

## The Gospel of Matthew

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## How to use this resource for a group study

# How to use this resource for a group study



*This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.*

- 1** Make enough copies of the Leader's Guide for everyone in the group.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

## Introduction

# Introduction for Group Leaders



*Throughout this gospel, Matthew invites us into a challenging adventure in which Jesus asks for nothing less than our wholehearted commitment. But it's also an adventure especially designed for those who feel they have little faith. It reassures them that they never have to walk alone. Jesus doesn't call spiritual experts; he continually calls the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3), the sick who need a doctor (Matt. 9:9–13), and the spiritual beginners and children (Matt. 11:25; 18:4). With particular clarity, Jesus himself provided the one and only requirement to follow him: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matt. 11:28–29).*

*So based on Jesus' big-hearted, merciful invitation, we come—not because we're worthy or qualified, not because we won't stumble or fail, not because our faith is big and strong. We come simply because he told us to come. And that's always enough.*

—From *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, by Matt Woodley

**This study guide** was designed to help a small community of people take a journey through the Gospel of Matthew. The lessons are loosely based on the book *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, published by InterVarsity Press. (**All quotes come from this commentary unless otherwise noted.**) This 16-week study is designed to accomplish the following goals:

- To walk through the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew.
- To deepen your personal love for and obedience to Jesus.
- To grow as a small community of fellow-disciples of Jesus, honestly sharing questions, burdens, and gifts along the journey.
- To deepen your compassion for the broken world around you.

## Introduction

### This study could be used in a number of settings, including:

- A leadership team that wants to grow in Christ and reach their community.
- A small group that wants a fresh approach to following Jesus.
- A church-wide study that will help the entire church learn to walk with Jesus and love the world around them.
- A one-to-one mentoring relationship.

### As you begin this study, keep in mind these guidelines:

- Each of the 16 studies is designed to last 45–60 minutes.
- It's helpful but not essential for every individual or couple to have their own copy of *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*. Each section begins with a short reading from the book to introduce the topic. Feel free to read other sections in the book, but this study guide is designed to help you engage the Bible, one another, and the Holy Spirit.
- Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Choose one of the opening questions, don't feel you have to use all of them. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- Begin and end each session in prayer. If you'd like, help your group focus all of your meetings on one of the main themes in the Gospel of Matthew—a prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer*:

*O God, who wonderfully created,  
and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature:  
Grant that we may share the divine life  
of him who humbled himself to share our humanity,  
your Son Jesus Christ;  
who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

## The Strangest Christmas Story

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# The Strangest Christmas Story



*But it's the original one.*

*From start to finish, this is the gospel of divine mercy. This Jesus is pro-sinner. He is for us, even in our sin and oddness. He is for the irregular and the preposterous. As a friend of mine said, "God chooses sinful, broken, unlikely people—who else does he have?" So this is the story of Jesus' mercy. He saves his people from their sins (1:21). He plunges into the river as he identifies with sinners at his baptism (3:13–15). He treats sick people, not the alleged healthy people (9:9–13). He dies pinned to a cross between two sinners (27:38). "Look at this Messiah, this Jesus, this Savior," Matthew gasps and then exclaims that Jesus even has sinners in his family tree! And if our Lord and Master and Messiah lives and dies for sinners and oddballs, then his followers must love them too.*

Scripture: [Matthew 1:1–2:23](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*

## The Strangest Christmas Story

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

If you would like to provide more background on this section, read pages 24–18 in *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*.

Read Matthew 1:1–17.

#### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** When you were growing up, what was one of the first stories that captured your imagination?

**[Q]** When did you make your first serious attempt to read the Bible on your own, and what did you think? Was it boring or exciting? What were your first reactions to the Bible?

**[Q]** When you were growing up, what family traditions made Christmas safe, familiar, or fun?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Learning about Jesus' birth gives us insight into who he would become.

Read Matthew 1:18–25.

An early Greek philosopher ridiculed the Incarnation by asking, “How can one admit (God) should become an embryo, that after his birth he is put in swaddling clothes, that he is soiled with blood and bile and worse things yet?”

**[Q]** Why is the idea of the Incarnation (God taking on human flesh and being born in a lowly manger) such a shocking concept?

- What helps you remember the wonder of the Incarnation?

**[Q]** What was the cost of the Incarnation for Joseph and Mary?

- What can we learn about following Jesus from the way they responded to that cost?

**[Q]** What are the two key names listed for Jesus in this passage?

## The Strangest Christmas Story

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** Since Matthew could have focused on many other names for Jesus, what is he trying to tell us about Jesus by highlighting these two names?

**[Q]** What is he saying about the nature of Jesus and the rest of this gospel?

**Teaching Point Two: The main characters in chapter 2 represent our search for God (the Magi), our flight from God (Herod), and God's vulnerable love for us (Jesus, the child).**

Read Matthew 2.

Herod represents an extreme example of human rebellion, yet is there any way that you can identify with Herod's rebellion against God? Consider this quote: "Like Herod, I'm not just an imperfect human who needs a little improvement; I'm a rebel who must lay down his arms. I'm a runaway who must come home. . . . I am *incurvatus in se*, curved in upon myself and bent away from God" (p. 37).

**[Q]** Imagine what the Magi's search must have looked like. How did they search for God—and how did God search for them?

**[Q]** What difference does it make that the Jewish people would have viewed the Magi as pagan outsiders?

**[Q]** What is Matthew's point in including them in the Christmas story?

**[Q]** Based on Matthew 2:1–18, how would you describe Herod's personality and his rebellion against God?

Matt Woodley writes, "Opening our lives to God's grace requires a miracle. For many people this miraculous opening to grace comes through an experience of powerlessness—perhaps a failure, an addiction, a deep sorrow, or a defeat."

**[Q]** What was the miracle that helped open your life to God's grace?

**Teaching Point Three: Jesus came for those who are most vulnerable.**

"[In chapter 2], Matthew foreshadows another great theme in this Gospel: King Jesus sides with the scorned (i.e. Mary), the sick and demonized (Matt. 4:23–24), the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3), the persecuted and hunted (Matt. 5:10–12), the anxious and 'little-faithed' (Matt. 6:25–34), the outcasts (Matt.8:1), the 'sick' sinners (Matt. 9:9–11), the 'little children' (Matt.11:25–27), the burnt-out and burdened (Matt.11:28–30). . . . In a very practical way, Matthew's real Christmas

## The Strangest Christmas Story

### Leader's Guide

story shapes the mission of the church. From its foundation, the church recalls that King Jesus, the one who came to us in utter vulnerability, also calls us to care for the ‘children,’ the weak and the oppressed, the hunted and hated, the sick and sin-infested.”

**[Q]** Who are the outsiders, the little-faithed people, the persecuted and hunted, the sinners, or the burnt-out and burdened people in our community? Be as specific as possible.

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

“On four occasions in chapter 2 (see verses 5, 13, 17–18, 23), Matthew reminds us that the Scriptures are coming to life. History—even our personal histories, so littered with betrayals and failures and losses—cannot overwhelm the hope of God’s story. Over and over again Matthew will insist that God’s plan is being fulfilled. Even when everything looks bleak, God is still among us working out a plan for world history” (see pages 39–40).

**Action Point:** How can we pray for those who are unaware of the Incarnation? And is there anything besides prayer that you (or we) can do for someone this week?

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken



## The Big Story of Jesus' Mission

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# The Big Story of Jesus' Mission



*It's all about the kingdom.*

*In Matthew's gospel, the arrival of the kingdom in and through Jesus is the major theme. At the end of chapter 4, and then again at the end of chapter 9, Matthew pauses and provides a mini-summary of Jesus' life and work. On both occasions Matthew uses almost identical words to say, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35).*

Scripture: [Matthew 3:1–4:25](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 40–50

# The Big Story of Jesus' Mission

Leader's Guide

## Part 1 Identify the Issue

Jesus never said or implied that the kingdom of heaven will start after you die, or the kingdom of heaven is here if you try harder. In his words and in his actions, Jesus declared that the kingdom of heaven is here right now, in this place (even lowly Galilee of all places), in his presence, and it's for you—yes, you ordinary, little, spiritually poor, mourning, meek, hungry, mercy-giving, peacemaking people. Jesus was the kingdom-bearer; anyone who trusted him could enter God's promise of a new creation under the King's reign.

### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Tell your baptism story, whether it occurred when you were a baby, child, teen, or adult.
- [Q] Describe what being “dead to sin and alive to Christ” means in your life today.
- [Q] If you were familiar with it as a child, what was your opinion of the Old Testament? Was it confusing, scary, beautiful, or harsh? How has your relationship with the Old Testament changed, if at all?
- [Q] When you think about the kingdom of God, what comes to mind?
  - How expansive is your view of God's restoration?

## Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

**Teaching Point One: The baptism of Jesus has a two-fold purpose: First, it confirms Jesus' divinity as the true Son of God (Matt. 3:17). Second, Jesus is baptized to show us that he is standing with us in our broken, sinful state.**

Matt Woodley describes John the Baptist as a “hairy, uncouth, insect-grubbing bozo of the backwoods railing at you about your need to repent.” Read Matthew 3:1–17.

- [Q] Put yourself in the shoes of Jews in John the Baptist's day. What is so startling about him? What does this wild picture say about the coming one (Jesus) and his gospel message?
- [Q] What does Jesus' baptism have in common with his death on the cross, the ultimate display of Christ being “with us”?

**Teaching Point Two: The temptation of Jesus reveals how he overcomes the “fog” of Satan and fulfills the broken story of humanity.**

## The Big Story of Jesus' Mission

### Leader's Guide

When tempting Jesus, Satan cut him to his very core and identity as the Son of God. Read Matthew 4:1–11.

**[Q]** How did Jesus use Satan's own tactic of quoting Scripture to combat Satan's cunning promises?

Read Hebrews 2:14–18.

**[Q]** According to this passage, why was it significant that Jesus was tempted by Satan and overcame the confusion of Satan's deception?

- What does it mean for us as we struggle with temptation?

### **Teaching Point Three: Talk of the kingdom of heaven began in the Old Testament, long before Jesus began to talk about it.**

Read Matthew 4:12–25.

Jesus declared, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 4:17). We won't understand the story of the kingdom unless we get the big picture. The kingdom of heaven didn't start when Jesus showed up by the shores of the Sea of Galilee; God told his people about the kingdom way back in Old Testament times.

**[Q]** Why do you think it's so important that we understand the context of the “big story”?

**[Q]** What was so surprising about the humble, “non-flashy” way Jesus started his ministry—preaching, healing the sick, and casting out demons?

**[Q]** Jesus understood the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in its broadest, most comprehensive sense in relation to calling his disciples in Matthew 4:18–22. Why do you think Jesus intentionally started his kingdom movement in community?

**[Q]** Look at some of the Old Testament messianic promises (Isa. 2:2, 4; 11:4, 6, 9; 61:1; 65:17–19). Why do you think Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of heaven being near was so significant for the people who had spent centuries waiting for it?

**[Q]** “Forging a community is part of kingdom living. It's the place where our egos can slowly shrivel and die because God delights to throw us together with people who love so poorly (and then they have to deal with our pathetic attempts at love).” Describe an experience when you were transformed because of a struggle or conflict you worked through in community.

# The Big Story of Jesus' Mission

Leader's Guide

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

How should we, the followers of Jesus the King, respond to the large, global problem of exploitation to feed worldwide consumerism? Do we ignore it and say it's not our problem, or our nation's problem? No, because the coming king will redeem every facet of this broken planet. Do I neglect this story because God only cares about my personal relationship with Jesus? No, because the coming king cares about both our salvation and justice for the poor and oppressed. If the kingdom of heaven is indeed coming now in the presence of Jesus, then as his followers we will care about the mistreatment of children around the world. We will also care about our choices as consumers, and how those choices may promote exploitation rather than compassion. I will consider these things because King Jesus and his coming kingdom address large, global issues of economic justice, human rights, and environmental wholeness. There is nothing that does not have kingdom implications.

**[Q]** What seemingly small choices that we make might have an impact on others around the globe?

**[Q]** How are these choices connected to the "big story" of Jesus' kingdom?

### Action Points:

- **As a group, make a list of realistic consumer choices you can make to address the reality of kingdom restoration. Pray that the Lord will reveal the ones that you should be proactive about.**

- **"The kingdom comes into small and personal places, like our struggle with bladder cancer, depression, sexual temptation or a drug addiction. It comes to a father fretting about his wayward daughter. It comes to my friend 'Curt,' who daily faces the fear of living with HIV/AIDS, the yearning to connect with a woman and be married someday, the struggle to pay his rent and medical expenses, and his intense battle to live in obedience to King Jesus. It's never easy, but if Jesus' kingdom power and presence doesn't flow to Curt and the rest of us, through the community of Jesus' people, it certainly can't heal global issues of poverty, human rights and war." What are the "small and personal places" in your life? This week, pray that Jesus will break into those places with the power and good news of his kingdom as you submit to his reign.**

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 1

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# Real Life with Jesus—Part 1



*You were a pauper and he made you rich.*

*Once again, Jesus' way isn't reserved for an elite cadre of spiritual superheroes. It's a path available for flawed and struggling non-heroes—the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, and the merciful. These people inherit the coming kingdom of Jesus. How? Take one example: when you're poor in spirit, when you know how much you needed and still need God's grace, when you realize you had no claim on God to give you anything, and yet he saved you, he loved you—no, he lavished you with grace and healing way beyond what you ever could have earned—then how could you possibly look with contempt on another human being? You will obey Jesus' words in Matthew 5:21–26 because you have experienced and continue to experience God's abundant, undeserved grace. You were a pauper and he made you rich. Once that sinks in, your anger, resentment, and contempt, which used to look so attractive and justified, suddenly feel petty and mean-spirited.*

Scripture: [Matthew 5:1–48](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 56–76

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 1

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

In *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, Ray, the gruff recovering alcoholic on pages 56–57, called Jesus' teachings “weird, unrealistic, and negative.”

#### Discussion Questions:

[Q] What were your initial and honest reactions to Jesus' teaching? Did you find them beautiful, liberating, shocking, difficult, harsh, or something else?

[Q] When you were in grade school, who or what kinds of kids did you have a hard time including or liking?

[Q] Obviously, there's nothing quite like salt to spice up and preserve food. But what are some of your favorite spices besides salt and pepper?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus turns our understanding of life upside down.

Read the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12). Most New Testament scholars believe that these verses serve as the foundation for the entire Sermon on the Mount.

[Q] What strikes you about these statements from Jesus?

[Q] What kind of person gets blessed by Jesus? What does Jesus promise in the Beatitudes?

[Q] Referring to Matthew 5:3, author Tim Keller claims that many Christians would rather be “middle-class in spirit” than “poor in spirit.” What do you think he meant by that? Why is it so hard to admit that we are *poor* in spirit?

#### Teaching Point Two: Jesus calls us to a radically different lifestyle as he points us to himself.

Read Matthew 5:13–16.

[Q] Notice that Jesus did not say, “You must start acting like salt and light.” He told his disciples, “You are [and the Greek construction is emphatic, as in “You, yes really you . . .”] the salt of the earth . . . the light of the world.” What are the implications of this for you personally?

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 1

### Leader's Guide

Read Matthew 5:17–37.

**[Q]** What is Jesus trying to say about his own identity and authority in this passage?

**[Q]** What is Jesus saying about anger/contempt and sexual lust in this passage?

**[Q]** Remember the flow of Jesus' sermon in this chapter—it started with Matthew 5:3 and the rest of the Beatitudes. What difference does that make as we try to obey Jesus' teaching in the rest of this section?

**Optional Activity:** *Break into pairs and discuss what Jesus said about anger and lust. Pair women with women and men with men. Obviously, this gets into the nitty-gritty of our lives. Where do you struggle the most with living out Jesus' words in these verses?*

### Teaching Point Three: Jesus tells us to love our enemies.

Read Matthew 5:38–48.

**[Q]** How would you summarize Jesus' message in this passage?

**[Q]** What does Jesus tell us about the character of his (and our) heavenly Father in this passage?

**[Q]** After reading this passage, the famous atheist Bertrand Russell once quipped, “The Christian principle, ‘Love your enemies’ is good. . . . There is nothing to be said against it except that it is too difficult for most of us to practice sincerely.” Was he right? If not, how can we “practice sincerely” Jesus' words in verses 38–48?

**[Q]** What difference does it make if you look at Jesus' specific examples in these verses as “case studies” rather than specific rules?

(See *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 73–74.)

**[Q]** Has anyone in this group displayed the kind of welcoming love that Jesus mentions in verses 43–44? Share that experience with us.

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Quietly reread Jesus' words in Matthew 5:3–12. Spend a few minutes in silent prayer and reflection.

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 1

Leader's Guide

### Action Points:

- Based on Jesus' words in the Beatitudes, how can we pray for you?
- What is one small, practical way that you can be the "salt of the earth" or the "light of the world" this week?
- What is one step our whole group can take to fulfill our identity as salt and light for Jesus' sake?

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken



## Real Life with Jesus—Part 2

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# Real Life with Jesus—Part 2



*Jesus demonstrated a triune God of love.*

*The underlying vision in Matthew 6 is that Jesus keeps pointing us to his Father's healing, filling, satisfying love. In Matthew 7:11 Jesus urges his disciples to come and ask God for their needs because "your Father in heaven [gives] good gifts to those who ask him." In this passage of 18 verses, Jesus refers to God as "Father" nine times. At his baptism (Matt. 3:17), Jesus heard his Father's word of blessing and affirmation.*

Scripture: [Matthew 6:1–7:27](#)

Based On: [The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us](#), pages 76–96

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 2

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Matthew's gospel provides a startling picture of what constantly flows in the life of the triune God: God the Father affirms and delights in God the Son; God the Son praises the Father and "lives off" his love; the Spirit descends into the middle of this love feast (see Matthew 3:16), relishing and delighting in this dance of love.

#### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Name a time when you received unexpected affirmation from another person. How did that feel, and why?
- [Q] Have you ever given a gift anonymously? What was fun or exciting about that experience?
- [Q] What songs or Scripture verses do you still remember from your childhood? Why do you think these have stuck in your memory?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus addresses our obsessive need for affirmation, our leaky-bucket hearts.

Matt Woodley writes that Jesus is essentially saying, "First, you have to heal your broken, leaky, needy heart; and there's only one thing that can fill the cracks: my Father's love."

Read Matthew 6:1–8 and 16–18.

Jesus' teaching in this passage has five parts: the Command (v. 1), the Warning (v. 1b), the Examples (vv.s 2–4, 5–8, and 9–15), the Consequences (vv. 2, 5, and 16), and the Promise (vv. 4, 6, and 18).

- [Q] Why do you think Jesus outlines it this way?
- [Q] In these 18 verses, Jesus talks about God as Father nine times. What is Jesus saying here about how our leaky buckets can *truly* be filled, and even fixed?
- [Q] Look at the warning Jesus gives in verse 1. Here, Jesus addresses the hypocrites, those who seek the attention of others. According to these verses, why must we choose between the affirmation of others and the affirmation of God?

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 2

### Leader's Guide

#### **Teaching Point Two: Jesus taught us how to pray by giving us a model prayer.**

Read Matthew 6:9–15.

**[Q]** Why do you think Jesus gave us such a simple prayer, a prayer that even children can say? How does its simplicity allow the words to take root in our hearts?

**[Q]** The Lord's Prayer starts with two huge revelations about God's character: his tender fatherhood and his awesome holiness ("Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name"). In light of these truths, how is Jesus saying his followers should approach God in prayer?

**[Q]** When we pray the first sentence of the Lord's Prayer, it becomes "our request for God to do what only God can do—make his name holy, distinct, and central in our lives and throughout all of creation. The passive voice ('hallowed be') instead of the active ('hallow') preserves God's sovereignty and prevents the prayer from being a command." What is the danger in praying the prayer as a command?

#### **Teaching Point Three: Jesus is not only with us, he is for us—but he warns us against judging others and the importance of obedience.**

Read Matthew 6:19–34.

Jesus is for us so much, in fact, that he wants to free us from the lesser treasures that we hold.

**[Q]** How is Jesus setting us free in this passage?

Read Matthew 7:1–6.

Jesus lays out a three-step approach to judging others: Start noticing the log in your eye (v. 3); spend less time and energy focusing on your neighbor's eye-specks (v. 4); and develop a plan to remove your own logs (v. 5).

**[Q]** Why do you think Jesus put the steps in this particular order?

Read Matthew 7:13–27, and then read Isaiah 1:11–17.

**[Q]** How are these passages connected?

**[Q]** In the four examples in Matthew, what is Jesus saying about obedience?

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 2

### Leader's Guide

**Optional Activity:** *Matt Woodley writes, “Jesus wants us to go deeper: the kingdom of God is all about restoration, bringing wholeness out of our wreckage. . . . Now whenever I see my neighbor’s brokenness, it’s not an opportunity to cast judgment, to perpetuate the cycle of condemnation. Instead, in and through Jesus, it’s a chance to offer the cold, clear water of mercy.” Name a time when you were able to offer Christ’s mercy, rather than judgment. Then, talk about a time when someone did the same for you.*

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

With our colossal supermarkets and oversized refrigerator-freezers, it’s difficult to empathize with a prayer for “daily” food. After all, we have enough food for the next six weeks. But for people of Jesus’ day, and for billions of people on our planet today, food does come on a daily basis. So as we consistently pray this prayer, it trains us to walk with the underfed people of this world (and perhaps our unemployed neighbors) who wonder if they’ll get a meal by nightfall. In our overfed but anxious culture, this prayer also trains us to trust our heavenly Father on a daily basis for all of our needs. I can’t do much of anything—battle my addictions, confess my sin, help my neighbor, care for my children, trust God to care for loved ones—unless I do it one day at a time.

**[Q]** In light of the excerpt above, what does asking for our “daily bread” really mean for others who don’t always have their needs met? What can that dependence teach us?

**[Q]** Praying the Lord’s Prayer “acknowledges the correct order: it begins with God’s name (‘hallowed be your name’), God’s activity, God’s character, and God’s initiative.” What does this mean for loving our world?

**[Q]** When we’re free from worry and anxiety, as Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:19–34, what is our response? How does freedom from consumerism lead to giving ourselves—and our stuff and money—away freely?

According to this gospel, Jesus is not only God-for-us, giving advice for a truly joyful life; he’s also God-with-us in Jesus. In other words, if just anyone told us, “Don’t be so anxious, trust God, enjoy the birds and the lilies,” we might gag with disgust. Jesus wasn’t merely the Man of Joy and Delight; he was also the Man of Sorrows, the God who plunged into our deepest darkness, the one who walks with us through our pain and suffering, the one who was crucified between two sinners, the one who stood by his friend Peter during Peter’s most crushing personal failure. He is for us and he is with us. He shows us the Father’s heart. He lived in loving, joyful, trust-filled union with the Father. And even in our darkest and most anxious moments, he invites us to trust in his Father as well.

## Real Life with Jesus—Part 2

Leader's Guide

**Action Point:** As a group, ask the Lord to reveal what other masters you may be clinging to. Invite Jesus to detach you from those things that make you anxious so that you may be free to fully enter a life with him.

*—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken*

## The Beauty of Being Present

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# The Beauty of Being Present



*Jesus cared about the suffering of others.*

*A few years ago I spent ten hours a week for 30 weeks visiting chronically sick patients in a large university hospital. After completing my 300 hours of visitation, I concluded that our modern hospitals—efficient, bright, and sterilized—qualify as some of the loneliest places on the planet. These long-term patients were receiving exceptional medical care, but they were often lonely, scared, and angry. Health care professionals could discuss diagnoses, prognoses, medications, and treatment options; but they almost never engaged a patient's agony or abandonment. I discovered that the worst thing about illness isn't the viruses or tumors or clogged arteries; it's the fear and isolation and despair.*

Scripture: [Matthew 8:1–9:34](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 96–111

## The Beauty of Being Present

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

#### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** Have you or a family member had a memorable experience (either positive or negative) while staying in a hospital? What happened?

**[Q]** Have you ever known an especially compassionate and attentive doctor, nurse, or medical care provider? Who was it and what made this person's medical care so memorable?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus healed, forgave, showed compassion, and restored broken lives.

Matthew 8 and 9 contain a number of stories about the power of Jesus' personal presence to heal, forgive, show compassion, and restore broken human lives:

- Matthew 8:1–4—The encounter with the leper
- Matthew 8:14–17—The encounter with Peter's mother-in-law
- Matthew 8:28–34—The encounter with two demoniacs
- Matthew 9:1–8—The encounter with the paralytic

**[Q]** Each of these four stories contains rich theological insights, but for now, stay focused on one thing: How did Jesus show up and be present? Walk briefly through each story and answer the following questions:

- What was the situation?
- What did Jesus say?
- What did he do—or not do—for the person needing help?

**[Q]** Based on all four of these encounters with Jesus, how would you describe his character? What else do you notice about Jesus' personal presence?

#### Teaching Point Two: Jesus demonstrated his character and call through his miracles.

Read Matthew 8:22–27.

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**[Q]** What does this passage tell us about the person and call of Jesus?

**Note to Leader:** Verses 21–22 are sometimes confusing to people. For more background on these verses, see *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, page 104.

**[Q]** Based on these verses, how would you describe what it means to be Jesus' disciple?

### Teaching Point Three: Jesus treated each individual uniquely.

As those who are connected to Jesus, trusting him in our spiritual poverty, we offer others the personal presence of Jesus. By touching others we are offering them the touch of Jesus. In our often impersonal culture, marked by deep loneliness, this “ministry of presence”—offering the presence of Christ, God-with-us, to others in their isolation and pain—is certainly an amazing privilege and calling.

When ancient translators of the New Testament translated Matthew 9 into Latin, they titled this chapter *desperation in extremis*, or extreme desperation. Interestingly, in verses 8–31 Matthew weaves together three stories of extreme desperation:

- The synagogue official
- The woman with the hemorrhage
- The two blind men

**[Q]** How were these people different? How were they alike? How did Jesus treat them?

**[Q]** What kinds of people in our society desperately need the healing presence of Jesus?

**[Q]** More specifically, who needs the presence of Christ this week? What is one practical way you can display the presence of Jesus?

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Read the following quote from *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*:

Recently I attended a worship service in Kansas City. I was moved by the sermon, a simple message focusing on Jesus' words from the cross—“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”—and the pastor's invitation to trust Jesus for our sins and our needs. At the close



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of the service, as we bowed our heads and prayed with our eyes closed, he asked us to raise our hands if we were struggling to trust in the care of our Heavenly Father. I knew I needed to raise my hand. I was living with a gaping wound of mistrust and anxiety, but for some reason I resisted raising my hand. Yes, I'm needy, I argued with myself, but I'm not *that* needy. I don't want to admit to God and to this community that I'm powerless to trust God. I don't want others to see that I'm as desperate as a despised tax-collector, a band of sinners, a grieving synagogue ruler, a chronically sick woman, two blind men or a mute demoniac. So I didn't raise my hand. I refused to display my need for Jesus. I have a hunch that almost everyone else in that service did the same thing. But by being dishonest about our wounds, we cut ourselves off from the flow of Jesus' mercy. Rather than approaching Jesus with confidence we flee from him.

**[Q]** Why do you think many of us are afraid to admit our need for Jesus?

**Action Point:** Spend some time in silence in the presence of the Jesus you've encountered in these stories. What is one way that you need Jesus in the upcoming week? Pray for each other about this need.

—*Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken*

## Disciples of Jesus—Unlikely Heroes

Leader's Guide

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# Disciples of Jesus— Unlikely Heroes



*Jesus calls the most surprising people.*

*Matthew 10 is surprising because most lists of heroes in the ancient world contained short descriptions of the hero's amazing exploits. So, for example, we read about the "much traveled Odysseus, the man of many ways" or "Hector, the breaker of horses." But in this list of 12 disciples the only descriptions are given to colossal failures—i.e. "Matthew the tax-collector." By including these descriptions, this gospel wants to declare, "Look at the kinds of people Jesus will choose. Look what God can do in and through and with such imperfect people. Look at how Jesus transforms such unlikely heroes." In chapter 10, Matthew recounts Jesus' selection of an entire band of unlikely heroes. There are only two spectacular things about this list of disciples: (1) they are utterly unspectacular in themselves; (2) they have become spectacular through their union with Jesus.*

Scripture: [Matthew 10:1–42](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 111–121

## Disciples of Jesus—Unlikely Heroes

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

Jesus doesn't call spectacular people to heroic deeds of glitzy faith. He calls the ordinary, the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3), those whose good deeds are hidden (Matt. 6:1–18), the quietly obedient (Matt. 7:21–27), the simple children (Matt. 11:25), the bruised reeds and the smoldering wicks (Matt. 12:20). God calls little and unspectacular people like you and me, the “things that are not” (Paul's phrase in 1 Corinthians 1:28), so that no one will boast before God, and everyone will know that it's God's power working through us to heal and transform this broken world. Of course, in the scope of Matthew's gospel, this will happen only as Jesus' followers depend on him, trusting him and obeying his words.

#### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** As a child, who was your favorite superhero or real-life hero? What about them made them so appealing to you?

**[Q]** Bilbo Baggins, from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, was an unlikely hero. Name some other unlikely heroes from literature, film, or pop culture.

**[Q]** When you were a child, were you ever bullied? What was your response to that person?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: The Old and New Testament themes are the same.

Read Matthew 10:1 and Genesis 1:26.

**[Q]** How do you think these two passages about God giving humans authority on earth are connected?

God kept telling his chosen people that they were chosen for a special purpose: to share God's love with the world. They were blessed in order to be a blessing to others. It's as if God's blessing always starts small and particular, like a single tiny seed, before it can spread out like a broad, beautiful, and fruit-bearing tree.

**[Q]** In this light, what was strategic about the way Jesus chose his disciples? What was surprising?

Read Matthew 10:8.

**[Q]** What four actions does Jesus give his disciples?

## Disciples of Jesus—Unlikely Heroes

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**[Q]** What do these acts of physical restoration say about Jesus' overall mission for the restoration of all things?

**[Q]** Why do you think it's accurate to call Jesus' disciples "unlikely heroes"?

**[Q]** What is the gospel writer Matthew saying about those who follow and are restored by Jesus?

### **Teaching Point Two: As we fulfill Christ's call, we need to be both innocent and shrewd.**

Read Matthew 10:11–15.

**[Q]** How might these verses have encouraged the disciples as they were sent out, especially in light of the rest of the chapter?

Read Matthew 10:16–42.

**[Q]** According to Jesus, what should his disciples expect to encounter as they share his message?

In this intense passage, Jesus tells his disciples to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves—or as Matt Woodley puts it, "Sheep are innocent and gentle but they don't have to be stupid."

**[Q]** What is Jesus telling his disciples about how they should live in a world saturated with wolves?

**[Q]** In this passage, Jesus mentions God as Father four times. What is he saying about God the Father in this passage?

**[Q]** What hope do we have in a world filled with cruel people and despair?

**Optional Activity:** *Break into pairs. Talk about a time when you felt persecuted for your belief in Christ, even in a small way, or a time when you were simply the victim of a wolf-like person. Did you respond shrewdly, innocently, and sheep-like, or did you respond with a wolf-like attitude? Describe how that scenario drew you closer to Christ as you trusted that he was with you, just as he promised his disciples.*

## Disciples of Jesus—Unlikely Heroes

Leader's Guide

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Sadly, throughout history, the church has often acted like a pack of wolves. Jesus' "sheep" have perpetrated all kinds of nasty acts of aggression. So when people look at the church and cry, "Wolves!" (i.e. the Crusades, Inquisitions, heresy-hunters, colonialists, scientist-punishers, slave traders, atheist-haters, gay-bashers, etc.), we can simply confess, "You're right: at times we have failed miserably to follow and obey Jesus and I am horribly sorry." But we can also calmly, confidently, and lovingly say, "But our Lord never wanted wolf-like followers. It's our fault, not his."

**[Q]** Why do you think many of us are afraid to admit our need for Jesus?

#### Action Points:

- **How have we, as primarily Western Christians, been guilty of acting like wolves? As a group, pray for forgiveness from individual and corporate sins.**
- **In Matthew 10, Jesus is talking to his disciples about some intense persecution. We don't usually experience that in the same ways as other Christians in the world. What are some ways we can love and serve those Christians who are persecuted for their faith?**
- **In Matthew 10:31, Jesus says, "So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." What is he saying about the sanctity of human life? Spend some time praying for the "least of these" in our culture: "the unborn and aged, the defective and disabled, the marginalized and shoved-aside, the politically hated or despised, the victims of violence and genocide."**
- **This week, what do you need as a Bilbo Baggins-like "unlikely hero"? Where do you need God's courage and perseverance for the battles that you're facing?**

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken

## Fighting for Redemption

Leader's Guide

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# Fighting for Redemption



*Jesus' claims stirred up a lot of controversy.*

*Some people seem to attract trouble wherever they go. Jesus certainly fit that description—except he wasn't looking for it; the controversy just came with his identity and mission. Of course, whenever someone walks around town making or accepting claims like Jesus did—Son of Man, Son of David, Lord of the Sabbath, Interpreter of the Law, and Bearer of the Kingdom—they're bound to create some strong reactions.*

Scripture: [Matthew 11:1–12:50](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 56–76

## Fighting for Redemption

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

In Matthew 11–12, the responses to Jesus start rolling in, and they're not always warm and fuzzy.

#### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** When you were under age 12, how did you get into trouble?

**[Q]** Can you recall a time, relationship, or incident in which you felt misunderstood? What happened and how did you react?

**[Q]** Describe how your family of origin dealt with conflict. Did people in your family tend to avoid conflict, talk honestly about conflict, or escalate conflict?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus doesn't always act as we think he will.

This section opens with even John the Baptist starting to misunderstand or question the identity and mission of Jesus. Read Matthew 11:1–6.

**[Q]** Why and how did John the Baptist struggle with Jesus?

**[Q]** How did Jesus respond to John's doubts and struggles, and what does that say about how Jesus will respond to your doubts and struggles?

#### Teaching Point Two: There is no "inside track" with Jesus.

Jesus addresses those who thought they had the "inside track" when it came to their faith in God. Read Matthew 11:20–24.

**[Q]** How does Jesus respond to these alleged inside-track "believers"? What is Jesus' main problem with them?

**[Q]** When and how do we sometimes assume that we have the inside track in our relationship with Christ? Why is that so dangerous?

**Optional Activity:** *As a group, take a few minutes to slow down and prayerfully pay attention to Jesus' prayer/invitation in Matthew 11:25–30. Here's an exercise to help ponder these verses: Read the passage out loud once and then allow for 1–2 minutes of silence. Read it out loud again and allow for*

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*another 1–2 minutes of silence. Then ask: What word or phrase from this passage strikes you the most? Why? (Note: The ancient church had a name for this practice of listening, reflecting, and praying on Scripture. They called it lectio divina.)*

### Teaching Point Three: Jesus fought for the truth.

Read Matthew 12:1–14, where Jesus has two run-ins with the religious authorities.

**[Q]** You can tell a lot about someone by what they're willing to fight for. What were the Pharisees fighting for in these two controversies?

- What was Jesus fighting for?

Throughout Matthew, Jesus was continually conveying his real identity. Read Matthew 12:6 and 12:8.

**[Q]** What do these verses say about who Jesus is?

**Note to Leader:** *In order to understand how shocking these statements would have sounded to Jesus' original hearers, keep in mind what the temple and the Sabbath meant to the Jewish people of Jesus' day.*

Of course Jesus didn't just fight for the sake of causing trouble. Read Matthew 12:15–21.

**[Q]** Describe Jesus' "fighting style." How did Jesus fight for what was right and true?

**[Q]** Can you think of a time when you fought for something important but your attitude (or your "fighting style") was unlike Jesus' style? How could you have handled the situation differently?

There's one more major controversy in Matthew 12:22–32.

**[Q]** What happened? How did the Pharisees respond to Jesus this time? How did Jesus reply to their accusations?

**Note to Leader:** *For some background on the "unforgivable sin" mentioned in verses 31–32, see The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us, pages 139–141.*



## Fighting for Redemption

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### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

“Jesus doesn’t just identify our brokenness; he also offers to transform us, other people, and all of his broken creation. So whenever or wherever a human life or a situation is distorted, broken, bent, confused, or perverted Jesus sees it and then moves toward that need with his compassion and power. Jesus has an internal, irrepressible drive towards transformation and wholeness; he wants to see broken lives transformed into their God-ordained beauty and glory.”

Matt Woodley quoted a young American serviceman who sent him the following story about Christ’s redemptive work in his life:

I was reading the best car magazine ever, *Sport Compact Car*. I have this obsession with rice rockets, little import cars with insanely large turbos and modified engines. Flipping through my magazines I am filled with hope and dreams of my own project car. But my favorite stories are ones where the cars have been salvaged from rust and ruin, and made into show-winning tuners. It reminds me of Jesus. Where others see a rusty, broken vehicle, a true tuner will see hidden potential. And when Jesus sees me, does he see a broken down man or something more? Redemption is like working on a project car. Jesus is the mechanic and I am the busted junker that needs repairing.

#### Action Points:

- **Where have you or where do you see Jesus repairing your life these days?**
- **As you think about your life, where do you feel like God is calling you to move with Christ’s compassion to help someone who is distorted, broken, bent, confused, or perverted? (Keep in mind that this could be a “big” or a “small” issue or situation.)**

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken

## Joy Happens with Jesus Around

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# Joy Happens with Jesus Around



*But we need to take time to listen.*

*There is nothing better than spending your life for the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said. Ultimately, it is the only treasure that brings true joy. It's worth living and dying for, and God wants to give it to us. Two times in this story Jesus tells us that his heavenly Father wants us to have treasure and joy. Many people are surprised about this because they assume that God is anti-joy, anti-fun, anti-delight, anti-passion, anti-creation, anti-treasure-giving, and just plain anti-everything in the universe. In contrast, over and over again, Jesus shows us that he is utterly and passionately pro-human. So in these two tiny stories Jesus gives us two different pictures of God's good heart: God wants to give us life's ultimate treasure, the treasure that gives us real joy.*

Scripture: [Matthew 13:1–46](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 142–154

## Joy Happens with Jesus Around

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

#### Discussion Questions:

[Q] Have you ever grown a plant from a seed? What were the results? What did you learn from that?

[Q] Have you ever found something valuable? If so, what was it, how did you find it, and what was your response?

[Q] Name a time when something really funny happened to you and those around you, even in the midst of a tough situation. Why is joy so powerful and surprising in those situations?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus explains the kingdom of heaven in simple terms.

Read Matthew 13:1–23.

[Q] Count the number of times Jesus tells us to listen or hear. Why do you think there's such an emphasis on listening in these parables?

[Q] Why does Jesus begin with the sower's action (v. 3)? What does this tell us about who is really fostering and tending the seeds?

[Q] Matt Woodley wrote, "In one sense, Jesus' entire life and ministry was like the little seed: small, exposed, vulnerable and yet brimming with fruitfulness." What do you think he means by this?

[Q] At the end of the sower and the seeds parable, Jesus says, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you." How does this contrast with the way the Pharisees viewed their spirituality?

- Why is viewing grace as a gift vital for a life in Christ?

#### Teaching Point Two: Jesus warns us of trouble within and without.

Read Matthew 13:24–43.

[Q] Why do you think Jesus tells his disciples not to pull up the weeds growing in the field? What does this passage tell us about what it means to live in the church?

## Joy Happens with Jesus Around

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** Matt Woodley says, “Those nasty tares aren’t just outside the church; they’re inside Jesus’ field as well, mixing in with the wheat.” In this light, why is loving those inside the church often harder than loving our world?

**[Q]** The next two parables that Jesus tells (Matt. 13:31–35) contain two mundane, humble images (a mustard seed and yeast). “The tiny mustard seed will become a world-sheltering tree; the ugly blob of leaven would produce a world-nourishing loaf of bread—just as a barbaric cross would produce hope for the world.” What is Jesus saying about the transformative power of his kingdom?

A quote from Wendell Berry powerfully illustrates Jesus’ parable in Matthew 13:44–46:

[Joy is] an obligation. What a horrible thing if you give up on joy just because of facts. . . . You never know when joy is going to hit. People have been joyful in the bitterest of circumstances. . . . Some of the best parties I’ve ever been to have taken place when we were [working in a barn] in miserable conditions, and all of a sudden everybody gets a big joke going, and everybody is laughing and happy right in the midst of what the modern world would consider the most miserable conditions: sweaty, hot, no air conditioning, no rest, everybody tired and smelling bad. So [joy] happens.

**[Q]** Share about a time that true, kingdom joy broke through to you and those around you, even in the midst of dire circumstances. Why was joy so unexpected and so powerful in that situation?

**Optional Activity:** *We in the affluent West need our dear brothers and sisters from the global South to become our leaders and mentors. They should be teaching us about clinging to the real treasure. They can tell us that when once the treasure captures your heart, once Jesus fills you with the “staggerment” of his value, beauty, and authority, you will cling to Jesus as your true treasure. And once that happens, joy will happen too. No one can take that joy away from you.*

- *As a group, talk about some specific values you could learn from brothers and sisters around the globe.*
- *What might it look like on a tangible level to learn lessons from these brothers and sisters?*
- *How can you partner with people in your community who are from different cultures to gain new perspectives about joy?*

## Joy Happens with Jesus Around

Leader's Guide

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

“Jesus’ kingdom is alive and well, growing in the midst of wheat and tares, thriving in places of insignificance. In ways that we can never control or make happen, the little mustard seed will grow into a beautiful tree; the little lump of dough will grow into a nourishing loaf. Jesus will make it happen.”

**Action Point:** What mustard seeds or little lumps of dough are in your life right now: small, insignificant things that have the potential for great growth and fruit in Christ? As a group, pray that God will give you a kingdom vision and faith for these things to flourish.

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken

## Faith Is “Impossible”

Leader’s Guide

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# Faith Is “Impossible”



*But all things are possible with God.*

*In the stories in this portion of Matthew we find almost everyone struggling to “find” faith. When it comes to faith, everyone muffs it. Chapters 8–15 contain clear indicators of God’s power and presence in Jesus. After watching Jesus perform miraculous feedings and healings, we’d assume that anyone could look at the evidence, sift it and analyze it, and then decide to follow Jesus. Yet the Pharisees and the Sadducees banded together and “came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven” (Matt. 16:1). The evidence wasn’t enough. They saw the facts but they kept spinning a different interpretation: Jesus, the untrained, sinner-loving, non-temple endorsed teacher from lowly Nazareth couldn’t possibly be the Messiah. For them, it was easier not to believe in Jesus. Like Anne Lamott said about her initial encounter with Jesus, “It seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen.”*

Scripture: [Matthew 14:22–16:12](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 154–169

## Faith Is “Impossible”

Leader’s Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

#### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** Name one area of your life where you’ve learned from your failures. It could be anything as ordinary as learning to cook or play a sport or a musical instrument, or as painful as experiencing a failed relationship or overcoming an addiction. How did the failures actually help you learn how to do something better?

**[Q]** What’s the best work of fiction (book or movie) that you’ve read or seen?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus sometimes teaches us in radical ways.

Read Matthew 14:22–33.

**[Q]** Many people poke fun at Peter for his impetuous and foolhardy approach to following Jesus. But what do you think he did right in this story?

**[Q]** Where did he go wrong?

**[Q]** What do we learn about Jesus in this passage?

**[Q]** How does this story intersect with your life right now? What can you relate to the most in this story—and why?

- Sitting in the boat (but you know you need to get out)
- Taking a step out of the boat
- Walking on water
- Seeing the wind and waves all around you
- Starting to sink into the water
- Grabbing Jesus’ hand

#### Teaching Point Two: We must carefully scrutinize whether our words and deeds are truly reflecting Jesus Christ.

Read Matthew 15:1–20.

## Faith Is “Impossible”

### Leader’s Guide

**[Q]** In this passage Jesus and the Pharisees offer two different visions for how to approach our relationship with God. How would you summarize the Pharisees’ vision?

- How would you summarize Jesus’ vision?

In her novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver tells a fictional story about a Christian missionary named Nathan Price. Nathan takes his wife and daughters into the heart of Africa to share the gospel. He is a harsh, arrogant, uncompassionate man. The title of the book comes from Nathan’s belief that he’s saying “Jesus is glorious” in the native language, when in reality they hear him saying, “Jesus is poisonwood.” Unfortunately, Nathan never changes. At one point in the novel Nathan’s daughter says, “I am born of a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, while he set down for all time the Poisonwood Bible.”

**[Q]** Based on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 15:1–20, how would you explain why followers of Christ end up like Nathan? In other words, based on this passage, how do Christians miss the point of it all and never actually become more like Jesus?

### Teaching Point Three: We all muff it when it comes to matters of faith.

Read Matthew 15:21–28.

This is a difficult passage because at first Jesus appears to ignore her. But remember that Jesus did respond to her request, not just grudgingly, but joyfully praising her faith and answering her heartfelt request.

**[Q]** Describe the woman in this story. What was she up against in this passage?

**[Q]** Describe how the disciples responded to her and her situation.

**[Q]** How do we sometimes act like the disciples in this story? Is there any situation or relationship that comes to your mind? Is there anything you need to do make amends and respond with compassion?

Read Matthew 16:1–12. (Note: This takes place right after the second time Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people.)

**[Q]** Matt Woodley wrote, “In the stories in this portion of Matthew we find almost everyone struggling to ‘find’ faith. When it comes to faith, everyone muffs it.” In this story, how and why did the Pharisees “muff it” when it came to believing in Jesus?

- How and why did the disciples “muff it” when it comes to faith in Jesus?



## Faith Is “Impossible”

Leader’s Guide

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

“Left to ourselves, riddled with our self-absorption, fear, and hardness of heart, we display a remarkable aversion to God. As C. S. Lewis once said, in our quest for God we often act like a mouse searching for a cat: we enjoy the hunt as long as we don’t actually find the cat. God must intervene or we’re all lost. Faith isn’t our work; from start to finish it is God’s gift to us. . . . For Jesus, faith (and even the ability to ask for faith) isn’t an achievement for the spiritually elite; it’s a gift for little-faiths, for beginners and strugglers, even for the spiritually dense and hard-hearted.”

**[Q]** Based on the Gospel of Matthew up to this point, do you agree or disagree with this statement?

**[Q]** Are there other examples from the Gospel of Matthew where faith is God’s gift, not our work, or where faith is for beginners and strugglers?

**Action Point:** **If faith is a truly a miracle and a gift from God (rather than something we just work up with more effort and evidence), where or how do you need more faith in the week ahead? How can we pray that God the Father will give you the good gift of faith?**

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken

## God Shows Us His Glory

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# God Shows Us His Glory



*Jesus showed us our weakness and his strength.*

*Through the repeated theme of brilliant light, Jesus displayed his glory in a unique way. Matthew records, "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. . . ."*

*While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them . . ." (Matt. 17:2, 5). As Kierkegaard said, at times the hidden glory of the king must shine forth through his peasant garb. Something similar happened to Moses when he stepped down from the mountain and his face shone with the glory of God. But Moses' brightness was a reflected glory; in union with his Father, the glory of God shone forth from Jesus (see Matt. 11:27). In other words, unlike any human being before or since, Jesus, as the living God, was the source of true glory.*

Scripture: [Matthew 16:13–17:23](#)

Based On: [The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us](#), pages 170–180

## God Shows Us His Glory

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

#### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Name a time when you were given a big responsibility as a kid, something you had never been responsible for before. How did you respond to that pressure?
- [Q] As a group, brainstorm fairy tales, fables, or other stories in which the hero is disguised in some way. In these stories, what is the response of other people when the hero reveals himself?
- [Q] Name a sacred or secular piece of music, art, or literature that has moved you to see beauty in the world. Why do you find it so powerful?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: All that came before leads to Peter's confession of faith.

Read Matthew 16:13–28.

- [Q] Think about what Peter is really saying in his confession in verse 16. What is the weight of this statement for Peter, a Jew?
- [Q] In Matthew 16:18b, what is Jesus promising for those who believe in him, even those who will experience great persecution and suffering?

Matt Woodley says, “Keys were given to those who had authority. Keys command respect and dignity and even power. The religious leaders also had keys; but they used their keys to lock the front door and keep people out (Matt. 23:13).”

- [Q] Why might Jesus' promise seem ludicrous to Peter and the other disciples?
- [Q] In Matthew 16:22, why is Peter so upset about what Jesus has explained? What significant part of Jesus' story doesn't he want to hear?
- [Q] In this passage, Peter makes a bold confession of faith, followed by a completely obtuse move, and Jesus still gives him authority in his church. What is Jesus saying here about the imperfect people we'll encounter in the church?

#### Teaching Point Two: Jesus displayed his glory for his disciples' sakes, both then and now.

## God Shows Us His Glory

### Leader's Guide

Read Matthew 17:1–23.

**[Q]** How is Jesus' display of glory linked to Peter's confession in Matthew 16?

**[Q]** Read Exodus 24. In light of this, what special meaning did Christ's transfiguration have for his Jewish disciples?

**[Q]** Matt Woodley says, "The Bible contains only one story, not two stories; one God, not two Gods." How does the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain with Jesus confirm the union of the Old and New Testaments?

**[Q]** When have you experienced a beautiful mountaintop experience with God, a time when you felt his glory in a palpable and transcendent way with others around you?

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

As the church of Jesus Christ we will train our ears and our eyes to hear and see both songs: songs of Christ's glory and songs of the world's brokenness. The Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa once said that the "artist is the one who does not look away." In this sense, followers of Jesus are also artists. First, we will not look away from Jesus' glory. In corporate worship and personal times of silent prayer, we will yearn for a glimpse of Jesus' true glory. We will spend time doing nothing else except listening to the Father who tells us to listen to Jesus. But, secondly, as artists of the spiritual life, we also won't look away from the world's pain and agony. With Jesus, we'll descend the mountain of glory and walk among the anguished and imperfect people around us.

**[Q]** Matt Woodley calls the "I'm-spiritual-but-not-religious" mindset "a colossal rejection of Jesus' plan for a new genesis. Jesus restores the world *through* a new community, a specific, concrete group of real human beings . . ." In this light, why is our commitment to the church so vital for the redemption of the world?

**[Q]** Why is it so hard to come down from the mountaintop into the ugliness and pain of the world? Why can't we stay up there?

We the unholy family, the snarled mix of sinner-saints, gather in our imperfect way, but we are gathering around and in and through and because of Jesus—and that makes all the difference. There is a reason why we're all here, a reason that's bigger than all of our dysfunctions and pathologies. Jesus is building his church; he will keep the project going and he will get it done all the way through the resurrection and new life in the kingdom. So stay put, fellow saints and sinners, he isn't finished with you yet—and he isn't finished with him or her or them yet either.

## God Shows Us His Glory

Leader's Guide

### Action Points:

- **As a group, think of tangible ways you can see both songs of Christ's glory and songs of the world's brokenness. Pray to live in that wonderful yet difficult tension.**
- **How is Jesus building his church in your life, your heart, and your relationships? This week, pray for openness to what he has to teach you through his imperfect church.**

*—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken*

## The Unnatural Act of Forgiveness

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# The Unnatural Act of Forgiveness



*Once again, just like the farmer who flings his seed in every direction (Matt. 13:3, 24), God the Father generously cancels unbelievable debts. Jesus isn't giving us a lesson in finances or debt collection; he's showing us a glimpse into his Father's heart. (Of course for Matthew, the Father's heart is also Jesus' heart.) In Matthew 18:27, the Greek word for "take pity" is the same word for Jesus' compassion in Matthew 9:36, as in "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them."*

Scripture: [Matthew 18:1–19:15](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 181–194

# The Unnatural Act of Forgiveness

Leader's Guide

## Part 1 Identify the Issue

Christians sometimes have intense debates about “theories of the atonement.” In other words, what really happened when Jesus died on the cross, and why was it all necessary? There are certainly different valid perspectives, but in some way forgiveness always involves absorbing a debt. It’s the same way with my sin and your sin and the sin of the entire planet: someone has to absorb the debt. So what was Jesus doing for us when he died on the cross? Well, lots of good things happened, but one thing is certain: he paid a debt that we could never have paid. Like the guy in this story, morally speaking, we were 1.5 gazillion dollars in debt with no chance of getting bailed out. But in and through Jesus’ love and mercy, God the Father “took pity on [us], canceled the debt and let [us] go.”

### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] What is the greatest debt you’ve ever gotten out from under? How did it feel?
- [Q] How would you describe what Jesus did on the cross for you?

## Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching Point One: God the Father took pity on us, canceled our debt, and let us go.

Read Matthew 18:1–4.

- [Q] What do you think Jesus meant by verse 3?
  - What’s the connection between this verse and Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:3?

Read Matthew 18:5–14.

The Greek word for “one” is *micron*—for one or micro-people. The Greek word for “the problem sheep” in verse 12 is *planomenon*, a word from which we get our English word planet, or wandering one.

- [Q] How many times in this passage does Jesus mention the phrase “little one,” just “one,” or wandering people?
- [Q] Who do you think Jesus meant by “little one”?

## The Unnatural Act of Forgiveness

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** As followers of Jesus, how are we supposed to respond to these “little ones”? How are we supposed to treat the “wandering ones” in verse 12?

**[Q]** Who are the little ones or the wandering ones that you'd like to pray for this week?

### Teaching Point Two: Jesus wants us to forgive from our hearts.

Read Matthew 18:21–33.

**[Q]** How would you retell the story in your own words?

Forgiveness is a difficult act. The psychologist Robert Karen said, “In talking to people about forgiveness I've been surprised at the resistance that some smart, sensitive, people feel to this subject.” Philip Yancey wrote, “Forgiveness is achingly difficult. . . . Forgiveness is an unnatural act. . . . The very taste of forgiveness seems somehow wrong.”

**[Q]** Why do we resist the subject of forgiveness?

**[Q]** What makes it seem so achingly difficult or unnatural or just plain wrong?

**[Q]** Name some things we do in lieu of forgiveness.

**[Q]** There are many reasons (psychological, theological, and even physiological) to forgive. Based just on this passage, what reason (or reasons) does Jesus give for forgiveness?

**[Q]** Based on your knowledge of other passages in Scripture, are there other good reasons to practice forgiveness even when it's difficult?

### Teaching Point Three: Jesus valued the marriage commitment.

Divorce and remarriage is a sensitive topic that brings up a lot of pain for many different reasons. These questions are primarily designed to get a clear sense about Jesus' vision for marriage. Here's some important background material for Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees about marriage and divorce:

The Pharisees wanted to know where Jesus stood on a touchy theological dispute within the ranks of Pharisaism. Basically, the dispute centered on how to interpret Deuteronomy 24:1, which mentions a man divorcing his wife “if he finds something indecent about her.” What, exactly, is indecent wifely behavior? One group within Pharisaism, followers of the famous Rabbi Hillel, offered a broad definition of indecency, even including the notoriously indecent act of burning your hubby's supper. A second party, followers of Rabbi Shammai, advocated a stricter interpretation of “indecency.” Either way, husbands—even religious



## The Unnatural Act of Forgiveness

### Leader's Guide

husbands—were shedding their wives at an alarming rate. In Jesus' day “if marriage did not work, divorce was a relatively simple option. Many sages considered it a duty to divorce a ‘bad’ wife.”

Read Matthew 19:1–12.

**[Q]** Jesus starts his discussion on marriage not with Deuteronomy 24 but with Genesis 1. What kind of vision for marriage is Jesus giving by pointing to this passage in Genesis 1?

Matt Woodley writes:

Jesus once again drives married couples back to the little way of discipleship. They aren't just “a couple”: they are also two sinners, spiritual beggars, hungering for righteousness, needing to display mercy as they have received mercy, needing to forgive as they have been forgiven. They are also called to focus, first and foremost, not on their spouse, but on themselves: mourning for their sin, observing the speck in their eye, growing in their own purity of heart.

This isn't easy. Both Matthew and Mark place Jesus' teaching on marriage at the border of his descent onto the way of the cross. In other words, in this Gospel, marriage is linked with suffering, especially the suffering of identifying my sin, acknowledging my hardness of heart, coming to grips with my botched attempts to love like Jesus. But as we shall see, for Matthew, the cross and resurrection are linked together as one event. Thus, marriage is also an ascent into the glory of the resurrection. Marriage propels us to ask for and receive the power of the resurrection, the presence of Jesus. As a married couple, as two broken but forgiven and forgiving sinners, we humbly obey Jesus when he says, “Come to me” (Matt. 11:28). As a married couple, we are sent into the world in mutual mission to bless others and proclaim the Gospel.

**[Q]** As you read this description of Jesus' approach to marriage, what practical difference should it make to us personally or to our church culture?

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Jesus understood our fundamental problem: we can't save or redeem ourselves. That's why this passage begins with Jesus' call to become a child. Children don't assume that they're utterly self-sufficient. Children know that some things are impossible for them but not for their parents. And children aren't shy about asking for help. So ask, Jesus says.

## The Unnatural Act of Forgiveness

Leader's Guide

**Action Points:** What areas in your life and heart aren't very childlike right now? How is God calling you to be more dependent upon him in these areas?

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken

## The Shock of Grace

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# The Shock of Grace



*The first will be last and the last first.*

*The point Jesus makes before and after this parable is that when we accept God's grace it turns our lives and our world upside down and inside out (although it actually gets turned right-side up). Jesus made this point by tucking this parable into two bookends. In Matthew 19:30 he introduced the story by saying, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." Then he concluded the story by saying it again in 20:16—"So the last will be first, and the first will be last." In Jesus' day (and often in our day) there were two clearly-defined groups: the "firsts" who sat at the table gobbling up course after course of spiritual blessings, and the "lasts" who sat under the table waiting for a few spiritual crumbs to fall their way. According to Jesus, God's grace threatens to upset these predictable seating arrangements: the "lasts" get raised to the best seats and the "firsts" might start missing meals.*

Scripture: [Matthew 18:1–19:15](#)

Based On: [The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us](#), pages 194–205

## The Shock of Grace

Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

#### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** Have you ever received something valuable—a prize, a raise, an award, a compliment—that required little or no effort? What was the situation? How did you feel about getting something you didn't really earn?

**[Q]** If you have children of your own or are close to some children, what are some of the characteristics about them that you most admire?

**[Q]** When you were a kid, what was your definition of fairness? Name some things you deemed unfair in your world, your family, or your friendships.

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus treats us as individuals as he reforms us.

Read Matthew 19:16–31.

**[Q]** Why was the young man sad in the end? What was so impossible about Jesus' command for this man?

**[Q]** Matt Woodley calls the rich young ruler an “addict.” What is his addiction, and why is this addiction so easy to miss yet so deadly, especially for this particular man, in the long run?

- What are the things that can hook us, causing overt or subtle addictions?

**[Q]** How would you describe Jesus' “intervention” in the rich young ruler's life?

**[Q]** In the parable of the rich young man, Jesus tells him to sell all of his possessions and give his money to the poor. How might God be calling you to live a generous life that reaches beyond yourself and your church into your community and the nations?

Read the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8–10.

**[Q]** How does Jesus' approach differ here? Why do you think Jesus had to be so intense in the account of the rich young man?

**[Q]** When Jesus tells his disciples how to enter the kingdom (by threading a camel through the eye of a needle), they are baffled because it's impossible! Or, it's impossible without God's grace. What is Jesus' point about God's activity and our activity in salvation?

## The Shock of Grace

### Leader's Guide

#### Teaching Point Two: Jesus turns our perception of fairness upside down.

Read Matthew 20:1–16.

**[Q]** What sentence does Jesus use just before and at the end of this passage? Why do you think Jesus stresses this point?

**[Q]** What is so shocking about the concept of grace for those who don't deserve it, in the ancient Near East, but also in our culture?

**[Q]** Read (or recall) the elder brother's response in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:24–32. How does the elder brother mirror the workers in the vineyard who worked a full day and complained?

#### Teaching Point Three: Jesus didn't seek fame, but cared about the "lowly" people.

Read Matthew 20:17–34.

**[Q]** In these short snippets, what is Matthew saying about the true cost of following Jesus?

**[Q]** Like the disciples in Matthew 20, we have all longed to be a "celebrity" in the eyes of God or others. Talk about a time when that desire was especially strong for you.

In an encounter with two blind men, Jesus demonstrates how to live and thrive away from the limelight of celebrity status. Two ordinary blind men get healed. We often forget that this little story—and most of Jesus' life—occurred away from the centers of power and influence. The real celebrities of Jesus' day—political and religious—lived and worked far removed from Jesus and his little band. By healing the blind men, Jesus demonstrates one way to break the grip of bondage to fame and power: pay attention to "little people." Go to marginal places and show extraordinary love for ordinary and even "lowly" people. Respect the disrespected. Offer generous portions of mercy to the mercy-starved.

**[Q]** Jesus' grace turns everything upside down in our world. If we've been Christians for a long time, most of us are like the "firsts" from Jesus' parable in Matthew 19. What does it mean to not take that for granted, to minister to the "lasts" in our culture?

**[Q]** Christian culture certainly isn't exempt from elevating celebrities. How have you seen a popular Christian thinker, pastor, or author use his or her influence to bring about real kingdom change in our world? How can we follow that example?

## The Shock of Grace

Leader's Guide

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

**Action Point:** It's easy for us to harbor idols in our hearts—the idol of greed, or the idol of placing our security and identity in wealth and material things. If Jesus came to you today, what do you think he would identify as the idol that has the deepest grip on your heart, the idol that keeps you bogged down and prevents you from following him? Spend a few minutes meditating on that question. Then share what you think Jesus would identify as your “pet idol.” Pray for each other for freedom to relinquish your idols and follow Christ.

—*Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken*

## Jesus Takes Charge

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# Jesus Takes Charge



*He's the one who has all authority.*

*It's a shocking scene because Jesus, the "self-educated" carpenter from Nazareth, strolls into town and acts like he owns the place. Imagine a standard Western movie, where a town gets overrun by thugs until a masked stranger arrives, slings his guns, shoots up the bad guys, defends women and children, tends the wounded, and lets the good guys out of jail. At some point in the dialogue one of the bad guys hisses, "Just who do you think you are? Apparently nobody told you that this is our town." Our hero twirls his gun as he coolly replies, "Not any more, partner. I'm in charge now." And then he pauses as he removes his mask and says, "Remember me? I'm the sheriff, boys. I'm back in town and I'm setting things right." All throughout this passage Jesus speaks and acts like the town-saving sheriff.*

Scripture: [Matthew 21:1–23:39](#)

Based On: [The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us, pages 206–222](#)

## Jesus Takes Charge

### Leader's Guide

## Part 1 Identify the Issue

### Discussion Questions:

**[Q]** Who is your all-time favorite hero, superhero, or all around “good guy”/”good gal” from TV, the movies, literature, etc.?

**[Q]** When you were growing up, who was your favorite “authority figure” (a teacher, coach, church leader, etc.—but not a relative)? How would you describe the way they exercised their authority?

## Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching Point One: Jesus has the authority.

Read Matthew 21:1–17.

**[Q]** As Jesus enters Jerusalem, how did these four groups of people—the crowds, the disciples, the “blind and the lame,” and the religious leaders—react to him?

Read Matthew 21:18–27. As you read, prepare to answer this question: How did Jesus display his authority?

Matt Woodley writes, “[Matthew 21:1–21:27] quietly unveils what theologians call ‘the dual natures of Christ,’ his full divinity and his full humanity. At times he seems so human. . . . Then, on other occasions, Jesus operates with the air of God-like authority. . . . The Gospels present a simple, clear theological formula: Jesus is 100 percent God and 100 percent human. If you dilute the formula—even .05 percent—in one direction or the other, it’s not the Gospel.”

**[Q]** Where do you see Jesus acting fully human in this passage?

**[Q]** Where do you see him acting with God-like authority?

### Teaching Point Two: Jesus gives us a glimpse of God’s grace—and warns us.

Matthew 21:28–22:14 contains three of Jesus’ stories that are designed to crack our hearts open to the shocking wonder of God’s grace—and the danger of rejecting it. Read Matthew 21:28–32.

**[Q]** This story has a shocking two-point purpose—it issues a warning and it offers a promise. Who gets warned and what’s the warning?



## Jesus Takes Charge

### Leader's Guide

**[Q]** Who receives the promise and what's the promise?

**[Q]** If Jesus were telling the story today, how do you think he would change the characters in verses 31–32?

Read the second story in Matthew 22:33–46.

**[Q]** How does this story summarize (at least in one sense) the entire story of the Bible? In other words, how is God like the persistently loving farmer and how are we like the persistently rebellious tenants?

**Note to Leader:** *The active verbs that refer to the farmer's or God's activity are: planted, put a wall, built, dug, built, rented, went, approached, and sent.*

### Teaching Point Three: Jesus opens the kingdom of heaven to all.

Read Matthew 22:1–14, which presents another picture from Jesus about the kingdom of heaven.

**[Q]** How is God pictured in this passage?

**[Q]** What's the promise and what's the warning in this story?

Read Matthew 23:1–38. This passage contains a series of woes in which Jesus expresses his disappointment and outrage at the Pharisees' hypocrisy. Of course it's easy to point our fingers at the hypocrisy of "those people" without seeing our own hypocrisy. So as you read this passage, don't ask, "Who is the biggest hypocrite I know?" Instead, as you read these verses ask yourself, "What telltale signs of hypocrisy can I find in my heart?" In other words, based on this passage, what's the biggest way that Jesus could turn to you and say, "I love you, but your hypocrisy is showing"?

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

### Action Points:

**• Think of the stories that Jesus told about the farmer and about the king who loves you with such relentless, persistent, open-hearted love. That's a picture of God's love for you! As you close this study, spend a few minutes quietly resting in God's love, knowing that in Christ there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). Receive his love, knowing that in and through Christ there is nothing you can do to make God love you more or love you less.**

## Jesus Takes Charge

Leader's Guide

• **Is there any way that your hypocrisy has prevented you (or our group or the church) from reaching out to people who need Jesus' love? If so, name it and pray for each other.**

—*Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken*

## Jesus' Final Teachings

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# Jesus' Final Teachings



*Jesus' promises make it all worthwhile.*

*Jesus promised that things will get better. When the kingdom of heaven comes in fullness you'll find joy and relief beyond your wildest dreams. That tiny mustard seed will bloom into an incredible nation-sheltering tree, and that lump of dough will become a world-nourishing loaf. So hold on, Jesus said, through the pain, through the contractions, through the long day and night of suffering, because there's a new world waiting to be born.*

Scripture: [Matthew 24:1–25:46](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 223–237

## Jesus' Final Teachings

### Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

#### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] What kinds of emotions does a newborn baby evoke in you? Why?
- [Q] Have you ever visited Washington, D.C., or another place with significant historical monuments? What do these physical structures symbolize?
- [Q] What's your favorite thing about having others over for a meal?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: Jesus prepares us for what is to come.

Read Matthew 24:1–35.

- [Q] Why do you think Jesus chooses the metaphor of labor and birth to symbolize the coming of God's kingdom?
- [Q] For the people of Jesus' day, the temple was the most stunning, beautiful, sophisticated building that had ever existed. It also served as the center of their religious life. So why do you think Jesus' comment in verse 2 is so shocking for the disciples?

Matthew 24:4–25 has baffled many scholars. According to Woodley, “The best answer is Jesus wanted us to view these events through a double-lens: a close up lens (the immediate future of Jesus' day) and a long-distance lens (the end of history or perhaps future traumatic events throughout history).”

- [Q] As you look through Jesus' predictions, identify ways in which the events Jesus mentions can be seen through a close-up lens or a long-distance lens.

Second-century theologian Justin Martyr said, “But the greater the number of persecutions which are inflicted upon us, so much the greater the number of other (persons) who become devout believers through the name of Jesus.”

- [Q] How does Matthew 24:14 point to the overall hope that we have, even in the midst of suffering?

## Jesus' Final Teachings

### Leader's Guide

#### Teaching Point Two: Jesus looks to the future while staying firmly in the present.

Read Matthew 24:36–51.

**[Q]** Why is it important that Jesus seems to be telling us to care *more* about our present life, not less?

Read Matthew 25:1–13.

**[Q]** In this story about the bridegroom and the virgins, what is Jesus telling us about the way many Christians live and how we *should* live while we wait for his return?

**[Q]** What's the significance of comparing the coming of Jesus to a wedding feast?

Read the next story in Matthew 25:14–30.

Woodley says this about the man who received one talent: “But all throughout this Gospel we’ve seen the disciples fail—big, frequent failures are on almost every page—and yet the mercy of Jesus abounds even more. So there is no excuse for this servant’s cringing lack of courage. His fear of failure is no excuse.”

**[Q]** What is Jesus saying about how we should engage with the world?

Read Matthew 25:31–46.

**[Q]** What connection is Jesus making between the mercy we have received from God and the mercy that we are able to give to others?

**[Q]** Woodley tells the story of a church planting a garden in a junkyard as an example of engaging with our world as we joyfully anticipate Christ’s return. Give a real-life example of how you have engaged in your local community or the global community in a way that has allowed you and others to see Jesus’ kingdom coming to earth.

#### Teaching Point Three: The merciful Jesus wants us to show mercy to others.

For Jesus, mercy isn’t just an abstract theory or an inaccessible ideal, like a dusty old book perched on a shelf. No, for Jesus mercy remains utterly accessible, practical, and “doable.” Notice the specific actions of mercy in this passage (Jesus repeats the set twice so we won’t forget it): feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, invite lonely people into your house, give clothing to the naked, visit the

## Jesus' Final Teachings

### Leader's Guide

imprisoned and spend time with sick people. Nothing on this list exceeds our grasp. Ordinary people can fulfill Jesus' high call to show mercy. Rather than tell us, "Earn your Ph.D. in micro-economics so you can eliminate world poverty in ten years," Jesus simply says, "I was hungry and you fed me." The call to mercy compels us to do something so simple: pay attention, show up (or be present), and then do something practical to alleviate the misery of one human being.

**[Q]** Who around you is starved for mercy? How have you ignored or met their needs?

**[Q]** Jesus gives a very practical list for serving others: visiting them when they're sick, satisfying their hunger and quenching their thirst, clothing them. Essentially, this kind of ministry is very holistic. What is one practical way that you can display mercy this week?

**[Q]** What obstacles (fear, laziness, apathy, busyness, hardness of heart, or something else) keep you from showing mercy to the "least of these"?

### Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Jesus asks for ordinary practices that help us stay present to him and to the world around us: watch out (24:4), keep your love warm (24:12), stand firm (24:13), and endure the labor pains. Once again, even as the world seems to unravel under our feet, Jesus invites us to walk in his little way of discipleship, living one day at a time (6:34), trusting our Father for daily bread (6:8), practicing forgiveness (6:14–15), making peace with our neighbors (5:9), shining a little light into dark corners (5:16), listening to Jesus (17:5), and being with the God who is with us (11:28). God's promise to be with us makes it possible to remain steadfast on the "little way" of discipleship.

**Action Point:** What "little ways" help you stay present to Christ in your life? Pray for one another in your group, that God would give each of you strength in the midst of labor pains and that you will grow in the little ways of discipleship.

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken

## God Is with Us

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

# God Is with Us



*Jesus demonstrates that God is with us as he hangs on the cross.*

*In Matthew's account, Jesus did not die in glorious triumph; he did not die soaring above human pain and suffering; instead, he died with a question on his lips: Why have you forsaken me?*

*Why did you ditch me? Ponder for a moment all of the things Jesus could have said (or that Matthew could have recorded) right before he died. Instead, in Matthew's story, Jesus punctuates the air not with a statement but with a question—and not just any question, but perhaps the question found on the lips of most fellow-sufferers. Jesus not only walks among us; he not only becomes a hunted and homeless refugee with us; he not only plunges into the water of baptism with us; he not only eats with sinners like us; he not only bears our sickness and guilt; he also walks into and then asks our most painful, perplexing questions. By living and asking our questions, Jesus can't be any more "with us."*

Scripture: [Matthew 26:1–27:66](#)

Based On: *The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us*, pages 238–259

## God Is with Us

### Leader's Guide

## Part 1 Identify the Issue

### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] What kinds of emotions does a newborn baby evoke in you? Why?
- [Q] Have you ever visited Washington, D.C., or another place with significant historical monuments? What do these physical structures symbolize?
- [Q] What's your favorite thing about having others over for a meal?

## Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

### Teaching Point One: Jesus prepares us for what is to come.

- [Q] Most kids grow up asking lots of questions. Can you remember one of the first or most persistent questions that you asked as a kid? (It doesn't have to be a deep or religious question.)
- [Q] About 30 years ago, a psychiatrist named Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* How would you answer that question? In other words, whatever did become of sin? In our culture at large, has the word gone out of fashion? If so, why has it gone out of fashion? What has replaced the Christian idea of sin?

### Teaching Point Two: We are sinful.

“In this long and ugly story, every person will unwittingly confirm another aspect of Jesus' evaluation of the human race: we are more sinful than we would ever dare to admit. . . . In one way or another, every person and group in this passage will display the symptoms of our human sickness.”

- [Q] Read the following vignettes one at a time. After reading each vignette, pause and answer this question: Who blew it and what was their fundamental sin?

- Matthew 26:31–35
- Matthew 26:36–46
- Matthew 26:47–68
- Matthew 26:69–75



## God Is with Us

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- Matthew 27:1–10
- Matthew 27:12–26

**[Q]** Based on these passages, how would you define or describe sin? What is sin? What is the essence of sin and where does it lead us?

**[Q]** As you read about the various characters in this story, which one can you relate to (even in some small way) the most at this point in your life—the disciples, Peter, Judas, the chief priests, Pilate, Jesus, the soldiers?

### Teaching Point Three: Jesus died for sinners.

The second major theme in this story is that Jesus died for sinners.

**[Q]** In Matthew 20:28, Jesus said that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. What does Jesus' ransom image imply about his work on the cross, our plight, and the nature of salvation?

Read Matthew 20:22 and 26:39. When Jesus talks about drinking “the cup,” he’s referring to Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 51:17–23.

**[Q]** What did the prophet Isaiah mean, that people were forced to drink the cup?

**[Q]** Why is it so significant that Jesus is now voluntarily offering to drink the cup of God's wrath?

**[Q]** Speaking about Jesus' cross, John Stott wrote, “Pain is endurable, but the seeming indifference of God is not. Sometimes we picture him lounging, perhaps dozing, in some celestial deck-chair, while the hungry millions starve to death.” What does this passage—and God on the cross—say to this view of God?

**[Q]** Shame is that “uneasy feeling that we don't measure up and that our real self will cause others to reject us.” During the story of Christ's death, how did he enter into and bear our shame?

**[Q]** Knowing that Jesus bore our shame, what difference does that make to how we view ourselves and how we treat others?

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Jesus asks for ordinary practices that help us stay present to him and to the world around us: watch out (24:4), keep your love warm (24:12), stand firm (24:13), and endure the labor pains. Once

## God Is with Us

### Leader's Guide

again, even as the world seems to unravel under our feet, Jesus invites us to walk in his little way of discipleship, living one day at a time (6:34), trusting our Father for daily bread (6:8), practicing forgiveness (6:14–15), making peace with our neighbors (5:9), shining a little light into dark corners (5:16), listening to Jesus (17:5), and being with the God who is with us (11:28). God's promise to be with us makes it possible to remain steadfast on the “little way” of discipleship.

#### Action Points:

- **What has been one of the most painful questions that you've asked—or that you still ask? How can we pray for you?**
- **Take a few minutes to reflect silently on the story of Jesus' death. After prayerfully reflecting on the Cross, what aspect of it do you need to hold on to these days? What word or words from the Passion story seem to intersect deeply with your heart? Based on that, how can we pray for you this week?**
- **Is there anyone in your life (or any group of people) who seems to experience an awful lot of God's *seeming* absence and life's haunting questions? How can we pray for him/her/them?**

—*Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken*

## Resurrection

Leader's Guide

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# Resurrection



*One word changes the world.*

*In Matthew 28, the entire mood of this gospel story changes. With complete authority Jesus arises from his brutal death and tells his disciples: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me. . . . All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:10, 18, 20). It's the confident assertion of the one—the only one!—who ever walked into and out of and back into the broken system of this world. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Don't be afraid. There is new life beyond these prison walls of sin, evil, and death. All things can be restored; all broken lives can be healed; all sad tales can become untrue. I know the way out. I've blazed a trail to freedom. But you have to trust me; you have to follow me."*

Scripture: [Matthew 28:1–20](#)

Based On: [The Gospel of Matthew: God with Us, pages 259–268](#)

# Resurrection

## Leader's Guide

### Part 1 Identify the Issue

#### Discussion Questions:

- [Q] As a child or before you came to Christ, what did Easter mean to you?
- [Q] What's the strangest or most unbelievable part of the Resurrection story for you?

### Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### Teaching Point One: God, in the person of Jesus, became God-with-us.

Read the Resurrection account in Matthew 28.

It's striking that two women, "the Marys" are the first ones to encounter the risen Lord. Matt Woodley says, "In light of the resurrection, it wasn't the end for Mary [Magdalene]; for Mary, the woman most famous for her broken past, it meant the beginning of a brand new world."

- [Q] Why do you think Matthew emphasizes this encounter?
- [Q] Name some emotions—other than sadness—that the disciples must have been feeling when Christ died. So what did the Resurrection mean for them, besides seeing their dear friend and Lord again?
- [Q] Matt Woodley says, "In Matthew chapter 1, we read that God, in the person of Jesus, became God-with-us. In other words, he entered our limited, walled-in existence. He became a prisoner with us." Using this metaphor, what does Christ's resurrection mean for us?
- [Q] In Matthew 28:11–15, the chief priests hatch a plan to deny that the Resurrection happened. Why do you think Matthew included this part of the story? How is it connected to faith and unbelief?
- [Q] At the end of Matthew, Jesus says, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Why is it so important that he gives us this promise at the end of the book, and how does it tie into the entire theme of Matthew?
- [Q] Notice the doubters in Matthew 28:17. Why do you think Matthew didn't gloss over this part?
- [Q] How is the reality of Jesus' authority (Matt. 28:18) connected to the charge to make disciples?

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- How does this promise give us hope and also give us authority in his name?

**[Q]** Talk about a time when the reality of the resurrection became tangible to you. How did that hope help you walk through a dire situation?

### Teaching Point Two: The Resurrection changes everything.

It's easy for us to minimize the profound social implications of the Resurrection. Imagine people like Mary Magdalene and those first disciples grasping the message of the Resurrection. In terms of their social status, they were near the bottom of the heap. Morally, they had failed to maintain a clean track record. Spiritually, they had often displayed their unremarkable little-faith. But now, in light of the Resurrection, a new world had opened for them. In and through the Resurrection, these socially-disregarded people found dignity and significance. Jesus bestowed honor and self-worth on them. The risen Jesus Christ breathes life-enriching promises into their souls: "Do not be afraid. Go and make disciples. I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

**[Q]** Name a time when the Resurrection was made real in your life by someone you didn't expect.

**[Q]** What do you think it really means to make disciples in the world? Is it just spiritual, or are there other elements involved in this sort of discipleship?

## Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Through the Crucifixion-Resurrection event, God the Father took every tragic, dead-end, broken thing and wove it into Jesus' victory. Now, in the light of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples are ushered into the same story. There are no dead ends for us either. As he did for Jesus, God the Father takes the things destined to destroy us, or at the very least hit a hopeless dead end—our failure, pain, suffering, even death itself—and he weaves them all into our redemption story.

### Action Points:

- **What are areas in your life that seem like dead ends? As a group, pray for the hope of the Resurrection to infiltrate these devastated places in your lives, your marriages, your relationships, your jobs, etc. Ask the Lord to bring his life and healing.**
- **This week, how can you share the joy of the Resurrection with others?**

—Study by Matthew Woodley, with Bonnie McMaken