



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: **Sermon on the Mount**

Theme: **Upside-Down Kingdom**

Overview: The greatest sermon ever preached was so upside down. It was countercultural and counterintuitive in every way. It turned the world's wisdom on its head. From it we learn who is truly blessed, how high the bar of righteousness really is, where genuine rewards are located, what focused generosity looks like, and how to make judgments that are not warped.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

INTRODUCTION

Author

The Sermon on the Mount is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (chapters 5–7). Early church tradition identifies the author as Matthew, also called Levi, the tax collector whom Jesus called to be one of the twelve apostles (Matthew 9:9; 10:3). A shorter parallel, often called the Sermon on the Plain, appears in Luke 6:20–49.

Audience

Jesus delivered the sermon to his disciples and to the large crowds that followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan (Matthew 4:25–5:1). When he finished, “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority” (7:28–29). Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily for Jewish Christians.

Date

Jesus preached the sermon early in his Galilean ministry, around AD 28. Matthew’s Gospel was likely written between AD 50 and 70.

Setting

Jesus sat down to teach, in typical rabbinical posture, on a mountainside in Galilee; the traditional site is between Capernaum and Bethsaida on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. Just as old Israel received God’s law on a mountain after passing through the sea and the wilderness, Jesus—after his baptism and testing in the wilderness—gave the new Israel the righteousness of his kingdom.

Theme

The kingdom of heaven turns the world’s values upside down. Jesus congratulates the poor in spirit, the meek, and the persecuted. He calls for a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20), devotion done for the Father who sees in secret, single-minded trust that seeks “first his kingdom and his righteousness” (6:33), and wise obedience that builds on the rock (7:24).

Why Study the Sermon on the Mount?

The Sermon on the Mount is not a list of rules that make us Christians, but a description of what the Lord makes of us when we surrender to him. This study calls believers to conform their perspective to Christ’s, to let love define their righteousness, to build character in private, to lay up treasure in heaven rather than worry, and to put Jesus’ words into practice.

STUDY CONTENT

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|----------------|---|
| WEEK 1: | Matthew 5:1-16 |
| WEEK 2: | Matthew 5:17-22, 27-28, 31-35, 38-39, 43-48 |
| WEEK 3: | Matthew 6:1-18 |
| WEEK 4: | Matthew 6:19-34 |
| WEEK 5: | Matthew 7:1-27 |

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Conform your
perspective to Christ's.**

STUDY: Sermon on the Mount

THEME: Upside-Down Kingdom

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 5:1-16

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 6:20-26

BACKWARD BLESSINGS

BY MARK SCOTT

After Israel was “baptized” in the Red Sea, they wandered in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:1-5). During that time they received God’s law on a mountain (Acts 7:38). Jesus retraced old Israel’s steps. He was baptized and tested in the wilderness (Matthew 3-4). Now it was time to give the new Israel (Matthew 4:18-22) a new law (of sorts).

The Sermon on the Mount was probably the greatest sermon ever preached. It was the first of five sermons of Jesus recorded in Matthew. The sermon was preached to the crowds and the disciples (5:1; 7:28). Jesus preached in typical rabbinical posture (sitting down) and did so from a mountainside (the traditional site is between Capernaum and Bethsaida on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee). From the start, the sermon content was upside down when compared to worldly wisdom.

Who Gets Congratulated?

Matthew 5:1-12

Preacher Randy Gariss said, “Our culture has turned honoring the wrong people into an art form.” We honor and bless movie stars, athletes, politicians, and the rich and famous. Jesus, by contrast, honors the poor, the humble, and peacemakers. That could not be more backward to the current culture.

There are eight Beatitudes (though the last one in Matthew is extended—and in Luke there are four Beatitudes and four “woes”—Luke 6:20-26). Each one starts with the word *blessed*. Seth Wilson used to say there are two words for *blessed* in the New Testament—one means “goodie for God” and the other means “goodie for you.” This is the “goodie for you” word. The English word *congratulations* might capture the idea. In his book, Max Lucado calls it *The Applause of Heaven*.

Jesus congratulated the *poor in spirit*. He was referring to those who had experienced spiritual bankruptcy, for that is always where real religion begins (i.e., recognizing our need for God).

Jesus congratulated *those who mourn*, meaning those with the ability to be touched in heart from sin’s personal and cosmic effects. This is real religion’s contrition.

Jesus congratulated *the meek*, by which he meant those who possess the strength of humility. Humble people will enjoy this world and the one to come the most.

Jesus congratulated those who are *hungry* and the *thirsty for righteousness*, for such people long for God’s justice to be established on the earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus congratulated *the merciful*. When these people give out God’s loving-kindness, it comes back to them in equal measure.

Jesus congratulated *the pure in heart*. They will habitually seek one thing (“God’s kingdom,” said Søren Kierkegaard) and will be allowed to see God.

Jesus congratulated *the peacemakers*—those who put themselves at risk and often in harm’s way to reconcile fighting brothers and sisters.

Jesus congratulated those who are “hunted down” because they follow God’s standard. This final beatitude gets some extra emphasis. The antagonists in Matthew’s Gospel were religious leaders. They made life miserable for the beatitude people. Their weapons were insults, persecution, and slander. But the reward for these beatitude people was the good company of the famous prophets of old.

These seemingly backward people were actually the ones whom Jesus commended. They demonstrate some of the biggest things in the Good Book (e.g., meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, and peace). Some of the congratulations come in this life (notice the present tense in verses 3 and 10), but many of the congratulations are left to God’s glorious future (notice the future tense of verses 4-9).

Who Has Influence?

Matthew 5:13-16

Who left the larger mark? Princess Diana or Mother Teresa? They both died the same day. John F. Kennedy or C.S. Lewis? They both died the same day. Looking through the list of congratulated people in the former section would cause one to say, “Surely the beatitude people have no clout, sway, or influence.” Wrong! The people described in verses 3-12 are the real movers and shakers of the world. They are the ones who leverage the influence in the world.

Jesus used two of the most common elements of the universe—salt and light—to drive home his point about influence. Salt and light are both known by their absence. Saltless food is bland. Hidden light is useless. Salt that loses its saltiness (Jesus was not speaking scientifically) is good only to be thrown out. Light that is hidden is flatly ridiculous. If the blessed people do not exercise their influence in the world, they will be judged and found to be silly.

The calling of this influence is cosmic in scope. Christ followers are to be *salt of the earth*. Christ followers are to be *light of the world*. They let their light shine locally, but they always try to think globally. After all, their Father is all the way in heaven.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

DO THE OPPOSITE

BY DAVID FAUST

In an episode of the TV show *Seinfeld*, Jerry's friend George sits in the coffee shop bemoaning his bad luck. He says, "My life is the opposite of everything I want it to be. Every instinct I have, in every aspect of life . . . it's all been wrong."

Jerry's advice? "If every instinct you have is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right."

George decides, "Yes, I will do the opposite. I used to sit here and do nothing, and regret it for the rest of the day, so now I will do the opposite!" Instead of his usual tuna salad on toast, he orders chicken salad on rye. Instead of shying away from a pretty woman, he initiates a conversation. George's social life improves and he gets promoted at work when he does the opposite of his natural instincts.

Counterintuitive Truth

Jesus' teaching was unprecedented in the first century, and it still sounds unconventional and uncomfortable today. At times his ideas seem contrary to common sense (the opposite of what seems natural or obvious), but on deeper reflection they prove true.

Instinct says:	Jesus says:
Protect yourself	Deny yourself
Promote yourself	Humble yourself
Greatness = others serving you	Greatness = you serving others

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confronts his disciples with counterintuitive truth and challenging questions. What does God's kingdom rule look like in real life? What will change if we invite him to take charge of our attitudes, priorities, money, and relationships? Don't murder—that's obvious enough. But do you ever hate others and wish they were dead? More than merely avoiding the physical act of adultery, how will you cure a lustful, unfaithful heart? Should you

follow your instincts and hit back at your haters? No, do the opposite and love your enemies.

The Sermon on the Mount isn't a list of rules that make you a Christian. It's a description of what the Lord makes out of you when you surrender your life to him. When someone asked Olympic athlete Bob Mathias how he managed to leap so high, he answered, "Throw your heart over the bar, and your body will follow." If you study the Sermon on the Mount as a list of religious rules, you will end up frustrated. Instead, the sermon challenges us to surrender our hearts to the heavenly Father who can transform us from the inside out.

Backward Blessings

At first glance, the Beatitudes sound like the opposite of a blessed life. How can it be a blessing to mourn or to endure persecution? But in the upside-down kingdom where God rules, brokenness leads to blessedness and the poor in spirit discover heaven's riches. God turns zeroes into heroes, the darkness of mourning into the morning of hope. In his kingdom, meekness isn't weakness, and the spiritually famished enjoy a feast where right relationships are always on the menu. God's mercy multiplies, his Spirit purifies, his peace unifies, and persecution intensifies the testimony of his faithful followers.

Remember when you were a kid on a playground swing? You had to pull back to propel yourself forward. It's counterintuitive, but according to Jesus, those who pull back on self and seek God first find true blessing, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Personal Challenge:

Do a spiritual inventory as this new year begins. What have you been doing your way that you need to start doing God's way?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What challenge did you face last week?
2. In what specific way did you live, love, or serve like Jesus over the past week?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 5:1-16** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to summarize the teaching in one minute or less.

3. What worldviews do you see represented in Jesus' teaching?
4. Let's dig more deeply into the passage.
 - To whom is Jesus teaching these lessons?
 - In what specific ways does Jesus separate (call out) his disciples from the crowd?
 - To what kind of life, in general, is Jesus calling his followers?
 - Note the different verb tenses—*is* and *will*—in the beatitudes (vv. 1-12). What does this indicate about our blessings now and in the future?
 - What does this passage demonstrate about the priorities of a disciple of Jesus?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. What will it look like this week for you to obey Jesus' directive to "let your light shine before others"?
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
9. What challenges or blessings do you anticipate as you go about your next week?

For Next Week: Over the next week, read and reflect on **Matthew 5:17-48** as we continue studying the Sermon on the Mount. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Let love define your righteousness.**

STUDY: Sermon on the Mount

THEME: Upside-Down Kingdom

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 5:17-22, 27-28, 31-35, 38-39, 43-48

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 7:12; 22:34-40; Romans 13:10;
Galatians 5:14

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

BY MARK SCOTT

In Jesus' upside-down kingdom, the most unlikely people (Matthew 5:3-12) have the most sway in the world (5:13-16). What comes next in the Sermon on the Mount is the thesis statement (i.e., the big idea). One way that Jesus fulfilled the entire Old Testament was to raise our understanding of what constituted real righteousness. Jesus did not abolish the old way; rather, he built on it. What Jesus said in this theme paragraph (5:17-20) was that every commandment of God matters, but we can never reduce our walk with God to a few favorite commandments.

When Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven," the crowds and disciples must have thought, *How would that even be possible?* After all, the religious leaders were experts in extreme righteousness. Jesus gave six examples—also called the "six antitheses"—of how this real, greater, fulfilled righteousness worked in daily life.

Scholars differ on what Jesus was doing. Was he extending the law? Raising its standards? Was Jesus changing the law in light of his coming, interpreting its real intent, or correcting abuses in it? Maybe he was doing some of all those.

Murder: Sanctity of Life

Matthew 5:21-22

Conventional wisdom said you were righteous if you refrained from murder. But Jesus skillfully showed that anger lurks behind murder. Calling someone, "Raca" (blockhead or imbecile) or "You fool!" are expressions of anger. Everyone knows that words hurt worse than sticks and stones. Care enough about life to reconcile with people while you have the chance.

Adultery: Sanctity of Sex

Matthew 5:27-28

The seventh commandment is clear enough. Do not be intimate with someone else's spouse. But Jesus indicated that dirty minds preceded dirty acts. Therefore, if a man *looks at a woman lustfully*—the Greek text has it as a purpose clause (i.e., looks at her with the purpose of mentally undressing her)—an immoral line has already been crossed. Intimacy begins in the mind before it ever makes it to the bedroom.

Divorce: Sanctity of Marriage

Matthew 5:31-32

Jesus did not use the full formula ("You have heard . . . but I say to you") for this antithesis. He simply said, "It has been said." This is probably because broken marriages often result from unfaithfulness (see the previous paragraph). God had

made provisions through Moses to grant divorces due to the people's hardness of heart (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:8). This also protected women from being abused. But Jesus indicated the problem with divorce wasn't that it was being done the wrong way; rather, divorce itself was wrong. Any divorce, for whatever reason, is an indication someone has failed.

In his mercy, Jesus did agree that *sexual immorality* was a legitimate reason for divorce. Sexual immorality breaks the sanctity of the relationship; it creates carnage by victimizing the innocent spouse (*makes her the victim of adultery*) and also brings adultery into the new relationship.

Oaths: Sanctity of Speech

Matthew 5:33-35

The fourth way that real righteousness works in daily life has to do with the integrity of our speech. Vows mattered in Israel (Leviticus 27; Judges 11:29-40). They were to matter to the New Israel as well. We are our words. We will be justified or condemned by them (Matthew 12:37). The best commentary on this paragraph is Matthew 23:16-22. We shouldn't need to underline the truthfulness of our words by saying things like, "I'll swear on a stack of Bibles." A yes is a yes, and a no is a no.

Eye for Eye: Sanctity of Fairness

Matthew 5:38-39

The law Jesus quoted in this antithesis was first given in Exodus 21:24. It was referred to as the "law of limited revenge." It may seem cruel to us but, given the cultures of the nations that surrounded Old Testament Israel, it was viewed as being extremely fair. Wicked nations and kings were known for exacting huge penalties for rather small offenses. Jesus recast it in a way that served as a sanity check, but which also was proactively kind and generous.

Love for Enemies: Sanctity of Foes

Matthew 5:43-48

The Old Testament said, "Love your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:18), but it never said, "Hate your enemy." That was added by some sly scribe. Jesus' way turns enemies into friends and prays for one's persecutors. God is kind to the ungrateful and evil (Luke 6:35), and he called his people to be mature in love like he is. God's love is unconditional, and his wisdom is unconventional.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

DON'T STAY THE WAY YOU ARE

BY DAVID FAUST

Does your church have a mission statement? A quick internet search turns up examples of mission statements that are good, bad, and funny. Unfortunately, you also can find church mission statements that sound lofty but don't translate well into real life. In truth, they sound like corporate jargon.

In churches, relationships matter more than slogans, so mission statements should be used wisely or they come across as manipulative or irrelevant—mere words posted on the wall. It's hard to beat the mission statement Jesus gave us in the Great Commission: make disciples, baptize, and teach (Matthew 28:18-20). However we express it, our mission always involves transformation as God moves us from lost to saved, death to life, alone to together, darkness to light, inactive to involved . . . from new birth to spiritual maturity and from aimlessness to fruitfulness.

Continued Growth

No matter how many times I read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, it consistently challenges me to deepen my walk with God. The Lord evidently wants me to keep growing. When Christ is Lord, the status quo isn't acceptable and spiritual growth isn't optional. God accepts us as we are, but he loves us too much to let us stay that way.

In the congregation where I serve, we summarize our mission by saying we "help people take their next steps with Jesus." That easy-to-remember mission statement not only reminds us to introduce non-Christians to the Lord, it also challenges those who already believe to take additional steps of faith and obedience. Even if we have been Christians for years, we still need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2), adding to our faith goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love (2 Peter 1:5-7).

Uncommon Sense

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly said, "You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you." First-

century rabbis backed up their opinions by citing respected authorities, but Jesus taught "as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:28-29). Christ didn't need anyone else's opinions to back him up. He fulfilled and embodied God's Law. He challenged conventional wisdom and still does. He leads us to move beyond common sense to uncommon sense. He prods us to examine our motives and obey God from the heart instead of trying to impress others.

On the surface it sounds logical to say, "If others hurt you, hurt them back." Jesus says, "Turn the other cheek."

Conventional wisdom asserts, "You'll get by just fine by doing the bare minimum." Jesus insists, "Go the extra mile."

Conventional wisdom says, "It's smart to live together before marriage. 'Kick the tires' and see if you are sexually compatible." God's Word declares, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure" (Hebrews 13:4).

Conventional wisdom says, "Money makes the world go 'round. Give a little to charity, but don't overdo it." The Lord says, "Store up treasures in heaven. It's more blessed to give than to receive" (Matthew 6:20; Acts 20:35).

In every stage of life, let's keep taking steps of faith and helping others do the same. That isn't a typical goal in our current culture, but it's the way of the cross. And it's our mission, if we choose to accept it.

Personal Challenge:

What is the next step you need to take with Jesus? This week, how can you help someone else grow in the Lord?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What challenge did you face or what blessing did you receive last week?
2. In what specific way did you “let your light shine before others” over the past week?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 5:17-22, 27-28, 31-35, 38-39, 43-48** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to summarize the teaching in one minute or less. (After the reteller finishes, others can fill in any parts the person missed.)

3. How would you title this Bible passage? Pick one and explain your choice.
 - How to Exceed What’s Expected of You
 - Going Beyond Just Following the Rules
 - Six Tips for Challenging Conventional Wisdom
 - From Common Sense to Uncommon Sense
 - You Don’t Have to Settle for Ordinary
4. What kind of life is Jesus calling his followers to live? Be as specific as possible.
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. How can living by Jesus’ higher standards help you to be salt and light to the people around you?
8. Look again at each “But I tell you . . .” precept from Jesus. Which one do you most need to start obeying now?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: “This week, I will . . .”
10. What new challenge do you anticipate as you head into next week?

For Next Week: Over the next week, read and reflect on **Matthew 6:1-18** as we continue studying the Sermon on the Mount. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Focus on building character, who you are even in private, more than you focus on your reputation, what others think of you.**

STUDY: Sermon on the Mount

THEME: Upside-Down Kingdom

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 6:1-18

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 23:1-12

REVERSE REWARDS

BY MARK SCOTT

There is a subtle danger of letting your righteousness surpass that of the religious elite (Matthew 5:20) and in striving to be perfect (5:48). The danger is religious hypocrisy, which is the worst kind of hypocrisy. True kingdom people will do their best to live out the real, greater, fulfilled righteousness that Jesus spoke about in the six antitheses (5:21-48). The danger comes when these true kingdom people practice their righteousness just to be seen by others. They become more interested in the praise of people than the nod of God. They become duplicitous in the public practices of their faith.

To ensure this does not happen, Jesus stated a huge principle (Matthew 6:1) and then illustrated it with three cardinal practices of the Jews of his day: giving, praying, and fasting (6:2-18). The practice of faith is always public and private. It cannot be otherwise. If the practice of faith is only public, then it is hypocritical. If the practice of faith is only private, then we miss the community aspect of it. Jesus cautioned against practicing righteousness *to be seen* (literally “do theatrics”) by people. God does not reward such pride.

When You Give*Matthew 6:2-4*

When (not if) you *give* (as in giving alms to the poor), do not announce it with fanfare. There is no evidence that people actually announced their giving with trumpets. But times of prayer and days of fasting were announced with trumpet blasts. Some thought that giving and fasting helped achieve answered prayers. Jesus may have meant it figuratively, such as, “Do not toot your own horn when you give.”

And it was not just “how” but also “where.” Synagogues and street corners are not the places to work on generous righteousness. Instead, giving should almost be done subconsciously (*not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing*) and *in secret*. Giving publicly is not wrong (2 Corinthians 8-9; Philippians 4:10-20), but giving to be praised is the wrong reward to seek.

When You Pray*Matthew 6:5-15*

When (not if) you pray, do not be like the *hypocrites* (play actors in the ancient world). Their prayers are quite “involved.” They pray in the prominent places (synagogues and street corners), and they pray with many words. The places of their prayers will get them noticed, and their verbosity will get them heard. If all

they want is to be seen by others, they will receive that reward. If all they want is to *babble like pagans* (Gentiles did this to be accepted by the Jews), they will receive that reward.

Instead, Jesus taught the value of private prayer (even closet prayer). This was not a prohibition against public prayer (John 12:27-30), but an acknowledgement that since God knows what we need before we ask, we should use humble and respectful plain speech by letting our words be few (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

Speaking of few words, the model prayer is exemplary in succinctness—just 53 words in English. Its two halves (the Lord’s half and our half) and six petitions are nothing short of brilliant. (See David Timm’s *Living the Lord’s Prayer*.) *Our(s)* is a term of community. *Father* is a term of intimacy. *In heaven* is the abode or throne of God. What access we have! God’s half of the prayer features imperatives. “Let your name be hallowed” (made holy, distinct, and set apart). “Let your kingdom come” (the dynamic reign of God colliding with earth’s values and ways). “Let your will be done” (the parallelism with *kingdom* is obvious). We are praying that heaven and earth will be one (Revelation 21:1-4).

Our half of the prayer concerns our needs (not greeds) for the bread of the day, our plea for forgiveness, and our ability to resist temptation and the forces of the evil one. Of the six petitions, it’s interesting that the plea for forgiveness receives the excursus. The person who prays this prayer will always reciprocate forgiveness.

When You Fast*Matthew 6:16-18*

When (not if) you *fast* (abstaining from food for a time to heighten spiritual formation), do not aspire to look like it (that is, sort of washed-out and *somber*). Some want to advertise this spiritual discipline. If so, they have already received their reward. Instead, clean up so you appear as you normally would. Let the fasting be your and God’s little secret.

The only way to do these acts of righteousness well in public is to practice them much in private. Who are you, really, when no one else is looking?

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

FOR MINE IS THE KINGDOM?

BY DAVID FAUST

Remember the part of the Lord's Prayer that says, "Thine is the kingdom"? It's tempting to say "mine" instead of "Thine." Every day I have to choose between the kingdom of God and the chaos of self. Every day I need to ask, *Am I in charge, or is God?* Often I find myself trying to run my own little kingdom—the "kingdom of Dave." I know that sounds ridiculous, but it won't sound any better if you substitute your own name in the phrase.

If I don't guard against it, the kingdom of Dave will dominate my life. When it's time to take out the trash and I pretend to be busy so my wife has to do it, there's a struggle going on between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Dave. When I want others to listen to me but I don't want to listen to them, the kingdom of Dave is taking over. When I'm tempted to play to the crowd, that's not the kingdom of God at work; it's the kingdom of Dave.

Hypocrisy runs rampant when self occupies the throne. That's why Jesus warned about doing religious acts in public places. Public admiration brings a fickle, fleeting reward, but nothing more. The heavenly Father sees how and why we give, pray, and serve, so why do we seek attention from others?

"Seek first the kingdom of Dave"—that has an absurd ring to it.

Putting Self in Its Place

When my wife, Candy, and I moved to Indiana from Ohio nearly seven years ago, I went to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles to get my new Indiana driver's license. The worker behind the counter asked me to take off my glasses while she took a picture of me, but after glancing at the photo, she shook her head and mumbled, "Oh, that's not good." She took a second picture and discarded the first one.

It's an understatement to say the photo that ended up on my driver's license is less than flattering. It looks

terrible—and very funny! Anytime I want to make my wife laugh, all I have to do is pull out my driver's license and show her the photo. My own mother cringed and laughed when she saw the picture. And remember—this was the second photo the worker took. How bad must the first one have been?

I sighed and told the woman behind the counter, "This picture is really embarrassing. And now I'll have to put up with it for the next four years." She shook her head and said, "No, in Indiana your license is good for six years." So for six years, I quietly looked forward to renewing my driver's license when I finally would get a new photo.

Sure enough, right on schedule, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles sent me a postcard saying it was time to renew my license. But because the offices were closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, I had to renew it by mail. The postcard said, "The BMV will use your last photo on-file for your new driver's license."

Now I am stuck with that same terrible photo for another six years—12 years altogether. Except the new photo is black and white instead of full color, so it looks even worse.

So much for the kingdom of Dave.

Personal Challenge:

Pray a prayer of confession like this: "Father, my life is an open book to you. You know me inside and out. You see everything I do, and you know why I do it. Forgive me for trying to impress others. Purify my motives, humble my heart, and help me discover the joy that comes from seeking your kingdom above all else. Amen."

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What new challenge did you face last week?
2. In what specific way did you live by Jesus' higher standards over the past week?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 6:1-18** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to summarize the teaching in one minute or less. (After the reteller finishes, others can fill in any parts the person may have missed.)

3. In what ways are a person's motives important to how they practice their faith?
4. Let's dig deeper into this passage:
 - What is Jesus' main point in this passage?
 - The three practices Jesus used to illustrate his main point—giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting—were common spiritual practices for Jewish people of that day. Why are these practices vital for living out one's faith?
 - Other spiritual practices that are important for Christ followers include (but are not limited to) worship and Bible study. What role do your motives play as you engage (privately or publicly) in these?
 - Look through the passage for repeated phrases. What do they teach you?
 - Note the use of second-person plural pronouns (*our, us, we*) in the model prayer. What does that signify about the importance of community?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. Serving others and sharing our faith are outward-focused spiritual practices for Christ followers. As you engage in these practices (either personally or as a group) how will you do them with the right motives?
8. Jesus gave several "how-to" directives in this passage. Which one do you sense you most need to focus on obeying now?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. What challenge do you anticipate as you seek to live your life for Christ this week?

For Next Week: Over the next week, read and reflect on **Matthew 6:19-34** as we continue studying the Sermon on the Mount. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Pursue God's kingdom
to lay up treasure in
Heaven.**

STUDY: Sermon on the Mount

THEME: Upside-Down Kingdom

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 6:19-34

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 37:1-4; Proverbs 23:4-5; Matthew 19:23-30; Luke 12:16-21

SINGULAR SERVANTS

BY MARK SCOTT

Rich Mullins played a song on his hammer dulcimer entitled “My One Thing.” When too many things occupy our attention, our devotion to Christ becomes compromised. The real, greater, fulfilled righteousness in Christ that Jesus taught about in the Sermon on the Mount should be our single focus. When it is, generosity will mark us, and worry will flee from us.

Jesus was one of the most colorful speakers ever. In this latter half of Matthew 6, Jesus employed at least 18 different metaphors or images to drive home his point. He spoke of treasures, moths, vermin, and thieves. He spoke of eyes, light, darkness, masters, and money. He spoke of eating, drinking, clothing, birds, grass, flowers, a king’s son, and fire. Jesus truly engaged the right side of people’s brains as he taught.

Treasures in Heaven: Pursue Generosity*Matthew 6:19-24*

The real righteousness of the upside-down kingdom can be hypocritical (Matthew 6:1-18), but it should always be “singular” in focus. We might call it “Cyclopes Christianity.” (The Cyclopes were great one-eyed creatures from Greek and Roman mythology.) Kingdom people have their hearts set on Heaven and their eyes focused on earth. Jesus said, “Don’t store up treasures on earth.” Earthly treasures get eaten by *moths*. Earthly treasures get destroyed by *vermin* (parasite worms or insects; many Bible translations use the word *rust*). Earthly treasures get stolen by *thieves* who “dig through” the house. Heaven is exempt from these problems. Look at your treasures, for there you will find your heart.

The human eye is an amazing piece of God’s handiwork. No wonder Jesus used it for illustrative purposes. It lets light in and enables us to see out. And even though we look through thousands of blood vessels, the eye has the incredible ability to focus. Jesus said our eyes need to be *healthy*; in the *King James Version*, the word used is *single*. At first hearing, *single* sounds strange, but it actually makes sense in context. The word could also be translated “generous” (see James 1:5). Healthy eyes will be generous and focused and spread light everywhere.

Jesus’ world was filled with masters and slaves, and he used this metaphorical reality to emphasize generosity. “No one can serve two masters” sounds like a reductive fallacy. But realistically there are only two options—theism or materialism. If we are devoted to or love one, we must despise or hate the other. It has been said we

can’t take our treasures to heaven with us, but we can send them on ahead of us by being generous here.

Life on Earth: Pursue the Kingdom*Matthew 6:25-34*

Setting our minds on things above (Colossians 3:1-4) actually helps us steward things on earth below. This mind-set deals a death blow to worry. Singular servants give up fretting because “worry” means to be drawn in two different directions at the same time. Sometimes worry can be a good motivator, such as worrying about taking care of our spouses and church people (1 Corinthians 7:33; 2 Corinthians 11:28). But in this passage, worry is antifaith.

A fine line exists between worry and concern. But being preoccupied with food and clothing is counterproductive. Jesus used a “lesser-to-greater” style of argument to make his point. Birds are busy little creatures, but they do not worry about their next meal or their designer feathers. People are more valuable than birds. Worrying about our needs (or greeds) cannot add a single hour (or greater stature) to our lives.

Clothing was necessary in a fallen world. It not only warmed people but also became a shelter and bed (Exodus 22:26-27). The flowers of the field are beautiful. God dresses them. But they do not worry. People are more valuable than flowers. Even Solomon’s wardrobe was not as beautiful as the flowers which would burn tomorrow. Jesus called us away from a preoccupation with food and clothing. He acknowledged that *pagans* (unbelievers) pursue these things that God graciously promised to give us.

Our task is to continually seek *first* God’s reign and standard (*kingdom* and *righteousness*). Then, as an added bonus, God will give us what we need. Worry gets us nowhere. In the last verse of our text, Jesus pictured worry as a person capable of choosing to worry or not. No truer words have ever been spoken about the fallen world than, “Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Focus allows us to be generous, and focus helps us to pursue God. Pursuing one thing helps put all other things into perspective.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

CONSIDER THE BIRDS

BY DAVID FAUST

Last spring my wife, Candy, put a decorative wreath on the front door of our house. A little brown wren decided the wreath would be a good place to build a nest. Some say it's a sign of good luck when a bird builds a nest on your front door. To me, it meant there was going to be a mess on our porch.

It was interesting, though, to watch the mother bird gather sticks, moss, grass, and straw, and weave them into a sturdy round nest tucked expertly into the wreath. Every time we opened our front door it disturbed the bird, but she persevered. Eventually four eggs hatched. The wren fed her four babies until they were big enough to fly off on their own, just as they were designed to do.

Creative Artistry

"Look at the birds of the air," Jesus said (Matthew 6:26), for they display God's creative artistry. Consider their variety. Chickens, ducks, and geese. Red cardinals and blue jays. Perky yellow canaries, pesky black crows, and bulky white turkeys. Graceful herons, storks, and swans. Wise owls, innocent doves, majestic peacocks, ominous ravens, quirky ostriches, and funny-looking kiwi birds. Hard-working woodpeckers, cheerful robins and parakeets. Black-and-white penguins and rainbow-colored macaws.

Birds fill the air with interesting sounds. They serenade us with songs, tweets, chirps, honks, clucks, quacks, hoots, gobbles, and whistles. Parrots and mynah birds can even imitate human speech.

Humans build machines that fly, but God engineered birds with sturdy, lightweight muscles, bones, and wings so they do it naturally. Geese soar in V formations. Hummingbirds fly forward, backward, upward, sideways, and upside down, and they can hover with their wings beating 70 times per second. Some birds are guided by an internal compass that

directs them with uncanny accuracy; they migrate thousands of miles to warmer climates to find insects and seeds during the winter months.

His Eye Is on the Sparrow

Our feathered friends illustrate God's ability to provide for us. Psalm 91:4 says, "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge." God "satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:5). The prophet wrote, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

In first-century Israel, sparrows were so cheap you could buy two of them for a penny (Matthew 10:29-31). If you were willing to buy four, the dealer would throw in an extra one for free—yet, "not one of them is forgotten by God" (Luke 12:6). Jesus didn't say a sparrow would never fall; he said they never fall without the Father's awareness (Matthew 10:29). Jesus didn't promise we would escape all hardship. He said whatever happens, he will be with us. Jesus perhaps had a twinkle in his eye as he stated the obvious, "You are worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:7).

One thing birds never do is worry. And even if they did, worry wouldn't help them find food, build nests, sing songs, escape predators, or look more beautiful. Birds stay busy doing what they were created to do, relying on God's provision. We're wise to do the same.

Personal Challenge:

What worries you right now? Talk about that issue with God and discuss it with another trusted friend.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What challenge did you face last week as you sought to live for Christ?
2. Were you more aware of your motives as you engaged in spiritual disciplines over the past week? If so, how?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 6:19-34** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to summarize the teaching in one minute or less. (After the reteller finishes, others can fill in any parts the person may have missed.)

3. What perspectives on life does Jesus provide in this passage?
4. Let's dig deeper into this passage:
 - Note the short phrase at the end of verse 30, "you of little faith." What does this phrase indicate to you about Jesus' audience and his purpose for teaching this?
 - What does this passage teach you about: Jesus' lordship? . . . faith? . . . God as our provider? . . . God as sovereign (in control)? . . . other: ____?
 - How do we combat worry?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. What do you learn about people and how Jesus wants us to see ourselves?
7. Look at the choices this passage presents: seeking treasures on earth or in heaven, committing ourselves to money or God as our master, embracing worry or faith, being preoccupied with food and clothing or seeking God, living as pagans or as disciples of Jesus. All of these are matters of obedience for the person who endeavors to live as a Christ follower. Which of these choices are you facing right now, and what will you do to choose wisely?
8. Seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness includes living out his kingdom mission to "go and make disciples of all nations . . ." (Matthew 28:19). In what specific way will you carry out that mission this week?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. In what way will you ask God to provide for you this week?

For Next Week: Over the next week, read and reflect on **Matthew 7:1-27** as we continue studying the Sermon on the Mount. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FIVE

LESSON AIM: **Discover Christ's
wisdom hidden in plain
view.**

STUDY: Sermon on the Mount

THEME: Upside-Down Kingdom

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 7:1-27

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 6:37-49; Hebrews 5:11-14

DIFFERENT DISCERNMENT

BY MARK SCOTT

People who are committed to Jesus' upside-down kingdom will discern differently than the people of this world. Their judgments will be more accurate. Their prayers will be more earnest. Their actions will be more generous. Their decisions will be more decisive.

The themes of the Sermon on the Mount flow in and out of one another. Often, because the genre of this sermon is similar to that of Wisdom Literature (Job, some Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon), these themes will balance and help qualify each other. People who work hard at righteousness (Matthew 5:20) might find themselves just being legalistic (5:21-47). People who strive for perfection (5:48) might find themselves trapped by religious pride (Matthew 6:1). And people who seek first the kingdom (6:33) might find themselves unduly judging others (Matthew 7:1). So, Jesus ended this famous sermon by calling for different discernments.

Tempered Judgments*Matthew 7:1-12*

Mother used to say, "When you point a finger at someone else, three fingers are pointing back at you." Judgment always seems to boomerang. When Jesus said, "Do not judge," he certainly did not mean not to make judgments. In fact, he taught elsewhere that we were to judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24). Here, he is teaching against making hypocritical judgments, for these judgments come back to bite us.

Jesus humorously compared a *speck of sawdust* to a *plank*. Sawdust in the eye hurts and needs to be removed. Specks are irritants. But failing to first see the obvious plank in our eyes is hypocrisy. We should always check ourselves as we strive to correct others (Galatians 6:1). Tempered judgments must also be made when considering our stewardship with "dogs and hogs." While the metaphors sound offensive to us, we dare not give the sacred kingdom message and the pearl of great price to people who will trample them (Matthew 13:45-46; Acts 13:51).*

What will help us temper our judgments? Two things—earnest prayer and seeking the welfare of others. It is difficult to wish evil on someone for whom we are praying. So Jesus taught us to *ask, seek, and knock*. Have confidence to pester heaven to align your judgments with God's. Jesus' paternal illustration made perfect sense. Earthly fathers, who are evil (Jesus' worldview of us), give good gifts to their children. God knows how to answer our prayers and open up the storehouses of heaven for his children (Malachi 3:10; James 1:18).

Proactively seeking the best for others (the Golden Rule) also tempers our judgments toward them. It also fulfills the Law and Prophets.

Decisive Choices*Matthew 7:13-27*

It is not enough to like or agree with the Sermon on the Mount. One must obey it. Jesus ended this sermon with a decisive call to action. He did so with a series of contrasts. First, he described two *gates* (which lead to two roads which, consequently, lead to two destinations). The way of the upside-down kingdom may not always be easy, but it does get us home (Luke 13:23-24).

Next, he described two *prophets*—true and false. To whom will we listen? The false ones come *in sheep's clothing*, meaning "in disguise" (John 10:1, 5, 12). Their true identities come out sooner or later, just like good fruit and bad fruit are produced by the corresponding trees. The false prophets are followed by people who make two *claims*. The claims can be earnest ("Lord, Lord"), and they can even be backed up by miraculous gifts (prophecy and miracles). In the end, claims are cheap. To those who give only lip service to the Lord, Jesus will say, "I never knew you." How could an omniscient God say that? The phrase probably should be understood, "I do not recognize you as mine."

Finally there are two *builders*. The greatest sermon ever preached hardly ended with "wooing." Instead, it ended with a house crashing during a terrible storm. But our loving Savior tied a bow around the Sermon on the Mount with a simple parable. Everyone builds on something. Storms come to all people. The difference is where (and on what) a person builds. The choice is ours. We can choose to be wise and obey these teachings and find ourselves securely grounded on the rock when the storms come, or we can foolishly choose to live in a sandcastle for the rest of our lives. Which will it be?

**A few scholars see this as referring to the Romans (see Glen H. Stassen's article in Journal of Biblical Literature), but that might be giving the text more political emphasis than is necessary. It might be better to keep it in the context of false teachers or apostates (2 Peter 2:21-22).*

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

CLEARING AWAY THE FOG

BY DAVID FAUST

A year ago this month, on January 26, 2020, basketball star Kobe Bryant boarded a helicopter along with his 13-year-old daughter Gianna and other passengers headed to a youth basketball tournament. The helicopter was a high-end model with a reputation for safety, and the pilot was known for his experience and reliability. The sky was blue when they took off, but soon a thick fog settled in and the pilot became disoriented. He thought they were going up, but actually they were plummeting toward the ground at a high rate of speed. In a horrific tragedy, the helicopter crashed on steep terrain, killing all nine people on board.

It's extremely dangerous when you can't see where you're going and you lose your bearings.

Unobstructed Vision

Like a defroster that melts ice from a car's windshield, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount clarifies our vision in several key areas.

A clearer view of others. Unselfishness is an underlying theme throughout the sermon. Love others—even those who mistreat you. Pray with plural pronouns: "Give *us* today *our* daily bread . . . Deliver *us* from the evil one" (Matthew 6:11, 13). Don't just seek forgiveness for your own sins; forgive those who sin against you (6:12). Don't view others through the distorted lens of a harsh, critical spirit. "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged" (7:2). Don't try to perform cataract surgery on someone else's eyes when a two-by-four obstructs your own vision (7:3-5).

A clearer view of prayer. "Ask, Seek, and Knock" (Matthew 7:7)—the first letters of those English verbs remind us to ASK! But prayer isn't just about asking; it's also about seeking. Discerning disciples seek God and his wisdom. We seek "first his kingdom and his righteousness" (6:33). We seek lost, straying sheep. And we knock—persistently trying to identify and enter

any doors God opens. "Knocking" in prayer means exploring new opportunities and finding new ways to serve. We can ask, seek, and knock with confidence because the heavenly Father knows our needs and wants to "give good gifts to those who ask him" (6:8; 7:11).

A clearer view of truth. In foggy, confusing times, we need a well-thought-out biblical worldview. "Enter through the narrow gate," Jesus insisted, "For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it" (Matthew 7:13). "Watch out for false prophets," he warned (7:15). Phony religious leaders create fog, not clarity. Not everyone who calls Jesus "Lord, Lord" truly knows him (7:21). Truth isn't always popular, but it always matters.

A clearer view of obedience. Jesus' teachings aren't just nice ideas; they are marching orders. The Sermon on the Mount isn't a philosophy course; it's a call to action. Like a homebuilder who constructs a house on a solid foundation, the wise person hears Jesus' words "and puts them into practice" (Matthew 7:24).

Ignoring Jesus' instructions is like trying to fly a helicopter in blinding fog. It's like trying to drive a car while the windshield is covered with ice. Let's learn from the ancient psalmist who prayed, "Open my eyes that I may see," and then went on to promise the Lord, "I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly" (Psalm 119:18, 167).

Personal Challenge:

Using a highlighter or a pencil, read through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) this week and mark key verses in each chapter that challenge you to action. Ask God to help you put these principles into practice.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In what ways did you see God provide for you during the past week?
2. What choices did you make over the last week to live in obedience to God and his Word?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 7:1-27** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to summarize the teaching as if teaching it to a group of middle schoolers.

3. What wisdom for living as a Christ follower do you see in this passage?
4. Let's dig deeper into this last section of the Sermon on the Mount:
 - What does this passage say a follower of Christ does and doesn't do?
 - What do you learn about how to live well in relationship with others?
 - What do you learn about how to build your relationship with God?
 - Verses 13-27 provide four contrasts a follower of Jesus must consider. What do each of those four contrasts teach you about living as a disciple of Christ?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. Let's discuss what you've learned about yourself. This passage presents each of us with four choices:
 - a. following the narrow gate and way (Jesus) or the wide road (the world)
 - b. listening to and following true teachers or false teachers
 - c. seeking a genuine, abiding relationship with Jesus (this is a disciple who does God's will) or adhering to a religion based on works and appearance
 - d. building your life on the solid rock of a relationship with Jesus or on the sinking sand of the world
 - We want this to be a safe place for everyone to be honest so that we can grow—and help each other grow—in our faith. With that in mind, which of these choices are you struggling with? How can we help you make the wise choice?
7. Think of a person in your life who has not yet accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord. What will you do this week to help that person find the narrow gate and narrow way that leads to life?
8. We study the Bible not just to hear and know God's Word, but to put it into practice (see vv. 21, 24, 26). This is why each week we always include a question about how we will obey what we've learned and discussed. What specific thing from this study will you put into practice this week?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. What challenges do you anticipate this week as you live out your faith?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.