

# 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 were.

*\*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?

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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?

## 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 following passages?

*Matt. 5:8, 9*

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

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*John 4:22–24*

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*John 10:27–30*

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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?**

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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.

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**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).

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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?**

## 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*

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*Matt. 20:25–28*

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*Matt. 23:1, 5–12*

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*1 Pet. 5:1–4*

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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?**

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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?**

**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*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) pp. 212, 213.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ 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?
- ❷ 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?
- ❸ 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?

# The Sidetracked Shuttle

by HOMER TRECARTIN

Pastor Dave Weigley boarded the airport shuttle and sat down, eager to relax a little before his meetings. He thought of the evangelistic meetings he had held in this Florida city a year earlier and wondered how the new members were doing. And what about the people who had come to the meetings but did not make a decision to follow Jesus?

His thoughts were interrupted by a woman's voice. "Please, just drop me off on your way to the hotel." Grudgingly the driver agreed to take the woman to her home.

The shuttle bus wound through traffic and stopped in front of a familiar-looking block of apartments. Pastor Weigley jumped up to help the woman with her bag. "Do you live here?" he asked.

"Yes," the woman said. Excited, Pastor Weigley asked if a certain woman still lived there. The woman eyed him and slowly answered, "Yes, she still lives there."

The shuttle door closed, and Pastor Weigley sat down. *This has to be more than coincidence*, he thought. *What does God want me to do?*

The woman he asked about had attended the meetings he had held, but in spite of many visits and prayers, she had not given her heart to Christ. Now God had led him back to her apartment complex. Weigley promised God that he would visit the woman before leaving town.

A few days later Weigley returned to the apartment where the woman lived. As he climbed the stairs he thought, *How do I greet someone whose name I don't remember?* He knocked on the door, but heard nothing from inside. As he turned to leave, the door opened and the woman exclaimed, "Well, Pastor Weigley. Please come in."

He entered and found the woman had company—a friend and another pastor who Weigley recognized. The women were as surprised as he was. Pastor Weigley told the others about his experience on the shuttle bus. The other pastor explained that he had come to apologize for an incident that had happened years earlier.

The two pastors prayed and invited the women to give their hearts to Jesus. With tears in her eyes, the woman who had attended the meetings knelt and surrendered to Christ. This woman has since been baptized, in part because two pastors had followed the Holy Spirit's leading and found a wanderer ready to come home.

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