

# On the Road to Discipleship

Moral and Ethical Teachings of Jesus

6-week Bible Study



By Rivertree Christian Ministries



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## **Course Description**

This six-week course is designed to uplift the moral and ethical lessons of Jesus: teachings centered on love, justice, mercy, humility, forgiveness, service, and the kingdom ethic. The course is suitable for adult learners in a mainline Protestant community. The didactic emphasis is on inclusivity, scriptural engagement, and practical application, while adapting theological and social themes to participants' needs.

## **Course Objectives**

- Explore and understand the core moral and ethical teachings of Jesus from the Gospels.
- Engage with historical and theological contexts to deepen the understanding of Jesus' ethics.
- Apply these teachings, such as love, justice, and mercy, to contemporary personal and social issues.
- Foster spiritual practices that embody these teachings within individual lives and community actions.

## Week 1 — Introduction: The Moral Vision of Jesus

### Goals

Introduce key themes of Jesus' ethical teaching and the concept of the "kingdom of God."

### Primary Texts

- Mark 1:14–15 (Jesus begins his ministry)
- Luke 4:16–21 (Jesus outlines his mission)
- Matthew 5:1–12 (The Beatitudes)

### Key Ideas

- Understanding the kingdom ethic versus societal norms
- The Beatitudes as a transformative ethical framework

### Reflection

Jesus' earthly ministry marked a decisive shift from the prevailing religious framework of Judaism. Prior teachings, particularly those of the Pharisees and scribes, centered on meticulous observance of the Law, ethnic identity, and external purity as the path to righteousness. Jesus, by contrast, proclaimed a radical inward transformation and an immediate, personal encounter with God's reign.

From the outset in **Mark 1:14–15**, Jesus announces, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." This differs sharply from previous expectations of a distant future restoration or a messianic warrior who would overthrow Rome. Jesus declares that God's reign is already breaking in *now*, not through political revolution or temple sacrifice, but through a call to repentance (a change of mind and heart) and trust in this present good news. The emphasis moves from waiting for divine intervention to actively entering it.

**Luke 4:16–21** further redefines mission. In the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus reads from Isaiah and claims its fulfillment in the present moment: good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. Previous religious leaders often saw poverty and disability as signs of divine disfavor or as conditions to be managed through almsgiving. Jesus, however, places these marginalized groups at the center of God's activity; they are not passive recipients but are the primary beneficiaries of the kingdom. He also includes gentiles later in the passage (Luke 4:25–27), subverting ethnic exclusivity. This "Jubilee" announcement challenges the socio-religious hierarchy by declaring that God's favor is not earned by status or sacrifice but is a gift to the undeserving.

**Matthew 5:1–12**, the Beatitudes, caps this reorientation. Previous ethical teaching under the Law often focused on external compliance ("You shall not..."). The Beatitudes target internal dispositions: poverty of spirit, meekness, mercy, and purity of heart. More strikingly, Jesus

pronounces blessings on those whom society considered cursed: the poor, the grieving, the persecuted. These blessings are not given as conditions to endure but as the very posture that opens one to the kingdom. This inverts worldly values and undermines the idea that material blessing or religious observance proves divine approval. By linking “blessedness” to humility and persecution, Jesus redefines righteous living as a state of complete dependence on God rather than self-sufficient legalism.

In sum, Jesus’ ministry departed from prior teachings by replacing external law-keeping with interior transformation, postponing hope with immediate kingdom presence, and favoring the elite with good news for the outcast. The kingdom he inaugurated was not a system to be obeyed but a reality to be entered through repentance, faith, and a humble heart.

### **Activities**

- Group discussion on the implications of the kingdom of God.
- Read and reflect on the Beatitudes in pairs, noting challenges to their lives.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How do the Beatitudes challenge conventional wisdom?
- What does the kingdom of God mean for our lives today?

### **Practical Assignment**

- Keep a journal for one week, noting moments of grace, justice, and love that you observe in your daily life.

## Week 2 — Love: Loving God, Neighbor, and Enemy

### Goals

Explore Jesus' commandments regarding love and the radical nature of loving one's neighbor and enemy.

### Primary Texts

- Matthew 22:34–40 (Greatest commandments)
- Luke 10:25–37 (Good Samaritan)
- Matthew 5:43–48 (Love your enemies)

### Key Ideas

- Love is active and transformative
- Understanding “neighbor” in a broad, inclusive context

### Reflection: The Two Commands That Sum Up Everything (Matthew 22:34–40)

You know those moments when someone tries to trap you with a question, and you give an answer that completely reframes the conversation? That's what happens in Matthew 22. A lawyer asks Jesus, “Which commandment is the greatest?” Probably expecting a fight over which law matters most. Instead, Jesus gives two.

He quotes Deuteronomy: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” That's the first. Then he adds a second, straight from Leviticus: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And then he drops this bombshell: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Think about that. Everything in Scripture, including every rule, every story, and every warning, hangs on love for God and love for neighbor. Not on getting the doctrine exactly right. Not on keeping a checklist. On love.

**The Self You Can't Ignore.** Here's the detail that often gets missed. Jesus says to love your neighbor *as yourself*. That “as yourself” is doing real work. It assumes you already have a baseline of care for your own life: you feed yourself; you protect yourself; you want good things for yourself. That's not selfishness; it's basic creaturehood. And Jesus picks that up as the measuring stick.

The command doesn't just tell you to love others. It also affirms that you, the one doing the loving, matter. You can't pour from an empty glass. Self-care, self-regard, treating yourself as someone God loves. That's not a side note. It's the unit of measurement for how you treat everyone else. If you hate yourself, you'll distort what love looks like. If you ignore yourself, you'll burn out. The command anchors neighbor-love in a healthy self-love that mirrors God's own care for you.

**Where Does the Enemy Fit?** You might notice that Jesus doesn't mention enemies in this passage. But the word "neighbor" is left deliberately undefined. That's the hook. Later, in Luke 10, Jesus tells the Good Samaritan parable to show that a neighbor is anyone who needs help. Even someone from a group you despise. And in Matthew 5, he explicitly commands you to love your enemies. Look at it this way: the "neighbor" in Matthew 22 is a placeholder waiting to be filled by the outsider, the stranger, the person who opposes you.

**Putting It All Together.** Here's what Matthew 22 gives us: It's one integrated command viewed from different angles. Love God, and you'll see yourself as his beloved child. See yourself rightly, and you'll be able to love the person next to you, even the one who's hard to love. And when you struggle, remember that Jesus not only gave these commands; he lived them, perfectly, for you.

### **Activities**

- Group brainstorming on modern examples of "Good Samaritans" in the community.
- Pair discussions about the challenges of loving one's enemies.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What does loving your enemy look like in practice?
- How can we cultivate a community of love amid conflict?

### **Practical Assignment**

- Identify someone you struggle to love and find a small, intentional act of kindness to perform for them.

## Week 3 — Justice and Mercy: The Prophetic Voice

### Goals

Examine Jesus' teachings on justice and mercy and how they challenge societal norms.

### Primary Texts

- Matthew 25:31–46 (Sheep and goats)
- Luke 4:18–19 (Jesus' mission)
- Matthew 23 (Woes against the religious leaders)

### Key Ideas

- The relationship between justice and mercy
- Jesus' critique of empty religion versus compassionate action

### Reflection: Justice Isn't Optional - Three Passages That Call Us In

If you've ever flipped through the Bible looking for the word "justice," you might land on Micah 6:8 or Amos 5:24 pretty quickly. But some of the most challenging and practical teachings on justice come straight from Jesus himself. Let's walk through three of them: the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4, and his blistering critique of religious leaders in Matthew 23. Each one reframes what justice means for everyday faith.

#### Matthew 25:31–46 — The Test Nobody Expects

You probably know this scene: the Son of Man separates people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The "sheep" are invited into the kingdom because they fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited prisoners. The "goats" are sent away because they did none of those things.

Justice, in this passage, isn't an abstract principle. It's a list of concrete, hands-on actions. And those actions are the only criterion for judgment that Jesus names. That's striking. It means that our theology, our worship, our moral stances—all of that gets filtered through how we treat the most vulnerable people around us. Jesus ties his own identity to the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner. Neglect them, and you've neglected him.

#### Luke 4:18–19 — Jesus' Own Job Description

Early in his ministry, Jesus walks into the synagogue in Nazareth, opens the scroll of Isaiah, and reads:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Then he sits down and says, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” He’s not just quoting a favorite verse—he’s announcing his entire mission. And that mission is framed in terms of justice: good news for the poor, freedom for captives, healing for the blind, liberation for the oppressed.

Notice who gets priority: the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed. Jesus doesn’t say, “I’ve come to help everyone feel spiritually fulfilled.” He starts with material, physical, and social restoration. The “year of the Lord’s favor” echoes the Old Testament Jubilee, when debts were canceled, and land returned to original families—a systemic reset of economic and social inequality. Justice isn’t a side project for Jesus; it’s the launch point of his whole public work.

### **Matthew 23 — Woe to the Hard-Hearted Leaders**

Then there’s Matthew 23. This chapter is uncomfortable, and it’s supposed to be. Jesus unloads seven “woes” on the Pharisees and teachers of the law. He calls them hypocrites, blind guides, whitewashed tombs. But what’s his specific accusation?

Look at verse 23: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices: mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

They were scrupulously tithing tiny herbs while ignoring justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Jesus doesn’t say tithing is wrong—he says don’t neglect the weightier things. The word “justice” here is the Hebrew *mishpat*, which means fair treatment, defending the weak, ensuring the system works for everyone. The religious leaders had turned faith into a checklist of rituals and rules, but they had no heart for the people those rules were supposed to protect.

That’s a warning for any of us who focus on religious performance—attendance, giving, purity codes—while overlooking the needs of the poor, the marginalized, and the outcast. Justice is not optional piety; it’s the core of the law Jesus came to fulfill.

### **Activities**

- Discuss how Jesus’ teachings can guide our responses to current social justice issues.
- Analyze case studies of contemporary movements for justice.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How can we faithfully advocate for justice in our communities?
- In what ways does mercy inform our understanding of justice?

### **Practical Assignment**

- Choose a local issue of justice, volunteer for 2–3 hours, and write a reflection on your experiences.

## Week 4 — Forgiveness and Reconciliation

### Goals

Study Jesus' teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation, emphasizing their importance in community life.

### Primary Texts

- Matthew 18:21–35 (Unforgiving servant)
- Luke 15:11–32 (Prodigal son)
- Matthew 5:23–24 (Reconciliation imperative)

### Key Ideas

- Forgiveness as a communal necessity
- Reconciliation beyond mere individual actions

### Reflection: Forgiveness Is the Hardest Teaching - Three Parables That Show Us Why

We've been walking through Jesus' teachings on justice, mercy, and compassionate action. But there's one topic that might be even harder than feeding the hungry or confronting empty religion: forgiveness. Specifically, the kind of forgiveness that Jesus not just recommends but *commands*. It's easy to nod along when we talk about systemic justice. It's a lot harder when someone has personally wronged you, and Jesus says, "forgive seventy-seven times."

The following passages illustrate this teaching: the parable of the prodigal son and the instruction to leave your gift at the altar. Together, they paint a picture of forgiveness that costs everything—and gives everything back.

#### The Prodigal Son: The Father Who Runs (Luke 15:11–32)

If the unforgiving servant shows us the necessity of forgiveness, the prodigal son shows us the heart behind it. A younger son demands his inheritance early—essentially telling his father, "I wish you were dead." He wastes everything in wild living, hits rock bottom, and finally decides to go home and beg to be a hired servant.

But while he is still a long way off, his father sees him and runs. He throws his arms around him, kisses him, and orders the best robe, a ring, sandals, and a feast. The son barely gets his repentance speech out before the father interrupts with celebration.

Then the older brother arrives. He's angry. He has served faithfully for years and never got a party. He refuses to go in. The father goes out to him too—the same running, the same pleading. "Everything I have is yours," he says. "But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Two sons, both lost. The younger one knows he's a mess; the older one thinks he's righteous. Both need the father's forgiveness. The father offers it freely to both. The parable ends without telling us whether the older brother finally went inside. That's deliberate. The question is left open for us.

This is the heart of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness: it's not grudging, not calculated, not keeping score. It's a father running down the road. It's a feast thrown for someone who deserves nothing. And it challenges anyone who thinks they've earned God's favor by being the good one.

### **The Reconciliation Imperative: Leave Your Gift at the Altar (Matthew 5:23–24)**

The third passage is short but maybe the most practical. Jesus says:

*“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”*

This is stunning. You're in the middle of worship—the most sacred act of your religious life—and Jesus says stop. Don't finish the prayer. Don't complete the offering. First, go make things right with the person you've wronged. Then come back to God.

It flips the priority. Reconciliation isn't a side project to spiritual life; it's a prerequisite. God doesn't want your worship if you're holding onto unforgiveness or if someone has a legitimate grievance against you. The vertical relationship with God is disrupted by horizontal brokenness between people.

This isn't about being a doormat or pretending conflicts don't exist. It's about taking the initiative. Jesus doesn't say “wait for them to apologize.” He says you go. If you remember that someone has something against you, you pause everything and go seek reconciliation. That's how seriously Jesus takes this.

#### **Activities**

- Lead a reflective practice on forgiveness and share experiences in small groups.
- Collaboratively create a reconciliation plan for a community conflict.

#### **Discussion Questions**

- Why is forgiveness central to community health?
- What barriers do we face in seeking reconciliation?

#### **Practical Assignment**

- Write a letter (either sent or unsent) to someone you need to forgive or who has harmed you, expressing your feelings.

## Week 5 — Humility, Servanthood, and Nonviolence

### Goals

Explore Jesus' teachings on humility and servanthood as hallmarks of discipleship.

### Primary Texts

- Mark 10:42–45 (Servant leadership)
- John 13:1–17 (Washing the disciples' feet)
- Matthew 5:38–42 (Turn the other cheek)

### Key Ideas

- Redefining leadership as service
- Nonviolence as a characteristic of the Christian response to conflict

### Reflection: Redefining Leadership as Service: The Upside-Down Kingdom

We have a leadership problem. You can feel it everywhere: in politics, in business, in churches, in families. We've been trained to think of leaders as those at the top: those who give orders, command respect, and enjoy perks. The ones who are served rather than serving. And honestly? That model is failing us. Burnout, betrayal, corruption, and disillusionment continue, and the pattern repeats over and over.

Jesus offers a different vision. It's not just a tweak to the existing model. It's a complete inversion. Greatness, in his kingdom, is measured by how many people you serve, not by how many serve you. And he doesn't just teach this; he embodies it in the most stunning way imaginable.

### The World's Model Versus Jesus' Model

In **Mark 10**, James and John ask Jesus for the top positions in his kingdom. They want to sit at his right and left—the seats of power and glory. The other disciples get angry when they find out, probably because they wanted those seats themselves.

Jesus sits them all down and says something that should stop every aspiring leader in their tracks: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

Notice the contrast. The world's rulers “lord it over” people and “exercise authority” in a way that benefits themselves. Jesus doesn't say authority itself is wrong—he has authority and gives it to his followers. But authority in his kingdom is exercised differently. It's used for the good of others, not for self-exaltation.

Then he gives the ultimate reason: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus is the Son of Man, the divine figure from Daniel’s prophecy who receives eternal dominion. He has all authority in heaven and on earth. And he uses it to serve. To die. To ransom.

That’s the model. If the King of the universe came to serve, then no leader is too important to serve. No position is too high for humble work.

### **Activities**

- Reflect on and share personal experiences in serving others.
- Group discussion on examples of nonviolent resistance.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How can we practice humility in leadership roles within our community?
- When is it difficult to respond nonviolently? What alternatives might Jesus offer us?

### **Practical Assignment**

- Volunteer at a local charity or assist a neighbor in need and document your insights from the experience.

## **Week 6 — Integrating the Way: Ethics, Discipleship, and Public Life**

### **Goals**

Synthesize what you've learned and consider how to live out Jesus' teachings in both public and personal spheres.

### **Primary Texts**

- Matthew 28:16–20 (The Great Commission)
- Galatians 5:22–26 (Fruit of the Spirit)

### **Key Ideas**

- Discipleship requires active engagement in personal and public life
- Long-term commitments to living out ethical teachings

### **Reflection: The Great Commission: A Mission Rooted in Authority (Matthew 28:16–20)**

Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus meeting his disciples on a mountain in Galilee. It's a deliberate echo of Moses on Sinai, a new lawgiver, a new covenant, a new commission. Matthew tells us that when the disciples saw Jesus, they worshiped him, but some doubted. Even at the moment of his exaltation, doubt lingered. That's honest. And it's comforting: Jesus gives the commission to people who still have doubts, not to perfect believers.

Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." That's the foundation. He doesn't say "all authority has been given to you." He is the one with ultimate authority, and he delegates a mission to his followers under that authority. We don't go in our own power or with our own agenda. We go as ambassadors of the King who holds all authority.

Then comes the command: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Notice the structure. The main verb is "make disciples." "Go," "baptizing," and "teaching" are supporting actions. The subjects are not just the converts: they are also disciples. People who learn to obey everything Jesus commanded. That means the commission includes everything we've been studying in this series: justice, mercy, forgiveness, servant leadership, and nonviolence. Making disciples means teaching people to live like Jesus.

And then comes the promise: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The mission is impossible without his presence. But he promises his presence. That changes everything.

**Activities**

- Group presentations on how participants intend to integrate Jesus' teachings into their lives.
- Reflection and sharing in a circle about the course process and key takeaways.

**Discussion Questions**

- How do we move from understanding Jesus' teachings to actively implementing them?
- What supports do we need as a community to live out these ethical principles?

**Practical Assignment**

- Write a personal plan outlining how you will integrate one of Jesus' ethical teachings into your daily life for the next three months. Include practical steps and accountability measures.

## Recommended Readings

McLaren, B. D. (2006). *The secret message of Jesus*. Thomas Nelson.

Morrison, T. (2017). *The origin of others*. Harvard University Press.

Volf, M. (1996). *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*. Abingdon Press.

Wright, N. T. (2011). *Simply Jesus: A new vision of who he was, what he did, and why he matters*. HarperOne.

