



KINGDOM

*An unusual
call to live
unlike the world*

KINGDOM

10-Week Radiant Groups Study

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Third, I want to thank Radiant Bible Church for giving me the opportunity to grow in writing resources for small groups. I know I'm not a writer, I'm a pastor. Yet, as a church of small groups, I've enjoyed providing resources that I hope are convicting and encouraging, thought-provoking, grounded in Scripture and easy to apply to everyday life. Personally, I don't enjoy fill-in-the-blank studies, so I hope the questions are engaging, refreshing and lead to application. Most of all, I hope this study will challenge you to become more like Christ and live unlike the world. I pray that you take away as much as I have by diving into Jesus' teaching and gathering around God's Word—Scripture first, Scripture most.

You are loved,
Eric Carlson

AN UNUSUAL CALL TO LIVE UNLIKE THE WORLD

INTRO



FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF SILENCE

Did you know there was a period of four hundred years from the time the Old Testament was completed to the birth of Jesus in the New Testament? Four hundred years of silence as God did not speak to His people through prophets, priests or kings. Four hundred years of God's people praying, crying out and wondering where God was.

To put this in perspective, four hundred years ago, a ship named the *Mayflower* set sail with 102 pilgrims from England to establish the first colony in New England. This ship landed at Plymouth Rock off the shore of Massachusetts. A lot can happen in four hundred years.

Although it's tempting to view the Bible as a seamless stream of voices who God spoke through to communicate to His people, whole generations were left in silence from Malachi to Matthew. **What were God's people waiting for? They were waiting for the kingdom.** Page after page, generation after generation, the entire Old Testament is one continuous story that looks ahead in hopeful anticipation of the coming of God's kingdom and the fulfillment of God's plan.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS HERE

After four hundred years, silence was shattered by the birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew opens with a royal ancestry and traveling wise men who brought gifts for a king. Other than a few shepherds and family members, the coming of the kingdom isn't clear until thirty years later when John the Baptist said, "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 3:2). In other words, "*Turn from your sins. Change the way you think and live. The long-awaited Messiah is here!*" While this message might sound strange, it is exactly what God's people were waiting for. **The kingdom of heaven is so close, you can reach out and touch it.**

A NEW KIND OF KING

John the Baptist might have been the first person to publicly declare the kingdom has come, but he wasn't the only one. From parables with His disciples, to teaching in local synagogues and preaching on a grassy hill, Jesus also announced the arrival of His kingdom.

Jesus didn't come to conquer the world or reclaim a plot of land. He didn't come to set up a nation, lead an army or rule a country. God sent Jesus to defeat the curse of death and unleash a movement that would spread the hope of the gospel to the ends of the earth. This kingdom is built on grace and advances through compassion. In this kingdom, the throne is a cross and the King reigns with love.¹

If you're wondering what the kingdom is, you're in good company.

Most of Jesus' listeners were also confused with His teaching. Jesus wasn't the king that the crowds expected. Jesus fulfilled every kingdom promise, but He built the kingdom in a way that was far more glorious than anyone could have imagined.²

AN INVITATION TO HIS KINGDOM

According to Jesus, *the kingdom* of God is something you should seek before all things. This kingdom is like a treasure you should pursue and go after. The kingdom is something to *enter* and *go into*. The kingdom is something that can *belong* to you and be *received*.

The questions remain, what is this kingdom? When will this occur? The answer is in front of you. Both John the Baptist and Jesus said, *the kingdom is here!* God's kingdom isn't some distant place or future reality that can only be fulfilled in the resurrection of the dead and second coming of Jesus. *The kingdom is here... right now.* Your feet are in it. Your lungs are inhaling its oxygen as you breath.

Look around. It's right in front of you. You're living in the kingdom.

A KINGDOM UNLIKE THE WORLD

God's intention was to give more than a list of rules to be followed. His plan all along was to create a particular sort of people with new hearts, new affections and new passions. This is what prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel anticipated as they looked forward to deliverance from sin's penalty and power.³ With the arrival of Jesus, God's Spirit transforms God's people in ways the Old Testament laws and regulations never could. Through His Spirit, God replaces hearts of stone with hearts of flesh.

As royal representatives of the King, we were created to reflect and emulate His kingdom. Since we live in a world that doesn't share the same kingdom mindset or recognize the same kingdom values, we're called to live unlike the world. As ambassadors of His kingdom, Jesus lays out a new way to live. It's about putting God first in everything. If Christ is the King and rules above all, this must change how we live, work and play. Jesus makes it clear that we must live in a new way. **We are called to discipleship. This is how the kingdom expands.**

In the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus wants all of us—our attitude, desires and ambitions, to be harnessed and changed by His Spirit. Jesus wants us to treasure Him above all. He wants to change us from the inside out. Following Jesus is more than what we do for 65 minutes on Sunday morning. The hope of the gospel impacts everything. It changes how we think and what we value.

SO... WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

Are you grasping the significance of the kingdom of God? Since this theme is so important and we see it woven throughout Scripture, here's a definition for what the Bible means when it says *kingdom of heaven* or *kingdom of God*. Both phrases mean the same thing.

The kingdom is God's reign through God's people over God's place.⁴

GOD'S REIGN

The word *kingdom* is first and foremost a statement about God. There isn't a square inch on the planet, a nanosecond of time nor a subatomic particle traveling across the galaxy that God is not standing watch over and ruling. History isn't a collection of random events. God is moving all things to His perfect will. Everything we have comes from the hand of God. This is His universe, and He rules over all of the physical and spiritual worlds.

GOD'S PEOPLE

Like walking statues of the invisible God, Adam and Eve were created to represent God and reflect His presence to the world. We are created in His image. As God's people, we are made to represent the Creator. Our job is to rule over creation as under-rulers of God. But this wasn't enough for Adam and Eve. Instead of representing God, they wanted to be God and rule as gods. This rebellion severed their relationship with God as they pursued their own path of power and glory. Though God could have ended His kingdom in the garden, He did not abandon His plan to rule over creation. Filled with love and grace, God didn't give up on His people.

GOD'S PLACE

Although the garden was created to initiate a global kingdom where God's people would flourish and expand His righteous rule, the effects of sin spread like wildfire, turning and twisting God's kingdom from Him and casting it into the hands of the Evil One. This required a reversal of the curse, and that's exactly what God did. Sin was confronted and hope was renewed through the promise of a Savior. Although the world is temporarily hijacked by sin, one day all things will be restored to their former glory and God's people will be delivered from the influence of sin's penalty and power. Since the foundation of the world, the kingdom of God was never intended to be detached from the earth. God's mission is to bring a new heaven to a new earth like the early days of paradise in the garden.

ALREADY, NOT YET

One challenge in understanding the kingdom of God is that God's kingdom is already here in the coming of Jesus, but it's not fully here. For now, Christians possess every spiritual blessing in Christ, but we cannot experience the fullness of these blessings yet. Living in the last days, we can be saved in Christ but this isn't our home and we're not in heaven. Though the kingdom currently exists in the world, it's not fully here. The kingdom will be fully established with the second coming of Christ when Jesus triumphs over the Evil One. **This means we're living in the tension of an *already-not-yet* reality.**⁵

THE KINGDOM IS AN UNUSUAL CALL TO LIVE UNLIKE THE WORLD

Now let's put this together as we dive into the *Sermon on the Mount*. The birth of Jesus shattered four hundred years of silence and ushered in a new period of redemptive history—the *kingdom is here*. Jesus was an unlikely King who came in an unusual way. He wasn't what the world expected, yet Jesus is exactly what the world needs. The call to follow Jesus is a call to live according to His values. Though we live in the world, the kingdom of God is unlike the world. God's kingdom is what we should treasure above everything else. And we should seek first the King with every fiber of our being.

The *Sermon on the Mount* is a clear call to live as God intended. God's plan has always been to raise a particular sort of people⁶ whose hearts, affections and passions align with His. God wants His people to live according to His standards and submit their lives to His way. This is why the path Jesus lays out is not a life of comfort, pleasure or self-help. It's a life of holiness, humility and love. The bar of discipleship is high. The cost is great. His teaching is hard, but Jesus doesn't leave us to struggle by ourselves. His Spirit enables us. He empowers us. The Holy Spirit is our guide to instruct, comfort and help us live unlike the world. **Let's live as citizens of the kingdom.**

WEEK 1



A KINGDOM MESSAGE

The *Sermon on the Mount* is probably the best-known teaching of Jesus, though it may be the least understood and least obeyed.⁷ From a grassy hillside early in His ministry, Jesus made His expectations clear as He laid out His vision for discipleship.

Why is the *Sermon on the Mount* one of the greatest sermons ever preached? Most significantly, because it came from the lips of Jesus. In the original context, this sermon was probably much longer. It's possible that Jesus taught for several hours, and what we have recorded in Matthew 5–7 are condensed highlights of His teaching. This is why the sermon is filled with so many bite-sized truths.

The primary theme throughout Jesus' teaching is the *kingdom of heaven*, which is another reason the sermon is so influential. When it comes to His kingdom, Jesus doesn't cut corners or water down His message. Few passages of Scripture confront us like the sermon. Jesus sets a high standard, asks convicting questions and calls us to examine our lives to see if we are living as citizens of God's kingdom.

Just like 2,000 years ago, the *Sermon on the Mount* is intended to challenge us to think deeply about what it means to follow Jesus.

And how should believers look? Differently! According to Jesus, His true followers are to be unlike the world.⁸ As Christians, we don't imitate or look like the world around us—we follow Christ. This world isn't our home and Jesus calls us to live noticeably different.

A key passage in the *Sermon on the Mount* is Matthew 5:13–16. As followers of Christ, we're called to be salt of the earth and light of the world. In other words, we're sent out and commissioned as followers of Christ to reflect Jesus and influence the world for good as God-like examples to those who don't know the Lord. This way of living doesn't blend in with the crowd; it is distinctly different.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Have you ever imagined what it would have been like to hear Jesus teach the *Sermon on the Mount*? What do you think happened? Do you imagine a scene with rolling hills and green grass cascading into the crystal blue Sea of Galilee? Is the sun shining with a warm glow and sparkling on the water as the crowd circles around Jesus? Do you see a flock of fluffy sheep nibbling in the background or doves cooing in a canopy of olive trees? Children are nestled on their mothers' lap and lay perfectly quiet. Perhaps you imagine the crowds smiling in unison as the disciples nod their heads in quiet agreement with Jesus' teaching. Not a soul is restless. Often, Jesus is applauded with a heartfelt AMEN.

Think about this—*the way we imagine the setting has a direct impact on how we receive and apply the message.* If we envision a setting that is comfortable or convenient, it's unlikely the sermon will challenge and confront us in the same way that it did the original listeners.

Though crowds gathered, Jesus' main audience was His followers. Like most of His teaching, Jesus was focused on His disciples. This is why He spoke plainly. This is why He shared hard truths. Interpreting Scripture is more than skimming words on a page. Instead, we must slow down and place ourselves in the text and see what's happening in the larger context and storyline of Scripture. This happens through careful study, unhurried prayer and illumination from the Holy Spirit. The setting, audience and message must fit together.

The *Sermon on the Mount* is an unusual call to live unlike the world.

In 111 verses, Jesus calls His disciples to live as citizens of His kingdom. To do this, we must reorient our entire lives around Him. Following Jesus is a deliberate choice to passionately pursue Him.

THE CROWDS WERE ASTONISHED

Instead of rolling hills, picture a rugged mountainside with worn out trees and jagged rocks cutting across the dusty roads of Galilee. The sheep are thin and tired. The sun is scorching. Children are restless. Your stomach is growling. The crowd is curious and confused. The disciples are less confident and squirm with embarrassment as eyes dart toward them. You've never heard someone speak with such authority. This is amazing. Deep in your soul, something is stirring.

With some of the most electrifying words of the New Testament, Jesus calls His disciples to live according to His Word. The *Sermon on the Mount* is like a *lightning bolt*. It is direct revelation from God, coming from the mouth of Jesus, the incarnate Word.⁹ As God speaks, we must enter this sermon with the same intensity. His message was direct but Jesus wasn't harsh. In fact, Jesus' tone was likely gentle. Jesus wasn't a typical teacher. Verse by verse, Jesus sees through pride and peers into each soul. Few passages of Scripture confront us like the *Sermon on the Mount*. **Jesus sets a high standard, asks penetrating questions and calls us to examine our lives to see if we're living as citizens of His kingdom.**

Jesus' words are direct, laser-focused and intense. He demands extreme standards. His teaching is filled with vivid illustrations. This sermon isn't about adhering to a list of rules. It isn't about cycling through the motions of religious duty. Jesus demands our attention. He wants to ignite His passion inside of us. He wants to sear our hearts with conviction. He wants to spark our souls with His glorious hope.

It's tempting to think the kingdom of God is far away and distant, or something that is so heavenly it's beyond this world. **Look around. God's kingdom has come and this message changes how we live.**

START WITH THE END IN MIND

At the end of His sermon, Jesus shares four scenarios to challenge His audience to consider whether they're a *citizen of heaven* or *earth*. There are two gates. Which will you choose? There are two teachers. Who will you listen to? There are two servants. Who will you be? There are two foundations. Which one will you build your life on?¹⁰

While it's tempting to write off Jesus' teaching as something that doesn't fit our modern world, these words have staying power. The reason these words are still relevant is because Jesus' words are centered around the heart. The heart is the control center for life. This is where our thoughts take place. This is where our choices, motives, ambitions, emotions, desires and values come from. The One who created our hearts knows what we need. The truth is, Jesus knows exactly what we need long before we do.

While reading, ask the Holy Spirit to speak. Read slowly. Do more than read lines on the page, understand what Jesus says. Let God speak as the Holy Spirit guides you through the sermon. Pause and take time to be challenged or encouraged.

Even if you've read these verses a thousand times, enter this sermon with a humble heart and open eyes. Be teachable and quick to listen. Allow these words to speak to you in a new and fresh way. Though the message of the sermon remains constant and has not changed in two thousand years, circumstances around us evolve and change quickly.

Read these verses as if you were sitting on the mountainside and hearing Jesus speak. There will likely be verses that jump out and resonate with you in a deeper way. Focus on these verses. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide and help you discern how to apply these truths.

Read Matthew 5–7 aloud. Try to read the whole sermon in one sitting without distractions.

A KINGDOM MESSAGE

Put yourself in the shoes of the disciples listening to this sermon. How have you imagined the backdrop surrounding Jesus' teaching? How might this setting influence the way you read these words?

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After reading the *Sermon on the Mount*, what does Jesus expect from His disciples?

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What does Jesus want from you? Consider one verse that is encouraging and one verse that is convicting. What do you sense the Holy Spirit speaking or calling to your attention?

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What is one question you have about the *Sermon on the Mount*?

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The *Sermon on the Mount* is filled with hard teachings and difficult truths that are seemingly impossible to achieve on your own. Why is it important to view the *Sermon on the Mount* alongside Matthew's whole gospel and not isolate these chapters?

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Underline the phrase "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God" in verses 5:3, 10, 19–20; 6:10, 33; 7:21. What stands out in these verses?

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What do you want to take away from this 10-week study? Why?

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WEEK 2



MATTHEW 5:17-20

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

A KINGDOM OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

After hearing the kind of person God blesses in the preceding verses (5:1–16), the crowds may have thought, “Ugh. We can’t do that! How can we ever measure up to this impossible standard of righteousness?” It’s in this moment that Jesus presses in and raises the bar further.

Jesus says, true righteousness must exceed the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees represented the holiest and most devoted people in the community. They were meticulous in arranging their lives to follow the tiniest details of the Old Testament. How can anyone surpass the lifestyle of these religious leaders?

With 248 regulations and 365 prohibitions to fence in and protect their laws and traditions, the righteousness of the Pharisees was shallow and skin deep.¹¹ Their actions were like an external veneer. Living this way was tedious, complicated and exhausting. Imagine how shocking it must have been to hear Jesus say you must be better than a Pharisee to enter the kingdom of heaven. No way! It’s impossible to live according to the sermon by this standard.

A Christian’s righteousness is not skin deep. Following Christ is more than a list of do’s and don’ts. Being a disciple isn’t about cycling through motions or measuring ourselves against a religious check list. Only through the presence of Christ and His righteousness can we live according to His kingdom with exceeding righteousness. To embody this way of living is only possible from the inside out.

Jesus did not come to dismantle or contradict the Law or Prophets.¹² He didn’t come to set aside or replace the Old Testament as if these writings were now obsolete with the New Testament. Jesus came to affirm and accomplish what the Old Testament promised but could not do. When Jesus says He came to *fulfill* the Old Testament, this means He came to *embody* the writings of the Law and Prophets. Jesus is the One the Old Testament points to.

More than reading, studying and talking about the *Sermon on the Mount*, this message is intended to be lived out and applied. Just as Jesus embodied these words in how He related to the world around Him, He is calling us to follow His example and emulate His life. Jesus doesn't just preach these truths; it is how He lived.

Unlike the Pharisees who tried to live out the external demands of Scripture, being a disciple means we are changed from the inside. Our conformity to Christ, isn't only apparent in our actions, but also our righteousness should be visible through our attitudes, desires and ambitions. From the things we treasure to how we relate to others, Jesus demands an inward righteousness that radiates outward. Exceeding righteousness can only originate from a heart that has been transformed by God's Spirit and is aligned with God's Word.

Jesus' message isn't about rolling up our sleeves and trying harder. Instead of exhausting ourselves through our own effort, Jesus offers a different kind of righteousness that is internal and spiritual. It is not about conjuring up an outer righteousness to show off our goodness, but an inner righteousness that shows how gracious and powerful God is. This is about following Jesus in a way that permeates our whole person. We can't do this on our own. This is only possible through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as we receive a new heart through the outpouring of His grace.

Throughout the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus' central point is that His true followers, the citizens of the kingdom of God, are to be different. We're not supposed to look like the world. Our character is to be set apart and distinct. We are to shine like lights in darkness. How we think, what we value, what we pursue in life, our inner motives and the choices that we make should reflect Christ and His kingdom. Jesus invites us to enter His kingdom both now and in the future as we reorient our entire lives around Him and His Word. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

How does Jesus say you can be great in the kingdom of heaven? How would you describe greatness according to Jesus?

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What are some ways you are tempted to relax or diminish what Scripture says?¹³ Have you ever thought to yourself, "Did God really say that? Does God really mean that? Does God care about that?"

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How can you tell when you are pursuing external righteousness versus internal righteousness?¹⁴ In other words, how do you discern between *holiness* and *obedience* or living in *religious legalism*?

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It's easy to bash the scribes and Pharisees and give them a hard time for conforming to a set of rules. But in a lot of ways, we're the same. Give one example of how you've measured your relationship with Christ by your external actions rather than your attitude or motives.

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In what way does the Old Testament point to Jesus? Give a few examples of how the Old Testament looks forward to Jesus who came to fulfill what the Old Testament could not do on its own.

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The Old Testament makes up 77% of the Bible and includes 39 books. If Jesus did not come to replace the writings of the Old Testament, how are these books still relevant or applied today?

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WEEK 3



MATTHEW 5:21-48

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

A KINGDOM ATTITUDE

If we've ever measured ourselves against the Ten Commandments, we've probably walked away feeling good about ourselves for not murdering anyone, right? Jesus' listeners probably did the same.¹⁵ The Pharisees created all kinds of ingenious ways to work around the intentions of God's Word. They may have lusted after a woman, but as long as they didn't commit the physical act of adultery, they felt holy, technically speaking.¹⁶ They mastered the art of loopholes. They blurred the edges of truth. Their self-justification created a complex system of sin management to elevate themselves. But in the end, this separated them from God and pushed them away from truth.

Jesus exposed the condition of our hearts. All actions, good and bad, reveal the swirling in our hearts. Self-justification and good appearances are not what Jesus desires. Jesus came to give us an inward righteousness that originates in our heart and bubbles up in love, purity, integrity and holiness. This is the kind of change Jesus produces through His Spirit.

As Jesus cuts through to our hearts, He exposes our inner motives. Jesus came to deepen, not destroy the decrees and demands of the Law. God has more in mind than prohibiting the act of murder. He is equally concerned with hateful attitudes.¹⁷ He knows every sin is a heart issue and warns us about allowing the attitude of anger to exist, because over time, it will creep in and set up camp in our hearts.

If Jesus' words sound extreme, they are. This is why many disciples walked away from Jesus' teaching. Who can live this way? This standard of perfection is humanly impossible! Exactly. That's the point. Jesus' unswerving statements aren't by accident. He makes His standards clear. God is not merely concerned with our actions; He's concerned with the quality of our hearts because it is the root of every action.¹⁸ *Our hearts need to change.*

In addition to murderous hearts, God is more concerned with the heart than our finances. Giving includes more than opening a wallet or debiting a bank account. It includes settling differences to avoid bigger troubles. Jesus says we are responsible for taking the initiative to solve problems and make things right. Do this as fast as possible, or this will prolong pain. The longer we wait, the more serious the consequences will be.¹⁹ Keep things from escalating by pursuing problems and acting now. This requires swift humility and getting out of our comfort zone. Making peace and pursuing reconciliation is always worth it. In the end, integrity, purity and love are what make a cheerful giver.

Jesus continues to say that we are to deal drastically with sin. We must not pamper it, flirt with it or enjoy nibbling around the edges. We are to hate it, crush it, dig it out by the roots and kill it.²⁰ Sin leads to hell. That is the ultimate reason why sin must be taken seriously. Jesus condemns lustful looks. Lust is adultery of the heart and must be guarded against, because if it is left unchecked, it will lead to hell. The Old Testament made the act of adultery punishable by death—it's that serious.²¹ Guarding our heart is equally as important as turning our eyes. Protect both! The stakes are high.

Few experiences in life bring more pain, sorrow, grief and heartache than divorce and the fracture of marriages and families. Although this is an uneasy topic in the church, Jesus tackles it head on. God's plan for marriage is the union of one man and one woman until separated by death. Although sexual immorality constitutes biblical grounds for divorce, God desires reconciliation and restoration. Jesus expects divorce to be the exception in the church not the rule. In a broken world, every marriage will go through problems, but God delights in putting broken families back together. Marriage is a sacred, holy and glorious institution that God gives to His children. God has a high view of marriage because He created it. Marriage was His idea.

From anger to adultery, Jesus continues to cast a vision for what it looks like to follow Him as a citizen of His kingdom through our words and how we treat others. Again, Jesus highlights what we say and how we relate to others because this too comes from the heart. Whatever is hiding on the inside will always surface on the outside.

Disciples of Jesus are to be known for honesty and integrity. Everything we say, do and think takes place before the watchful eye of God who takes seriously the words that we speak.²² Our words matter. The Lord hears every single one of them.

Jesus says our words and actions go together. Having dealt with the importance of our words, Jesus addresses the importance of our actions and guides us on what we are called to do as His disciples.²³ Don't retaliate against enemies. Relate to them as neighbors. If someone causes embarrassment, be willing to endure further insult. If someone tries to take advantage or has a complaint, let grace abound with an unselfish attitude. If someone asks for help, do more than the bare minimum and be an example of compassion. When people come across our paths with a desperate and legitimate need, be generous and wise and jump in with both feet.

Our motive for helping others is simple—we have been helped by our heavenly Father when our need for forgiveness was the greatest.²⁴

In His final example of perfect righteousness, Jesus demands we love our enemies as proof that God is our Father. We are to be like Him. Returning good for good is what it looks like to be human. Returning good for evil is supernatural.²⁵ Loving our enemy is a necessary part of our pursuit to be like Him. The startling reality is that Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, and this includes those who are hostile and do evil against us. Like obedient children, we must emulate our Father and act as He does. If God can be merciful to the wicked as well as to those who are good, so must we. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

As Jesus launches into His sermon and lays out a new standard for living, what do you find most difficult? Why?

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Does your attitude reflect the kingdom of heaven or the earth? How?

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Relationships matter. Jesus makes it clear how we should relate to others. As Christians, we should be willing to make things right. It's hypocrisy to say you're good with God but not good with others. Look at the following questions²⁶ and consider if you need to initiate a conversation and make something right with someone in your life:

- Am I responsible for any grudges that someone has against me?*
- Am I responsible for any anger that someone has against me?*
- Am I responsible for any bitterness that someone has against me?*
- Am I responsible for any hostility that someone has against me?*

Jesus calls you to deal urgently with relational issues and examine your attitude. How can you evaluate your heart before talking with someone in a hard situation? Remember, the Bible says, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9)

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In Mathew 5:29–30, Jesus talks about the severity of sin and going to great lengths to avoid sin. What does this passage teach you about God’s view of sin? What are the consequences for not viewing sin as seriously as Jesus does?

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Throughout this passage, Jesus advocates a righteousness that goes beyond the letter of the Law and interprets the attitude behind it. How do these requirements redefine what it means to be perfect?

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WEEK 4



MATTHEW 6:1-18

6 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹Pray then like this:

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread,
¹²and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

A KINGDOM DESIRE

Jesus says our righteousness should be evident in our inner desires. This includes the spiritual acts of giving, prayer and fasting. Just to be clear, Jesus is not telling His disciples to abandon these things, but to do them in the right way²⁷—a way that glorifies God. His concern in addressing these topics is to show us that our desires must flow from motives of obedience, not the validation of man.

There's no denying that most of us struggle with seeking man's approval. Yet, our ultimate desire should be for God's recognition, regardless of what people think or say. We shouldn't give to impress others with our generosity. We shouldn't pray to highlight our theology. We shouldn't fast so others admire our spirituality.²⁸ Giving, prayer and fasting should be done sincerely and secretly. Pursuing God is more than a list of *don'ts*. It includes a list of things we should do and is concerned with something deeper—our motives.

As Jesus confronts our inward motives and desires, He's pressing into why we do the things we do. What moves us to act and behave as we do, especially in matters of faith or attempting to look more spiritual than we really are? All of us are tempted to seek the approval of man.

Though Jesus calls us to do good works so others can see our good works and give glory to God (Matthew 5:16), when it comes to giving, prayer and fasting, Jesus introduces an important twist on how we should exercise these sacred acts. Do them secretly and without show.²⁹ This would have been shocking to His listeners who celebrated public and visible displays of religion. Jesus warns us to be careful with our motives. This implies constant vigilance and watchfulness. Ask yourself, "Is my desire for doing good works such as giving, praying and fasting based solely on the purpose of honoring God? Or do I want to feel better about myself through the applause of man?"³⁰

Jesus assumes we will give. But He warns us to not call attention to ourselves or announce our righteous deeds. We don't pat ourselves on the back to validate our goodness. There's a better reward to gain. Seek God's approval, no other. Give quietly and without attention.

Jesus moves from giving to prayer as a second spiritual discipline. Prayer in its simplest and most basic sense is a conversation with God.³¹ As Jesus teaches us about prayer, He expects prayer to be a regular habit for His disciples. Just like giving, He assumes we are praying. Again, His focus is centered on how to pray. This includes what to say and what to avoid. Don't put on a show. Hypocrites love to flaunt a false spirituality.³² But they're not genuine in prayer. Instead, pray in quiet to our heavenly Father. He knows our needs.

Do we pray differently in public than in private? Jesus wants to help us understand that who we are in private is who we truly are. With strong words, Jesus condemns senseless and mindless prayers that are littered with rote phrases that could be uttered by pagans.³³ If we look at Jesus' prayers in the gospels, His prayers were simple, intensely personal, often spontaneous and an expression of His deep relationship with His Father. Jesus prayed conversationally as He talked with His Father. More words do not impress God. Instead, focus your prayer on the concerns that matter to God and humbly share needs, crying out with child-like dependence.

Jesus also addresses the discipline of fasting. Fasting consists of self-denial for the purpose of prayer, spiritual devotion, mourning and repentance. It can be corporate or personal.³⁴ Fasting isn't intended to be depressing but to focus on God. In a way similar to prayer and giving, Jesus rebukes fasting for attention. He warns us to not be gloomy or appear to be sad like the hypocrites who seek to draw attention to themselves. God sees beyond our actions. He knows our hearts and wants our inward motives to match our outward obedience. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

What does your practice of giving look like? How does this passage challenge the way you give?

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What does your practice of praying look like? How does this passage challenge the way you pray?

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What does your practice of fasting look like? How does this passage challenge the way you fast?

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What is one way you could apply each of these practices (giving, praying, fasting) as a small group?

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Jesus confronts the religious acts of His listeners and warns them to not be hypocritical like the Pharisees or mechanical like the pagans.³⁵ In what ways can you search your motives to know if they are pure?

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In what areas of your life do you struggle with the approval of man? How has this made life harder (Proverbs 29:25)?

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Do your desires reflect the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of earth? Spend time in prayer and fasting, asking God to change your desires.

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WEEK 5



MATTHEW 6:19-24

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

A KINGDOM PRIORITY

Life is short. This sobering reminder puts life into perspective as we consider what creates real, ultimate and lasting value.³⁶ Like Jesus' listeners, we all have things we treasure and love. Most of us are probably convinced some things are essential to our happiness.

But as followers of Christ, our priorities should be different. Yes, we live in the world, but Jesus calls us to live as citizens of His kingdom. We are to set our sights on the world above. In the end, Jesus wants us to have the right treasure, the right devotion and the right master³⁷ in mind as we pursue life in His kingdom.

Not only is life short, but life is also a series of decisions and choices. Sometimes, choices are drastic. Other times they are camouflaged and difficult to discern: God or Satan? Right or wrong? Faith or unbelief? Light or darkness? Earthly treasure or heavenly treasure?³⁸ Choices confront us again and again. Likewise, decisions shape our character and guide our destiny.

The decisions we make are critical. Some have eternal consequences. In His sermon, Jesus simplifies the process for making decisions. Jesus speaks in absolute terms and claims that there are two options at stake. There are only two paths to pursue—the choice is ours.

Jesus says not to treasure the things of this world as most precious. Earthly treasures do not last and they can be easily taken away.³⁹ We cannot protect them. They lack any sort of permanent pleasure. Because earthly treasures are transient and temporary, Jesus says we must place a higher priority on treasures that do last and cannot be taken. Earthly treasures are not secure, but heavenly treasures are eternally secure. The things we treasure are the things that we will love and pursue. We must ask ourselves, *"What do I treasure the most? Are my treasures tied to heaven or earth?"*

In addition to what we treasure, Jesus says we have a choice in pursuing darkness or light. For example, a good eye is fixed on God.⁴⁰ It's unswerving in its gaze and constantly focused on God's kingdom. A person with this sort of perspective is devoted to heavenly values and is not distracted by the glitz and glam the world tries to offer.

The opposite of a good eye is a bad eye, which loses the ability to see life correctly. A bad eye is unhealthy for the whole body because it is prone to wander. A bad eye isn't focused on God's kingdom. Its outlook is misdirected and fails to see life the way that God intended. A bad eye isn't blind. It can still see. But the problem is that it looks at the wrong things and roams toward trouble. A bad eye loses its focus on what matters most to God and is easily distracted by the way of the world. A bad eye might achieve great treasures, but it seeks the wrong treasures and misses everything that matters.

Jesus says the eyes of His disciples should be fixed on heaven, not earth. This vision must be singular and not divided.⁴¹ It should be focused on serving the right master, not the wrong master. The statement that no one can serve two masters points to Jesus' claim over His disciples. In His kingdom, divided allegiance and split loyalty is not possible. We are made to serve one master.

The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world will never agree. As much as we try to mingle and mesh them together, it won't work. As followers of Christ, we can't pursue both. We either live for this world or the next.

In the end, the point of Jesus' teaching isn't about how much we have in our bank account, but about who and what we pursue. Jesus understands that making decisions will require hard but necessary choices. If we desire God's kingdom, we won't try to be rich on earth. Instead, we will be rich spiritually and in our relationship with God, who gives an eternal reward. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

Think back on this week and measure yourself against Jesus' words. In light of this passage, what do you treasure most?

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What do you think is meant by, "Where your treasure is, your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21)?⁴² What do you treasure the most?

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While we think we can balance everything, Jesus emphasizes the necessity of priorities and having a singular focus on Him. How are your eyes? Do you have a "bad eye" that is distracted? If so, by what?

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Many people hold down two jobs or report to two different bosses. In effect, they serve two masters.⁴³ In the context that Jesus is speaking in the sermon, what does the term "master" mean?

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What worldly "master" is fighting for your loyalty or attention?

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Jesus warns that our hearts will follow what we value or treasure. How do you lessen your desire for earthly treasure and increase your desire for heavenly treasure?⁴⁴

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When it comes to the top priorities in your life, what earthly treasures are crowding out your kingdom priorities? What heavenly treasures need to be elevated or set as a higher priority?

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WEEK 6



MATTHEW 6:25-34

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

A KINGDOM AMBITION

The greatest battles of the Christian life aren't fought in wide open spaces where things are clearly defined and laid out. Instead, some of our hardest battles are hiding in the shadows of the unknown. This is especially true when it comes to fear and our tendency to worry.⁴⁵ *What's next? What's going to happen? What if..*

When Jesus tells us not to be anxious, He means do not spend life worrying about material things. This doesn't mean these things are not important. Food, drink and clothing are vital to everyday life. But this isn't where our attention should be. With a vivid illustration, Jesus points out how God cares for the birds. Though birds are busy and industrious creatures, it's God who feeds them. Birds do not plant crops in the ground, harvest grains or build silos to store food. Yet, they are fed daily and cared for by their heavenly Father.⁴⁶

We are more precious than sparrows. What good is it to worry? What problem does worry solve? We cannot add one year, month, week, day or second to life by worrying.⁴⁷ Worrying will impact the quality of life but not add to the length of life.

God did not create us to worry about earthly items and if we do, worry can wreck us. There are many ways that worry can hurt. It can carve itself into a body as a painful ulcer. It can be heard in footsteps pacing back and forth on cold floors late at night. It can be muffled in restless silence as we stare wide-eyed at the ceiling when we should be sleeping.⁴⁸

As the Bible says, God has numbered our days. God has determined both our moment of birth and time of death.⁴⁹ God is sovereign and our lives are in His hands. He has mapped out our lives from beginning to end. He coordinates each step and knows exactly what we need.

In addition to being concerned with food, we can also worry about our clothing. Unlike Jesus' listeners, most of us have more clothes than we need. Think about the disciples and how they didn't have much more than the shirt on their back. The point of Jesus' teaching is to confront our tendency to prioritize earthly belongings and earthly treasures over the kingdom of heaven, which is far superior.

Small faith is often the root of uncontrolled anxiety and worry. It's a battle that we must fight even when the future is ill-defined and unknown. What is clear is God's goodness, compassion and strength. His kingdom is better.

Worry has never solved a problem, dried a tear or lifted a burden. It's never made bad things good or good things better. Jesus knew this as much as any person who has ever lived. So again, He is direct and to the point—"Don't worry."⁵⁰ To be precise, Jesus says *do not worry about what you eat or what you will drink or what you will wear* (6:31). Instead, the comforting truth is that our heavenly Father sees us. God is not ignorant or indifferent. He knows what we want, but His attention is focused on what we *need*, not what we want.⁵¹ There is a tension of submitting our lives to God and seeking first His kingdom.

Jesus commands that we seek God's rule and reign above all things. Seek first His righteousness and God will always provide. Instead of worrying, seek the Lord. Passionately pursue the kingdom of heaven and trust God to take care of everything.

God has called each of us to live for Him and His mercies are new every morning. As we put first and pursue His kingdom, our hands will release their grip on the things of this world and worries will fade away.

Jesus encourages us to seek His kingdom and not worry. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

What do you find yourself worrying about the most? Why?

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How are you seeking *first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*?

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How does Jesus connect worry to a lack of faith?⁵² Do you agree?

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How might what you treasure (verses 19–24) affect your ability to live free from worry (verse 25)?⁵³

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Looking back, has there ever been a time when God gave you exactly what you needed, but at the time it wasn't what you wanted?

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Jesus does not say that we should neglect planning or working hard. What is one goal that you have for expanding God's kingdom?

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Verses 33 says, *"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."* Now that we're halfway through this study, what stands out to you? What is Jesus teaching you about yourself and His kingdom?

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WEEK 7



MATTHEW 7:1-6

7 "Judge not, that you be not judged. ²For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

⁶"Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

A KINGDOM JUDGMENT

When Jesus speaks against judgment, He's not saying we should overlook sin or sweep it under the rug. Instead, Jesus is confronting the Pharisees who elevated themselves and demeaned others who didn't live up to their inflated standards.⁵⁴ This bogus self-promotion allowed the Pharisees to look down their long religious noses. Pride is the root of self-righteousness, which fosters a judgmental spirit. By puffing themselves up and viewing themselves more highly than they should, they kept the so-called "common" people below them.

Jesus' response doesn't deny calling out sinful habits. But first, we must reflect on ourselves and carefully examine how sin is present in our own lives. In this way, Jesus distinguishes between an act of judgment and an attitude of judgmentalism.⁵⁵ As God's people, we are called to discern good from evil, right from wrong and good fruit from bad fruit. But we're not called to judge the motives of others or look down on others with a self-righteous attitude or critical spirit.

A judgmental spirit is suspicious and accusatory. It assumes the worst. It's harsh and mean. Having a judgmental spirit is an attempt to play God.⁵⁶ Like the Pharisees, it's applying a standard to others that we do not want applied to ourselves because our spiritual vision is blurred. It's viewing ourselves too highly and failing to see reality as it truly is.

Though we might think judging others isn't a big deal, Jesus says it is foolish (7:1–2), prideful (7:3–4) and hypocritical (7:5). He speaks directly and boldly. Without watering down His words, Jesus exposes the dangers of judgmentalism and self-deception.

After tasting God's forgiveness, how can we condemn others? Showing mercy to others is an act of self-awareness, as God has shown us mercy. Likewise, judging harshly is an act of foolishness and pride because it reveals that we do not fully understand God's grace.⁵⁷

Jesus' teaching was vivid and profoundly practical. According to Jesus' example, your brother has a speck of wood in his eye, but you have a massive beam of wood in your eye. It's absurd to think that we should try to correct our brother's teeny, tiny splinter when an 8x8 post is sticking out of our eye. The beam of wood, which represents sin, is an obvious obstacle that blinds us from the ability to see clearly. The illustration proves the point—how can we attempt to correct another person when we are in more need of correction ourselves?⁵⁸

Jesus issues a warning: do not become desensitized to sin. Before our hearts burn with righteous anger, we should ruthlessly inspect our lives first. We might be surprised to discover a log in our own eyes. Only after we have dealt with our sin are we in a position to come alongside someone else. Correcting others without careful introspection is hypocrisy.⁵⁹

After warning against judgmentalism (vs 1–5), Jesus warns against being careless with the gospel (vs 6). In the first century, dogs were not cute and cuddly house pets. They lived in wild packs as scavengers and terrorized the city streets at night. Dogs were dangerous.⁶⁰ They represent people who rip the gospel to shreds and bite with vicious words. Do not force the gospel on those who are hostile.

If dogs attack the gospel, pigs trample on it. Pigs cannot recognize the beauty and value of biblical truth. They see it, think it's worthless and drag it under their feet like trash through the mud. Not only do they grossly reject the gospel, but also they could care less about it.⁶¹

Christians are called to share the hope of the gospel with all people. Don't prematurely judge how others might respond, but have discernment. Leave those who are "dogs" or "pigs" alone and seek receptive ears. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

In what ways were you overly judgmental or critical of others this past week?

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In what areas of life do you tend to be harsh and overly critical?

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How have you grown in awareness and sensitivity to sin after struggling with your own sins? Has this allowed you to help others?

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Have you ever experienced total rejection after sharing the gospel? How can you discern if you are dealing with someone who is unreceptive when it comes to sharing the hope of the gospel?

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HOW TO COME ALONGSIDE OTHERS

As the people of God, we have the Word of God and the Spirit of God. This means we shouldn't run away when situations get difficult. Instead, we should be the kind of people who run toward problems with the hope of the gospel and be instruments of righteousness. **To get practical, here are five things to consider when God calls you to step into a messy situation as an ambassador of grace.**⁶²

1. Examine yourself. Ask yourself, *"Am I in a position to help others? Am I aware of any sin in my life that needs to be addressed?"* See Matthew 7:1–5.
2. Think about how you would want to be treated if you were in a similar situation. See Matthew 7:12.
3. Be careful to not make a snap decision or quick judgment. Get the facts and listen well before acting. See Proverbs 18:13.
4. Pray for the one who appears to be in sin before correcting him or her. Seek to restore them gently. See James 5:15–16.
5. Speak the truth in love. See Ephesians 4:15.

WEEK 8



MATTHEW 7:7-12

⁷"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

¹²"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

A KINGDOM REQUEST

Pause and consider what God is like. He is infinitely strong and can do all that He pleases. He's perfectly righteous, so He only does what is right. He is infinitely good, so everything He does is purely good. He is perfectly wise and always knows what is necessary and good. And as our heavenly Father, His love is pure and never waivers. When we pause to consider the attributes of God, Jesus' request to ask our heavenly Father for good things is breathtaking. And the fact that He promises to provide good gifts for His children is unimaginable.⁶³

Prayer is an invitation to acknowledge our weakness and areas of struggle. It puts our needs in touch with God's abundant supply. Unlike the Pharisees who paraded their lofty prayers, Jesus invites us to pray with three simple words: *ask, seek and knock*.⁶⁴

All three words are imperatives, which means they are commands. This isn't a suggestion—Jesus tells us how to pray. All three verbs are in the present tense, which implies continuous action. *Ask and keep on asking. Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking*.⁶⁵

When we pray like this, God promises to answer. *Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be open*. This promise is inclusive and comprehensive for all of God's children. Our Father wants to give His children good things. This promise encompasses everyone—not some, not most—but *everyone* who calls God their Father receives this incredible promise.

There is no doubt that Jesus understands our hesitancy to pray, especially when we are deeply aware of our sin and unworthiness. He knows that we are spiritually timid and shy. He knows that we feel unfit to present our requests. Surely, the Lord has something better to do than listen to me, right?⁶⁶ We know that God is infinitely great and we are so insignificantly tiny that we dare not pray with this sort of boldness. Jesus removes our doubt and gives us assurance to come to Him.

When we pray, we are praying to our heavenly Father, who is so much better than our earthly father.⁶⁷ Jesus points out even fallen, depraved, sinful fathers try to meet the needs of their children. How much more will our heavenly Father give us because He is perfectly good and loves us? Expect God to do more. We are not a burden, nuisance or disappointment to God. He delights in us. God loves blessing His children and giving them good things when they ask, seek and knock. He's honored by our persistence and expectancy. And because He is a perfect heavenly Father, we can ask with confidence because God gives us exactly what we need.

God will always give us what's best to live for Him and do His will. God answers our prayers and gives us what we need, even if it's not what we ask for.⁶⁸ Our heavenly Father knows how to give far better than we know how to ask. It would be a terrible thing if God always gave us everything we ask for.

Jesus connects how we pray to how we treat others. These two concepts go hand in hand. It's impossible to treat others the way that we would like to be treated without deep confidence that our Father will give us everything we need. As God provides for our needs, we are called to meet the needs of others. When we trust our heavenly Father to meet all of our needs, we will give to others.

Unlike the Pharisees who placed limits and exceptions on their rules and traditions, Jesus spoke in comprehensive terms. *Whatever you want people to do to you, do the same thing to them.* Jesus doesn't put restrictions on this command and upholds a simple, yet powerful principle in how we should relate to others. This is what the world needs more of today. The reason these verses resonate with us and speak so powerfully is because they show us how Jesus lived.⁶⁹ Jesus didn't just preach this; He lived it. This was His filter for how He treated and related to others. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

How did you treat someone in the same way you wanted to be treated this week?

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How were you treated in a way you didn't want to be treated?

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What can you be praying for this week and asking God to provide? Use the space below to write out your prayer.

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How brave are your prayers? Are they filled with needs that you can accomplish on your own or needs that require God to work?⁷⁰

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Ask Jesus for something in your prayers that is straightforward. What does it mean to *seek* and *knock* in your prayers?

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The Pharisees would have studied and adopted the Jewish Talmud as a part of their sacred writings. These writings were a compilation of documents and instructions to preserve culture and traditions. Similar to Jesus' teaching, the Talmud commands, "What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor." Though the truth is similar, Jesus phrases this same concept in the positive rather than the negative. How does Jesus' command go beyond the Talmud?⁷¹ How does this alter the way we apply this truth and treat others?

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What do you do when God doesn't answer prayers? Does this mean this passage is wrong or perhaps you are doing something wrong?

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WEEK 9



MATTHEW 7:13-23

¹³ "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

A KINGDOM PATH

As Jesus wraps up His sermon, He commands action. He doesn't want us to sit back and think, "*What a great message! What's for lunch?*" After hearing Jesus, we have a decision to make. *What will we do?* Remember, these aren't just words on a page. It's a call to discipleship. Sitting idle or staying neutral isn't an option.⁷² In an unforgettable and uncomfortable way, Jesus puts each of us on the spot. To illustrate how we might respond, Jesus gives three examples: There are *two paths with two gates*. We can bear *good fruit* or *bad fruit*. And we can build our home on *solid rock* or *shifting sand*. Choose wisely, the decision is up to you.

Two paths are in front of us. One path reflects the kingdom of heaven. Jesus describes His kingdom as a small path with a narrow gate. It's easy to overlook and miss. In comparison to the wide earthly path, only a few people will find it. Peering down the entrance, Jesus describes this path as hard.

But the path that leads to the gate called destruction is large and attractive. This path is full of people. This is the popular road. Being a much wider path, this journey is open-minded. Morally it's not restrictive in its behavior. Virtually anything goes because it has few rules or values. Spiritually it is inclusive and imposes no boundaries. Those traveling on this road argue it's a wide highway to heaven. Take the left or right or stay in the middle, everyone thinks they're headed to the same place.⁷³

Yet, the way to God is exclusive and restrictive. In John 14:6, Jesus says there's only one way and everyone must enter through Him. There's no other road. Jesus calls us to walk the road less traveled. He calls us to pursue the narrow gate and difficult path.⁷⁴ Following Christ isn't the path of least resistance, but it's the only way to eternal life. The question remains, *which path will you choose?*

Continuing His illustration, Jesus moves from the path of destruction to focus on teachers of destruction. Jesus calls false prophets wolves in sheep's clothing because they disguise themselves as sheep until they are ready to devour. Looks can be deceiving, so Jesus warns us to carefully watch our teachers and to examine the fruit of their teaching.⁷⁵

A wolf can wear sheep's clothing, but it cannot grow a sheep's coat. No matter how much it tries, a wolf is always a wolf—never a sheep. Appearances only work for so long. Ultimately, time will reveal the true nature of every heart. In the same way, only a healthy tree can produce good fruit and rotten fruit always comes from a bad tree. Though it's possible to attach grapes to a thornbush and figs to thistles, this fruit won't last. And this fruit certainly can't grow.

The point of Jesus' illustration is simple. Over time, our hearts will always reveal themselves. This is a harsh rebuke against superficial faith. Following Jesus is more than a casual profession of faith. There must be evidence of obedience that reflects the kingdom of heaven. Like a wolf wearing sheep's clothing or a grape glued to a thornbush, we can only disguise the things swirling in our hearts for so long because eventually our hearts will be exposed.

Jesus applies this same truth to our relationship with Him. Seek Him first. Pursue His righteousness. Treasure Him above all. More than being zealous for ministry and doing good deeds for the Lord, this is about cultivating our hearts with the gospel until it permeates our whole life. By renouncing lip service, Jesus demands more than a profession of faith. The evidence Jesus looks for is what He's already described in His sermon—holiness, righteousness and obedience are the fruits of faith that flow from the heart.

Living this way doesn't happen on the wide path that follows the way of the world. This sort of change occurs on the narrow path. This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

What path are you traveling? Describe this path in your own words.

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If you were telling someone about the two paths that Jesus lays out, how would you describe each path?

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In what way is the gate of Christianity small (or the path is narrow)?⁷⁶

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What is your response to verses 21–23? Explain.

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What does the statement “Lord, Lord” imply in Jesus’ teaching?⁷⁷

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Why is it important to read verses 21–23 in the larger context of Jesus’ illustration? Do you think Jesus is speaking mainly to false prophets or is He questioning the profession of shallow believers?

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How would you describe the condition of your heart right now?

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WEEK 10



MATTHEW 7:24-29

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

A KINGDOM FOUNDATION

Jesus was an expert teacher. One of His greatest skills was illustrating stories in a simple and memorable way.⁷⁸ Jesus didn't just tell people what to do, He showed them what to do in vivid and creative ways. Through illustrations, metaphors and parables, Jesus connected with His listeners. Through His teaching, Jesus asked questions and pointed to spiritual truths. His teaching ended with a clear call to action and begged a response.

When Jesus says "everyone," He intends for this metaphor to apply to every man, woman and child who hears these same words. Jesus notes two qualities of a wise man. First, he hears the word, which in this context refers to everything Jesus says in the *Sermon on the Mount*. Second, the wise man does them. He obeys them.⁷⁹

Hearing God's Word and obeying it is like a wise builder who constructs his house on a rock-solid foundation.⁸⁰ Wisdom knows storms will come and a wise builder doesn't want his house to be wrecked. "Storms of life" can be a cancer diagnosis, uncertainty with a job, losing a loved one or enduring a major crisis.⁸¹ These storms are real and painful. Eventually, everyone has a storm. And storms will be devastating without a firm foundation anchored to Biblical truth and concrete hope in the gospel. Otherwise, life and everything in it can be washed away in a storm. While erosion is slow and subtle over many years, it only takes one serious storm to decimate a home and destroy a life.

A basic theological truth runs throughout the storyline of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation: *revelation brings responsibility*.⁸² The more we hear and know about God and His Word, the greater our responsibility is in the kingdom of heaven. Those who are wise will hear and obey His Word. When the storm clouds of life blow in and the winds beat against your life, will your house collapse or stand firm on its foundation? You are the builder. The choice is up to you.

Unlike the wise man, Jesus presents a foolish man who built his house on sand. On the surface, there are more similarities between these two men than differences. Both builders heard the gospel. Both built a house after hearing the same message. Both builders appear to have their home in the same general location. Both homes seem to be constructed in a similar way. The only difference is the foundation of their house.⁸³

The foolish man hears the message but doesn't act on it. He is a hearer only. He is the person who hears faithful gospel preaching week after week but never changes. He hears the Word again and again but never obeys. The gospel has little impact on the foolish man's life. The problem is this man assumes he is genuinely safe.⁸⁴ He thinks his life is good because on the outside everything looks okay. Yet, this man is headed into a horrible storm that will wreck his life.

Building on the sand is hearing the Word and not obeying it. Wisdom says it's only a matter of time until a storm rolls in. When it does, the house will fall. Jesus says it will be a *great* fall.⁸⁵

Jesus did not preach the *Sermon on the Mount* to be admired. Jesus preached to produce obedience. Verse by verse, Jesus goes after our hearts and calls us to live in an unusual way unlike the world. His Word must penetrate our souls and permeate our lives. There is no greater tragedy than to meet Jesus, hear His word and walk away amazed, but unchanged.⁸⁶

Ending His sermon, Jesus warned His listeners. Listening isn't enough—we must act upon and apply His words. Earning our faith is opposed to the gospel. Yet, Jesus demands effort. This way of living is only possible with the power and presence of God's help. The Lord enables us to obey Him in His strength and we're called to persevere in our faith because Jesus is worth it. He's the treasure! This is what it looks like to be a citizen of His kingdom. *Is this you?*

How are you building your life on a rock-solid foundation?

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What does casual and comfortable Christianity look like, and how does that compare to the way Jesus calls His followers to live?⁸⁷

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What do you say to a Christian who builds their house on the sand?
How do you confront them from what you've learned in this study?

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The sermon ends with the crowds being amazed by Jesus' authority. Give an example for how you are submitting a specific area of your life to the authority of the Word. How is Jesus ruling over your life?

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Are you presently in a storm? Do you see storm clouds on the horizon? Have you recently sheltered through a storm? Explain.

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How has obedience to the Word helped you endure storms of life?

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How can you grow in your skill as a builder and become better at applying the foundation of God's Word throughout your life?

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Think of one teaching from the *Sermon on the Mount* that has challenged you the most. How will you put this into practice?

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SMALL GROUP
RESOURCES



EIGHT COMMITMENTS OF SMALL GROUP

1. SPIRITUAL GROWTH

I will pursue spiritual growth and encourage my group as they grow in their walk with Christ.

2. CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS

I will be present and make it a priority to know and stay connected with the people in my group.

3. ACCEPT OWNERSHIP

I will look for big and small ways to contribute and care for needs that come up in my group

4. BE AUTHENTIC

I will trust, be transparent and strive to be open while maintaining respect and confidentiality in my group.

5. EMBRACE ACCOUNTABILITY

I will invite my group to speak into my life while extending grace to my group.

6. CELEBRATE GROWTH

I will encourage and celebrate when God is working in the lives of my group.

7. SERVE TOGETHER

I will serve with my group and look for ways to permeate the westside of Indianapolis with the hope of the gospel.

8. MULTIPLY MINISTRY

I will be open to new members and as we grow, we will multiply to advance God's work so more people can experience what we have experienced.

CHARACTER QUALITIES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH



WHAT CHARACTER QUALITY DO YOU WANT TO GROW IN?

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT YOU AS A SMALL GROUP?

Boldness – not afraid to share your faith with gentleness and conviction

Compassion – empathy for someone and courage to act on their behalf

Contentment – at peace rather than worry, fear, anxiety, envy or jealousy

Even-Tempered – not reacting with sinful anger or a quick temper

Faith – unswerving confidence in God and His promise of good regardless of present circumstances

Forgiveness – releasing someone from a wrong that has been done and not dwelling on it

Honesty – truthful and above reproach in all things; not deceptive

Initiative – inviting people into your life and taking an interest in others through hospitality and service

Joy – supernatural delight in the Lord that overflows into a love for others

Kindness – putting the needs and well-being of others first

Patience – a spirit of mercy, humility and trusting that God is in control

Peace – fulfillment and confidence that comes from being rightly related to God and others

Purity – thinking and acting in godly ways while fleeing from sexual immorality

Self-Controlled – bringing thoughts, emotions and actions under the control of the Holy Spirit

Truth in Love – willing to speak what's right while not being harsh

Wholesome Speech – build others up with words that edify; not vulgar, gossip, slander, lying or sarcasm

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH



WHAT SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE DO YOU WANT TO GROW IN?
HOW CAN WE SUPPORT YOU AS A SMALL GROUP?

Accountability – to be honest with yourself, honest with others and honest before the Lord

Bible study – desire for God's Word; regular time of reading, studying, meditating and applying Scripture

Corporate worship – engage with God and other believers by participating in weekend worship

Fasting – take a break from food, media or activity to use this time to meet with the Lord through prayer, focus and dependence on Him

Giving – cheerfully and generously giving to the Lord and others through your time, talents and treasure

Prayer - a regular time of praise, confession and intercession for others

Rest – setting aside time to slow down and stop the busyness of life as a reminder that our final rest is in heaven

Scripture memory – hiding God's Word in your heart and reflecting on Scripture

Serving – looking for big and small ways to care for the needs of others

ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH



WEEKLY GAUGE:

1. This week was great. My high was...
2. This week was bad. My low was...
3. This week was the same. I am stuck in a rut...



VICTORY AND FAILURE:

1. What is one win from this past month?
2. What is one failure from this past month?
3. How are you being recharged?
4. What has been most draining?



MORAL GUARDRAILS:

1. Am I aware of any unconfessed sin in my life?
2. Do I have anyone I need to forgive or ask for forgiveness?
3. Have I been jealous, lying or complaining?
4. Have I been with a man or woman in an inappropriate way?
5. Have I exposed myself to any explicit materials this week?
6. Have I looked for opportunities to point others to Christ and the hope of the gospel?
7. How have I demonstrated love and respect to my spouse?
8. How have I sought to have spiritual input with my family?
9. What is one relationship I want to focus on?
10. How can my small group support me?

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