

The Wisdom of His Teachings



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matthew 5–7, 20:25–28, John 4:22–24, 8:1–11.*

Memory Text: “The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (*Mark 1:22, NIV*).

Jesus could have flashed bright beams of light on the darkest mysteries of science, but He would not spare a moment from teaching the knowledge of the science of salvation. His time, His knowledge, His faculties, His life itself, were appreciated only as the means of working out the salvation of the souls of men.”—Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 1, p. 245.

There is a danger that in talking about the wisdom of His teachings (as in the title of this week's lesson), we may not distinguish enough between Jesus and other (so-called) wise teachers across the centuries. Jesus' teachings were not simply wise. They contained, in addition, a qualitative element that essentially distinguished them from everything that preceded or has since followed. There was about them a certain finality, a conclusiveness not found elsewhere. In other words, *this was God talking in human flesh*. However much the people did not know about the true identity of Christ, they still could tell there was something unique about Him and what He said. “The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority” (*Matt. 7:28, 29, NIV*).

This week we will look at just what some of those teachings are.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 26.*

The Greatest Sermon (*Matthew 5–7*)

Year after year hundreds of thousands of sermons make their way into the realm of oblivion. Some are remembered for a while then forgotten. What would it take to have a particular sermon not only remembered and quoted for two thousand years but even identified by the place of its delivery? Such is the Sermon on the Mount.

During the First World War, the Society of Friends printed *The Sermon on the Mount* as a separate pamphlet, without commentary, for distribution among the allied forces. But both the British and French governments forbade its distribution among their troops. After all, a sermon telling people to love their enemies was not exactly what you wanted men on the front lines in a war to be reading!

Read through the Beatitudes (*Matt. 5:3–12*). Which aspects do you find most meaningful for the experiences you are going through right now?

In the Beatitudes some elements merely describe the condition in which we may find ourselves. The person who “mourns,” for instance, does not seek that state. But meekness (or better, humility) we should seek; as the prophet says, “Seek righteousness, seek humility [meekness]” (*Zeph. 2:3, NIV*). Hungering and thirsting after righteousness is not a state natural to us humans, nor can we manufacture it. But we are admonished to seek after it.

Give a brief summary of the following teachings that appear (among others) in the rest of the sermon:

1. **Our influence in society** (*Matt. 5:13–16*)
2. **The law of God** (*Matt. 5:17–20*)
3. **Heart religion** (*Matt. 5:21–30*)
4. **Divorce** (*Matt. 5:31, 32*)
5. **Retaliation** (*Matt. 5:38–42*)
6. **Love for enemies** (*Matt. 5:43–48*)
7. **Prayer** (*Matt. 6:5–15*)

As you reflect on the Beatitudes and the rest of the sermon, which aspects do you find most pointed? Which most keenly cuts across your accustomed ways, your own cultural norms? What changes do you need to make in order to be more in harmony with these words from God?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *John 7:46*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that Jesus showed compassion for ordinary people, including the weakest of society.

Feel: Nurture a desire to minister to people personally, as Jesus did.

Do: Live a life of humility, forgiving others as we have been forgiven.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. The Words of Jesus

A Jesus was not just a wise teacher; He spoke as one with authority.

B In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught attitudes and behaviors that were contrary to the social norm for that time and for the present time.

II. A Revelation of God

A Jesus gave us the greatest revelation of God.

B The Savior's loving regard for children and the weakest members of society is a manifestation of the true character of God.

C Jesus taught that we must forgive others just as we have been forgiven.

III. Humility and Grace

A Jesus gave us the greatest example of humility by becoming a man and dying the death of a criminal—a sinner.

B The true meaning of grace can be seen in the parables and real-life experiences of Jesus.

C The Lord's examples of grace show that the undeserving can receive help and forgiveness in times of need.

▶ **Summary:** The words and actions of Jesus reveal the true nature of God and teach us the real meaning of humility.

What He Taught About God

Into a world dark with misunderstanding about the person and character of God, Jesus came to set things straight, by His life and by His word. Coming from the very essence of God, He brought a revelation of God that could not be improved upon. In the past, the prophets had spoken about God; but now, “in these last days,” God was speaking “by his Son . . . through whom he made the universe” (*Heb. 1:1, 2, NIV*). Through Jesus, in other words, we have the ultimate disclosure of the Supreme Being.

What is Jesus saying about God in the following passages?

Matt. 5:8, 9

Matt. 18:5, 6, 10; 19:13, 14

John 4:22–24

John 10:27–30

A critical test of the decency of any society, ancient or modern, is the value it places upon the most vulnerable of its members, and there is none more vulnerable than children. Jesus’ regard for these tender ones must have come as a breath of fresh air to those poor mothers two thousand years ago when He vigorously defended their children’s right of access to Him, when He made time in His hectic calendar for these tiny tots, time to touch them and to bless them.

God is like that, Jesus’ action said. He cares for the children and, by extension, for all who are vulnerable and exploited. He is the God of the underdog. As He sat there with these little ones looking into His face, Jesus must have thought of what we call “the Slaughter of the Innocents” by Herod on account of Him (*Matt. 2:16–18*) and the bloody edict of an ancient pharaoh against all Jewish male infants (*Exod. 1:15, 16*). Jesus came to model a God who was the complete antithesis of these murderous psychopaths.

From what you have read above, what picture of God does Jesus present? How have you experienced these aspects of God’s character yourself? Even more important, how well do you reflect those aspects of His character in your own life?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Just for Teachers: “‘You are a teacher who has come from God’” (*John 3:2, NIV*). History joins Nicodemus in acclaiming Jesus as a great teacher. Other religious founders, philosophers, and leaders may also be great teachers. But what separates Jesus from all others? The wisdom of His teachings? His ethical benchmarks? His philosophical insights? His profound definition of life and its meaning? Ask your class to focus on where lies the uniqueness of Jesus as a teacher.

It lies in who He is. Socrates and Confucius, Buddha and Krishna, Shakespeare and Tolstoy found their authority in logic, ethics, morality, poetry, humanism, or philosophy, but Christ’s authority was His own life: He is God speaking God’s will. He did not come seeking truth; He was the Truth, the Way, and the Life (*John 14:6*).

It lies in His authority. When Jesus finished speaking, the crowds were “amazed” (*Matt. 7:28, 29, NIV*). The word translated “amazed” literally means “blown away.” His teachings were so compelling, so pointed, so divine that people were astonished and unsettled. There was no room for debate: His word was God’s word. “‘My teaching,’” He said, “‘is not my own. It comes from him who sent me’” (*John 7:16, NIV*).

Consider This: What other factors underscore Jesus as a unique teacher?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Suppose archaeologists suddenly came upon fragments of an ancient book titled, *Autobiography of Jesus* or *My Teachings, by Jesus of Nazareth*. Would that change anything that we believe as the teachings of Christ based on the Gospels? If not, why not? Reflect on *John 21:24, 25* for a possible answer.

Bible Commentary

While the Bible is the means through which Christ the Word speaks to us (*2 Tim. 3:16, 17*), the Gospels in a special way record the wonder of Christ’s

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What He Taught About Forgiveness

(*Matt. 6:12–14*)

Of all the words that we might associate with Jesus, *forgiveness* has to be right there among the top. Jesus and forgiveness go together. Amid the excruciating agony of the cross, and as soldiers and people derided and abused Him, the heartrending words stumbled out through quivering lips: “ ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ ” (*Luke 23:34, NIV*). And in the Sermon on the Mount He went so far as to say that if we do not forgive those who offend us, then we should not expect God to forgive our offenses against Him (*Matt. 6:12, 14, 15*).

What is Jesus teaching about forgiveness in each of the following passages? *Mark 2:5–12; Luke 7:36–50; 17:3, 4; John 8:1–11.*

The wonderful statements about forgiveness notwithstanding, what cautionary, balancing factors do we find in the following passages? *Matt. 12:31, 32; 18:6; Mark 14:21.*

In Mark 14:21, Jesus uttered a woe upon the “man who betrays the Son of Man.” But suppose that man were to confess and repent? In this connection, contrast the actions of Judas and Peter following their separate betrayals of Jesus. After witnessing Jesus’ condemnation by those who had arrested Him, Judas, “seized with remorse,” returned the betrayal money to the authorities, and his words seemed most appropriate: “I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood” (*Matt. 27:3, 4, NIV*). In contrast to Judas’s public display of regret, Peter’s tears of penitence were shed in silence; nor did he return to Caiaphas’s judgment hall to make amends for his shameful betrayal. Yet, the one was condemned, the other forgiven. What was the crucial difference?

How are we to understand forgiveness in a practical sense? For instance, a woman can forgive a husband who beats her, but does forgiveness mean leaving oneself vulnerable to more abuse? How can we forgive while at the same time be wise and prudent enough to protect ourselves and others from those who have violated our trust?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

teachings on many essentials of life—from where we came to where we are headed, and all the in-between issues. But this week we focus on Christ’s teachings on who God is and how we ought to live.

I. What Christ Taught About God

Discuss what some concepts of God found outside of Christ are and what is wrong with such notions.


Christ incarnated as a human being to dispel false notions that Satan had instilled in human minds and to reveal the true nature of God. If indeed God was speaking through His Son (*Heb. 1:1, 2; John 1:1–3, 14*), it is important for us to recognize that Jesus is the ultimate disclosure of God. What did He disclose about God?

Christ taught that God is our Father (*Matt. 6:9–14*). In the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us a model prayer in which He bids us to relate to God as Father—intimate, personal, caring, and loving; not a distant, impersonal force or idea. “Father” is Christ’s favorite way of describing God. He uses it four times in Mark, 15 times in Luke, 44 times in Matthew, and no fewer than 107 times in John—an ascending increase in usage. Does this signify the importance of the concept of God as Father to the growing faith community?

Christ taught that God our Father is One of love, grace, and truth (*John 1:14, 3:16*). The Fatherhood of God presents God in terms of true love (*1 John 4:16*). God’s love not only has created us but has sought out to redeem us when we have chosen to wander away in sin (*Rom. 5:6–8*). In describing God’s love, the New Testament uses the word *agape*, a sacrificial, outgoing, unmerited love. It neither changes nor oscillates; it is utterly dependable. It is love for love’s sake. It loves us not because we deserve it but because we are in need of it. By His *agape*, God has given the utmost dignity to human life, so that if there had been only one sinner, Christ would have died for that single prodigal.

II. What Christ Taught About How We Should Live

The Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5–7*) stands as the epitome of Christian lifestyle and conduct. Through this most significant sermon ever preached, Jesus presented not an impossible idealism or a

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What He Taught About Humility

(Matt. 20:25–28)

In a 1995 survey, some athletes were asked the following question: If there was a drug you could take that would guarantee you'd receive a gold medal at the Olympics but that would kill you in five years, would you take it? More than 50 percent said Yes. It is a commentary on the lure of fame and power on contemporary society. To be “in front of the camera,” to hold millions drooling in the palm of our hand, that is the rage of the twenty-first century.

And that same general spirit can invade the church if we do not remain constantly on guard. The lust for power over others (the drive to be in control, the hunger for the first place) has not diminished with the passing of the years.

Study the following passages in the context of this insatiable struggle for the top:

Matt. 18:1–6

Matt. 20:25–28

Matt. 23:1, 5–12

1 Pet. 5:1–4

The harsh events of history sometimes have sent proud dictators scrambling penniless among refugees or cowering in solitary confinement, taking orders from third-class prison wardens. There even have been times when a monarch temporarily gives up the throne to make common lot with the marginalized members of society. But all these cases put together, voluntary or coerced, pale in comparison with the magnitude of the condescension we see in Christ. He was “in very nature God,” Paul says; that is the *God of the universe* we are talking about here! “But [He] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” Descending further yet, “he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (*Phil. 2:5–8, NIV*).

In light of the Cross, in light of the amazing condescension of the Son of God, why should all forms of self-exaltation be brought to shame? How can we protect ourselves from this subtle yet very dangerous form of self-deception?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

perfectionist legalism but a standard of conduct for those saved by His grace. The Sermon on the Mount is the divine manifesto for the believer's life. Note two keys to understanding this sermon.

First, the Sermon on the Mount is God's eternal call to be different. This is the same call that came to Noah, Abraham, Israel—and now His disciples. Christ wants a people who are not “‘like them’ ” (*Matt. 6:8, NIV*). Jesus demands of His disciples to be different from those around them—in the way they believe, worship, relate, live, love, or die. The purpose is not to form an isolationist cult but to be a distinct and permeating remnant—like salt to make the food edible or light to dispel darkness (*Matt. 5:13–16*). Discipleship is a call to be different.

Second, the Sermon on the Mount is an affirmation of the moral law through the unique technique of extension by the Lord who Himself authored that law, thus establishing the eternal relevance of the Decalogue (*Matt. 5:17–19*). Jesus does this masterfully by using two phrases, “It was said . . . but I say unto you.” The contrast introduces a more demanding definition and a transparent lifestyle. Sin moves from act to thought (*5:21–42*), prayer from the mechanical to the relational (*6:7–13*), righteousness from what one does to in whom one lives (*6:14–34*), relationship from blood to brotherhood (*7:1–12*), love from the near to the other (*7:43–48*), and the ultimate living principle from the hypocritical to a radical one of commitment (*7:21–27*).

Consider This: The Beatitudes (*Matt. 5:3–12*) are not a cafeteria of choices from which Christians can choose and select. They must possess all just as they must have the components of the fruit of the Spirit (*Gal. 5:22, 23*).

► STEP 3—Practice

Just for Teachers: Take some time to let your class members share with each other how the Sermon on the Mount is relevant to some

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What He Taught About Grace—and Faith

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works” (*Eph. 2:8, 9, NIV*). The words are from the apostle Paul as he reflected on the Christian message of salvation, which he expressed differently than Jesus did. In fact, one might be tempted to ask whether Jesus believed in righteousness by faith. But to ask that question is to grossly misunderstand both Paul and Jesus. Jesus’ approach to teaching about grace seemed at times to go in a different direction; one reason, incidentally, that we should not be too legalistic with one another over the exact formulas we each use to describe God’s marvelous act of grace in Jesus and our response to it.

Jesus came as the epitome of grace. He was grace personified. To encounter Him was to encounter grace. “We have seen his glory,” John wrote, “the glory of the One and Only, . . . full of grace and truth” (*John 1:14, NIV*).

In the following passages, what is Jesus teaching about grace and faith?

Matt. 14:28–31

Matt. 20:1–15

Luke 7:36–48

Luke 15:11–31

John 8:1–11

From these passages, we learn something of the many ways Jesus taught about grace, through His parables and through the object lessons of His own life. How could Peter ever forget his utter helplessness in the face of the deadly elements that surrounded him that night on the lake? His only recourse was to cry out to a Power beyond himself. And instantly the response was there! No delay. No need for penance. No complicated formula or requirement. Just three words, coming naturally from his extreme desperation: “Lord, save me!” (*Matt. 14:30, NIV*). And immediately the hand of Jesus was on him. That is grace.

Of the various accounts listed above, which one speaks to you most powerfully of God’s grace? Having received such grace yourself, how can you be more willing to give it to others just as undeserving as yourself?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

burning issues, such as child and spousal abuse and status of marriage in society today.

Thought Questions:

- 1 Some versions begin the Beatitudes with “Blessed are they . . .” and others begin with “Happy are they . . .” Which is more appealing to you, and why? Is there a difference between the two?
- 2 Implied in Matthew 5:17–20 is the notion that some have evidently thought that Jesus was opposed to the law. What would have prompted such thinking?

Application Questions:

- 1 Fasting is not a popular practice these days. Can you think of reasons in favor of fasting?
- 2 The Lord’s Prayer has six petitions. Identify them. How can one use this as a model in private and public prayers?

► STEP 4—Apply

Just for Teachers: We learned this week the wondrous nature of the teachings of Jesus. Probe your class with questions such as these: Where does the wonder lie? Have you felt a tug at your heart as you contemplated some of Christ’s teachings? Which of His teachings are the most timely and relevant to you this week?

Application Questions:

- 1 Jesus taught us to address God as our Father. If God is our Father, what are we to each other? And how is that new relationship in Christ reflected in Christ’s teaching on our relationship to each other?
- 2 Christ taught us to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (*Matt. 6:12*). What does this imply to our day-to-day life?

Further Study: According to historian Huston Smith, Jesus' teachings "may be the most repeated in history. *'Love your neighbor as yourself. What you would like people to do to you, do to them. Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'* Most of the time, though, he told stories: of buried treasure, of sowers who went out to sow, of pearl merchants, of a good Samaritan. People who heard these stories were moved to exclaim, *'This man speaks with authority. Never spoke man thus!'* . . . The most impressive thing about the teachings of Jesus is not that he taught them but that he appears to have lived them. From the accounts that we have, his entire life was one of humility, self-giving, and love that sought not its own. The supreme evidence of his humility is that it is impossible to discover precisely what Jesus thought of himself. He wasn't concerned with that. He was concerned with what people thought of God. . . . We have seen that he ignored the barriers that mores erected between people. He loved children. He hated injustice, and perhaps hated hypocrisy even more because it hid people from themselves."—*The Illustrated World's Religions*, pp. 212, 213.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Many issues that have concerned us in recent times Jesus never touched (drug abuse, health reform, homosexuality, slavery, cloning, abortion, etc.). What conclusions should we draw from these omissions? What conclusions should we *not* draw?
- 2 What role might Jesus' teaching on forgiveness play in issues of international conflict today? How can Christians bring that teaching to bear upon the resolution of issues in their homes, churches, and communities? When is forgiveness *not* the answer to the particular problems faced by nations and individuals, or is it always the answer?
- 3 Notwithstanding its universal appeal, the Sermon on the Mount often is ignored when we confront the real problems of life. Why do you think this is so? And how is it in your own life? In what ways could you consciously try to apply these principles in your own walk with the Lord?