

Jesus' Teachings

Leader's Guide

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Jesus' Teachings introduces Jesus — both who he was historically and who he is for Christians — in such a way that someone with no church experience or Bible knowledge can begin to know about him. It focuses on the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with an occasional nod to John's Gospel. It can be used with discussion groups at nearly any level of knowledge and with groups that are all over the map in their knowledge. Because of the way in which the material is presented, participants at different levels of knowledge can work together and learn together.

The booklet *Jesus' Teachings* is fairly bare-boned and doesn't have much discussion, usually just naming a topic and saying what Jesus said about it and something about the circumstances in which he said it. The topics come from the material, that is, from Jesus' teachings themselves, not from modern issues. The booklet also includes some historical background information, mainly about Judaism at the time of Jesus. It is not, by itself, group-friendly, and it includes far more than a 10 to 13-session group can look at (references to all the red-letter passages in three Gospels!). The main thing that should occur in a discussion group is discussion, so this Guide provides some brief discussion starters and steerers that can be used by group leaders and shows one way in which the material has been divided into sessions and slimmed down to key Gospel passages for each session.

But first, about printing *Jesus Teachings*: it comes in two pdfs, both containing the same material (so that you can give your participants either) and both for printing on 8½ x 11-inch paper. [Jesus'Teachings_fullpage.pdf](#) produces full-size pages and is the better version for on-screen reading. [Jesus'Teachings_halfpage.pdf](#) produces a folded booklet with half-size pages, and printing it so that the pages end up in order can be a bit of an adventure. This is how I managed to do it most recently in Windows 10, and your setup may work similarly: Open the file in Reader. Print it with these parameters: all pages, letter size, one page per sheet, print on two sides (flip on short edge), landscape orientation. Fold the printout in half — all the pages together — without changing the order in which they came from the printer. If that gives you a booklet with all the pages in order, then a couple staples lined up close to the fold will finish it off. If you have access to a long-reach stapler, lay the booklet open and put the staples through the fold.

I've found it best not to overload the schedule for a Life Group, class, or Sunday School season before it has begun. For a twelve-week group I've found it best to allow for interruptions and alterations of the schedule by planning for only nine meetings. If you use *Jesus' Teachings* as background material for your preparation, make it available to your participants, and proceed in the same order as the booklet, this is how your discussions can be divided into nine sessions:

Week One *Jesus' Teachings* has, after three short paragraphs of introduction, two further introductory sections, "Who Was Jesus?" and "The Four Gospels." Those sections, together with "Appendix: Judaism at the time of Jesus" at the end of the booklet, work well as background for a beginning session.

- ❖ It is important that participants begin to know each other and to develop a sense of the group as learning and working together. Use whatever introduction activities are appropriate for your group.

- ❖ To start off discussion you can ask participants what basic information they know about Jesus. From this you can generate a chalkboard/whiteboard list of answers to “reporter’s questions” — “who?” “when?” “where?” “why is this significant?” — and by working your way around the group you can get some idea of what level of knowledge participants bring with them. If some come with little knowledge, you can move on to “Jesus was a man who....” The reminder that Jesus was a real person who lived in a particular historical / geographical setting can be helpful even for Christians with long-time steady Bible-reading habits.
- ❖ Your “reporter’s questions” list might contain entries about both Jesus the man who lived back then and Jesus as he has been through history since then and still is — whether as a symbol or as a living reality. If so, then you might ask participants how, or if, they understand those two aspects fitting together for them. The point is not to say whether particular answers are right or wrong but to start off thinking about the question. Let later sessions move toward fuller understandings of who Jesus is for us.
- ❖ If the word “disciple” or “discipleship” emerges, explore it by asking participants what it means. Here you might camp for a moment on the last sentence of the first paragraph of “The Four Gospels”: “Their [the Gospels’] purpose was (and is) to enable people who do not live during the time of Jesus to be his disciples.”
- ❖ If it is needed, make sure that each participant knows where to find the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and chapter:verse references in his or her printed Bible or Bible app, or online.
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus’ Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on. Explain that future sessions will all have that sort of structure: proceeding through *Jesus’ Teachings* and focusing on discussion around particular passages named in it.

The rest of the sessions are focused on particular Gospels passages. Most of the time you will want to deal with each passage separately.

- ❖ Have someone read the passage aloud while the others follow along in their Bibles or on their devices.
- ❖ Begin the discussion with a focus simply on what the passage says: What is the setting of Jesus words? What does he say? To whom does he say it?
- ❖ Set the passage in context: What can we say (without taking much time for it) about where this fits in the sequence of Jesus’ career? How do these words of Jesus fit with other teachings that we have looked at? What kinds of historical/cultural background information might help in our understanding of Jesus’ words here?
- ❖ Move on to the meaning and impact of Jesus words: How would different groups within Jesus’ original audience perceive Jesus differently because of what he says here? What is he asking them to understand or to do? Does the author of *Jesus’ Teachings* put this passage under the right heading?
- ❖ Finally, guide the discussion toward how we hear the passage today: How do we incorporate this passage into our understanding of Christian discipleship? How we obey Jesus in our specific situations?

This general sequence — from the content of the passage through its place in the career of Jesus and in his historical and cultural setting to our hearing of and response to the passage today — can be used with each of the Gospel passages, but not all of the questions suggested here will fit with a particular passage.

Week Two This session focuses on “Jesus’ Authority and Identity.” The Gospels come back several times to the controversy surrounding who Jesus is and why that matters. Six passages can be a lot to discuss, but, as you look at each passage in turn, a pattern of common features will emerge.

Mark 6:1-6
John 7:12-15
Luke 19:47-20:2
Luke 11:14-20
John 6:14-15
Matthew 16:13-17

- ❖ Your initial focus with each passage can be on how questions like these were asked and answered at the time of Jesus: Who is this guy? And what gives him the right to speak so boldly and to be so critical? Along with that, ask what mattered to the people Jesus spoke to and why these things mattered.
- ❖ To set the passage in context ask: What did Jesus do or say to set off this particular round of questioning or controversy?
- ❖ What ideas about Jesus were suggested by different kinds of people in this situation?
- ❖ What does Jesus claim for himself here? Along with that, what assessments of him does he reject?
- ❖ As you guide the discussion to the meaning of the passage today, go back to what your participants said about what mattered to Jesus’ first audience and ask: What matters now? What would people ask Jesus now? What would the controversy be about now?
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus’ Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on.

Week Three This is the first of two sessions that will explore Jesus’ call for people to follow him in discipleship. Matthew 28:19-20 is the fundamental beginning point. Here are some suggested questions to draw out what these two verses say to us:

Matthew 28:19-20
Matthew 4:17
Luke 5:1-11

- ❖ Where do these verses come in the Gospel of Matthew, in Jesus’ career, and in the history of the church?
- ❖ What is the one specific task that Jesus gives these first disciples, and the church, to do?
- ❖ What components of that task does Jesus explicitly name here?
- ❖ Are we, in fact, disciples of Jesus? Do we have a sense that observing everything that Jesus taught is something that we care about and that churches teach? These questions might lead into extensive discussion that takes up most of your time this session. That might be okay as long as the discussion continues to focus on the imperative to be and make disciples of Jesus.

Take your participants back from the end of Jesus’ career to the beginning with the other two passages. Matthew 4:17 gives the basic content of Jesus’ first preaching:

- ❖ What does Jesus tell people to do? What is it to repent? Do we have a sense of ourselves as people who need to repent?

Luke 5:1-11 describes how some professional fishermen began to be disciples of Jesus:

- ❖ What is Simon’s concern that causes such a strong reaction (verse 8)?

- ❖ These men change occupations, but how might we describe their new occupation in our own terms?
- ❖ What was it about Jesus that caused these men to make such a significant change in their lives?
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus' Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on.

Week Four As you continue with Jesus' call to discipleship, your discussion will be focused on parts of the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in chapters 5-7 of Matthew. This focus will continue into succeeding sessions as well. As you look together at each of these short pieces of the Sermon,

Matthew 5:6
Matthew 6:19-24
Matthew 6:25-34
Matthew 7:13-14
Matthew 7:21-27

- ❖ find the key statement or climactic saying in each of the longer pieces,
- ❖ find the pivotal verb in each of the shorter pieces and in each of the climactic sayings, and
- ❖ focus particularly on what aspect of life or what sort of thought or emotion these verbs address.
- ❖ Then discuss how it is that you and your participants — in your own historical and cultural setting — can hear and carry out Jesus' call to unreserved and active commitment to him.
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus' Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on.

Week Five This session is focused on “Jesus and the Jewish Law,” but it is important to bridge the gap from first-century inner-Jewish concerns to our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus today. First, set some background before your participants:

Matthew 5:17-48

- ❖ Review the paragraph in the Appendix of *Jesus' Teachings* (six paragraphs from the end) on the Pharisees.
- ❖ Read Matthew 12:1-2 and 12:9-10 for two examples of the Pharisees' attention to the law given by God to Israel.

Look then at Matthew 5:17-20 and begin the discussion by asking:

- ❖ What is Jesus' response to the Pharisees' concern for observance of the law?

This might receive a number of answers that are in tension with each other and that contain further questions. Take those questions and difficulties into your reading of each of six sections that come after verse 20 (verses 21-26, 27-30, 31-32, 33-37, 38-42, and 43-48), and see if any answers come out of discussion of them. Take each of the six sections in turn and ask your group to identify:

- ❖ the moral issue involved,
- ❖ what it is that Jews taught by Pharisees “heard” about that issue,
- ❖ what the Old Testament says that became the basis of the Pharisees' teaching,
- ❖ what Jesus says about the issue,
- ❖ how what he says is different from the Pharisees' teaching,

and, most importantly,

- ❖ the fundamental concern involved in that difference — that is, *why* does Jesus regard it as important to argue these points?

Lead your group from the answers to the last of these questions to a more general assessment of what Jesus is up to and what it means for us today:

- ❖ What basic human characteristics is Jesus teaching here?
- ❖ What is the relationship between discipleship to Jesus and the law given to the people of Israel?
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus' Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on.

Week Six Here the focus is on “How to Act toward God.” The Matthew passages are Jesus’ teachings on three kinds of what we can call “religious practices” or “spiritual disciplines.” If you skip over the Lord’s Prayer as it is found in Matthew 6 and get it instead from Luke 11, then you can have a broader discussion of the basis of prayer, which is trust of God as the provider. As you look in turn at what Jesus says about each of the three religious practices addressed in Matthew 6:2-4, 5-8, and 16-18, guide your group’s discussion with questions like these:

Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18 Luke 11:1-13

- ❖ What is it that the “hypocrites” do? Here it will be good to note that Jesus could exaggerate to make his point, particularly with the reference to “trumpets” (verse 2).
- ❖ What do the “hypocrites” hope to achieve by doing that, and what does it mean that they “have received their full reward”?
- ❖ Who are the “hypocrites” and why does Jesus call them that? Jesus, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, uses this term in his criticism of the Pharisees (see particularly Matthew 23).
- ❖ What similar practices of “hypocrites” do we find among ourselves?
- ❖ What is it that Jesus tells us to do differently than the “hypocrites”?
- ❖ What is the different goal — different from that of the “hypocrites” — that Jesus gives us for our practices of giving to the poor / prayer / fasting?

When you turn to the Lord’s Prayer in Luke 11, lead the discussion by asking:

- ❖ How does the prayer (verses 2-4) demonstrate Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Matthew 6?
- ❖ Where do we see God’s attitude spoken of in the parable in verses 5-8? The object here should be to guide your group away from an interpretation that lays emphasis on the persistence of the asker, which would then mean that God is as reluctant to give as the parable’s householder is. Rather, note that the asker begins with “friend” (verse 5) but finds friendship ineffective (verse 8). But with God, his friendship, that is, love, does count in his response to our prayers, as with human fathers (verses 11-13).
- ❖ What then is the basis for our asking, seeking, and knocking (verses 9-10)?
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus' Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on.

Week Seven Here the focus shifts to “How to Act toward Other People,” this week concentrating on issues surrounding leadership. First, some suggested discussion-starters for the story in Matthew 20:20-28:

Matthew 20:20-28 Matthew 23:8-10 Matthew 5:39-42
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- ❖ What sort of leader does the mother of James and John (and presumably James and John themselves) think Jesus is?

- ❖ What is Jesus' "cup"?
- ❖ What sort of rulers do "the Gentiles" have?
- ❖ What sort of rulers do we have?
- ❖ How does Jesus' role as "ransom for many" affect how his disciples are to act in relation to each other?

Next, Matthew 23:8-10. Here you might begin at verse 1 and recall what was said about the Pharisees in Weeks Five and Six. Then:

- ❖ What titles does Jesus exclude for use among his disciples?
- ❖ Why does he exclude them?
- ❖ What titles do we use that Jesus might want us to drop for the same reasons?

Matthew 5:39-42, which came up in Week Five, shows us some of Jesus' remodeling of how his disciples approach relationships with people who exercise power. Here you might ask:

- ❖ How is the disciple of Jesus to respond to coercion? Note that what Jesus says to do is not simply "do as you're told" but involves a restructuring of the relationship: if you give more than I want to steal from you, you are no longer my victim but my benefactor.
- ❖ What relationships of coercion are we in that we might handle in similar ways?
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus' Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on.

Week Eight This week your focus is on the disciple's active concern for others and extension of mercy in difficult relationships. Matthew 25:31-46 is a long teaching about final judgment that involves a mixture of images and similes. Try to keep your participants' discussion from getting bogged down in trying to figure out the end-time location and implications of the passage. Instead, guide them to the key issues for the disciple's manner of life:

Matthew 25:31-46
Matthew 6:12-15
Matthew 18:21-35

- ❖ What criteria for the judgment are named in this passage? How many times are these criteria named? The answer is four: verses 35-36, 37-39, 42-43, and 44.
- ❖ What kind of "king" is it who identifies so closely with his subjects (the "I" in "I was hungry," etc., and verses 40 and 45)? Here you might recall what was said about Jesus as king in your discussion of Matthew 20:20-28, and Matthew 18:5 can be brought in as well.
- ❖ Who are "the least of these"? Here you can direct the group to Matthew 10:40-42, where "the least of these" who are to receive aid from Jesus' followers are explicitly identified as those who proclaim the coming of God's kingdom.

Return to the Lord's Prayer, this time Matthew's version, for Jesus' teaching on mercy:

- ❖ Why is God's extension of forgiveness to us dependent on our forgiveness of other people? Here you might recall Matthew 5:48 from Week Five.

Turn then to Peter's question and Jesus' answering parable in Matthew 18:

- ❖ Why does Peter pick the number "seven"? Most simply, because he thinks it's a lot.
- ❖ Why does Jesus say "seventy-seven" in response? Basically to shock Peter with the differentness of what he is teaching — and to give a number beyond anyone's ability to keep count. Here you might refer to the last clause of 1 Corinthians 13:5: Love "keeps no record of wrongs."

- ❖ In the parable, why does the master change his mind the first time (verses 25 and 27)?
- ❖ Then why does he change his mind the second time (verse 34)?
- ❖ Again, as with Matthew 6, why is God's extension of forgiveness to us dependent on our forgiveness of other people?
- ❖ Let your group know what parts of *Jesus' Teachings* and what specific Gospel passages your next session will focus on.

Week Nine Jesus said quite a lot about "What Will Happen," the focus of this last session. You will focus on a few major points. First, Jesus predicted his own death and resurrection. You might point out that there are three occasions on which he did so in each of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Here, take the first such event in Mark as a sample:

Mark 8:31-34 Mark 13:1-2, 14-20 Mark 13:26-27 Matthew 12:36 Matthew 7:21-27 Mark 10:31

- ❖ What will be the sequence of events according to Mark 8:31?
- ❖ Why does Peter oppose what Jesus says (verse 32)?
- ❖ Why, then, does Jesus react so strongly against Peter's opposition (verse 33)?
- ❖ In what way is the experience of Jesus the pattern for his disciples (verse 34)?

Jesus also predicted that the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed, which happened in AD 70 in the midst of a rebellion against Rome:

- ❖ How would Jesus' prediction have sounded in response to his disciples' excitement (Mark 13:1-2)?
- ❖ What dangers will people in Jerusalem and Judea face during the war with Rome (Mark 13:14-23)? "The abomination of desolation" (verse 14) is a phrase derived from the Old Testament book of Daniel that was used for any occasion when Gentiles or their worship practices came into the holy inner chambers of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

Later will come the return of Jesus to gather his people to himself:

- ❖ Who will see Jesus when he returns, according to Mark 13:26? "The Son of Man" is a term Jesus used to refer to himself.
- ❖ Where will Jesus' "elect" be when he comes for them (verse 27)?

And final judgment:

- ❖ According to Matthew 12:36-37, who is facing final judgment?
- ❖ And, in the same verses, what specific kind of action will be judged?

Jesus referred to criteria of judgment several times.

- ❖ What are to be the criteria of judgment according to Matthew 7:21-27? And what will *not* be considered in the judgment?
- ❖ What surprises are in store at the final judgment according to Mark 10:31?