

THE
WISDOM
of JESUS

Sermon Notes

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Published by Wesleyan Publishing House
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250

These sermon notes are to be used in conjunction with *The Wisdom of Jesus* by Kenneth Schenck (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2014).

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CONTENTS

About These Notes	4
Week 1. The Winner Isn't Who You Think	5
Week 2. Love the Whole Way	7
Week 3. Who Is Your Audience?	9
Week 4. True Significance	11
Week 5. Jumping to Conclusions	13
Week 6. Building on Rock	15



ABOUT THESE NOTES

The Wisdom of Jesus forms the basis of this six-week sermon series. You and your congregation will discover how Jesus' Sermon on the Mount can apply to us today. As you depend on the Holy Spirit for illumination and ways to apply the truths Jesus taught in his sermon, you will grow in wisdom and holiness. Trust God to make you and your congregation more effective in ministering to the needs your contemporaries. He will not disappoint you!



Week 1

THE WINNER ISN'T WHO YOU THINK

Matthew 5:3–12

INTRODUCTION

Open with an example of a situation where the winner was unexpected. It could be a personal story or an interesting story from history or a clip from a movie.

Now give a little context to the Beatitudes. Week 1 of *The Wisdom of Jesus* is on the Beatitudes (pp. 9–25), as well as *Jesus—Portraits from the Gospels* (pp. 61–63). Being “blessed” is honor-shame language. It has to do with being honored more than being happy. And where we will most be honored is in the kingdom of God, which is already started but will arrive fully after Jesus returns.

The Beatitudes turn everything upside down. Those who would seem honored now (the wealthy, those with power and prestige) will not necessarily be those “on top” in the coming kingdom of God. Rather, those who suffer now, will be most honored then, when Jesus comes as king.

SERMON OUTLINE

I. The Poor are Rich

Several of the Beatitudes indicate a reversal of fortunes in the kingdom of God. Those whose situations make them mourn now, will find themselves comforted in the kingdom (Matt. 5:4).

In Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount (called the Sermon on the Plain), Jesus boldly stated that those who are poor now will be blessed, while those who are rich now will not be comforted (Luke 6:20, 24). Similarly, he stated that those who are hungry now will be fed, while those who are full now will be hungry (vv. 21, 25).

Matthew gives the spiritual version: blessed are the poor *in spirit* (Matt. 5:3) and who hunger *for righteousness* (v. 6). In both, those who seem to be “on top” now, because their values are the values of the world now, will not be the winners then in the kingdom of God. The ultimate winners are those who are part of God’s kingdom, those who have a spirit of dependence on him rather than on the world.

Bring the point home with an illustration that concretely shows how being on the right team in the long run is more important than being on the team that seems to be winning now. You might give an example of someone who took a chance on a job that involved a pay cut now or a loss of prestige now but that in the long run ended in security. You might also use the biblical story of Joseph in Genesis. He endured some hard years of “poverty” but in the end he saved his family and the kingdom of Egypt (Gen. 50:20).

II. The Meek Excel

It is counterintuitive in the world to think that the winners will be those who do not strive to win. Yet Jesus consistently taught that the last will be first (for example, Matt. 19:30). Several of the Beatitudes fall into the category of “those who do not fight to win will win in the end.”

- The meek will inherit the earth—those who are not pushy will end owning the whole thing (5:5).
- The merciful obtain mercy—while those who have to inflict defeat will lose (5:7).
- The pure in heart get to see God—while those with a heart for the world go down with it (5:8).
- The peacemakers are like God—instead of those who fight to win (5:9).

You can go any number of ways with these. There are any number of illustrations from movies or pop culture to history or the business world.

American culture tells us that you have to be assertive to get ahead, that you have to promote yourself to win. There is certainly truth to this. But in God’s eyes, winning isn’t everything. In fact, winning in this world is nothing. Christianity is primarily about promoting others rather than ourselves.

III. The Persecuted Win

A final theme in the Beatitudes is that those who are persecuted and mocked today will be “on top” in the kingdom of God. Victor Frankl, a Jew who was in a concentration camp in World War II, came to realize that a person can live with any “how” if he or she has a “why” to live. This makes an excellent illustration or you can come up with another about someone in the Bible, history, movies, or your experience who endured a period of suffering and persecution only to emerge with honor at the end. For Frankl, he did not give up hope under the Nazis, and he survived his experience where others gave up.

In the same way, while we do not want to ignore the opportunities of the present, we are ultimately living for another time and another kingdom. At times we may feel like we are foreigners in our own country (compare to Heb. 11:13–16).

CONCLUSION

What are you depending on in this life? What kingdom are you living in? Are you living in the one that is destined to end soon enough? Or are you living in the one that is going to last?

If you started with a particular illustration, you might return to it here as part of the closing and complete the loop. Also you will want to call the congregation to commitment to live as citizens of the kingdom.



Week 2

LOVE THE WHOLE WAY

Matthew 5:43–48

INTRODUCTION

You might start with a story about someone who did pretty well with something but did not finish or did not go the whole way and thus failed in some key way. It could be an example from sports or history or the Bible. It could be a personal story. It could even be a hypothetical, like a product that was mostly finished but missing some crucial final component.

Explain the context of Matthew 5:17–48. See *The Wisdom of Jesus*, week 2, and *Jesus—Portraits from the Gospels*, chapter 4.

SERMON OUTLINE

I. Jesus Calls Us to Love Everybody

You don't have to like someone to love them. Love is a choice in this context. When you are faced with choices, love does the Jesus thing, not the unloving thing. This dynamic is especially important in the case of the person who has wronged you in a significant way. Forgiveness and love, in this context, are not about feelings. They are about how you act toward others.

Again, you can use a personal story, a story from the newspaper, history, sports, or the Bible. For example, a nice cross reference here is the parable of the good Samaritan. Jesus picked the “wrong person” to be the good guy in this story. Who is the person you most do not want to “love.” That is the person you should picture in this parable.

II. Examples Jesus Gives

A. Hatred

The first example Jesus gave has to do with murder and hatred. It's not enough just not to kill anyone. Going the loving way, going the whole way, means not acting hatefully, not only in our actions, but in the choices of our minds. (See *Jesus—Portraits from the Gospels*, pages 63–66 for more details.)

B. Sexual Faithfulness

Again, it is not simply enough not to commit adultery. Do you commit adultery with your mind? Some would divorce in order to try to commit adultery legally.

C. Keeping Your Word

Going the loving way in truthfulness is not simply telling the truths when you swear by God. It is being a truthful person, someone who is dependable in what they say. This is not a matter of legalism, but a matter of being loving with your words. An important example is the person who is unloving while telling the truth—this person also violates the spirit of Jesus here.

D. Mercy Over Justice

It is common to think of these instructions as making things even harder, but that is not exactly what Jesus was doing. Jesus was not being a legalist with Scripture. In going the loving way, some of the Old Testament instruction gets shuffled (such as the “eye for an eye” instruction). Fulfilling the Law and Prophets (Matt. 5:17) sometimes means making exceptions to the rule. It involves the right priorities, with love as the chief priority.

III. What It Means to Be “Perfect”

“Perfect” in Matthew 5:48 is not about mistakes or absolute perfection. It is not about performance. It is about an attitude. It is about acting in a “complete” way.

Give a story that captures this principle, especially an example where someone is very imperfect at being perfect.

CONCLUSION

Virtue is not simply about making the right choices. Virtue is when it takes effort to make the right choices. “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?” (Matt. 5:46). As Christians, we do not believe we either have to love others alone or even can do it alone. But we have the promise that the Holy Spirit will empower us to do the right thing, the loving thing (1 Cor. 10:13).

End with a call to commitment and a challenge to live accordingly this week.



Week 3

WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

Matthew 6:5–14

INTRODUCTION

Open with an illustration where someone appears to be talking to you but is obviously really talking to someone else. For example, a young woman is talking to another woman, but really is wanting a young man to overhear that she is not doing anything Friday night. You could use a story from history, literature, or the Bible.

Now give the context of Matthew 6. You will find background material in *The Wisdom of Jesus* (pp. 43–59), as well as *Jesus—Portraits from the Gospels* (pp. 67–71).

SERMON OUTLINE

I. Where to Find Authenticity

Our parents and grandparents more or less trusted politicians, pastors, and important people. You can no doubt find many examples of this fact to introduce the concept. For example, there was incredible outrage among the American public in the late 1960s and early 1970s as vets protested the Vietnam War, even though they were the ones who had actually experienced what was going on. To find that Richard Nixon had lied and actually done the things of which he was accused was a horrible shock to the American people. Now, it seems like the opposite party wants to impeach every president. We have come to expect scandal. We assume that the squeaky clean exterior of public officials—including pastors—is not what it seems. We are cynical. We almost assume that what you see is not what you get when it comes to people in the public eye. This is a change in our culture.

Matthew 5:20 is key literary background to our passage today: “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” This would have terrified a first-century Jewish audience. Today, we assume the Pharisees were unrighteous hypocrites. They would have assumed they were the ones most righteous and closest to God.

II. Pray to Who?

Have you ever heard someone praying who said things that wouldn’t make much sense if they weren’t talking to God? Have you ever heard a pastor give a lesson to the congregation in a prayer? “Lord, we know that . . .” It’s not necessarily bad to do these things—prayer in those situations is a corporate prayer, so it is reasonable that the pray-er help facilitate bringing the prayers of everyone there to God.

So often our prayers are self-talk—talking to ourselves instead of talking to God. And there are those who are still trying to impress others when they pray publicly rather than talk to God. Who are you praying to in prayer?

Matthew 6 gives several examples of individuals who did religious things for show rather than for God. There is the religious person who gives so that he or she can be seen giving (Matt. 6:1–4). We are most honored by God (blessed) when we give without anyone knowing. Then there is the person who fasts or sacrifices so that others will see and they will get credit (Matt. 6:16–18). But the key instance has to do with prayer (Matt. 6:5–15).

III. How to Pray

We do not pray to inform God. He already knows everything.

We are incompetent pray-ers. The Holy Spirit has to help us out (Rom. 8:26).

Praying helps us. It is more for us than for God, although we owe God our praise.

Maybe God lets our prayers determine how he acts in history, how he interrupts the flow of time. So how should we pray? Jesus gives us the Lord’s Prayer as a model prayer in Matthew 6:9–13.

A. Adoration—“Hallowed be your name” (v. 9).

B. Confession—“Forgive us our debts” (v. 12).

C. Thanksgiving—“Our daily bread” (v. 11).

D. Supplication—“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (v. 13).

CONCLUSION

Who is your true audience? Are you mostly interested in what other people around you think or with what God thinks? To whom do you pray? God or those listening? Who do you sacrifice for—to serve God or to get credit?

You might challenge people to pray more authentically than ever—to adore God more than ever in prayer; to be honest with God about our failings and pray for the power to change; to thank God for all the good things and for the bad that hasn’t happened, not to take the credit ourselves; then humbly to ask for his help in needs and desires.



Week 4

TRUE SIGNIFICANCE

Matthew 6:19–34

INTRODUCTION

Open with a story where something is taken to be significant that really isn't. For example, children might fight over something the parent knows is trivial.

Matthew 6:19–34 is about what is truly significant. It is not what you see around you, the treasures of earth. And the things that should worry you are not matters of your body. The things of greatest significance are heavenly things.

For background, see week 4 in *The Wisdom of Jesus* (pp. 60–76).

SERMON OUTLINE

I. Status Non-Symbols

If you read what Jesus says in Matthew 6:19–24, what is insignificant? Money and possessions. Like so much of Jesus' teaching, he turns our worldly common sense upside down. Our first instinct is to treat those with much wealth as special. We have a tendency to envy the person with the car, the nice house, the nice clothes, the nice shoes.

There are similar distractions we might mention like fame or status. We treasure the football star, the movie star, the famous politician. In the church, we might value the pastor, the leader, maybe even a college professor. But status means nothing in the kingdom of God. The least in this world is great in the kingdom of God.

What do you look for? What makes you light up? Is it the new car? Is it the promotion? In the light of eternity, these are completely trivial things. Any number of stories and illustrations could be made, from high school status to the lives of the rich and famous in the media.

II. Passing Worries

We realize that money means nothing if there is no food to buy. You would give anything for a coat if you were freezing to death. If you were in a life boat on the ocean without water, you would give every penny you had for a drink of water.

In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus said that even needs like food, water, and clothing are things that we should not worry about. They, too, are passing things in light of eternity. And, more importantly, they are things we can trust God for.

Christians worry. It is human nature to be sure, But it is a point of inconsistency. If we really believed, if we really trusted God, we would not worry. We would trust that he is in control.

III. True Significance

Jesus told us that what is truly significant are the things that last, things associated with God and his kingdom.

We can live for what is eternal now, even while we wait for Christ. What is eternal and heavenly? God and Christ, for one. Being God's servant is more significant than being king of the world. We all have an eternal destiny. An investment in a person can yield an eternal result. That's an infinite return on your investment. Better than any financial deal you might give as an example.

Truth is eternal. People forget knowledge, but that which is true is not passing. Jesus is the truth.

CONCLUSION

Are you living for what is truly significant? If you were to add up your values and the things you are living for, what is your net worth? It's not how many stocks you have or how much you have invested. How much do you have invested in God and Christ? How much do you have invested in your family and others? Are you laying up treasures in heaven or treasures on earth? Are you worrying about the kingdom or the earth?

You might close with either a positive or negative example of either investing in heavenly things or investing in passing things.



Week 5

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Matthew 7:1–5

INTRODUCTION

Most of us who are parents can easily think of a situation where we immediately jumped to a wrong conclusion about one of our children. Maybe we immediately assumed guilt when, at least in this case, our child was innocent. There are of course many movies where this happens (for example, *The Fugitive*). There are stories from history (people wrongly lynched, “witches” burned). Prejudice is all about jumping to conclusions because of how someone looks or because they fit a certain stereotype.

Matthew 7:1–5 is about judging others. For Jesus, loving our neighbor captured all of God’s expectations for us in relation to one another. Those who judge others are not loving their neighbor.

SERMON OUTLINE

I. When We Can Judge

Judging has to do with intentions. We often don’t know why people do the things they do. We see the action but we may not know why they did it.

But consider 1 Corinthians 5, where a man was sleeping with his stepmother. Paul had no problem drawing a conclusion about this action—the man was wrong and needed to stop. Paul judged this man (1 Cor. 5:3).

It is not judging in the sense of Matthew 7 to conclude that a confessed first-degree murderer has done wrong. It is not judging to conclude that someone who has confessed to cheating on a spouse has done wrong. A person is not jumping to conclusions in such cases for the person has clearly done wrong. A concrete example from the news or a story from experience can make the point.

Although there are clearly gray areas and areas of personal conviction, there are also clear areas of right and wrong where it is not judging to conclude that a person has done wrong and where the intent is clear (for example, when a person openly admits it). To draw conclusions here is not judging.

II. Judging with Hypocrisy

What Jesus was especially concerned with in Matthew 7 was judging with hypocrisy. This is when you do the same or worse kinds of things that you criticize or condemn in others.

Psychologists have a name for this common human dynamic: projection. Projection is when, usually without even realizing it, you criticize others because you feel guilty about yourself. You subconsciously try to make yourself feel better by putting down or condemning others.

Tell a story about someone who accused someone else of something they were guilty of. Tell a story from life, the news, movies, novels, etc., that illustrates judging with hypocrisy.

This is a crucial moment of potential awareness. You might even pause and have everyone close their eyes to reflect for a moment. Ask them to reflect on who annoys them the most. What do they most criticize or condemn in others? Now ask if they do those things they find so annoying. Do they condemn others because they feel guilty about themselves?

III. Jumping to Conclusions

There is another kind of judging that has to do with assuming the worst of others when we do not have all the information. Because God requires us to love both our neighbors and enemies, it is something we must discipline ourselves not to do. When we do not know a person's intentions, we must be very careful about drawing firm conclusions about their character or motives.

Love doesn't want to find out that a person's intentions have been bad. Love should not be stupid either, of course. But love wants to see the best in others, even when in wisdom you fear less.

Again, drive the point home with a story of someone who took a chance on having faith in someone when their motives were in question. Or you could give the opposite illustration.

CONCLUSION

End with a challenge, such as in the devotional for the week. Can you go a whole week without jumping to conclusions? When you are about to criticize, pause and examine yourself first. When you are about to assume bad intentions, can you stop yourself and suspend judgment?



Week 6

BUILDING ON ROCK

Matthew 7:24–29

INTRODUCTION

Open this final sermon in the series with a recap of the previous five Sundays, a run through the Sermon on the Mount. Resources include week 6 of *The Wisdom of Jesus* (pp. 94–110) and *Jesus—Portraits from the Gospels* (pp. 71–72).

For the last five Sundays, we have made our way through the Sermon on the Mount. From one perspective, it gives the essence of what Jesus taught about how we are to live in this world. We learned what the values of the kingdom of God are, and we found out that they are not what we might think. It is not the assertive, but the meek who inherit the kingdom. It is not the rich, but the poor in spirit. It is not those who dominate, but the merciful and the peacemakers. We learned that Jesus fulfilled the law by fully orienting it around God’s command to love both friend and enemy. We were to be “perfect” and go the whole way in our loving others. Jesus didn’t just raise the standard by targeting our intentions. He shuffled the standard by orienting it around the love of others. We were reminded that God is the one we want to honor us, not other people. We were reminded that true significance comes from God, not from the things that preoccupy most people here on earth. And we heard Jesus’ teaching on not judging others.

Most of us know the children’s song: “The wise man built his house upon the rock.” Do you know what it means to build your house on rock? This “almost parable” is part of the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount. The rock is the teaching in the sermon, and the wise person is the one who builds his or her life on Jesus’ teaching in it. This is also what it means to walk through the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13–14).

SERMON OUTLINE

One idea for a sermon this week is for the body of the sermon to be a series of stories, each illustrating building on rock or sand. In keeping with the series, these stories might best be illustrations of the basic teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. One after another, perhaps no more than five minutes each, these stories might hammer home the content of the series and seal it in a way that will stay on the minds of the congregation for a long time.

The kinds of stories you might tell include:

- A story of someone who was largely unnoticed, but Christlike in the manner of the Beatitudes. This person was not considered “successful” by worldly standards, but will be a rock star in the kingdom of God. This person built his or her house on rock, and it will stay standing when the judgment comes.
- A story of someone who overcame temptation to harm another, to have an affair, to divorce to be with another person, or to seek revenge. This person built his or her house on rock, and it will stay standing when the judgment comes.
- A story of someone who prays, fasts, or gives a lot, but you might hardly notice because he or she does not do it for show, but for God. This person built his or her house on rock, and it will stay standing when the judgment comes.
- A story of someone who had good reason to worry from a human perspective, but who demonstrated a calm peace in the middle of a storm of life. This person built his or her house on rock, and it will stay standing when the judgment comes.
- A story of someone who might easily have jumped to conclusions about the motives of someone else, but who chose to suspend judgment in the name of not judging others. However, the story turned out, this person built his or her house on rock, and it will stay standing when the judgment comes.

CONCLUSION

The main content of the Sermon on the Mount ends with the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12: “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” If we were to love our neighbors and enemies, we would “fulfill” the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17). Our righteousness would then go beyond the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). We would be perfect like our heavenly Father is perfect (5:48). The person who lives this way is building his or her house on rock, and that rock will stand when the judgment comes.

Challenge the congregation to ask themselves “What would Jesus do?” in every decision they made one week. The challenge of WWJD is that people fill in the details with what they *think* Jesus would do. But the Sermon on the Mount gives us specifics. Ask yourself, “What would the Sermon on the Mount say?” about each decision you face. If you make those kinds of decisions, you will be building on rock.