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DIFFERENT

**Week One:
Different Disciples
Matthew 5:1-12**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

If there are new people in your group, introduce yourselves and share three fun facts about your life.

Have you ever been a part of a small group before? What did you like or dislike about the experience?

Have you ever studied the Sermon on the Mount before? What do you remember about it?

Background

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus's first major teaching recorded in the Gospels. Like the opening scenes to a movie or a play, it sets the stage for the rest of his ministry, which lasts for roughly three years. In Matthew 4:17, he declared, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" But there was so much confusion as to what that kingdom was going to look like. Some expected a political one that looked like a formal monarchy. Others expected an apocalyptic one in which Jesus would eliminate all of their enemies in end-of-times fashion. Still others expected one in which the Old Testament law from the Pentateuch was reestablished and adhered to radically. There were probably even more ideas of what it would look like and what would be expected of its citizens.

The Sermon on the Mount has been called "the Manifesto of the King" because it is as though King Jesus was establishing in clear, revolutionary terms what it means to live in his kingdom. It is full of unexpected twists and challenges that would have startled his original audience and forced them to confront their personal allegiances, whatever they might have been.

Matthew is intentional in the chapters leading up to the Sermon on the Mount to illustrate that something new is happening, something that would turn everything upside down. He begins with the genealogy that links Jesus directly back to Abraham and David and is laid out in such a way to show that he is the fulfillment of the longings of Israel in the Old Testament.

Next, Matthew continues Jesus' early story, including various dreams by different characters. These dreams included guidance from angels as the messengers of God. Matthew tells of the visit of the Magi following a star seeking the King of the Jews, recounts prophetic fulfillments of the Old Testament proclaimed by chief priests and scribes, and tells of evil King Herod's efforts to murder the Christ child at all costs.

In chapter 3, Jesus launches his public ministry when he asks John to baptize him in the Jordan River. From there he is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted 40 days by the Devil, echoing the Israelites wandering through the wilderness for 40 years after the Exodus. However, unlike the Israelites, Jesus repels the Devil's attacks and models faithfulness to God.

Jesus returns from the wilderness and begins his formal ministry, calling his core disciples and inviting the crowds to be taught and healed. It was obvious to everyone around him that God was doing something new and that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" just as Jesus and John the Baptist were declaring. However, what would this kingdom look like and what would it mean for them to be a part of it?

The Sermon on the Mount is a teaching opportunity for the disciples to come to Jesus and hear this radical kingdom described in vibrant and living color. In Jewish traditions, coming to the rabbi was a sign of wanting to learn. When they came to him, Matthew tells us that Jesus "*opened his mouth and taught them*" (Matt. 5:2).

Read together The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12).

Reflect and Apply

1. Imagine this is your first time reading the Beatitudes. Which of the statements would be the most shocking?
2. Looking at Matthew 5:3-12, there are three distinct characteristics found in each statement Jesus makes. What are they?

Each Beatitude begins with the word _____

In the Beatitudes, what are the causes and the effects of living in these experiences, as it relates to the Kingdom of Heaven? List the various causes and the effects.
Example: cause: being poor in spirit, effect: inheriting the Kingdom of heaven.

3. How are these different than how the world would describe those who are “blessed?”
4. Which beatitudes focus on our relationship with God and which ones focus on our relationships with one another?
5. Read Luke 4:16-21. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 61 in this passage. What similarities do you hear between this passage and the Beatitudes? What does it say about Jesus’s mission in the world?
6. To be “poor in spirit” is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, our bankruptcy before God. Why is this an indispensable condition for receiving the kingdom of heaven?
7. Read Psalm 24:3-5. Why is purity of heart so important?
8. We are called to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Our ultimate satisfaction should be found in seeking righteousness, which means to pursue God as our only source of fulfillment. What else in this world have you sought to fulfill you? Why did it fail to deliver true satisfaction? What keeps you from pursuing God as the only true source of fulfillment?
9. Reading the Beatitudes and thinking about the worlds that you function within (family, work, present or past, friends, community) which Beatitude is the most difficult for you at this point in life?

10. There are many modern-day interpretations of the Christian life. How would you describe the current, Americanized version of the Christian life? How does it compare with a Beatitude-based approach to following Jesus?

11. In Matthew 4:17 Jesus says the kingdom of God has arrived. What does living in a Beatitude lifestyle say about being a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Praise & Prayer Requests

**Week Two:
Different Influence
Matthew 5:13-16**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

From our study of last week, were there any specific Beatitudes that you thought more about during the week? What do you think the Holy Spirit is trying to teach you as you reflect on them?

Think of someone you personally know who you admire for how they live out their Christian life publicly. Describe why you find their life remarkable and how their life impacts others, including yours.

Background

Our study moves from the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) into a statement Jesus makes to the gathered group, especially his disciples, about whom His followers are to be in the world. Recall the formula Jesus used in the Beatitudes: Jesus announced blessing (Godly favor), upon those who live within certain traits and experience certain things in life, followed by descriptions of what living in Christ will bring (the Kingdom of Heaven, both on earth and in eternity).

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus declares who His followers are in the Kingdom of God. A key concept in this passage is whenever the word “you” appears in Matthew 5:13-16, he is not referring to you as individuals, but you as collective followers of Jesus and participants in the Kingdom of God.

Read Matthew 5:13-16.

Reflect and Apply

1. Take a moment and reflect on Matthew's use of "you." Have you ever thought of this understanding of Jesus speaking in the collective plural? What does thinking of Jesus speaking in the collective "you" mean for the Christian life?
2. Read Exodus 19:1-6. What images are used to describe the new identity God was giving His people at Mt. Sinai?
3. Looking at Matthew 5:13-16, there are three distinct word pictures Jesus uses to make his point. Can you identify them?
4. Salt was used to preserve, purify, and used for sacrifices in the Old Testament (Leviticus 2:13, Ezekiel 43:24). Numbers 18:19 tells of God viewing the covenant practices of the chosen people to be preserved like a covenant of salt, a lasting agreement. It was a symbol for permanence. What is Jesus trying to say when he calls his followers the salt of the earth?
5. Salt does not technically lose its "saltiness." However in ancient Israel what was considered "salt" was a white powder that contained true sodium chloride but also had other things mixed into it. If the sodium chloride were to be removed, it would look the same but only leave the impurities, becoming useless if not dangerous. How might we as Christians lose our saltiness?
5. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the house of Jacob (Israel, God's chosen people) walking in the light of the Lord (Isaiah 2:1-5). The connection of the Old Testament Covenant people to being the light to the world is further substantiated in Isaiah 42:1-9 and 49:1-6. Calling His followers light of the world, what point is Jesus possibly making?
6. What is the purpose of being the salt of the world, the light to the world, and the city on the hill as Jesus states in Matthew 5:16? Is it about getting credit for one's excellent work? Is it about earning God's favor? Does Matthew claim there is another purpose?
7. The idea of putting a lamp under a bowl is a silly image because it renders the light useless. What are some ways that Christians today hide their light?

8. When have you preferred to hide your light? Why?

9. With the discussion of salt, light, a city on the hill from the perspectives just offered, what do you think Jesus is urging His followers in the modern era to be and to do?
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10. What examples can you think of where the work of Christians has motivated people to praise God or at least consider Him in a new way?

11. Where do you most long to see Christ's light shine in the darkness? How might God be calling you to shine in that darkness?

Praise & Prayer Requests

**Week Three:
Different Standard
Matthew 5:17-37**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

What was one way you were “salt and light” this past week?

In this week’s passage Jesus talks about the Law and the Prophets. How familiar are you with the Old Testament on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = “not at all” aka “There’s another half of the Bible??!” to 10 = “I’ve read and studied it” aka “Deuteronomy is my homeboy!”)?

How would you describe to someone who answered 1 or 2 on the scale what they are missing out on by not being familiar with the Old Testament?

Background

As Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount, He declares he comes to the world to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not to abolish them. Jesus warns against any efforts to relax the Law by even a single letter (using iota, the smallest of the letters in the Greek alphabet) or single marking being removed. Jesus calls for the Law and the Prophets to be the source of our life choices and claims they should be taught to future generations. Christ then develops seven aspects of the Christ-following life based on the listeners being aware of each saying as something known by God’s covenant people from times of old. These include: righteousness, anger, lust, divorce, oaths, revenge, and love. Knowing what the Law and the Prophets teach and state, understanding righteousness (from a Biblical perspective) is crucial, according to Jesus, in living the Christian life.

Since Jesus assumes those who hear Him will be familiar with the Law and Prophets, the group may want to read Exodus 20:1-21. To understand what Jesus means by righteousness in Matthew 5:6, read Genesis 15:1-6 and Deuteronomy 6:20-25 for a clear Biblical understanding of the meaning of righteousness for God's covenant people and the modern age Christian.

Read Matthew 5:17-37.

Reflect and Apply

1. At the heart of our passage is the definition of righteousness. Based on the Old Testament passages how would you define it? (Other insightful texts include: Proverbs 21:3, Romans 6:13, Ephesians 6:14, Philippians 3:9, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 1:8-9, I John 2:29)
2. How would you say the Law in the Old Testament is viewed today? Read Psalm 19:7-11 to see how the Law was perceived by God's people. How does that differ from our modern perspective or the Pharisee's perspective in New Testament times?
3. What do you think Jesus intended to communicate with the repetition of "You have heard it said... but I say to you..."?

This week's questions are broken down into a pair of questions for each of the areas Jesus discusses. Discuss at least question 1 or 2, then choose which areas the group wants to examine more deeply.

Matthew 5:17-20

1. What stands out to you as a modern-day Christ follower in what Jesus says about the Law and the Prophets?
2. Jesus says that living in righteousness is imperative to entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Based on what we know about who Jesus is, and how righteousness is defined in Deuteronomy 6:25, what does this mean for those of us who seek to follow Christ and declare Him Lord?

Matthew 5:21-26

3. Each of Jesus' next six explanations of the Law and the Prophets begin with the words "You have heard it said." What is Jesus saying to us about our own familiarity with the Old Testament? In terms of your own journey, honestly self-evaluate your life practices and share where you may be in understanding these Old Testament principles that Jesus is affirming.

4. While Jesus acknowledges that murder is sin, He extends the understanding of the commandment to anger, and the need for reconciliation between one another. Discuss what Jesus is saying about "killing" another.

Matthew 5:27-30

5. What type of activities would Jesus claim are adulterous?

6. What point is Jesus making by using a word picture of plucking out one's eye when referring to the impact of the sin of lust?

Matthew 5:31-32

7. Divorce existed and is mentioned in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 22 and 24:1-4). Jesus is discouraging divorce and challenges easy or manipulative divorces for the sake of remarriage or sexual freedom. For Jesus, marriage is not about convenience or a cancellable contract, but a covenant relationship. Discuss Matthew 5:31-32 through this lens.

8. Likely someone in the group has been divorced, or you know a divorced person. What can be said to them about God's grace and Jesus' words?

Matthew 5:33-37

- 9. Leviticus 17-26 is called the Holiness Code of God's people. Leviticus 19:11-16 offers how we are to act towards our neighbor. There are several Old Testament texts which explain offering an oath in God's name and what is expected of the person who makes the oath. You could even relate giving an oath in God's name to Exodus 20:7 and Deuteronomy 5:11, the Third Commandment that calls for God's people not to use the name of the Lord in vain.

If we were to state the Jesus formula for doing what we say/promise/commit to, unconditionally, what would that look like based on Matthew 5:33-37?

- 10. What are some challenges today with living according to Jesus' principle of yes being yes and no being no? What about in our business life? Or as a parent raising children? Or as a person trying to live by Jesus' teaching?

Praise & Prayer Requests

**Week Four:
Different Love
Matthew 5:38-48**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

Since the last study what further thoughts have you had about how Jesus takes the Law from just rules on paper to the condition of our hearts?

In this session Jesus's teaching centers on revenge and enemies. What are the unspoken rules about how to treat your enemies that you have seen at work in your life or in our culture in 2023?

Background

In our last study, Jesus gave an overview of the Law and the Prophets as not being displaced by Him or His teachings. This week, we examine the last two statements in the Matthew 5:17-48 grouping. Jesus again offers insights into what His listeners, and Matthew's gospel readers, should recall from having heard/read various Old Testament passages and how Jesus wants His followers to apply God's Words.

Matthew 5:38-42 directly links Jesus' words to Old Testament teachings concerning retaliation and restitution found in Exodus 21:22-25, Leviticus 24:17-23, and Deuteronomy 19:15-21. Jesus' teachings begin with "but I say," and are supported by Old Testament texts which encourage staying strong in the moral principles the covenant people are to live by. There are also Scriptures that support Jesus' suggestion of offering mercy to those who may have harmed another person or are due retaliation. Jesus wants his followers to go beyond what the Covenant Law or civil law may prescribe by giving more than what is required. Jesus suggests that going above and beyond is a sign of living in God's Kingdom. When Jesus encouraged his believers to go the extra mile, he was referring to the expectation in the Roman Empire for anyone to carry whatever was demanded by a Roman soldier for a mile. Jesus says instead, to go two miles.

The final explanation Jesus offers in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:43-48, deals with loving all people, regardless of their being part of God's covenant people. Jesus closes this section calling on God's people to be perfect. The word used actually means whole or entire, with completeness, more so than without fault. What Jesus is calling for is our action towards God that is with "wholeheartedness with no compromise with pagan practices."¹

Read Matthew 5:38-48.

Reflect and Apply

1. What specific three things is Jesus calling for His followers to do?
2. In Matthew 5:43-48, what overarching themes does Jesus attempt to reinforce?
3. Read Proverbs 25:21-22. What does it say about how we are to treat our enemies? What do you think the "burning coals" refer to?
4. While our English translation uses "perfect" to describe what we are to seek to be (Matthew 5:48), a more literal translation is wholeheartedness towards Godly principles and ways. Discuss the challenge in our Christian culture that perfection brings as opposed to living with a sincere, whole heartedness that seeks to live in Godly principles and ways.
5. When has someone turned the other cheek, handed over their coat, or gone the second mile for you, and what were the results?

¹ Nollans, John, *The Gospel of Matthew A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 271.

6. In verses 46-47, how can Christians do “more than others?”

7. In a culture where public attacks and bad behavior are in the spotlight, how difficult is it to choose to follow Jesus’ words regarding our enemies? What do you think it would look like? What effects might it have?

8. Having studied Jesus’ words about not changing a word from the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17-48), and then examining these six “...you have heard it said, but I say to you...” statements, what conclusions are you personally drawing from this section of the Sermon on the Mount? Has Jesus deleted, changed, or expanded these Old Testament teachings?

Praise & Prayer Requests

Week Five:
Different Audience, Part 1
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18.

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

What examples did you see last week, helpful ones or harmful ones that reminded you of what Jesus taught about revenge and loving our enemies?

In this lesson Jesus teaches about spiritual habits and disciplines. What spiritual habits or disciplines have you cultivated or experimented with over the years? Did they last? What did you learn from those experiences?

Background

As the Sermon on the Mount continues, Jesus shifts the third segment of his teachings to the true meaning of journeying with Him, as Lord and Savior. While the entire section goes through Matthew 7:12, Matthew 6:1-18 focuses on what Jesus teaches as the right ways to practice three of the elements of faith. Jesus wants His followers to understand the methods of giving, the pattern of an active prayer life and the understanding of how to fast. As you read Matthew 6:1-18, there are common elements that help link the do's and don'ts of these important spiritual habits.

Jesus begins with "When you ..." as He teaches each spiritual habit. It is important to understand that the Old Testament, in multiple texts, teaches the purpose and reason for practicing giving, praying, and fasting. You can perform searches in a good Bible app for words/phrases such as giving, needy, widow, sojourner, offering, tithing, first fruits, to find many texts detailing Jesus' call for giving. Also, similar word studies of pray/prayer, fast/fasting will help you to understand the roots, practices, and purposes for God's people.

Read Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18.

Reflect and Apply

1. Jesus begins each of the teachings about giving, praying, and fasting with “when you...” What is Jesus saying to those hearing Him?
2. What are the common elements Jesus discussed when He addresses each of these three spiritual habits His followers will practice?
3. The word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek word for “actor.” It literally means “an interpreter from underneath” because of the common use of masks in ancient Greek theater. Why would this be an appropriate word image for Jesus to use in this passage?
4. What are some ways that you have “sounded trumpets,” or at least been tempted to, when you have given?
5. In what other ways are we tempted to seek the approval of people rather than of God?
6. How does this passage about “practicing righteousness before others” relate to the command in 5:16 for us to let our light shine before other others?
7. Read Isaiah 58. What do we learn about the true nature of fasting and discipleship from this passage?
8. Think about the communities of faith you may have been a part of. Share any ministries you may be familiar with from those communities of faith that promoted and nourished giving, praying, and fasting as practices. What have been your personal experiences with these spiritual disciplines? How have you experienced God’s “rewards” for practicing these disciplines?

9. Share with one another your personal takeaways from Jesus' teachings in Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18. Also consider sharing what areas you would personally like to grow a deeper understanding of from a Biblical perspective.

Praise and Prayer Requests

Week Six:
Different Audience, Part 2
Matthew 6:7-15

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

The Christian faith can be described as living out your life for the “Audience of One,” which Matthew 6:1-18 focuses on. Were there any moments last week where you caught yourself being tempted to perform for the people around you instead of God?

Background

Last week’s lesson gave an overview of Jesus’ teaching about three spiritual habits: giving, praying, and fasting. This week, we explore the specifics about the model of prayer Jesus provides through the Lord’s Prayer. It is frequently recited in various corporate worship settings and as a personal worship tool.

The Old and the New Testament contain multiple forms of prayer and the encouragement to pray to God as the means of communicating faithfully and regularly with God. Pray/prayer is mentioned over 300 times in the Old and New Testaments. Several times, particular prayers are offered by various Biblical characters. The greatest example is the Lord’s Prayer, found in Matthew 6:7-15 (a shortened version is found in Luke 11:1-4). What makes Matthew 6:7-15 most unique of all the various prayer forms in Scripture is that Jesus, God Incarnate, offers a pattern for prayer for us to apply to our own prayers.

His pattern offers various phrases and forms that can be traced through the Old Testament and various Jewish prayer forms found before and during the time of the Christ. As an example, I Chronicles 29:10–19 provides similar themes by David as he prays before the assembly of God’s people. What Jesus suggests as a prayer formula would have been recognized by Jewish people who heard or read Jesus’ words. The phrases and words Jesus suggested can also be traced through various historical Jewish prayers, most significantly the Eighteen Benedictions (Google “Eighteen Benedictions” to read them).

Read Matthew 6:7-15.

Reflect and Apply

1. Imagine your prayers were recorded verbatim like the psalms for others to read. What would people learn about your image of God?
2. How do Gentile/pagan prayers differ from the model Jesus taught?
3. What phrases/petitions are associated with God, our Father?
4. What phrases/petitions are associated with us/we as people?
5. Read I Chronicles 29:10-20, noting the similar phrases and themes found in David's prayer and the words Jesus chose for a model of praying to God.
6. Search online for the "Eighteen Benedictions." What similar phrases or themes do you see in Jesus's prayer?
7. Is there one petition in Matthew 6:7-15 that stands out as the toughest to sincerely pray? If so, which one, and for what reasons?
8. Jesus says in verse 8 that God already knows what we need, yet He still commands us to pray. Why do you think we should still pray?

9. As you begin to see the Lord's Prayer as a formula for praying to God, what is the danger of reciting it repeatedly without thinking about and understanding each phrase?

10. Consider as a group praying and saying Matthew 6:7-15, as each participant knows it, slowly, pausing after each phrase, stopping for 10 seconds, then continuing through each phrase. When finished, discuss the experience.

Praise & Prayer Requests

**Week Seven:
Different Priorities
Matthew 6:19-34**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

This past week how did the discussion of the Lord's Prayer cause you to think or act differently in your prayer life?

Think of a person that you know who you would describe as having a generous spirit. What evidence do you see of this in their life?

Background

Our small group has now met six times as we work through the Sermon on the Mount. While we may not remember each aspect of the Sermon, Jesus has been building phrase by phrase through a variety of teachings that even inform today's Christian life. As we read Matthew 6:19-34, there will be several points that will be helpful to a more complete understanding of the text.

Matthew 6:19-34 continues to build on previous sections of the Sermon and within the context of the entire sermon. Realizing Matthew 6:19-34 could be broken down into two connected sections, Matthew 6:19-24 and Matthew 6:25-34, is helpful in discerning what Jesus is saying. In Matthew 6:19-24, Jesus refers again to the image of a lamp and the eye. Key to this section is the importance of the discipleship commitment – It is to God alone, without distractions of trying to divide our loyalty to multiple causes or beliefs. In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus connects this commitment to our anxieties and life pursuits.

Again, looking back at principles introduced and stated in the Old Testament helps us understand Jesus' teaching. Familiarity with Deuteronomy 6, known as the Shema, a Jewish

prayer still recited, would be a great start for the group before reading this week's text. Other helpful texts that provide insights into the priority of loving God include Deuteronomy 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41.

Read Mathew 6:19-34.

Reflect and Apply

1. Matthew 6:19-34 can be broken down into two sections of teaching. Look at Matthew 6:19-24, and Matthew 6:25-34. Break down Jesus' sayings of what not to seek, what to seek, and an overarching thematic statement at/near the end of each section.

Matthew 6:19-24

What not to seek –

What to seek –

Key closing statement by Jesus –

Matthew 6:25-34

What not to seek –

What to seek –

Key closing statement by Jesus –

2. As a group, read Deuteronomy 6:4-15. What portions of what Jesus says in Matthew 6:19-24 can be linked to the over-arching theme of God's call to His people in Deuteronomy 6?
3. Jewish teaching, long before Jesus, saw the healthy eye as a symbol for great devotion to God. Sight was linked to the ability to do internally and externally what God's covenant people were expected to do because of how God had defined living within Him. Poor or blurred vision were seen as spiritual symbols for moral and Godly 'blurriness.' Knowing

this, what could Jesus be relaying to those hearing this portion of Sermon on the Mount?

4. Look at Matthew 6:21, 24, 33 as a group. These are the core statements within Matthew 6:19-34. In reading these statements together, what do they teach about Jesus' view of the Christian life?
5. Some people have no problem carrying two jobs and pleasing two bosses. How is Jesus' command different? What is the challenge at the heart of His statement that "No one can serve two masters?" Are there challenges in our culture today with living as Jesus prescribes?
6. Read Proverbs 23:4-5 and Ecclesiastes 5:10-20. What do they teach us about the nature of wealth?
7. What is the significance of verses 25-34 beginning with the word "Therefore?"
8. Matthew 6:25-34 addresses the worries associated with the everyday life in Jesus' day. What does Jesus claim is the challenge for those who follow Him? In our modern-day life, share the anxieties/worries we may have. Does Jesus advise us how we can manage these life anxiety/stress points ourselves and with one another's help?
9. What is one thing in your life that would visibly change if you were to pursue God's kingdom more diligently?

Praise & Prayer Requests

**Week Eight:
Different Discernment
Matthew 7:1-12**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

What further reflections did you have last week on the relationship between “storing up treasures in heaven” and worry?

Matthew 7:1 is arguably one of the most quoted verses in American culture. How have you heard it referenced? What do you think it means?

Background

As Jesus continues to teach about living within the Kingdom of God, He addresses three key elements of the Christian life then offers a summary of things He has taught so far in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus teaches accountability of self before judging or holding others accountable. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus uses animal images from His time to share who to share God’s wisdom and ways with. In Matthew 7:7-11, Jesus continues to teach about venturing out, pursuing, and seeking God and His ways through an active prayer life.² In Matthew 7:12, Jesus provides a summary of what has been taught to this point in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:1-5 is frequently seen as a text that urges Christians in no way to judge another’s actions, but that is not the whole truth. The text uses language that warns a follower of Jesus not to judge lest they be judged, too. Jesus uses language that says we should examine our own beam-sized faults before judging the tiny splinter-sized faults in someone else. In verse 2, Jesus uses a unit of measuring familiar in His times. When grain was sold, the actual measure used to quantify the grain being sold was the same device used when the grain was received and measured by the buyer.

² Nolland, 325.

In Matthew 7:6, Jesus uses the imagery of dogs and pigs, viewing what Jesus is offering as pearls. The Old Testament includes symbolic images of dogs as enemies of God's ways, evil doers, and as a reference for foolish folly (see Psalm 22, 59, Proverbs 26:11, as examples.) Pigs are viewed for God's chosen people as dirty and used at times as an image of a person lacking Godly wisdom or discretion (Leviticus 11, especially Leviticus 11:1-8, 46-47, Deuteronomy 14:1-21, Proverbs 11:22). Pearls were viewed from before the time of Christ as precious, of the highest value compared to other gems.

Read Matthew 7:1-12.

Reflect and Apply

1. Focus on Matthew 7:1-5 and read it again. Identify the key elements within this verse that help bring a more complete understanding to this passage as a whole.
2. In many modern Christian circles, Matthew 7:1-5 is frequently interpreted as a text that encourages Christians to never judge another person. In reading the text, does it possibly suggest something different about self-accountability and the accountability of others within the body of Christ? How could Christians help other Christians who may be dealing with straying from God's way, while not being judgmental, but being accountable with one another?
3. Why do we often see other people's faults much more clearly than our own?
4. Matthew 7:6 speaks in terms of dogs, swine, and pearls. Review at least one of the Old Testament images mentioned above for dogs and pigs. Consider the insights offered about pearls and their value mentioned above. Who/What could Jesus be claiming are the pearls? Who is Jesus intending to refer to by using the imagery of the dogs and the pigs? How does knowing this help an understanding of Jesus' words?

5. In Matthew 7:7-11, Jesus urges His followers to ask, seek, and knock and our Father in heaven will make His kingdom part of our lives. Jesus uses the imagery of an earthly parent, even claiming despite humanity's sinfulness, a parent does good things for their child. What is Jesus saying about our heavenly Father's intention for those who seek His Kingdom? Does this mean that everything asked for will be given, especially in light of Jesus' previous prayer words "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done?"

6. Look at Leviticus 19. If using a study Bible, what is it called? Carefully read Leviticus 19:9-18. How does Matthew 7:12 capture the essence of the Leviticus passage?

7. How would you explain to someone that "the golden rule" is a summary of the Law and the Prophets?

8. Reflecting on verse 7-11, when have you had an answer to prayer after a long time of asking, seeking, and knocking? What are you most urgently asking/seeking/knocking for right now?

Praise & Prayer Requests

**Week Nine:
Different Path
Matthew 7:13-20**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

Was there anything this past week for which you decided to start “knocking on the door” or perhaps *knocking a little harder* than you were before? (Matthew 7:7-8)

Background

Jesus continues to guide those seeking to follow Him by using three word pictures to teach about the journey into the Christian life. Jesus uses three comparisons in Matthew 7:13-27: two gates (Matthew 7:13-14); two trees (Matthew 7:15-20); and two foundations (Matthew 7:21-23). In this study two of these three images are covered. Jesus’ imagery choices are not new but can be traced back through the Old Testament.

Jesus begins with a comparison of a narrow and wide path as an entry point into His Kingdom. The image is of a narrow gate that is the way of entry, and the way is hard (God calls it a blessing) compared to the wide gate that is easy and leads to destruction (God claims it is a curse). The image Jesus uses can be traced through the Old Testament beginning in Deuteronomy 11, especially 11:26-32. Psalm 15 and 16, especially 16:11, Psalm 118, Proverbs 15:24, 28:6, 8 teach of the righteous paths/gates. Isaiah 26:2,7-8 speaks of God’s people asking God to open the gates of righteousness to them. Several Jewish rabbinic teachings between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New refer to the narrow pathway as the ways of God, compared to the less prudent ways associated with the world. The teachings recognize that many will choose the wide worldly path, while few will choose the ways of God.

Jesus then offers warning concerning false prophets and claims that false prophets come dressed in sheep clothing but are ravenous wolves. Deuteronomy 13:1-5, 18:15-22, Jeremiah 14:13-22, 23:16-22 build a description of false prophets while Ezekiel 22:23-31 and 34:1-10 paints a picture of the ravenous nature of false prophets. False prophets lead God’s people into seeking and worshipping false gods. False prophets attempt to lead God’s people away from

complete devotion to the One True God, to distract God's people from loving and revering God with all their make-up and being. False prophets teach rebellion against God. False prophets speak self-initiated words that are not from God, words the false prophets think God's people want to hear or bring self-promotion to the false prophet instead of to God.

The image of sheep and shepherd are used many times in the Old Testament to represent God as the shepherd of His chosen people. God's people, referred to as Israel, are represented as sheep of His fold. Two of the many shepherd/sheep imagery texts of the Old Testament are Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34:11-24.

Jesus then moves to the image of bearing fruit, mentioning thorns and thistles. Again, the imagery Jesus uses is traceable through the Old Testament. Jesus is implying that good fruit is the result of good trees. Thorns are the direct result of the fall of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 3:18, Hosea 10:8) and represent sin. Good fruit is associated with those who truly follow Jesus because it is not associated with sinful means or motives. Living in God's grace and love, God's people bear the fruits of Kingdom living in many ways.

Read Matthew 7:13-20.

Reflect and Apply

1. What are the various points Jesus is attempting to make in Matthew 7:13-20.
2. Read Deuteronomy 30:11-20. What did "wide gate" and "narrow gate" look like for the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land?
3. Read Psalm 1 as another example of "wide" and "narrow" gates in the Old Testament. Compare and contrast the two options in the passage.
4. Jesus spoke the words of Matthew 7:13-20 nearly 2,000 years ago. What could be considered the narrow gate for the modern-day Christian?
5. Why are broad gates and false prophets so appealing to people?

6. Why do you think many people dislike the idea that there is only one true gate?

7. Have you personally experienced a false teacher or watched someone else drawn in by one? What did that look like? What happened?

8. Jesus defines false prophets as ravenous wolves. Read Jeremiah 23:16-32. What are characteristics of false prophets and those who listen to them? What disguises might false prophets be wearing today to lead God's sheep astray?

9. Based on what Jesus teaches in Matthew 7:13-20, and the background information provided, what is needed for Christians to fully grasp the Christian life?

10. If you were once on the wide road yourself, how did God turn you around?

11. Self-describe your current journey in the Christian life. What do you think would be examples of bearing fruit by living the Christian life? Are there areas of your life that you consider are bearing good fruit? What might be needed in your journey to bear Kingdom fruit going forward?

Praise & Prayer Requests

**Week Ten:
Different Foundation
Matthew 7:21-28**

Warm Up

Open in Prayer.

This past week did you have to make any decisions where you felt challenged to discern and choose the narrow gate vs. the wide gate? What was that like?

Fill in the blank. "When I grow up I want to be like _____." What is it about them that you want to emulate or experience?

Background

Having just warned His followers about false prophets, Jesus now includes a rather strong statement about some who will claim to follow Him but will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21-23). Jesus then concludes the Sermon on the Mount by assuring the qualities of those who will enter the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:24-27). To make His point, Jesus describes those who will inherit the Kingdom will be like a builder of a house on a rock, and those who will not hear and do God's Word as those who build on sand.

Jesus also says those who will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven will be those who "practice lawlessness" (NASB). This idea is also expressed in Psalm 6:8. Lawlessness appears in the Old Testament over 300 times, stretching from the early Old Testament writings through the prophets. Outside of this group study, you may want to do a complete study on this topic. Is there a general understanding we can glean from all these uses? Yes. Biblical lawlessness is living outside the boundary God has established through the Ten Commandments and the instructions God gives His covenant people. Worshiping false gods, placing other gods/things in front of God, teaching falsely God's Word, failing to serve and live by God's order of life explained in the Old Testament and by Jesus in the New Testament, all result in covenant lawlessness towards God.

Jesus concludes His teaching by saying that those who follow His ways are wise and like someone building upon a solid rock foundation. The association of wisdom with following God's ways is found in Proverbs 10:6-32, 12:7, and 14:11. The Old Testament refers to God as the rock in various prayers by different Bible characters. Moses' closing prayer before his death shared with God's people claims God as the true rock of God's people (Deuteronomy 32:4, 18, 31). Hannah's prayer to God (I Samuel 2:2) and David's prayer to God upon being delivered from His enemies (II Samuel 22:1-4) both also declare God as the rock. Jesus is urging those who hear His words to build their life foundation with God as the rock, not on the shifting substrate of sand, which is symbolic of the many ways we can move away from Godly ways into lawlessness.

Read Matthew 7:21-28.

Reflect and Apply

1. What themes do you notice as you read Matthew 7:21-28?
2. Jesus makes three distinct comments about entering the Kingdom of heaven. Identify the comments found in 7:21 and 7:24. Having confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior, what do these three distinct descriptions mean for those seeking to live the Christian life?
3. On the surface, what might we admire about the people described in verse 21-23?
4. Why do we often confuse religious activity with "doing the will of the Father?"
5. Jesus also warns about lawless living for all, but especially those who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior. Discuss the meaning of lawlessness beginning with what a secular definition may look like, then how lawlessness is defined according to Matthew 7:21-27, and then adding a teaching from one of the Old Testament texts such as Exodus 32:7-10, Deuteronomy 4:13-31, Ezekiel 37:15-28, Malachi 3:6-17. Is there a difference between following the secular law and striving to live in God's Kingdom lawful ways?

6. Read Proverbs 9:1-8. What do wisdom and folly offer?

7. In the comparison of the two builders, how were their houses and circumstances similar and different?

8. What did the storms reveal about what was previously unseen?

9. Jesus says the wise person builds their faith on the rock. What does a faith with such a foundation look like in the modern-day world we live in?

10. What are “sand foundations” that some people build on in our culture?

11. Share about someone who you know who has built their spiritual house on the rock and withstood the storms of life.

12. Was there a time when you experienced a storm that revealed whether your house was built on the rock or on sand? If you feel comfortable, share with the group about that experience.

13. Are the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:21-27 soothing, alarming, affirming, worrisome, all of the above, none of the above or other? Why? How does this text impact your Christian life?

14. How are verses 21-29 a perfect conclusion to the entire sermon?

15. The Sermon on the Mount concludes with an astonished crowd in verses 28-29. As you reflect on the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount, what are some of your reactions and observations?

Praise & Prayer Requests
