an engineer to follow Jesus. I graduated from college when I was 23. I started a career as a textile engineer. But then God called me to be a preacher. And so, after only 3 years into my career, I stepped out in faith and became a United Methodist minister. I thought my wife might leave me, because me going into the ministry had never been part of our plans. She chose to marry a strait-laced, dependable man with great career prospects. Leaving all that took a lot of faith for me and Kelly.



But as scary as it was, there's actually a lot of security for ministers in the United Methodist Church. We had health insurance, a pension, a decent salary, and a *guaranteed appointment*. Yes, we had to go wherever they sent us and they moved us away from family and friends frequently. But we also had job security.

Now, I never took anything for granted. **Ephesians 6:7** says, "Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people." So, I've always tried to do my best, because I realized I didn't really work for the United Methodist Church. I work for the

Lord. The UMC was an ally, *for a time*, which helped me fulfill *my* calling to help people grow closer to Jesus. But I've always said if the UMC ever departed from traditional Scriptural Christianity, I would depart from the UMC. And that time has come.

And so, I'm walking away from a second career. As of *January 1st, 2024*, I will no longer be a United Methodist minister. I will be a Global Methodist minister. And I've had to trust the Lord in this. Because I am walking away from something I've known very well for the past 2 decades into an unknown future and an unproven denomination with less job security than the UMC.

But I know this is where God is leading me. And I trust Him! He has never failed me yet. He won't fail me now. I am His servant. It is a privilege to serve Him and God wherever He leads!

I want to read to you one of my favorite passages from God's Holy Word—something that has encouraged me my whole life as a Disciple of Jesus Christ. It's right in the middle of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 6:25-33

²⁵ “That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? ²⁷ Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?

²⁸ “And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, ²⁹ yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. ³⁰ And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?

³¹ “So don't worry about these things, saying, ‘What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?’ ³² These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. ³³ Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.



Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God...

I've tried to make that verse 33 the theme of my whole life and ministry. In the old King James Version it goes, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

If you think about it, that's the whole theme of the Bible. Isn't it? Go all the way back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis. What do you find? There's Adam and Eve living in paradise. God has given them everything they need. They have food. They have peace. They have protection. They're naked and don't even care. They aren't ashamed. They don't feel vulnerable and exposed. (Now you think about

that. They are wild animals roaming all around—lions, tigers, and bears—and Adam and Eve are totally naked. No knife. No bear spray. No gun. No weapons. Not even a scrap of clothing. But they weren't "naked and afraid". Why? Because God provided everything they needed.)

That is the way we were all meant to live. It's a life where God provides everything we need—just like He cares for the birds of the sky and the flowers of the field. Oh, that we could go back to that Garden in Eden and live without a care in the world. Where we can walk in harmony with each other and with God!



Sin Wrecked It All!

Ah but sin! Sin came in and wrecked it all! It wrecked you! It wrecked me! And the curse of sin is that we must scrape a living from the dust of the ground. And try as we might, it's constantly producing thorns and thistles! Do you have any thorns and thistles in your life—in your family, in your work?

And so, the curse of sin has always meant, "By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat." I always thought that sweat meant the sweat that comes from the hard work of farming. But it's not. There's nothing wrong with working hard and sweating. That's a good thing. A cleansing thing. Some people (like me) actually enjoy doing hard work with their hands.

No, "sweat of your brow" means the sweat that comes from the deep, overwhelming anxiety we have when we think, "Oh no! It's all up to me! The fate of my family and the people I love rest on *my shoulders*. Whether I live or die will be a result of my own hands." Have you ever been so stressed out and worried drops of sweat literally broke out on your forehead? THAT is the sweaty, anxious curse God proclaimed in Genesis 3:19, "By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return."



Jesus Breaks the Curse!

Jesus Breaks the Curse!

But praise God! Hallelujah! Jesus came to break the curse! That's what it's all about! Jesus is our redeemer! He redeems us from our sin. He heals our whole lives. His life, death, and resurrection mean we know longer have to drown in the anxious sweaty drops of worrying whether we will have food to eat and clothes to wear. In the words of one of my favorite

Christmas songs: "No more let sins and sorrows grow! Nor thorns infest the ground! He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found! Far as the curse is found!" We don't have

to feel ashamed and naked because of our sin. We don't have to fear death, because Jesus gives us new life—new life now and for all eternity!

And so, Jesus invites us all in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.” Jesus is leading us back to Eden—back to life in Paradise where we don't have to worry where our next meal will come from or if we will have a job in the morning or if our church property will get seized by a corrupt denomination.



It is Eternal Life, and it starts the moment we put all our faith in Jesus and follow Him.

Walking Through the Wilderness

We still have some wilderness to walk through. We're not in the Paradise Garden yet. But we *will* get there. In the meantime, God leads us like He led the Israelites through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. And He will provide manna from heaven to feed us and water from a rock

to quench our thirst. You don't have to understand it all; but you must have faith. You must trust Jesus when He says, “Don't worry about all these things. Your Heavenly Father already knows all your needs and He will take care of you.”

And so, we come to my favorite verse—the theme verse of my ministry—that tells us the secret of living as Christians who follow Christ. Matthew 6:33 – “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.”



Seek the Kingdom of God above all else.

When my middle child was still a toddler, we were shopping in JC Penny. In a moment of lapsed attention, she wandered away from me and my wife. We dropped everything and frantically searched for her. It only took a few minutes to find her hiding behind some clothes hanging on a rack, but the anxiety of those moments was palpable. (Talk about the sweat of anxiety breaking out on your

brow!)

That story about searching for a lost child is a great illustration of seeking the Kingdom of God. That's how we should *seek* the Kingdom of God *above all else*. We drop everything else and make the Kingdom our number one priority. And that's what I want to do with my life. And that's what I want to challenge our church to do in 2024. And that's what I want to challenge you to do with your family and with your own life.



Closing

I want you reflect for just a minute. I want you to think about the one thing in your life that's really important to you right now. (I'm not talking about Jesus, OK. Everyone knows in church the answer's supposed to be Jesus. But let's be real right now, OK?) What's something that's really important thing to you?

Think about it. If *this person or thing* (whatever it is) is so important if it we lost, you'd drop everything to go look for it. **What would that thing be for you?** Maybe it's your kids. Maybe it's your spouse or your mom or dad. Maybe it's your phone; let's be real. If you went on a trip and left your phone at home, how many of us wouldn't turn the car around and back track an hour to go get our phone?

Now, I want you to make a mental image of whatever you're thinking of right now. And I want you to think about how you'd feel if this thing was lost. Think about the lengths you would go to find it.

From now on, every time you see that thing or even think of it, here's what I want you to do: I want it to remind you that Jesus told you to "Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and all these other things will be added to you as well.

Session 15 Leader's Guide – Don't Worry; Seek God

Goal: Encourage participants to let go of anxiety over material needs and learn to trust in God's loving provision by seeking His Kingdom first.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: What is something you tend to worry about most often? Why do you think it has such a grip on you?

Read Matthew 6: 25–33 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus teaches that worry doesn't add to our lives and that God knows our needs. He uses the birds and lilies as reminders of God's faithful care. The antidote to anxiety is focusing on the Kingdom of God above everything else.

Key Point: We are called to invest in eternal things—people, God's work, and Kingdom living—not possessions that fade away.

- What are some things Jesus specifically tells us not to worry about?
- Why do you think we worry about things we can't control?
- Can you share a time when worry caused you more harm than good?

Key Point: Worry doesn't solve anything and robs us of peace.

- What do you think Jesus means by a "healthy eye" or an "unhealthy eye"?
- How can materialism distort our spiritual vision?
- How might focusing on Jesus help clarify how we use money and view possessions?

Key Point: If God takes care of birds and flowers, He will certainly take care of His people.

- What do Jesus' examples of birds and lilies teach us about God's character?
- How does recognizing your value to God help combat anxiety?
- What truths from this passage can help shift your perspective in anxious times?

Key Point: Putting God's Kingdom first leads to peace, purpose, and provision.

- What does it mean to "seek the Kingdom of God above all else"?
- What does "living righteously" look like in daily life?
- What's something you've had to give up or risk in order to follow God's call more faithfully?

Closing

Summarize the main idea: Jesus invites us to leave behind worry and trust Him for everything we need as we prioritize His Kingdom.

Closing Question: What is something that tends to dominate their thoughts or worries? (Perhaps you can write a short prayer surrendering that specific worry to God.)

Pray: Ask God to help us release our anxieties, trust in His daily provision, and seek His Kingdom above all else in every area of our lives. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 16

Don't Judge



Introduction

When I arrived at church early Sunday morning, I was surprised to find a pickup truck parked crooked across the space where I normally park. I thought it was sort of odd because no one is usually at church that early and people don't normally park in that spot. Furthermore, the truck was taking up 2 spaces. As I wondered what was going on and also noticed the lights inside the church

were not on yet, our sound technician came walking out toward me and said, "Hey Chris. I got here early to turn on the organ for Sarah (his wife). It acts funny if it doesn't have a couple hours to warm up. I wasn't sleeping well and decided to come on down and turn it on."

I'm glad I didn't judge Bobby for parking so badly this morning before I found out the whole story. He wasn't worried about parking properly. No one else was going to be at church and he would only be there for a couple of minutes. So, he just pulled in really quickly. He's such a good husband to help out his wife like that--and to help out the church so we have a good sounding organ in worship.



Meanwhile, I go into my office and realize, I've had a small piece of toilet paper stuck to my chin the whole time I was talking to Bobby. I nicked my chin shaving that morning and used toilet paper to stem the blood. I didn't expect to see anyone at church so early and didn't think about the toilet paper stuck to my chin as I was talking to Bobby. Bobby never said anything about it. I'm glad he didn't judge me either!

Matthew 7:1-5

¹“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. ²For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

³“And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? ⁴How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? ⁵Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.



Judging vs. Being Judgmental

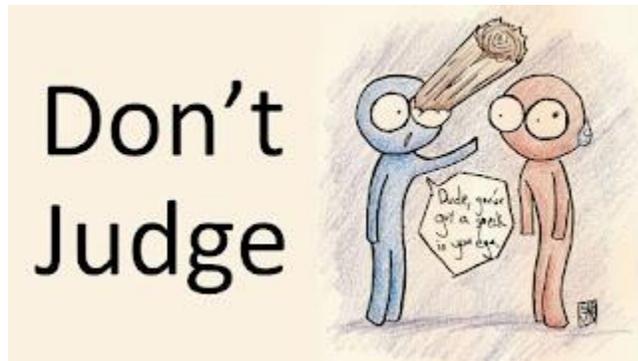
Judging vs. Being Judgmental

Jesus words here are often misused and misunderstood. Saying defensively, “Judge not lest ye be judged!” has become a common comeback when people get challenged on their bad behavior. Did Jesus really mean we can’t call people out on their bad behavior or even make judgments of any kind?

Absolutely not. In fact, if you skip down just a few more verses in this same chapter, Jesus teaches people how to judge if someone is a false prophet. He says you judge them by their actions. There’s a difference between judgement and being judgmental.

Good judgment is a virtue the Bible applauds, and it is a valuable asset in life. We need to use good judgment. When a boy wants to date your daughter, you definitely need good judgment. If the boy shows up acting high and wearing a t-shirt with a pot leaf on the front, good judgment says, “This boy is not taking my daughter out on a date!” You have to have wisdom, which includes using good judgment about people and situations. Good judgment is based on facts about people’s behavior.

Being judgmental is rushing to judge someone negatively based on limited information. If you notice someone has parked their truck crooked. Well, that’s a fact. You can see the facts and know it. But you need more information to make a good judgment about why the truck is parked crooked. But the judgmental person won’t wait for more information. They rush to judgment. They might say: “The person who parked that crooked is a bad driver or is inconsiderate or must be drunk.” And when we are judgmental, there’s often a feeling of superiority attached to it. We might say, “I would never park like that. I’m not *that kind of person.*”

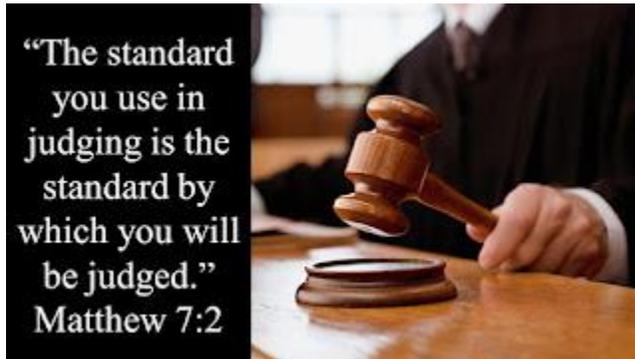


because... I have a reason for this bad behavior. If people understood, they would excuse me. But my neighbor’s behavior is truly annoying, disappointing, or appalling...”

The meaning of Jesus teaching in Matthew 7:1-5 should be clear. Don’t be judgmental. He even uses a funny illustration to drive home the point. “Why worry about the speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own eye?” We all have issues. We are gracious with ourselves when it comes to our own faults, but we might not extend the same grace to others. “My problems aren’t that bad

Jesus points out vividly that *our* sins are no small thing. How did He describe them? He said they are like a “log in your eye”. If you saw someone with a log in their eye, you would immediately call 911 and rush them to the hospital. And that’s the way Jesus described our spiritual condition!

Our sin is so rancorous it required Jesus to die for us on the cross. That's serious. But often, we would rather worry about everyone else's sin than come to terms with our own. It's more comfortable to focus on everyone else's sin than deal with our own. But Jesus reminds us, we have a serious problem. We need to be taken to a spiritual emergency room, not be worried about the specks in our neighbor's eye.



Warning

Jesus gives a stern warning. He said, "The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged." This has at least 2 ramifications for your life. One for now. One for later. If you are gracious, think the best of people, and give them the benefit of the doubt, people tend to be gracious with you too. But if you are overly critical of others, you may be over-critical of you. So,

there is an immediate benefit if you have a generous spirit with others.

But there may be consequences for being judgmental later too. We will all stand before Jesus one day. As the Apostles' Creed says, "We believe Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead..." Now that's a sobering thought. Especially when you consider Jesus words: "The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged." How do you think Jesus will take it if you have been judgmental all your life with other people? Why should he be gracious about your faults if you have refused to be gracious with others?



Conclusion

Now back to the log in your eye. What can you do about that? That's why Jesus came. I mean, you've got a log in your eye! I'm not judging you. I've got one in my eye too. What are *we* going to do about these logs sticking in our eyes! That's why Jesus came.

Here's the biggest log – Sin! Not sins. Sins are the bad things we do. But *the* SIN is rejection of God. It is the attitude from which all the other bad behaviors flow. We have turned away from God. We don't not want Him to be in charge of our lives. We want to live however we want to live. We put ourselves above God. That is the Sin that leads to all the other sins. And Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans:

"All have sinned and fallen short of God's glorious standard." (3:23)

"And the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ our Lord." (6:23)

So, call upon Jesus and be saved. Believe Him in your heart and confess He is Lord with your words.

Take up your cross and each day and follow Him.

Jesus can remove the log from your eye (and from your neighbor's) if we will let Him. But we have to repent, turn away from our sin, and let Him heal us. Won't you do that today?

Session 16 Leader's Guide – Don't Judge

Goal: Help participants understand the difference between making wise judgments and being judgmental, and encourage them to deal with their own sin humbly before addressing others'

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Can you remember a time when you judged someone too quickly—only to find out you were wrong?

Read Matthew 7:1–5 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus warns against being judgmental. His famous “speck and log” illustration calls us to self-awareness and humility. The passage doesn't forbid judgment but instructs us to avoid hypocrisy.

Key Point: Jesus is not prohibiting discernment but calling out self-righteous, hypocritical attitudes.

- Why do you think people often quote “Do not judge” without reading the full context?
- What's the difference between good judgment and being judgmental?
- Can you think of a time when someone used poor judgment because they were trying not to “judge”?

Key Point: It's easier to notice others' sins than confront our own, but Jesus calls us to personal repentance first.

- Why do you think Jesus used such a humorous image with a log and a speck?
- Why is it so hard to see our own faults clearly?
- What are some signs we might be more focused on someone else's “speck” than our own “log”?

Key Point: The standard we use for others will be used for us—both by people and by God.

- What does Jesus mean when He says, “*The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged*”?
- How does being gracious toward others affect how they treat you?
- How might your own relationship with Jesus help you extend grace to others who fail?

Group Activity:

- Have each participant silently reflect on this question: “*Is there someone I've judged harshly without knowing the full story?*”
- Invite them to write a prayer asking God for forgiveness and the ability to extend grace.

Closing

Summarize the main idea: Jesus calls us to self-examination, grace, and dependence on Him to heal our brokenness.

Closing Question: How can I cultivate a spirit of humility and compassion instead of criticism?

Pray: Ask God to reveal our spiritual blind spots, to forgive us, and to fill us with compassion for others. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 17

Pigs & Pearls



Introduction

We've been working our way through Jesus Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7. His sermon is a precious treasure filled with wisdom and truth. So far, we've covered 16 topics. Each one is like a precious pearl in a beautiful necklace. I encourage you to go back and study them. Treasure these teachings for their priceless wisdom. Incorporate them into

your heart and live their principles in everything you do.

Today, we will look at one single verse; three short sentences from Matthew 7:6.

Matthew 7:6

6 "Don't waste what is holy on people who are unholy. Don't throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you.



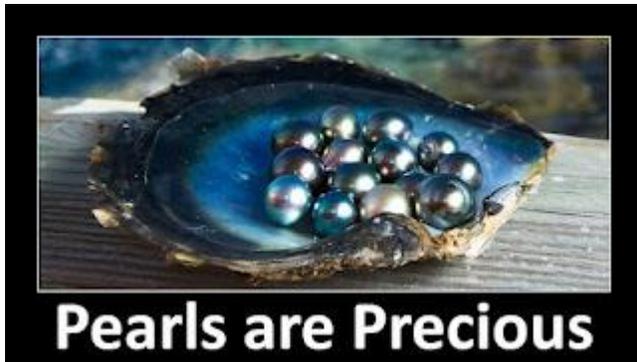
Pigs are Unclean

Jesus says not to throw your pearls to pigs. For Jews in the 1st century, pigs represented ungodliness. Their idea was rooted in thousands of years of religious and cultural practices outlined in the Hebrew Bible. Leviticus forbids Jews from eating. Pigs were a symbol of impurity. I love bacon, ham, and pork chops. But for the Jews in Jesus' day, the thought of eating

these was as revolting as eating a dog or a horse might be for us today.

In 167 BC, the King of Syria captured Jerusalem. And as a way to assault Jewish culture, they desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig to Zeus on the sacred altar. This was a sacrilege that horrified Jews and was remembered right down to the time of Christ. It was still at the forefront of everyone's mind when Jesus said, "Don't throw your pearls to pigs!"

Pigs represent those who may disrespect, reject, or abuse sacred truths. And the pearls in Jesus' metaphor represent the sacred truths of God's Kingdom.



Pearls are Precious

Pearls were highly valued treasures in ancient times, just as today. These rare, naturally formed jewels were traded all around the ancient world and symbolize purity, beauty, and wealth. Whether or not you love bacon, it's easy to understand the literal meaning of Jesus' warning: "Don't to throw your pearls to pigs!"

But what are the pearls in your life? What are those things that are precious and sacred to you? Things that you want to be protected, preserved, handled with great care, and honored? The first thing that comes to my mind is my wife and children. They are precious to me. I don't want any harm to come to them—especially from callous, careless behavior or people who would disrespect or reject them. I know you feel the same way about people you love. You wouldn't want anyone to mistreat them.

But Jesus has some specific things in mind when He says, "Don't throw your pearls to pigs!" He's talking about His teachings. These are the most precious pearls of all. These pearls are priceless because they have the ability to transform your whole life. Not only can they transform your life, but they have the potential to transform your family too. They can set you free from sin. They can fill you with joy and an abundant life. They can help you live in harmony with God and people. They offer you eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven! They are absolutely precious and sacred! And Jesus says, "Don't throw your pearls to pigs!"

Who (or What) Are the Pigs?

- Gentiles?
- Jews?
- Evil People?
- Sin



Who (or What) are the Pigs?

Well then, we need to know who the pigs are.

Pigs represent those who may disrespect, reject, or abuse our sacred truths. But who are they?

This is something that takes wisdom and discernment.

As I've prayed about it this week, I've been hearing this: the pigs are not people. The Jews of Jesus' day believed the pigs were the Gentiles—people who weren't Jews, who weren't circumcised, who didn't follow the Laws of the Hebrew Bible. The Romans were pigs! But that's not what Jesus believed. He believed God loved all people—both Jews & Gentiles.

On the other hand, the Romans thought the Jews were pigs. They were weak, untrustworthy, backwards, uneducated, uncivilized, and ungrateful. The Romans saw the Jews as a people who would not get with the program and come into the modern, global order the Romans were trying to establish. To the Romans, the Jews were pigs! But that's not what Jesus believed. Jesus believed God loved all people—both Jews & Gentiles. And all people bear God's image—an image that is a pearl in and of itself. People are not the pigs. People are precious.

You may know some people who seem more like pigs than people to you. Maybe they look different and act different. Maybe you don't understand the things they do. Maybe their attitudes or behavior it makes you really angry. Maybe they even seem more like animals or even monsters. Surely, they are pigs, right? People are not pigs. People are precious.

But sometime people are overcome with evil, selfish desires that push us down into the mud. The real pig is the Sin that makes people reject God and seek their own sinful, selfish ambitions. All people bear the image of God. All people are of sacred worth. But not all people are ready to receive the precious pearls of Christ's Truth because the "pigs" of evil are still running rampant in their hearts.

This is a hard Truth for us to accept because we want to stand in judgement of some people. We want to say, "There are just some people who are pigs. They are irredeemably bad." But then we remember Jesus words just one verse before in Matthew 7:5 that says, "Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye."

It is not for us to judge whether a person is good or bad. Only God can judge. Yet, we do need to be careful. We don't want to throw our pearls to pigs. It's not about labeling people but discerning attitudes and receptivity to spiritual teachings.



Prudence & Patience

- Repentance comes first
- Pray About It
- Lead by Example
- Be Persistent

Prudence and Patience

Be prudent and patient. You wouldn't let a dog wear your great grandmother's pearl necklace (or a 2-year-old for that matter). They couldn't appreciate the preciousness of those pearls and they wouldn't respect and care for them properly. It's not that your dog (or your child) is bad; they're just not capable or ready for the responsibility. It wouldn't be

appropriate at this time.

The same may be true when it comes to the precious pearls of Jesus' truth. Someone may not be ready for it. You can't just go throwing your pearls at them willy-nilly. The pigs may trample them in the mud and even turn to attack you!

Remember, Jesus' first step was to call people to repentance. "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near!"

Until people repent and turn to Jesus, they're not ready for the precious pearls He offers. Jesus offers forgiveness to everyone, but first they must repent.

Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance when discerning interactions with others. Ask for wisdom and insight to understand their spiritual needs and the readiness of individuals. God will show you if and when it is time to share your pearls with someone. Until then, be patient and be careful.

While you wait, you can lead by example. You must! Demonstrate Christ's teachings through your actions. Let your life be a testimony to the transformative power of the gospel. Sometimes, actions speak louder than words and can influence others positively. And pray for people the whole time. Pray that God will prepare them to be ready when the time is right. Pray that you will be ready to speak when the time is right.

Don't be discouraged if someone doesn't respond right away. Keep praying! Some may initially appear unreceptive or even reject Christ outright, but this could change over time. Remember, Jesus is the one who changes people's heart—not you! His ministry was marked by patience and persistent love for all people. And Jesus calls us to be patient and persistent too as we seek to make disciples who follow Christ.

Conclusion

- Treasure Christ's Teaching
- Pray for Wisdom
- Be Patient
- Share the Gospel



Conclusion

Following Jesus means treasuring His teachings—really knowing what He wants of us and cooperating with the Holy Spirit to live it out. These Sacred Truths are precious, and we should treat them with honor and respect. Jesus calls us to share His love and truth with all people, because God loves everyone and He made everyone in His image. But we need His wisdom about how

and when to show our pearls to others. We can't just cast our pearls all around carelessly. We must be patient and pray for God's guidance to know when and how to share the sacred Truth of the Gospel with people.

So, I challenge you to evaluate how you are taking care of your precious pearls. Are you honoring the sacred and avoiding the mud of worldly sin? Are you walking closely with the Lord, so you will know how to share His Gospel with people? Repent of your sin and live for Jesus. For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Closing Prayer

Lord, grant us wisdom and discernment, and a deeper understanding of Jesus' teachings. Guide us in living out these precious principles so our actions reflect the transformative power of the Gospel. Amen.

Session 17 Leader's Guide – Pigs & Pearls

Goal: Help participants discern when and how to share sacred truths wisely, avoiding harm while still demonstrating Christ's love and patience.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever shared something important with someone who didn't appreciate it? What happened?

Read Matthew 7:6 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus compares sacred truth to pearls and warns against giving them to pigs. This verse follows directly after Jesus' call not to judge hypocritically. The challenge: How do we avoid judgmentalism while still being wise in sharing the gospel?

Key Point: Jesus uses a cultural image (pearls and pigs) to communicate the value of the gospel and the importance of discernment.

- What do you think Jesus meant by “pearls”?
- In what ways are the teachings of Jesus sacred or “pearls” in your life?
- Why were pigs such a powerful symbol of uncleanness for Jesus' audience?

Key Point: The warning is not about labeling people, but about recognizing when hearts are not ready to receive spiritual truth.

- Why is it important to say that people are not pigs, but that sin can cloud their receptivity?
- How can we know when someone is truly open to hearing the gospel?
- What are some situations where it might be unwise to press someone with spiritual truth?

Key Point: Jesus teaches that discernment, patience, and prayer must guide our efforts to share the gospel.

- Have you ever pushed too hard in sharing your faith? What did you learn from that?
- What does it look like to “lead by example” rather than by confrontation?
- What role does the Holy Spirit play in guiding us to know when and how to speak?

Group Activity:

- Who in your life might be “not ready” to receive spiritual truth?
- Invite them to write a prayer asking God to give them (and you) the right timing and attitude for future conversations.

Closing

Summarize the main idea: Jesus calls us to treasure His truth and share it wisely—not with judgment, but with grace and discernment.

Closing Question: How can you walk in both compassion and wisdom as you share the gospel in your everyday life?

Pray: Ask God for insight, patience, and boldness when needed—and for a heart that values the gospel as a pearl of great price. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 18

Ask, Seek, Knock



Introduction

As we transition from the sacrament of infant baptism, a symbol of new beginnings and divine promise, we're reminded of our own spiritual journey. Baptism invites us into a life of asking, seeking, and knocking, a theme we'll explore further in today's sermon. Open your hearts to the transformative power of faith as we remember the teachings of Jesus from the

Sermon on the Mount and consider how they speak to us at every stage of our spiritual journey.

Matthew 7:7-11

⁷“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹“You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? ¹⁰Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! ¹¹So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.



Ask, Seek, Knock

Jesus says: Ask, Seek, Knock. When it comes to the most important things in life—like your goals, your dreams, your family, your physical and spiritual well-being—you have to have humility, commitment, and persistence. God requires it for the deepest blessings of His Kingdom. It's not because God is stingy. He wants to reward you. But you cannot handle the deepest blessings of

God's Kingdom” until you are ready for them. Asking, seeking, knocking prepares you to receive what God wants to give you.

Wise parents do the same thing with their kids. They don't just give whatever their kids ask for. Just because your 7-year-old son wants to drive a car, you don't let them. You might set them in your lap and let them drive around an empty parking lot for fun, but a 7-year-old is not ready to drive on their own yet.

Good parents encourage their kids to persist and develop and prove they are responsible before they give them something for which they aren't ready.



FRED STOKES

- *Asked* God for a better life
- *Sought* improvement
- Persistently *knocked* at the door of success

Fred Stokes

I'm pumped about our guest speaker for Super Bowl Sunday next week. Fred Stokes, is a former defensive end who played for the Washington Redskins (now known as the Washington Commanders). His life exemplifies Jesus' lesson about asking, seeking, and knocking. Fred grew up in poverty in rural Georgia and faced numerous challenges early in life. This fueled his desire

to **ask** God for a better life and success.

Stokes went to college at Georgia Southern University. He was not a highly touted prospect for the NFL, but he **sought** to improve, to make his mark, and to achieve his dream, despite the odds being against him.

Stokes was drafted by the Los Angeles Rams in the twelfth round of the 1987 NFL Draft. However, his early years in the NFL were marked by injuries and limited playing time. But He didn't give up. He persistently "**knocked**" at the door success despite the setbacks.

Stokes' perseverance paid off when he joined the Washington Redskins. He became an integral part of the team's defense and played a key role in their 1992 Super Bowl victory. The door of success finally opened for him. Stokes' journey from a challenging childhood to a Super Bowl champion is a testament to determination, hard work, and faith. It illustrates how asking for a better life, seeking it through relentless effort, and knocking on the doors of opportunity, despite obstacles, can lead to success and fulfillment.



Ask

- Lost
- Humility
- Needing Help
- Not Strong Enough

Ask

Jesus said "Keep on asking..." Asking emphasizes humility. We ask for help. It's a recognition that we need something. We don't know how to do something. We are lost and need directions. We're not strong enough. We're worried and need peace and comfort. And so, we have to ask for help. I hate to ask for help. I've always been very independent and I just want to be able to do

it myself—and I can do most things myself. But Jesus has taught me over the years to get over it. I need to ask for help. He has a sense of humor too, because He made me a pastor and it's my job to ask people for help... God wants to give you deeper blessings than you can even imagine. So, keep on asking.



Seek

Jesus said, “Keep on seeking.” You’ve got to get out there and do your part to actively pursue God’s will and wisdom. It’s not just about finding answers but about growing closer to God. It is often as we seek and pursue God that we build the spiritual muscles we need to hold the blessing God intends to give us.

Knock

Jesus said, “Keep on knocking.” Knocking represents persistence in our spiritual pursuit. Don’t give up if the door doesn’t open right away. Keep on knocking.

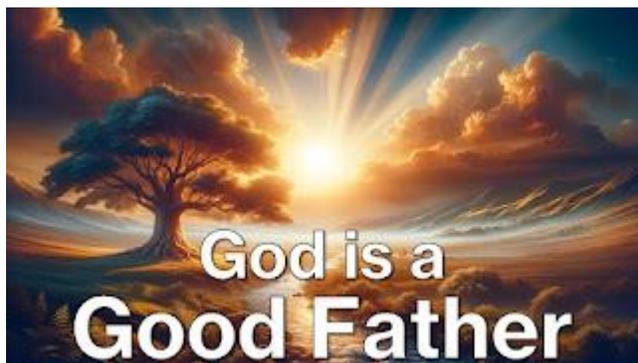
Have you ever had that awkward moment when you go to someone’s house and knock on the door and they don’t answer right away. I used to deliver pizzas back before

everyone had GPS. You would get the address, look on a map, and then go out to find the house and deliver the pizza. Sometimes the address wasn’t clearly marked on a house. You might be 95% sure it was the right house, but you would knock on the door and not know until someone answered the door. Sometimes you had to knock two or three times before they came to the door. It was awkward, but you couldn’t just leave. Your job was to keep knocking until you delivered the pizza to the right person. When it comes to the blessings of God’s Kingdom, you have to keep on knocking with that same persistent determination. It is good to know that Jesus is knocking on your door too. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears me and opens the door, I will come in and we will share a meal together.”



Knock

Be Persistent
Don't Give Up
It May Take Time
It's a Spiritual Pursuit



God is a Good, Good Father

Jesus calls God our Heavenly Father, and compares Him to our earthly parents. Most earthly parents—even the poorest examples—know how to give good gifts to their kids. They feed them, shelter them, clothe them. Although people are flawed and sinful, our heavenly Father is perfect love and full of wisdom and power. He knows what we need before we even ask and

has all the power of the universe at His disposal. He will bless you, but you must get ready first. So, keep on asking, seeking, knocking so you will be ready.

Holy Communion with Guided Meditation

We had the privilege of sharing the sacrament of Holy Communion at my church Sunday. Here

is a meditation I guided them through. Perhaps this will be useful for your too.
Relax with your eyes open and contemplate the sacrament of Holy Communion.
Breathe deeply as we rest in God's grace. Inhale peace. Exhale any distractions.
Reflect on the grace of Jesus' invitation to us, an invitation to ask, to seek, to knock.

On the night Christ gave Himself up for us,
He shared His last meal with the Disciples before the crucifixion.

The Bread: He took the bread, broke it, and asked the Lord to bless it.
Then He gave it to His Disciples and said, "Take and eat. This is my body given for you."
In the quiet of this sacred time, present your requests to God.
Ask Him for what you need.
Let the bread of Holy Communion remind you of God's readiness to provide everything you
need.

The Cup: After the meal, Jesus took the cup, raised it to heaven, and asked the Lord to bless it.
He gave it to His disciples and said,
"This is my blood, which confirms the New Covenant between God and His people.
It is poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins."
Take a moment to meditate on what it means to seek God.
Imagine yourself drawing closer to the heart of Jesus,
seeking His wisdom and presence in every aspect of your life.

Receiving: Envision yourself knocking on the door of God's kingdom.
Feel the door of God's blessings opening to you, inviting you into a deeper communion with
Christ.

Session 18 Leader's Guide – Ask, Seek, Knock

Goal: Help participants understand the power and persistence of prayer, and how asking, seeking, and knocking deepen our relationship with God.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever prayed persistently for something? What happened—whether or not the answer came quickly?

Read Matthew 7:7-11 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus encourages a lifestyle of persistent prayer and active pursuit of God's will. The passage compares God to a loving Father who gives good gifts to His children. It invites us to seek the deeper blessings of God's Kingdom through humility, persistence, and trust.

Key Point: Asking is an act of humility that acknowledges our need for God.

- Why do you think Jesus starts with "ask"?
- What makes it hard for people to ask God—or others—for help?
- What kinds of things do you think we often fail to ask God for?

Key Point: Seeking goes beyond asking—it requires effort, intentionality, and a desire to grow.

- How is “seeking” different from just asking?
- What are some ways we can actively seek God in our daily lives?
- What has God taught you during a season of spiritual searching?

Key Point: Knocking represents persistence and faith that God will open doors at the right time.

- What does it mean to “keep on knocking” when it comes to your faith?
- Why do you think God sometimes delays answering prayers?
- How do we balance persistence with trusting God's timing and will?

Key Point: Even flawed human parents know how to care for their kids. Our perfect Heavenly Father certainly knows what we need and will give it at the right time.

- What are some of the “good gifts” you've received from God in your life?
- How can reflecting on God's goodness change your approach to prayer?
- How does this passage shape your image of who God is?

Group Activity:

- Invite participants to write down one thing they need to ask God for, one area where they are seeking guidance, and one door they feel they're knocking on.
- Encourage them to commit to praying for those things daily this week.

Summary: Asking, seeking, and knocking aren't one-time actions—they're a way of life rooted in trust, effort, and relationship with a loving God.

Pray: Ask God to give wisdom, courage, and perseverance to pursue Him persistently, and to trust His timing and provision. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 19

The Golden Rule



Introduction

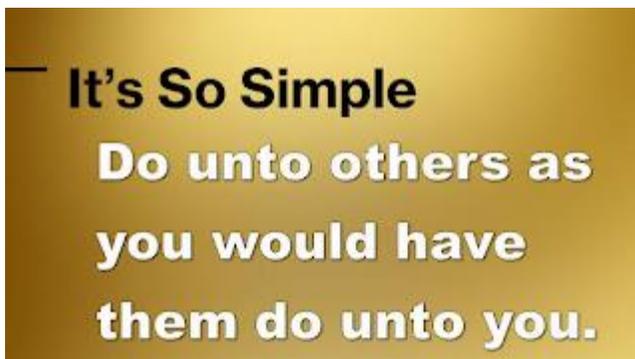
This is the 19th sermon I have preached from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. Leave it to a preacher to turn Jesus' one sermon over 19 sermons! Actually, this is not unlike what the Twelve Disciples would have done. Jesus preached this Sermon on the Mount as an overview of His core teachings. Then, the Twelve would have gone town to town to share His lessons,

expanding upon them much as I have in this series.

The sermon today is based on just one verse. And I bet it is one most of you have memorized. Can you guess it?

Matthew 7:12

¹²“Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.



It's So Simple

Can you think of a time when someone treated you kindly and it left a lasting impression upon you? I remember many. One time when I was about 12 years old, my karate instructor started coming to pick me up for classes a few times each week. My mom was a single mom with 4 kids and couldn't always get me to class. So, Jeff Carmichael picked me up every week. I

felt bad because I knew it was extra time and gas for him to come get me. I offered to pay for his gas and Jeff said, "No. Don't pay me. One day you will have a chance to help someone else. Whenever you do, you'll be paying me back." I've always remembered that and tried to live it out.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's so simple, many are taught the golden rule in Kindergarten. It's so simple, almost every world religion teaches some form of "The Golden Rule".

Judaism 16th century BC: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law, all the rest is commentary." (Talmud, Shabbat 3id)

Hinduism 15th century BC: "This is the sum of duty. Do not unto others that which would cause you pain if done to you." (Mahabharata 5, 1517)

Buddhism 6th century BC: “Whatever is disagreeable to yourself, do not do unto others.” (The Buddha, Udana-Varga 5.18)

Islam 7th Century AD: “None of you will believe until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.” (Hadith 13, The Forty Hadith of Imam Nawawi)

It would seem the concept of treating other people with the respect, dignity, and kindness you would want for yourself is a universal law for all humans everywhere. But if that’s true, it raises some questions.



But Why?

First of all: Why should we treat people the way we want to be treated? For what reason? There have been many people throughout history who have rejected the Golden Rule in favor of something we could call *The Law of the Jungle* where only the strong survive and the weak are culled from the herd. Why should we value and treat weak, less talented, less beautiful, less

intelligent people with the same dignity and respect we want? And what about people who act like animals and do despicable things? Why shouldn’t we treat them like animals since they act like animals?

There may be some self-serving reasons to treat others well. It could earn you a better reputation or open opportunities or encourage others to treat you well. If you scratch someone else’s back, they may scratch yours. So, it might benefit you to do good unto others. The only problem with these motivations is sometimes it will not benefit you. What then? Does that give you an excuse to break the Golden Rule? Not according to Jesus and the Holy Scripture.



All Humans are Sacred Works of Art

The Bible gives a reason to follow the Golden Rule that’s outside humanity all together and firmly grounded in the divine nature of God. Genesis 1:27 says “So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them.” We are created in God’s image. Every human being is a

sacred, image of God. And therefore, every person should be treated with dignity and respect—the way you would treat a priceless work of art.

Suppose several priceless works of art like *Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh or the *Mona Lisa* or the *Last Supper* by Leonardo de Vinci were inside a burning building. Wouldn’t you want people to do everything they could to rescue the masterpieces from being destroyed? And it wouldn’t matter if the building that housed them were a beautiful museum or a shack in a

swamp. The value of the art inside the building is not diminished by the type of building they're in. We would want to save them either way. The same is true of every human being. Each one has sacred worth because they bear the priceless image of God--a divine image that should be treated with dignity and honor regardless of the shell that holds it.

When we treat people poorly, it's a denial of the divine image within them. This kind of behavior doesn't just harm the person on the receiving end; it also impacts our relationship with God. It's a form of disrespect to what God has created and valued. It reduces our interactions to something less than human. *We* become less than human. When we treat others like animals, we become animals ourselves. When we treat any part of creation without respect for the Creator who made it, we degrade ourselves.

Jesus said, "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you." They bear the sacred image of God just like you do. God loves people. He loves everyone. And if we love God, we should love what He loves. We can't see God, but we can see people. How can we say we love God (when we can't even see Him) if we don't love the people God made (that we can clearly see)? One of the ways we express our love to God is by loving the people He made in His image. (And also, by taking good care of all His creation.)

That's not just something Jesus said. It's something Jesus did. He treated everyone with dignity. He valued and included children in his ministry—welcoming them in his presence when adults tried to push them away. He spent time talking with the Samaritan woman at the well and revealed his true identity as the Messiah to her. He was even kind to the thief on the cross who was dying in agony next to him at the crucifixion—welcoming him into Paradise.

**WHY DON'T
WE FOLLOW
THE GOLDEN
RULE?**

letter word: SIN.

Why Doesn't Everyone Follow the Golden Rule?

The Golden Rule is so simple and universal. It's been known by cultures all over the world for over 3000 years. And if people would just follow this simple rule, the world would be a much better place. So why doesn't everyone just do it?

The answer is summed up in one simple, 3



SIN

God created us to love Him and to love each other. But our SIN is we love ourselves more. We are selfish. We want to be in control and do things our way. And when we want something, we are willing to go against God's laws and moral principles and His purposes in order to get what we want.

This SIN is captured in the creation story in Genesis when the Serpent tempted Eve to break God's command and eat the forbidden fruit. The Serpent promised the fruit would make Eve like God. And that's often still the temptation--that if we bend God's rules a little, we will receive some benefit, some reward, that is better than what we have when we obey God. God's way is always the best way, but we think we can do better by cheating the system.

Lenten Challenge

- Make an intentional effort to follow the Golden Rule during Lent
- Keep a journal of your interactions and how you do

Lenten Challenge

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a season of 40 days leading up to Easter. It is a time when Christians refocus their spiritual lives. Some may give up something as a form of self-denial to draw them closer to Christ. Others commit to do something positive to live out their faith more authentically.

Perhaps, for Lent this year, you could simply make an intentional effort to follow Jesus' Golden Rule to treat others the way you would like them to treat you (in every circumstance). I challenge you to do it as a spiritual practice. Maybe you could even keep a journal every day. Prayerfully keep track of the different interactions you had and how you did or didn't follow the Golden Rule in different situations.

Closing Invitation

In closing, I must say you will always struggle with the Golden Rule until you surrender completely to God and become a Christian. There will always be a reason to bend or break it until you finally surrender control of your life to God. Jesus is Lord. Surrender and let Him be your Lord. Perhaps you would like to do that right now.

Session 19 Leader's Guide – The Golden Rule

Goal: Understand the depth and divine foundation of the Golden Rule and explore how living it out honors God and reflects His image in us and others.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Can you think of a time when someone treated you kindly, and it made a lasting impact?

Read Matthew 7:12 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus sums up the Law and Prophets in one powerful sentence. Though often known as a simple children's rule, it carries deep theological and ethical weight. This command is grounded not in human kindness alone, but in the divine image each person bears.

Key Point: The Golden Rule reflects God's nature and our calling as His image-bearers.

- Why do you think Jesus says this one rule sums up the entire Law and Prophets?
- What motivates people to follow or ignore the Golden Rule?
- How does knowing every human is made in God's image impact the way you treat others?

Key Point: Jesus lived out the Golden Rule perfectly—welcoming, healing, and loving all people.

- What are some specific ways Jesus treated people the way He wanted to be treated?
- Why do you think Jesus included outcasts, sinners, and even enemies in His ministry?
- What might it look like for you to follow Jesus' example more closely this week?

Key Point: Our selfish nature resists the Golden Rule; we need God's grace to live it out.

- Why is it difficult to treat others well when we feel disrespected, angry, or wronged?
- How does sin twist our interactions and cause us to treat others unfairly?
- What role does surrendering to Christ play in helping us love others consistently?

Key Point: Practicing the Golden Rule should be a daily spiritual discipline that reflects our ongoing relationship with God.

- What are some of the "good gifts" you've received from God in your life?
- How can remembering God's kindness and generosity inspire you to treat others with the same grace?
- What would change if you made "treating others the way you want to be treated" a daily habit?

Group Activity:

Encourage participants to memorize Matthew 7:12 this week. Invite them to choose one intentional act of kindness or fairness each day based on the Golden Rule and reflect on it in prayer or a journal each evening.

Summary: The Golden Rule is simple but profound. It reminds us that people matter—not because of who they are, but because of whose image they bear.

Pray: Ask God for the grace to treat others with the dignity He gives them, to reflect Christ's example, and to overcome selfishness and sin. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 20

The Narrow vs. Wide Gate

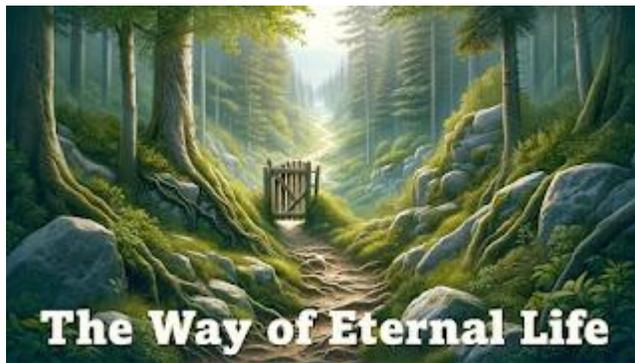


Introduction

I couldn't sleep last night. I was very tired. I worked outside in my garden all day Saturday and I was physically tired. I went to bed early. I fell asleep fast. But I woke up just a couple hours later with this sermon and *you* on my mind. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus said we all have a choice to make. Listen to what He said.

Matthew 7:13-14

¹³“You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. ¹⁴But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.”



The Way of Eternal Life

Jesus used gates and roads as a metaphor for eternal life and eternal damnation. The narrow gate and difficult road represent the way of life that leads to eternal life in heaven. The narrowness of the gate represents the exclusive nature of the path to eternal life. Jesus is the only way to eternal life. Jesus explicitly said so in John 14:6 - “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one

comes to the Father except through me.”

So, some will not go to heaven because they either reject Christ or never deliberately choose Him. Jesus said the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult. Living a life that adheres to Jesus' teachings requires self-discipline, sacrifice, and a willingness to go against the prevailing norms and values of society. This path is not the easiest, but it is the one that leads to true life.

Jesus wants everyone to have eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven. (I want that for you too!) But the reality is: the gate is narrow and the road is difficult and few people ever find it.



The Highway to Hell

Most people choose the wide gate and take the highway to hell. It's the route that seems easiest and most convenient, requiring little to no sacrifice or change. It aligns with our natural desires and the immediate gratification of our wants without considering the long-term consequences.

And besides, it's the road most people choose. You don't even have to think about it. You just go along with the crowd. It requires no discipline, no self-examination, no repentance or transformation.

Yeah, it's easy; it's convenient; and it offers the false promise of freedom. But it's a lie! While the gate is wide and the path is easy, it leads to spiritual death, separation from God, and eternal punishment in Hell.

And I woke up last night full of sorrow and concern for the multitudes of people traveling on the highway to hell and for the very few who choose the narrow, difficult road to heaven. I lay in my bed thinking about how I may have failed to do my part to encourage others to choose the right path—the one that leads to Heaven. I lay there thinking about everyone who would be sitting in my congregation or watching online the next morning to hear this sermon, as well as everyone who might read it on my blog. And I thought about how so many think they are walking on a path that leads to eternal life in heaven when they are not. Maybe you think you're going to heaven because:

- You were baptized as a baby, (or as an adult), or
- You go to church, or
- Your parents or grandparents were great Christians, or
- You believe God exists, or
- Because you're a good person, or
- Because you just believe everyone goes to heaven.

Listen to me. No. Don't listen to me; listen to **Jesus**. Jesus says it right here in our Scripture. "You can enter God's Kingdom *only* through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. **But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.**"



Few Ever Find It

Most people think it's so easy. They say: Just be a good person. Go to church if you want to. Be nice. You'll go to heaven. But Jesus says: "The gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it."

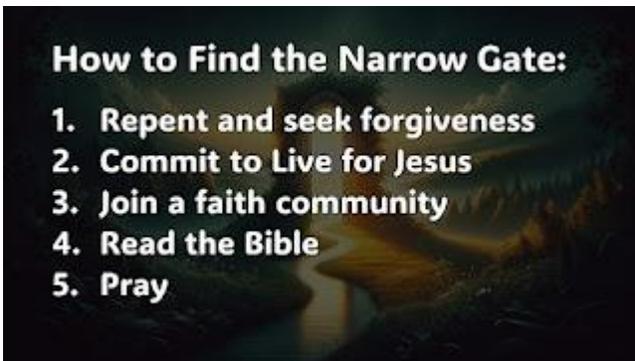
You see, the idea here is, you can have good intentions and still miss the gate to life. You can't just casually walk through life assuming you'll stumble through the right gate. No sir. You might still miss it. You may think you went through the right gate but realize too late you chose the wrong one. If you want to be one of the *few* people who find the gateway to eternal life, you better get serious about it. You better study it so you'll recognize the right gate and the right path when you see it. you better choose wisely.

People get serious about all kinds of things in this life. They'll work hard to achieve goals like:

- Athletic achievements
- Educational Achievements
- Finding a mate to spend their life with
- Building a successful career,
- Home ownership
- Health and wellness
- Travel and adventure

Perhaps you can think about how you have strived for some of these in your own life.

People plan and save and study and invest themselves in all kinds of things—some things that are good and important. But the *most* important thing, the thing that will literally last for all eternity, so many people approach carelessly, as if this most important thing just happens automatically. Few things worth having just happen automatically. You have to be committed and strive for it.



How to Find the Narrow Gate

If you really wanted to be a winning athlete, you would intentionally train to succeed. You might practice daily to get good, maybe workout to grow stronger; you might even change the way you eat to become healthier and fuel your body.

There are things you can do to help you be one of the few who finds the narrow gate Jesus says leads to eternal life. And I suggest everyone be dedicated to spiritual training.

1. **Repent and seek forgiveness** - Acknowledge your sins and mistakes, repent, and seek God's forgiveness. This process of turning away from sin is crucial in finding the narrow gate. You will never find the gate until you decide to start looking. And repentance is the first step.
2. **Commit to Live for Jesus** - Jesus chose you. But you have to choose Jesus. You have to consciously decide to be His disciple—to apply Jesus' teachings in your daily life, including loving your neighbor, forgiving others, practicing humility, and serving those in need.
3. **Join a faith community** - Being part of a church or a spiritual community provides support, accountability, and encouragement as you strive to live a life that reflects Jesus' teachings. Worship together. Study together in a small group. Serve together. Jesus and the original Twelve Disciples worked together as a group. If Jesus and the Twelve needed to be in a group, what makes you think you can do it alone?
4. **Read the Bible** - Regularly reading and studying the Bible helps you understand God's principles and Jesus' teachings. This knowledge is foundational to discerning the narrow path. It's the only way you are going to know which gate to go through and which path to follow in life.
5. **Pray** - Prayer is a powerful way to communicate with God, seek His guidance, and express your desire to follow Him. It aligns your heart with God's will. Prayer is the heart of walking on the right path with Jesus.



eternity!

Closing

Some of you are already doing these things.

Some of you need to do better.

Some of you need to take a good hard look at your life and recognize, you're just blindly walking through life along with everyone else, and you don't even realize you are traveling on the highway to hell.

You better wake up now, before it's too late

and you find yourself suffering for all

Session 20 Leader's Guide – The Narrow vs Wide Gate

Goal: Help participants understand Jesus' teaching about the narrow and wide gates as a sobering call to intentional discipleship, spiritual discipline, and eternal decision-making.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever taken a path that looked easier at first, but ended up being the wrong way?

Read Matthew 7:13-14 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus uses a vivid metaphor: two gates, two roads, and two destinations. The narrow gate and difficult road represent intentional, committed discipleship leading to eternal life. The wide gate and easy road represent the careless path of spiritual apathy or cultural conformity that leads to destruction.

Key Point: Entering through the narrow gate means deliberately choosing Jesus and a life of faith, sacrifice, and discipline.

- What do you think makes the gate to eternal life “narrow” and the road “difficult”?
- Why do so few people find it, according to Jesus?
- What spiritual habits help you stay on the narrow road?
- How does following Jesus sometimes require going against culture or comfort?

Key Point: The wide gate represents the easy, default path of life that most people follow—one that leads away from God.

- Why is the wide path so appealing?
- Can you think of cultural messages that encourage people to take the wide path?
- How do we sometimes fool ourselves into thinking we're on the right path when we're not?
- How can we lovingly warn others about the wide road without sounding judgmental?

Key Point: Jesus calls us to spiritual training—intentional steps that align us with the narrow path.

- What role does repentance play in helping us “find the gate”?
- How do church involvement and Christian community help us stay on course?
- How can Scripture and prayer shape our journey on the narrow road?
- What's one area in your life where God might be calling you to greater intentionality?

Group Activity:

- Invite participants to reflect silently and then share (if comfortable): “Which path have I been walking lately?”
- Ask each person to name one spiritual practice they will commit to this week to keep them on the narrow road (e.g., daily prayer, fasting, journaling, worship attendance).

Summary: The narrow path is not popular or easy, but it leads to life. Jesus is not just the gate; He is the way. Choosing Him means choosing life, now and forever.

Pray: Ask God to give clarity, courage, and conviction to walk the narrow road and to help others find it through our witness and love. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 21

False Prophets vs. Good Fruit

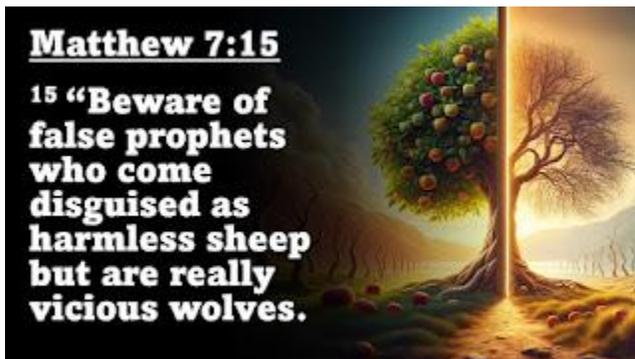


Introduction

We are nearing the end of our series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—just a few more weeks to go. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount our Lord's foundational teaching in the New Testament. It outlines the ethics of the Kingdom of Heaven. If you want to be a Christian, you should understand these principles in Jesus' sermon.

I challenge you to go back over Jesus' sermon, found in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7. You can find the sermons I've preached on it here on this blog over the last 21 or so weeks. These could be a resource for you as you study Jesus' core teachings.

Today's focus is Matthew 7:15-20, discerning what's true from false in our spiritual journey.



Matthew 7:15

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves."

The Warning Against False Prophets

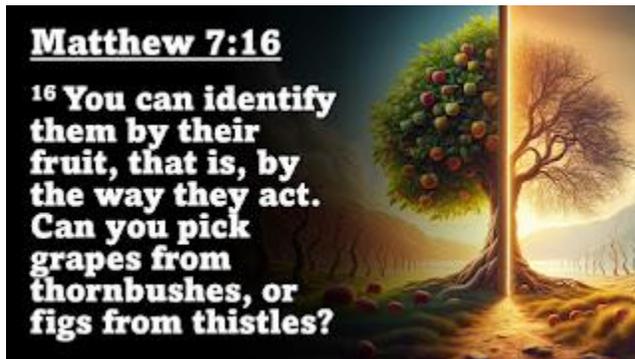
Jesus warned his people to watch out for false prophets. Jesus' followers were poor. They were oppressed. They were hungry. They were desperate. They needed a savior. This made them especially

vulnerable to false prophets who would lie and tell people what they wanted to hear in order to use them for their own selfish gain. Some real-life examples we know of false prophets are:

- In 4 BC, Simon of Persia proclaimed himself as Messiah during the time of Herod's death, leading a rebellion against Roman rule; he was killed by Roman forces, and his movement was crushed.
- In 6 AD, Judas of Galilee led a violent resistance against the Roman census taxation, claiming to be the messiah who would deliver Israel, ultimately leading his followers to a failed revolt and increased Roman repression.
- A false prophet mentioned in the Bible (in Acts 8) was Simon the Magician. He used magic tricks to convince Samaritans he was full of God's power for his own personal gain. Simon's influence was finally destroyed when the Apostle's Peter and John brought the true power of God to Samaria and exposed Simon's magic tricks as false.

One may ask why people would follow a false prophet. When people feel desperate, they often cling to *anything* or *anyone* who seems to offer hope. But that's when you need to be especially

careful. You must understand how vulnerable you are. And Jesus gives some practical advice about how to discern if someone is a false prophet.



Slides – Matthew 7:16-20

¹⁶ You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. ¹⁹ So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Yes, just as you can

identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

Understanding "By Their Fruits"

Jesus says you can tell a tree (or a prophet) by their fruit. That's great advice. It means looking at the visible results of a person's ministry. But even here we have to be careful. False prophets also often produce "signs" that may seem look like good fruit. A magician can do tricks that seem like impossible miracles. Charismatic leaders can often speak and act in ways that accomplish things that seem to be good. You may think magic tricks are real or the accomplishments of a charismatic personality show they are from God. But that is not necessarily true. You have to look closely at what kind of fruit they really produce.

Hitler came to power in Germany during a time when people were desperate for hope. Germans were in a state of deep economic despair, national humiliation, and the devastating effects of the Great Depression. Hitler was a charismatic leader who could stir national pride. He was going to make Germany great again! And initially, Hitler had success. Through hate, bigotry, and racism, Hitler rallied Germans to revitalize their country. But they did so by evil means and, in the process, they committed the most terrible atrocities the world has ever seen. Approximately 6 million Jews died because of the Holocaust. Is that good fruit? Absolutely not. That's rotten, poisonous fruit.

I want to warn you. As you look to the leaders you admire—whether they be political or business or spiritual leaders—consider the fruit they produce. Is it good fruit or bad fruit? And be careful because some will say the ends justify the means. They may argue, "Yeah I wish they didn't do or say those bad things, but look at what they accomplish." In other words, the good they accomplish is justified by the bad things they do to accomplish them.

Jesus is clear about who to tell a false prophet that is a wolf in sheep's clothing who will tear you apart. You have to look at their fruit. And the fruit is not the results of their work but the fruits of the Spirit.



Galatians 5:22-23

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control

Galatians 5:22-23

Galatians 5:22-23 names the good spiritual fruit a true prophet (and an authentic Christian) produces: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Just as we've seen bad false prophets (like Hitler, Jim Jones, and David Koresh), we have also seen true prophets lead movements to produce great fruit of the spirit (as defined

by Galatians). The early Methodists, guided by John Wesley's teachings, demonstrated the fruits of the Spirit in various impactful ways that reflected their deep commitment to living out their faith in practical acts of love and service. Their work led to:



Methodist Fruit:

- Evangelism
- Social Reforms
- Visiting Sick & Imprisoned
- Class Meetings

Evangelism: passionately preaching the gospel in open fields, towns, and cities, reaching out to the marginalized and working-class people, leading to widespread spiritual revivals and the rapid growth of the Methodist movement.

Social Reforms: Embodying the fruits of love, kindness, and goodness, they took strong stands against the societal ills of their

time, including the abolition of slavery, prison reform, and the promotion of education for the poor.

Visiting the Sick and Prisoners: Demonstrating compassion and faithfulness, early Methodists took seriously the call to visit the sick and those in prison to offer comfort, healing, and encouragement to those in need.

Small Group Meetings: The early Methodist movement was marked by its innovative structure of small group meetings that met regularly for prayer, study, and mutual accountability. These meetings were essential for spiritual growth and community, fostering the fruits of peace, patience, gentleness, and self-control.

Christians can't just believe in Jesus as an intellectual thing. True Christians must live out an inward holiness that transforms our thoughts, words, and actions. It's not about moral superiority, but about being filled with the love of God and neighbor, a love that manifests in every aspect of your life. Christian holiness is not static but dynamic and constantly growing and bearing fruit like a living tree. It's characterized by continuous self-examination, prayer, and participation in the means of grace, such as Holy Communion, Bible study, and fellowship with other believers.



Do you bear good fruit? If a fruit inspector examined your life today, what would he find? Would he find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

Now, we understand the life of a Christian is a journey. Fruitfulness is not something that happens overnight (just like a fruit tree does not bear fruit overnight). But your life should definitely be heading in the right direction—toward fruitfulness. God is the one who makes us grow and bear fruit. But what are you doing to tend the garden in your heart that nurtures fruitfulness? There are several things you can do to nurture the development of spiritual fruit God wants to grow in your life.

There is **worship** where you gather with other Christian believers and honor God. Do you regularly in worship God with other Christians?

There is **fellowship**. We may have many different groups we socialize with on a weekly basis at school and work. But if you are a Christian whose heart's truest desire is to bear fruit for the Kingdom, other Christian friends should be your main social group. Are you deeply involved with Christian fellowship?

Prayer is the heart of the Christian faith. Are you investing deeply in regular prayer throughout your day?

Bible Study is essential. How else are you going to know how we are supposed to think and live unless we study God's Word--His official method for speaking to His people?

Are you in a **small group** where you talk about your prayer life and what you've read in your Bible and where people intentional hold you accountable and offer encouragement to live more fully for Jesus?

Are you practicing the means of grace Jesus specifically commanded His followers in practice in the Bible--**Baptism** and **Holy Communion**?

- **Baptism** is the initiation ceremony for Christians in the New Covenant that replaced the circumcision ceremony of the Old Covenant. Baptism is a means for God to pour out His grace upon those being baptized and those who stand with them to help everyone know and walk with Jesus. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.
- **Holy Communion** is as a means to receive God's grace where we have our eyes opened as we experience the presence of Christ and receive spiritual nourishment for our faith journey. Communion is a sacramental act of thanksgiving and remembrance, commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, where bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ. This sacred practice fosters a deeper communion with Christ and with one another, strengthening our bonds with the church and empowering us to live out our Christian discipleship in the world.

Conclusion

As we reflect on Jesus' warning against false prophets and the importance of discerning true from false in our spiritual journeys, let us be vigilant gardeners of our souls. May we not only seek to identify the fruits in others but also nurture the growth of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control within ourselves. Through worship, fellowship, prayer, Bible study, and participation in the means of grace like Baptism and Holy Communion, let us cultivate a life that bears good fruit, reflecting the light of Christ in a world often shadowed by deception. Live out the Kingdom ethics Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount, growing closer to Him and each other as we journey together in faith.

Session 21 Leader’s Guide – False Prophets vs Good Fruit

Goal: Help participants discern truth from falsehood in spiritual leadership and examine their own lives for evidence of the fruits of the Spirit.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever been fooled by someone who seemed trustworthy at first? What helped you realize the truth?

Read Matthew 7:15-20 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus warns that not everyone who appears to be a spiritual leader is trustworthy. False prophets may look like sheep but are actually wolves. The test: examine their fruit—not their charisma or claims, but the outcomes and character of their lives.

Key Point: False prophets often thrive where people are desperate for hope and truth.

- Why do you think Jesus compares false prophets to wolves in sheep’s clothing?
- What might make someone vulnerable to following a false teacher today?
- What are some examples (past or present) of leaders who produced bad fruit despite popularity or success?

Key Point: Good trees bear good fruit; bad trees bear bad fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is the clearest evidence of authenticity.

- Read Galatians 5:22–23
- What does Jesus mean when He says, “You will know them by their fruit”?
- What kind of fruit do false prophets often produce?
- How does the fruit of the Spirit help us identify true spiritual maturity?
- In what ways do spiritual disciplines (like prayer, study, worship, communion) help cultivate that fruit?

Key Point: True Christians grow steadily in Christlike character, even if it’s not instant or dramatic.

- If someone examined the “fruit” of your life today, what might they see?
- How do things like fellowship, small groups, and accountability help us grow?
- How can participation in the sacraments (Baptism and Communion) deepen our spiritual health?

Group Reflection:

Invite participants to reflect silently: “What are you doing to tend the soil of your heart so God can grow good fruit in you?” Then have them share (if comfortable) one fruit of the Spirit they want to focus on growing this week.

Summary: Jesus teaches that fruit—not flash—is the true evidence of authenticity. We’re not just to watch for false prophets, but to become fruitful followers of Jesus.

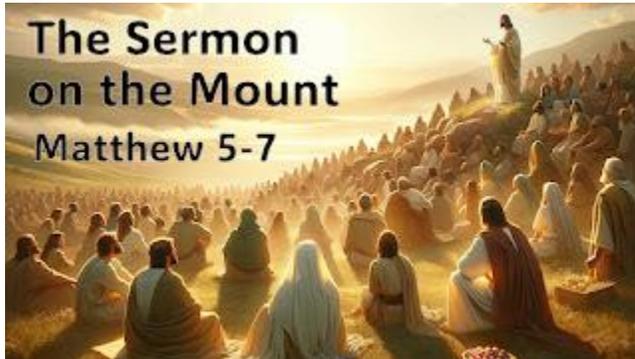
Pray: Ask God for wisdom to discern truth from deception, and for grace to grow good fruit that glorifies Him and blesses others. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.



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The Sermon on the Mount Session 22

A True Disciple



Introduction

I've been preaching through Jesus Sermon on the Mount from Matthew chapters 5-7. These are the key precepts of Jesus' message, revealing His core values for His followers.

My sermons for the last three weeks have been quite challenging. I assure you, I would rather preach cheerful sermons. But the texts from Jesus Sermon on the Mount have

required I speak some harsh truths.

- Matthew 7:13-14 revealed the highway to hell is broad because many people follow it, but the pathway to life is very narrow and only a few ever find it.
- Last week I preached about telling true prophets from false prophets based on their fruit. We are called to bear love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
- My message today is just as challenging (maybe even disturbing). It comes from Matthew 7:21-23.



Matthew 7:21-23

²¹ "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. ²² On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' ²³ But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you

who break God's laws.'

A True Disciple

In these 3 verses, Jesus warns about a terrible reality many people will face on judgment day. He says many people who *thought* they were following Jesus and going to Heaven will be shocked to find out Jesus never knew them, and they are turned away from Heaven.



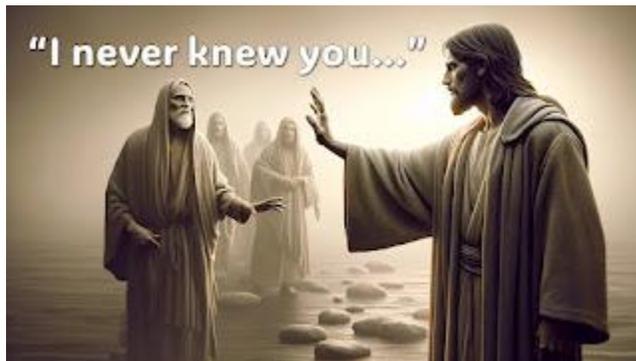
And that's disturbing, because it makes you question: "Am I one of those who will be horrified to find out Jesus never knew me? Will I be one of the unfortunate souls turned away when Jesus says: Get away from me, you who break God's laws?"

This brings us back again to the concerns raised in Matthew 7:13-14. "The gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult,

and only a *few* ever find it."

Friends, the Message of Christ is very serious. And we need to take it seriously. So many dabble in religion as if it was an afterthought of life. They go to church whenever we feel like it. If they pray, it is only when they are desperate and need something. God is only an afterthought if He is a thought at all. Everyone has more important things to chase after than God.

Friends, our relationship with God is the *most* important thing! It will literally determine where you spend eternity--whether you will spend it in heaven with God or in Hell eternally separated from God.



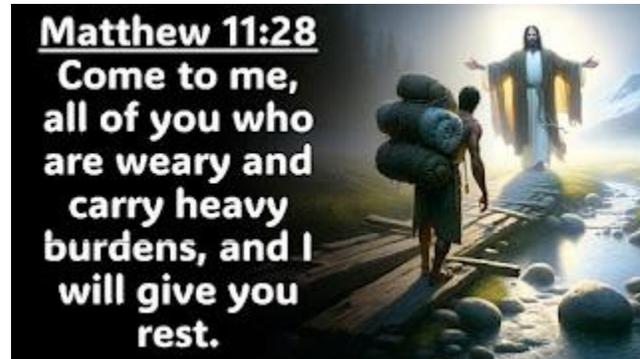
"I never knew you..."

Jesus warns one of the claims the damned will say on judgment day is, "We prophesied in your name..." In other words, they said all the right things. Maybe they even spoke on behalf of Lord Jesus—sharing His Word with others. Others who are damned will claim, "We cast out demons in your name and did miracles in your name..." These too will be cast into hell. Why?

Jesus gives the answer in simple terms. "I never knew you." Entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven starts with a real relationship—a relationship with Jesus. It's not about *what* you know. It's *Who* you know. Jesus left the glory of Heaven to come to our broken world to be *with* us. That's the definition of one of His names we often sing about at Christmas is Emanuel; it means "God with us."

Jesus did ministry *with* 12 Disciples. He could have done it alone. He didn't need help. But Jesus chose to work with 12 people to have relationships with them. Furthermore, Jesus ate with sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and other notorious sinners. Jesus interacted with people. He got to know people and built relationships. Relationship is the most important thing to Jesus. That's how He knows people and saves people and heals people.

And that's what Jesus wants with you—a relationship, to know you. It's what God has always wanted from the very beginning when He created us—a relationship. But, because of sin, we turn away from God. We chase after our own selfish ambitions instead of a relationship with God.



Matthew 11:28

Jesus came to invite us back. He said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Mt 11:28)

Jesus wants a real relationship with you—one where you talk every day and walk together, eat together, live together, serve together laugh and cry together. Part of that

relationship may include prophesying in His name and casting out demons and doing miracles in His name. But it's the relationship that's really important.

It starts with a choice. Jesus wants a relationship with everyone. Some may think Jesus wouldn't want a relationship with you. Maybe you feel like you're not good enough or you've done something terrible and Jesus wouldn't want to be around you. But Jesus showed He loved everyone. He never shied away from anyone, no matter how bad they sinned. Rich, poor, sinners, saints--Jesus loved them all and He still does today. There's nothing you have done or could ever do that would keep Jesus from wanting a personal relationship with you.

He stands at the door of your heart knocking. But you have to open the door and let Him in. And once Jesus comes onto your heart, you've got to walk with Him every day. Are you spending time with Jesus every day in a real, personal relationship? Some ways you can do that are through:

- Prayer and Bible study, which are the heart of a relationship with Jesus. Through prayer and Bible study we talk to Jesus and hear from Jesus. We learn who He is and how He wants us to live.
- Worship and Fellowship with Other Christians. Just like Jesus called 12 Disciples to follow Him as a group, Jesus calls us to follow Him in a group with other believers. We fellowship and worship as a Church (which is a community of faith). We have a relationship with each other and with Jesus, together.
- Serving. Jesus came to serve, not to be served. His followers serve alongside Jesus—giving ourselves to make more Disciples who also have a relationship with Jesus. Jesus doesn't *need* our help, but graciously invites us to work alongside Him. Serving together is part of how we relate with Jesus and each other.

Matthew 7:21
Only those
who actually
do the will of
my Father in
heaven will
enter.



Matthew 7:21

The other key part of Jesus warning is in His statement in verse 21, which says, “Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.” This statement connects to all the lessons we’ve studied from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount

(as well as everything Jesus taught in the Gospels and through His servants in the

Bible). Jesus tells us in the Bible how we are to live. These are His teachings. The Bible is the will of His Father in Heaven. Are we living it?

God is gracious. He understands we often misunderstand. We may read one thing in the Bible and totally misunderstand what Jesus wants us to do. We may do the wrong thing. But most people aren't even reading it to try and figure it out. Most people aren't even trying. Do you think willfully ignoring Jesus’ teachings in the Bible is “doing the will of God?” Of course not. It’s no wonder there will be so many people on Judgment Day crying, “Lord! Lord!” and Jesus will reply, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws.’



Walking with Jesus and Doing
God's Will Go Together

Walking with Jesus and Doing God’s Will Go Together

Something else important needs to be said. It’s this: Walking with Jesus and doing God’s will go together. You really can’t separate them.

You would think prophesying, casting out demons, and doing miracles *in Jesus’ name* must be “doing God’s will.” Right? Yet Jesus said many will tell

Him they did all these very things in His name and Jesus will reply: “I never knew you.” Why is that? Maybe because Jesus didn’t tell them to do those things.

Walking with Jesus means staying in tune with His daily instructions. If He didn’t tell you to prophesy, don’t do it. If He didn’t tell you to cast out a demon, don’t do it. If He didn’t tell you to do a miracle, don’t do it. Just because something sounds holy and impressive, doesn't mean Jesus told you to do it. But do whatever He tells you to do--even if it's simple and unimpressive.

And if you truly have an intimate relationship with Jesus, the Holy Spirit will lead you to do everything Jesus wants you to do. A true relationship with Jesus leads you to live for Him. As you walk with Jesus, you become more accustomed to hearing His voice through the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit directs us exactly how to obey Jesus if we are listening. Are you listening?

Practical Advice:

- Ask Jesus to Save You
- Pray and Read Your Bible
- Participate in Christian Fellowship and Worship
- Listen to the Holy Spirit

take our relationship with Jesus seriously.

Let me conclude with a summary of some practical things you can do to ensure you're traveling on the pathway to eternal life and not blindly following the highway to hell.

- Ask Jesus to save you – decide to follow Him as Lord and start walking with Him. This is the very first step. If you haven't already done so, please do this right now.
- Pray and read your Bible – these are the heart of our relationship with Jesus. They are how we talk to and hear God.
- Immerse yourself in Christian fellowship and worship. If we are truly following Jesus, our most important social group will be other followers of Jesus. We need each other.
- Listen to how the Holy Spirit is leading you to live and do it. Practice following the Spirit's guidance every day as He:
 - leads you to forgive people who wrong you, just as Jesus forgave you,
 - teaches you to be kind and compassionate,
 - enables you to be honest and ethical,
 - prompts you to be a witness who share how Jesus is changing your life,
 - calls you to serve. God gives each one of us special gift so we can build up His church. Use them for the glory of God.

Prayer

"Lord Jesus, forgive us for the ways we have pushed You aside in favor of other things. Thank You for inviting us to have a relationship with You so that we can know You and be known by You. Help us to walk with You each day as we pray and study Your Word. Surround us with Your people, so our fellowship and worship will honor You and build up our faith. Lead us to know and obey God's law and live for You every day. We ask these things in Your most holy name. Amen."

Conclusion

Jesus words are unsettling today in His Sermon on the Mount. "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter."

It's troubling. It's unsettling. But that's good. Because maybe it will motivate us to

Session 22 Leader's Guide – A True Disciple

Goal: Help participants understand the difference between outward appearances and true discipleship, and inspire them to pursue an authentic, obedient relationship with Jesus.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever met someone who talked a good game but didn't back it up with action? What gave them away?

Read Matthew 7:21-23 aloud.

Overview:

True discipleship isn't about impressive words or spiritual performance—it's about doing the will of God. Jesus warns that only those who truly obey Him will enter the Kingdom. We must examine our hearts and live in an authentic relationship with Him.

Key Point: True discipleship is not about saying the right things but doing the will of God.

- Why do you think Jesus says that not everyone who calls Him “Lord” will enter the Kingdom?
- What's the difference between confessing Christ and obeying Him?
- How can we guard against “surface faith” or spiritual performance?

Key Point: Miracles and ministry success are not proof of salvation—obedience and relationship are.

- Why is it dangerous to equate religious activity with genuine relationship?
- How might someone be deceived into thinking they are “good with God” when they are not?
- What are some signs of authentic spiritual transformation?

Key Point: The true disciple doesn't just know God's will but strives to live it out daily.

- What does it look like to do the will of the Father in daily life?
- How do prayer, Bible study, and Christian community help us know and do God's will?
- How do you personally discern what God wants you to do?

Group Reflection:

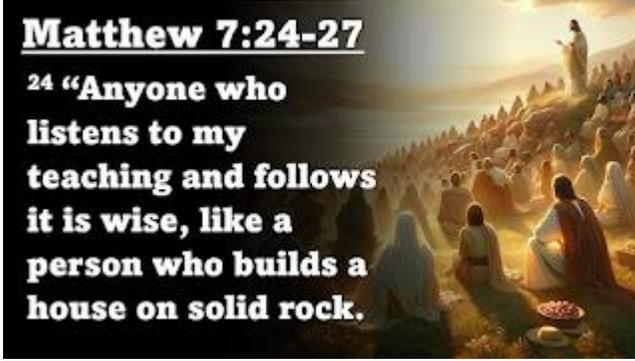
- Invite participants to reflect silently: “Lord, am I truly doing Your will—or am I just calling You ‘Lord’ with my lips?”
- Ask participants: What is one area where you're asking God for help to obey more completely?

Summary: True discipleship is measured not by words, works, or appearances—but by a surrendered heart that seeks to do the will of the Father.

Pray: Ask God for wisdom, humility, and a deep desire to follow Him in obedience. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.

Matthew 7:24-27

24 “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock.



Matthew 7:24-27

24 “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. 25 Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock. 26 But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. 27 When

the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.”



The Solid Foundation

Jesus says, “Any who listens to my teachings and follows is wise, like a person who builds a house on a solid rock.” Now, we’ve just finished 23 sermons based on Jesus’ core teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. They are challenging, but not difficult to understand. If you build your life upon these teachings, your life will stand against anything.

We will all face many trials and tribulations in this life. But if your life is built upon the solid rock of Christ, you will not fall even when rains and floods and wind beat against you. Now, you know we’re not talking about rain and floods and wind. We’re talking anything that life can throw at you: grief, divorce, depression, unemployment, alcoholism... You can think of hundreds of trials and tribulations you might face in your life—whether they come into your own life or in the lives of people you love. But when these trials come against you, you will not fall *if* your life is firmly built upon the solid rock of Christ’s teaching.

Even when cold, dark death comes to visit you (as it comes for every person), you will not fall *if* your life is built firmly upon the rock of Christ’s teaching. For everyone “...who believes in Jesus will not perish, but have eternal life.”

But I must also point out that Jesus says, “Any who listens to my teachings *and follows* is wise, like a person who builds a house on a solid rock.” You’ll notice he says, listens *and follows*.

There are many people who come to church every time the door is open. They love the experience of being at church. They love the music. They love the people. They may even love to *hear* the words of Jesus preached and read from the Bible. But you can’t build a solid foundation on *hearing* alone. You also have to *follow*.

James 1:22 says, “But don’t just *listen* to God’s word. You must *do* what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.” Many people listen to the Word of God week after week, but

never *do* the Word of God. They are only fooling themselves. It is critical we listen *and follow* Jesus' teaching. It is the only way our lives will be able to remain standing when the troubles of life assail us and when death finally comes to visit and we must face Jesus on our last day.



Sinking Sand

Jesus' teaching is a solid foundation that can support your life and even lead you into eternal life in Heaven. Everything else is sinking sand. There are a lot of people who build their life on things beside Jesus' teaching. But it's not a solid foundation. It cannot stand.

You cannot build your life on a foundation of feelings, but so many try. They base everything on how they feel. Some even choose to follow Christ because of an emotional religious experience. Maybe they went to a revival and heard the Word of God or some great spiritual music and it moved them and made them *feel* something wonderful and the experience led them to follow Christ. But that cannot be the foundation--because the feelings change and sometimes fade. We have highs and we have lows. Feelings are good and can be (should be) part of our walk with Jesus, but they cannot be the foundation.

Some will say they found their faith on traditions instead. They say traditions last generation after generation and are more permanent than feelings and emotional experiences. Traditions can be a helpful part of our walk with Christ, but they cannot be the foundation. Traditions change and sometimes they are wrong. Sometimes we find our traditions are contrary to Scripture and must be discarded. Other times our traditions lose their value when they now longer serve to connect us to Christ and the mission of His Church. So, tradition cannot be our foundation.

Others will say they build their life on ideas, reason and philosophy. They want to use their intellect to build a reasonable foundation that doesn't rely on tradition or religion or superstition. Some may even subscribe to the best ideas and knowledge of the modern era. But these also are an inadequate foundation. For we soon find we were wrong. And the morals and values and philosophies of today are soon found by another generation to be outdated and rejected. These too are sinking sand.

What about family? Surely family is a sure foundation upon which we can build. Well, family is very important. Maybe it should be the walls or the roof or the carpet of our life, but it cannot be the foundation. For our family is only human. They cannot fill the void in our life that only God can fill. And family members will disappoint, reject, or die (for they are only mortal). Family cannot be a truly solid foundation.

Nor can the pursuit of pleasures, our careers, wealth, status, popularity, or anything else other than Jesus' teachings be the sure foundation we need to stand against the storms of

life. Everything else is sinking sand. If you try to build your life and your faith upon them, they will fail and you will fall.

BELIEVE IN JESUS

James 2:14 – “What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?”

Believe in Jesus

We are told often in Church (and in the Bible), “Believe in Jesus and you will be saved.” This is true. I can quote many Scriptures that say this and I preach it. But what does it mean to believe?

To believe Jesus means to trust Him enough to leave behind your life of sin and follow His way of living. Jesus’ way of living is

spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount (as well as the Gospels and the teachings of His people in the Bible).

James 2:14 puts it this way: “What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?” You see, saving faith is listening to Jesus’ teachings and following them.

We all fall short, but God is gracious and forgiving. In 1 John 1:8-9, it says: “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.”

So, as we end the message today—as we end this series of messages on Jesus Sermon on the Mount—I invite you to join me in a confession of our sins. The words to this confession are taken the new Methodist hymnal "Our Great Redeemers Praise" on pages 738-739. This is part of the Wesley Covenant Service.



The Confession

Leader: We are those who seek to live as true disciples of Jesus Christ, but sometimes we fall short. Let us now examine ourselves before God, humbly confessing our sins and submitting our hearts so that we do not deceive ourselves and cut ourselves away from God. Let us pray:

People: **Father God, You have set forth the way of life through Your Son Jesus Christ, whom You love dearly. We shamefully confess that we have been slow to learn of Him and have been reluctant to follow Him. You have spoken and called to us, but we have not listened. You have revealed Your beauty to us, but we have been blind. You have stretched out Your hands to us through our friends, but we have passed by them. We have accepted Your gifts and offered little thanks. We are unworthy of Your unchanging love.**

Leader: We now confess to You our sins.

Please forgive us for the poverty of our worship...

for the selfishness of our prayers...

for our inconsistency and unbelief...

for the ways we neglect fellowship and Your grace...

for our hesitation to tell others about Christ....

for the ways we deceive others...

People: Forgive us for when we waste time and when we misuse the gifts you have given us. Forgive us for when we have made excuses for the wrong things we have done and when we have purposefully avoided responsibility.

Leader: Forgive us that we have been unwilling to overcome evil with good and that we have not been ready to carry our cross. Forgive us that we have not allowed Your love to work through us to help others and that we have not made their suffering our own. Forgive us for those times when instead of working for unity we made it hard for others to live with us because of our lack of forgiveness, inconsiderate judgment, and quick criticism.

People: Forgive us for when we have not tried to reconcile with others and when we have been slow to seek redemption.

Leader: Forgive us also for these sins that we silently confess to you now.

Leader: God, the Father of all mercies, is faithful to cleanse us from our sins and restore us to Christ's image. Praise and glory be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.

Session 23 Leader's Guide – A Solid Foundation

Goal: Help participants understand that living as a true disciple means putting Jesus' words into practice—and that obedience builds a life that can withstand every storm.

Welcome participants, make announcements, and open with prayer.

Icebreaker Question: Have you ever built or fixed something that fell apart because of something basic that went wrong?

Read Matthew 7:24-27 aloud.

Overview:

Jesus teaches that wise disciples not only hear His words but live them out. Obedience builds a life with a solid foundation—able to withstand life's storms—while ignoring His teaching leads to collapse. Faith that endures is faith put into action.

Key Point: It's not enough to hear Jesus' words—we must act on them to build a life of faith that lasts.

- Why does Jesus compare obedience to building on rock?
- What are some ways Christians hear but fail to apply Jesus' teachings?
- What spiritual practices help move us from hearing to doing?

Key Point: Obedience doesn't prevent life's storms, but it prepares us to endure them with faith and stability.

- What kinds of storms is Jesus talking about—literal, emotional, spiritual?
- Can you share a time when your faith helped you through a storm?
- Why is obedience more reliable than emotion or experience when trials come?

Key Point: Both builders heard the same words—but only the obedient one stood firm.

- Why do you think Jesus ends His sermon with such a stark warning?
- How can we build “on the rock” daily?
- What's one specific teaching of Jesus you're working to live out more consistently?

Group Reflection:

- Invite participants to reflect silently: “What foundation am I building my life on right now?”
- Ask participants: What is one area where you need to act on what Jesus has taught?

Summary: A life built on Jesus is one rooted in obedience—not just belief or emotion. His words are rock-solid truth, and when we live by them, we can weather any storm.

Pray: Thank God for His Word, and ask for the courage and discipline to live it out daily. Pray for any requests or needs from the group.

A Final Reflection – Building on the Rock

Matthew 7:24 – *“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”*

Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount with a clear challenge: it’s not enough to hear His words—we must live them. This study has taken us through some of the most powerful and practical teachings in all of Scripture. We’ve heard the heart of Jesus for His followers: to be humble, merciful, truthful, generous, forgiving, prayerful, discerning, and obedient.

As we come to the end of this journey, now is the time to decide—how will we respond? Will we walk away inspired but unchanged? Or will we begin, step by step, to build our lives on the firm foundation of His truth?

Take some time to reflect and respond to what you’ve learned over these 23 sessions.

Reflection Questions:

1. What teaching from the Sermon on the Mount challenged you the most—and why?
2. In what ways has your understanding of Jesus and His Kingdom grown?
3. Where have you seen signs of spiritual growth in your own life during this study?
4. What is one specific way you will begin to live out Jesus’ words more faithfully from this point forward?

Prayer of Commitment:

Lord Jesus, I have heard Your words—words of life, truth, and challenge. I don’t want to be a hearer only. I want to be a doer. Help me to build my life on Your teaching, to walk the narrow road with courage, and to reflect Your light in this world. Thank You for the gift of this journey. Now, help me live it out—one step at a time, with You as my firm foundation. Amen.

