

THE
WISDOM
of JESUS

Group Leader's Guide

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This study guide is to be used in conjunction with *The Wisdom of Jesus* by Kenneth Schenck (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2014).

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

The book *The Wisdom of Jesus* forms the basis of this six-week group study. As you and your group study *The Wisdom of Jesus*, culled from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, you may feel like part of the crowd that heard his sermon two thousand years ago. You will find truth for everyday living and wisdom for your walk with God. Expect lively discussions and memorable group sessions as you tap into the wisdom of Jesus.



Week 1

THE BEATITUDES

Matthew 5:3–16

Those who honor God with their lives are blessed.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Begin this session with a brief sharing time. Ask whether any members of the group told someone recently, “God bless you!” or “May the Lord bless you!” Have volunteers tell what they meant by those words. Explain that this group session focuses on blessings that celebrate those who honor God with their lives.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

When Jesus looked upon the crowds that followed him in Galilee, he went up on a mountainside, sat down, and began to deliver what has been called the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–2). We cannot easily identify Jesus’ “disciples.” The term may refer to the crowds that followed him or specifically to the Twelve. However, we can glean applications for our own lives from Jesus’ sermon.

The sermon’s introduction contains pronouncements of blessing called the Beatitudes (vv. 3–11). In his book, *The Wisdom of Jesus*, Kenneth Schenck uses the word *honored* to explain “blessed” (pp. 11–12).

It is clear from the first four beatitudes that God honors those who recognize they have no ability in themselves to please God, but must depend on him for righteousness. According to the next beatitudes, he also honors those who mourn, those who are humble and gentle, those who have a voracious appetite and thirst for righteousness, those who offer mercy to others, those who are morally and spiritually clean in his sight, and those who are verbally assaulted and persecuted because of their righteous living.

Clearly, a striking difference exists between the kingdoms of the world (see Matt. 4:8) and the kingdom of God. Those whose hearts are firmly planted in the kingdoms of the world despise God and his followers, whereas those whose hearts are firmly planted in righteousness will be persecuted but ultimately rewarded. Kenneth Schenck observes on page 17 of *The Wisdom of Jesus*: “When we hear that someone’s reward is great in heaven, we might think about going to heaven when we die. But Matthew 8:11 indicates that the feast of the kingdom will be on earth, and there is good reason to believe that the New Testament writers expected a renewed earth (for example, Rom. 8:21).” Based on Schenck’s observation, we may think of the persecuted followers of Jesus as receiving their great reward (Matt. 5:12) on earth at what might be called an awards banquet.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compared God's people to salt and light (vv. 13–16). Salt preserves and adds flavor. As believers, we keep the evil in the world from becoming chaotic, and we keep the world from experiencing the full blast of God's wrath (2 Thess. 2:7). Furthermore, our lives add flavor to society by showing attractive qualities (Gal. 5:22–23).

As light, we shine in a dark world, reflecting the Light of the World and pointing the way to him (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:14–16).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that no one today can live the way the Beatitudes describe life?
2. What are some significant differences between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God?
3. How would you describe “blessed” as Jesus used it in the Sermon on the Mount?
4. What might a person legitimately mourn besides the death of a loved one?
5. What difference do you see between meekness and weakness?
6. How might a believer's meekness be revealed at work?
7. How might a hunger and thirst for righteousness manifest itself?
8. Why do you agree or disagree that there is a shortage of merciful believers? A shortage of peacemaking believers?
9. On a scale of one to ten, what level of persecution do you think Christians in North America are experiencing? Why did you choose that number?
10. How well do you think believers today are acting as salt and light? Defend your answer.
11. Have you observed Christians being insulted or misrepresented on TV? If so, describe what you saw.
12. How can a persecuted believer rejoice and be glad?

WRAP-UP

The kind of life the Beatitudes describe can be attained only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Have a volunteer read aloud Romans 8:1–4. Ask another volunteer to pray that group members will be salt and light where they live and work.



Week 2

PERFECT LOVE

Matthew 5:17–48

Love fulfills the law.

TO THE FACILITATOR

This session emphasizes the superiority of love over law. This may be a good time for introspection. Which do you love more: teaching or the people you teach? Show your group members that you serve as their facilitator because you love them.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Jesus put the demands of the Old Testament—the Law and the Prophets—into perspective. He had not come to earth to abolish those demands, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). The law God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai set such a high standard that only Jesus could attain. The law was intended to expose sin so the recipients of the law would see how greatly they needed to be saved from their sin (Rom. 3:19–20; Gal. 3:10–11, 21–25).

The Pharisees failed to understand the law's purpose. They believed they could keep its demands plus others they had invented, and by doing so attain a measure of righteousness that God would accept. Of course, they were wrong both in their thinking and in their actions. Jesus said they were hypocrites (Matt. 23:23). In the Sermon on the Mount, he told his disciples their righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (the scribes) in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20).

True righteousness, according to Jesus, excludes murder (vv. 21–22). He equated anger with murder. In doing so, he reached beyond the act of murder and uncovered the attitude—hatred—that wishes a person were dead. The apostle John echoed Jesus' teaching by calling a murderer anyone who hates his brother or sister (1 John 3:15). Instead of hating, a truly righteous person will seek reconciliation and settle differences quickly (Matt. 5:23–26).

Jesus upheld the sacredness of marriage and insisted that adultery of the heart is as sinful as the act of adultery (vv. 27–28). Kenneth Schenck applies Jesus' words to the marriage relationship. He writes on page 35 of *The Wisdom of Jesus*: “How much better to love your own spouse than just to avoid looking at other people's spouses! Rather than seeing how close to evil we can get, we should head consistently for the good.”

The law forbade the Israelites to take God's name in vain. Invoking God's name in an oath was very serious. Anyone who used it in an oath had better keep his or her word. But an oath should

not be necessary. Truly righteous people are trustworthy. They keep their word (vv. 33–37). Furthermore, they should not seek revenge when they are mistreated, but patiently endure the injustice while they leave justice to God (vv. 38–42).

It is not hard to love those who are lovable, but it takes a righteous heart to love our enemies. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and our persecutors (vv. 43–44). Our loving God sends sunshine and rain to the unrighteous as well as to the righteous, so our love should extend beyond those who love us and include those who mistreat us (vv. 45–47).

This unbiased love reflects the intentions of the law and comes from a heart that is right with God. God is complete in his love and kindness and wants us to be complete in ours (v. 48).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How much of the law of Moses applies directly to believers today? All of it? Some of it? None of it? Defend your answer.
2. How did Jesus fulfill the law?
3. Why do so many people think they will go to heaven if they perform enough good deeds?
4. Why is it impossible to keep the whole law?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that hypocrisy is commonly practiced in religious settings?
6. Do you think it is not sinful to hate someone if you don't take any hateful action? Why or why not?
7. If someone offends you, who should take the first step toward reconciliation? Why that person?
8. How can a believer combat adulterous desires?
9. Do you think it is right or wrong for a nation to retaliate against an enemy? Why or why not?
10. How does holding a grudge hurt the person who holds it?
11. What kindness have you bestowed on someone who offended you? What resulted from your kindness?
12. How is it possible to love unlovable people?

WRAP-UP

Only complete love for God and others meets the standard of righteousness Jesus spoke about. Challenge the group to love God and others sincerely, not hypocritically.



Week 3

PRACTICING RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 6:1–18

True righteousness is done for God rather than for show.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Everyone appreciates a good listener, but listening skills are not developed easily. We seem to live in an age, when people talk more than listen. To be sure you listen well to your group members when they ask a question or make a comment, occasionally repeat what you think they said. Say something like, “John, I value what your input, and I want to be sure I heard you correctly. You said, ‘ . . . ’ Am I right?”

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

The Pharisees wanted to impress their fellow Jews by parading their religion in front of them. Their religious deeds brought them public admiration but God was not impressed. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said God does not reward hypocrisy (Matt. 6:1). The only reward for hypocritical giving is human honor (v. 2). It is better, Jesus assured his disciples, to give to help the needy by doing so quietly in the sight of God (vv. 3–4). He will see the sincerity of the giver’s heart and reward the giver.

It is also hypocritical to make a public show of religion by praying in public in order to gain attention to yourself (v. 5). God rewards prayer that arises from the heart and is offered privately (v. 6). Also, prayer accomplishes nothing if it is full of mindless repetitions (v. 7). God knows our needs, so we should mention them simply and sincerely (v. 8). Public prayer has its time and purpose, but it is never time to show off when we pray in public.

Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer in which he taught them to hold God’s name sacred, to pray for his rule to cover the earth, to ask him to meet our basic needs, to forgive our sins, and to deliver us from temptation (vv. 9–13). Jesus assured his disciples that those who are unwilling to forgive others should not expect to receive God’s forgiveness (vv. 14–15). In *The Wisdom of Jesus*, Kenneth Schenck writes: “It is the merciful who will receive mercy. It is those who forgive others who will themselves be forgiven. Seventy times seven, we are to forgive those who do us wrong” (pp. 54–55).

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day made a big show of fasting. They wanted others to see them and think they were super spiritual. The Pharisees refused to apply oil to their heads when they fasted because they wanted to call attention to their fasting by appearing gaunt (vv. 16–18). Although fasting was actually a way to deny the flesh, the Pharisees used it as an occasion to draw attention to the flesh.

Jesus repudiated the Pharisees manner of fasting. He advised those who fast to put oil on their head and wash their face so the fasting would be apparent only to God (vv. 17–18). In turn God would reward the practice of genuine righteousness.

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How might certain religious practices give hypocrites an opportunity to show off?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that the Lord's Prayer should be recited in every worship service?
3. Why should we ask God to meet our needs when he has already promised to do so?
4. Why do you agree or disagree that believers should give thanks before they eat food in a restaurant? How might this practice be done in a hypocritical way?
5. Do you think God will not save someone who has not forgiven others? Why or why not? What evidence of profaning God's name do you see in public? In the media? Among believers?
6. How might Christians effectively convey the message that God's name is and should be hallowed?
7. How can a church maintain the privacy of its members' giving?
8. How might the practice of fasting become hypocritical?
9. What measures might a believer take to fast only to God?

WRAP-UP

Encourage the group members to examine their spiritual practices and make any necessary changes to them so they will arise from the heart and proceed to God's heart.



Week 4

TRUSTING THE MASTER

Matthew 6:19–34

We should trust God and not worry.

TO THE FACILITATOR

Create a casual atmosphere in which group members find it easy to speak in the session. Begin this session by asking how everyone's past week went. What blessings, challenges, victories, or disappointments did they encounter? Explain that this session focuses on the importance of trusting God in every circumstance.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Perhaps the main motive for making a show of one's religion is to gain some material benefit. Jesus turned that thinking upside-down by contrasting eternal treasures with temporal treasures. Earthly treasures are subject to various disasters, but nothing can destroy the treasures we store in heaven (Matt. 6:19–21). In *The Wisdom of Jesus*, Kenneth Schenck observes: "In the light of eternity, it is rather foolish that we would focus our energies on earthly treasures to the exclusion of heavenly ones. When we put a few decades next to infinity, the decades basically reduce to zero" (p. 61).

Jesus warned his audience about the folly of trying to serve both God and money. He said, "No one can serve two masters" (v. 24). If we see this world as God sees it, we will choose to serve God. If we focus on material prosperity, we will worry about creature comforts. Will we have enough to eat, drink, and wear (v. 25)? Jesus said our heavenly Father cares about us and will provide for us. How can we doubt his care when we see how well he takes care of the birds and lilies of the field? The birds have enough to eat, and the lilies sport garments more glorious than those King Solomon wore. Instead of worrying, an activity that accomplishes nothing good, we ought to trust him (vv. 26–32).

Life has its priorities. We can make God and his kingdom our highest priority, or we can put material things at the top of the list. Jesus told us to seek first God and his kingdom (v. 33). Tomorrow may bring adversity, but we should not worry. If we trust in God, he will enable us to cope victoriously with whatever tomorrow brings (v. 34). On page 74 of *The Wisdom of Jesus*, Kenneth Schenck comments: "After we have done everything we can to stand, we need to let it go and let God do the rest. God will take care of us tomorrow just like he took care of today. A little sleep might actually make tomorrow better."

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How does the culture influence our values system?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that slick advertising makes it hard to say no to things we could live without?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that each of us deserves certain high-priced items?
4. How would you answer someone who claims the person who dies with the most toys wins?
5. What do you think are the top three worries on the minds of non-Christians? Do most Christians share these worries? Why or why not?
6. How has God demonstrated to you personally that you can trust him to meet your needs?
7. What kinds of treasures do you think await believers whose hearts are focused on God and his kingdom?
8. When have you found it especially hard to trust God? What did you learn from that experience?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that worry never solved a problem?
10. Do you think even churches perpetuate the notion that spirituality is the key to material prosperity?

WRAP-UP

Urge the group members to compile a list of what they sometimes worry about, and then write over the list in big letters, "I choose to trust God."



Week 5

AUTHENTIC LOVE

Matthew 7:1–14

Authentic love reaches out to others.

TO THE FACILITATOR

If you create a casual environment for your sessions, group members will be allowed to ask any question or make any comment without being ridiculed or censured. Instead, their participation will be valued, and they will be glad they belong to the group. So let them know every question and comment is welcome.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

According to Jesus, we have no right to criticize or condemn someone for something we do ourselves (Matt. 7:1). We can’t expect to receive mercy if we do not extend mercy to others (v. 2). Hypocrites are quick to find a small problem in someone else’s life but unable to see a big problem in their own life (v. 3). If we truly want to extricate a fault from another person’s life, we should first rid ourselves of our own big fault (vv. 4–5).

In *The Wisdom of Jesus*, Kenneth Schenck refers to what psychologists call projection to explain why some people find fault with others but not with themselves (p. 80). For example, Schenck notes, “A dishonest worker might distrust others because he himself is not trustworthy.”)

It is important to be receptive to Jesus’ words. Otherwise, we resemble dogs and pigs that would trample on valuables if they were given to them (v. 6).

Regardless of how we feel, we should never give up on prayer. Jesus taught his disciples to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking, because God answers prayer (vv. 7–8). Like a loving human father, God gives what is best for his children. Because he loves us, he never brings anything into our lives to hurt us (vv. 9–10). Our treatment of others should reflect God’s great love. We should treat others the way we want them to treat us (v. 12). Such loving treatment of others fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

There is only one way to heaven; Jesus is the way (John 14:6). He recognized that the number of people who enter the narrow gate and walk the narrow road is small, whereas many people enter a wide gate and walk the broad road that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13–14). Kenneth Schenck comments: “After Jesus rose from the dead, Acts tells us that thousands believed and the word began to spread. But, again, this was a small portion of the overall populace. By the 50s, when Paul wrote Romans, he struggled with the fact that most of the Jews did not accept Jesus (for example, Rom. 9:27). Eventually, Christianity would become an overwhelmingly non-Jewish phenomenon,

although only a small percentage of Gentiles believed. Narrow is the road that leads to life” (*The Wisdom of Jesus*, pp. 90–91).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that Jesus’ instructions about judging others forbids us to judge false teaching and sin?
2. In light of Jesus’ words about judging, do you think it is wrong to exercise church discipline? Why or why not?
3. Without identifying anyone, what hypocritical judging have you observed?
4. What clue(s) might suggest a faultfinder is projecting his or her own faults onto another person or group?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that it is pointless to offer the gospel to certain people?
6. Why should we not give up on prayer even when it seems God will never answer us?
7. How has God acted as a loving Father on your behalf?
8. How do you want others to treat you? How do you think others want you to treat them? In what situations is it hard to follow the Golden Rule?
9. How would you respond to someone who says God is too loving to send anyone to hell?
10. Although we know few people choose to enter the narrow gate to heaven, why should we continue to share the gospel freely and fervently?

WRAP-UP

Remind the group that authentic love reaches out to others. Conclude this week’s session by having two or three volunteers pray for the salvation of lost people.



Week 6

BUILDING YOUR HOUSE

Matthew 7:15–29

A life built on Jesus endures and is productive.

TO THE FACILITATOR

It's time for a big thank you. Thank your group for attending the sessions of this study, and thank everyone for participating in the discussions. You may want to show your appreciation by treating the group to light refreshments.

Ask if anyone in the group built their own house. What was rewarding about the effort? What difficulties did they experience? Explain that this session focuses on building a life.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Jesus made it plain that false teachers want to divert his disciples away from the path he wants them to travel. He issued a warning to watch out for them (Matt. 7:15), and he described them as masters of disguise. They look like sheep, but they are really hungry wolves. Their fruit gives them away, though (v. 16). Good fruit doesn't grow on thorn bushes or on thistles. A bad tree produces bad fruit, but a good tree produces good fruit (vv. 17–18). Similarly, a false prophet will spew false doctrine, whereas a true prophet will speak God's truth. The apostle Paul warned about false apostles, noting that Satan masquerades as an angel of light, so it isn't surprising that his emissaries disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:13–15). But Paul also pointed out, as did Jesus, that the false teachers will ultimately get what they deserve (see Matt. 7:19; 2 Cor. 11:15).

In *The Wisdom of Jesus*, Kenneth Schenck observes: "A tree that does not bear good fruit needs to be cut down; that sort of tree is thrown into the fire. The allusion to hell is clear, especially given how often Matthew alludes to hellfire. . . . Sometimes, to be sure, we produce mixed fruit. But God is very good with trees. He knows just how to turn around a tree in trouble and cultivate good fruit" (pp. 99–100).

Pious words do not surprise or fool Jesus. It is one thing to profess to know and serve him, but quite another to truly know and serve him (Matt. 7:21–22). Real Christianity is a matter of the heart, and someday the Lord will expose the hypocrisy of those who merely profess faith in him. He will banish them from his presence forever (v. 23; 25:41).

Jesus compared his true followers—those who hear and obey his words—to a wise man who built his house on a rock (7:24). The house withstood the forces of torrential rains and brutal wind, whereas the house a foolish man built on sand crashed in the storm. The foolish builder, Jesus said, represents everyone who hears his words but doesn't put them into practice (vv. 25–27).

After hearing the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were amazed at Jesus' teaching (Matt. 7:28). Unlike the religious leaders, he spoke with authority (v. 29). Our world, like the first-century world, has plenty of religion, but it needs to hear the message of Jesus. Unlike the words of empty religion, Jesus' words are authoritative and life giving (John 6:63).

FOCUS ON LIFE

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Have false teachers knocked on your door? If so, did they appear to be harmless? Why or why not?

2. What are a few errors false teachers try to spread?

3. How can a believer arm him- or herself against false teaching?

4. Why do you agree or disagree that it is possible to use biblical language in a deceptive manner?

5. How do you explain the fact that some people hear the gospel many times in church but fail to believe in Jesus as their Savior?

6. What would you say is convincing evidence that a person has trusted in Jesus as Savior? Defend your answer.

7. Why do you agree or disagree that obedience to Jesus is essential to building a secure life?

8. What kinds of flimsy materials do some individuals use in building their lives?

9. What do you think are the greatest adversities a believer might face as he or she builds his or her life on Jesus' words?

10. Why do you agree or disagree that Christians who obey Jesus' words can expect to be misunderstood and even persecuted?

11. How do you explain the fact that so many people attend churches that fail to teach God's Word?

12. How would you explain the difference between Jesus' words and the words of popular, but false, religious teachers?

WRAP-UP

Ask volunteers to share what they found most helpful in their study of *The Wisdom of Jesus*.

If your group benefited from studying *The Wisdom of Jesus* together, check out *The Witness of Jesus* and *Jesus—Portraits from the Gospels* by Kenneth Schenck, available now!