



The Kingdom Is Like **A Study in Matthew**

Small Group Leader Guide

SMCC - Winter 2023



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Purpose: This leader guide has been designed to equip group leaders to lead their groups well and encourage their group members in taking next steps towards FDFD, primarily in the category of Heart.



Preface

Before anything else, thank you for serving.

AND thank you for being one of those people who actually reads a preface. I promise we've done our best to make it worth your while.

In your group, there will be people who are struggling. People who are lacking in delight and devotion, and struggling their way through life.

And there will be people who are fine.

Your job is to create a group culture that encourages next steps for all of them. That equips their hearts to give and receive relational nutrients. That helps each and every one of them grow in their devotion to and delight in Jesus, and to be equipped to navigate relationships, emotions, and the spiritual life better.

It's no small task.

Our job is to equip you for that purpose. That is precisely why this leader guide exists. It's designed as a toolbox, to ensure that you have all the necessary tools you need. To break it down to nuts and bolts, most weeks contain the following:

- Suggested Flow - for how to structure the group time.
- Fun Opener - a game, quiz, or icebreaker that helps start the group well.
- Setup Notes - a short explanation, to set up the group's study time.
- Group Study Guide - a step-by-step guide for studying the passage together.
- Group Discussion Questions - for facilitating discussion around the passage.

Weeks three, six, and seven are aimed more directly at relational growth, and provide other tools aimed at that.

- Origin Stories - for learning one another's stories.
- Highest Highs & Lowest Lows - for fostering vulnerability and connection.

Altogether, these are the tools at your disposal. Use them however suits you best to lead your group well.

Our prayer is that you would find great joy, as you labor to serve your group well, knowing that all of your efforts will foster the increase of joy and devotion in the lives of those you're serving.



Week One - The Parable of the Soils

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome - 5 minutes**
 - Introduce yourself as the leader.
 - Provide an overview of the evening's plan.
- **Defining Expectations - 10 minutes**
 - Clarify what people can expect from you as the group leader.
 - The purpose of SMCC groups - next steps in Heart, relational maturity
 - The typical flow for group gatherings
 - Frequency and channel of communication, ex. weekly email
 - Clarify what you expect from them.
 - The Blue Card (see Appendix II)
 - Existing groups can use this time to revisit expectations.
- **Bible Study - 60 minutes**
 - Fun Opener - One Word
 - Setup Note - On Matthew
 - Group Study - The Parable of the Soils
 - Group Discussion Questions
- **Prayer - 15 minutes**
 - Prayer Cards
 - Prayer Cards: one praise & one prayer request.
 - Shuffle the cards among the group.
 - Spend a few minutes praying for whoever wrote the card each received.

A Word on Managing Time

Each week, the Suggested Flows are paired with time recommendations. Be aware that certain activities have the potential to take significantly more time depending on how they're set up. The "Highs and Lows" each week and the "Fun Openers" are two to be especially intentional with in managing time.

Here are a few recommendations on how to manage time well by setting clear expectations at the beginning.

- Define how much time each person has to share.
- Define by what time you'd like to move on to the next section.
- Consider mentioning that, for the sake of the group, you may have to cut people short.
- If need be, in a fun and joking manner, you could set a timer for each person.



Managing time well is an important skill in facilitating a small group. By doing this well, you're setting up your group to succeed.

Fun Opener

One Word

Have everyone share one word for what they hope to get out of their small group experience this winter. Examples: friendship, community, a deeper understanding of Matthew, etc.

Then, if they'd like, they can provide a short explanation of the word they chose.

Go first, as the group leader. Then go around the circle, having people share their one word, with a short explanation. Record the words people say, and save them for the final week.

Setup Note - On Matthew

The earliest sources are unanimous that Matthew, one of the twelve disciples, is the author of this book. Matthew's chosen genre is that of "gospel," which is similar to biography, but slightly different. Gospel comes from a Greek word that simply means "good news." So, the gospel of Matthew is a biography of Jesus that's intended to provide good news to the reader.

The good news has everything to do with Jesus.

Thankfully, Matthew is a trustworthy source, because he himself learned from and lived with Jesus. As one of his disciples, he was an eyewitness to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

However, his gospel isn't just some diary of recollections, tossed together in whatever order they occurred in his memory. His gospel evidences a highly intentional and even artful design, that was crafted in order to communicate something very specific about who Jesus is.

First, **Jesus is the New Moses.**

In the same fashion that Moses arose and taught the people about God, rescued them from their slavery, and formed a covenant relationship between them and God, Jesus is a new and greater Moses.

Naturally, this idea would resonate most with those who are already familiar with and honor Moses—Jewish people. For that reason, and many others, it seems Matthew's primary audience was Jewish Christians. The overwhelming number of times Matthew quotes the Old Testament also supports this idea.



Structurally, Matthew's gospel is organized around five major blocks of teaching, paralleling the teachings of Moses, which were also delivered to the people of Israel in a set of five—the first five books of the Bible, often referred to as the Pentateuch.

So, Jesus is the new and better Moses, and that's good news. But that's not all.

Second, **Jesus is also the Long-Awaited Messianic King.**

In 2 Samuel 7, God promised David, a former king of Israel, that one of his descendants would reign upon the throne forever. But then, several generations later, the throne of Israel was abolished in the Babylonian Exile, in 587 b.c. (see 2 Kings 24-25). The kingdom was destroyed and the people of Israel were exiled to the land of Babylon.

Seventy years later, they returned to the land, but the throne was never re-established. They continued to live under the reign of foreign kingdoms.

During that time, the promise of a king that would reign forever became a lynchpin for hope. Therefore, when Jesus arrived, expectations for this king's arrival were already high. The kingdom of God is the primary theme of Jesus' teaching throughout Matthew's gospel (Matt. 4:17, 23). Jesus himself is the king of that kingdom, the descendant of David who will reign for all of eternity. He is the long-awaited messianic king.

This also is some very good news.

Throughout this series, we're exploring many of the parables that Jesus taught. Each one illustrated something about the nature of his kingdom. By growing in our understanding of these parables, we're learning exactly what Jesus has invited us into in his everlasting kingdom.

The Parable of the Sower, the parable we're exploring tonight, is sort of a preliminary, foundational parable. By understanding it, we set ourselves up well to understand all the rest.

Group Study Guide

The Parable of the Soils - Matthew 13:1-23

V. 1-9

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-What are the four situations the seeds fall into?

1. (along the path - birds ate)
2. (rocky places without soil - sprang up but then withered)



3. (among thorns - choked by the thorns)
4. (good soil - produced a crop; multiplied)

V. 10-17

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

The twelve disciples approach Jesus after the parable and ask him to explain what he just said. Jesus does do that, but first, he explains why he's transitioned into using parables in his teaching.

Notice his invitation at the parable's close:

Whoever has ears, let them hear." -Matthew 13:9 (NIV)

At this point, Jesus was beginning to experience opposition in his ministry and teaching. Many listened to him who had no interest in following him or understanding his teaching. So, he began to teach in parables, in order to guard himself from those who were against him, but to still offer teaching to those who desired to understand.

The disciples, in approaching Jesus and asking for further explanation, represent that group.

This split in the group of people listening is why Jesus references Isaiah 6:9-10. This passage speaks of the people of Israel hardening their own hearts against God. They stopped up their ears and refused to listen to him, until it was too late, and they had lost the ability to hear or understand altogether. Jesus references that passage to say the same thing is happening all over again.

So, the parables draw the divide between those two groups to an even greater degree. Those who want to learn, will; those who don't, will not. The parables are a strategy for putting the ball in their court, to see how they will respond.

V. 18-23

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-What is the seed? (the message that the king and kingdom of God have arrived)

-What do the four situations the seeds fall into represent?

1. Along the Path - (the one who hears the gospel, but doesn't understand)
2. Rocky Places - (the one who hears and receives the gospel—but without roots, falls away from trusting Jesus shortly after, especially when difficulty arises)



3. Among Thorns - (the one who hears the gospel, but is distracted by worry and an unhealthy desire for wealth)
4. Good Soil - (the one who hears the gospel, understands, and receives it, and even goes on to produce good things by trusting and following Jesus)

Group Discussion Questions

1. What's the earliest memory you have of the gospel being shared with you?
2. How has your understanding of and trust in the gospel changed over time?
3. How have difficulties served to test and perhaps even grow your faith in Jesus?
4. How do you see the cares and worries of this life, and maybe even the desire for wealth and what it can offer, as distracting you from trusting Jesus?
5. What would it look like to continue trusting Jesus in the current season you're in?



Week Two - The Parable of the Weeds

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome - 5 minutes**
 - Share one high and one low from the past week. Go around the circle.
- **The Small Group Meal - 10 minutes**
 - Discuss plans for this meal (see description in Week Three).
- **Bible Study - 60 minutes**
 - Fun Opener - The Tortoise & The Hare (5-10 minutes)
 - Setup Note - Intro to Matthew
 - Group Study - The Parable of the Weeds
 - Group Discussion Questions
- **Prayer - 10 minutes**
 - Prayer Cards
 - Prayer Cards: one praise & one prayer request.
 - Shuffle the cards among the group.
 - Spend a few minutes praying for whoever wrote the card each received.

Fun Opener

Group Story & Quiz

- See if someone, or even the group altogether, can recount the story, "The Tortoise and The Hare."
- After retelling it, hold this two-question pop quiz.
 - What is the point of the story, "The Tortoise and The Hare?"
 - a. Better a strong shell with slow feet, than no shell with fast feet.
 - b. If you're fast AND focused, you can win at everything.
 - c. The animal kingdom is more competitive than you think.
 - d. Slow and steady wins the race. (this is the answer!)
 - How do you know?

*This Fun Opener ties intentionally into the setup note, by illustrating how context helps us interpret stories.

Setup Note - On Context



The way we interpret stories we've heard all our lives isn't something we usually think about. We just know how to understand them, because they fit our context.

When it comes to the parables of Jesus—his teachings that were given in the shape of stories—more work is required to cross the cultural gap in order to understand them well.

Tonight, we're looking into just that.

Last week, we learned about the Parable of the Soils, a foundational parable for understanding the rest of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom. We also learned how Matthew structured his gospel to stress that Jesus is both the New Moses and the Long-Awaited Messianic King.

Throughout this series, we'll be exploring Jesus' teaching on the kingdom, which aligns with both of these themes. As the New Moses, he is the one who provides new authoritative teaching. The content of that teaching is entirely wrapped up in a kingdom of which he himself is king—the kingdom of God.

He delivers these teachings through a unique genre—parables. Parables are little stories given to communicate truth. When striving to understand and interpret the parables, it's important to keep a few things in mind.

First, sometimes Jesus provides the interpretation. This is true of both the Parable of the Soils and the Parable of the Weeds. When that's the case, there's no need to look for anything further, because Jesus has already explained the meaning.

However, for many of the parables, Jesus doesn't offer any explanation. So, what do we do with those?

Second, in interpretation, context is king.

Jesus may not offer full-length interpretations, but he often provides the context we need to understand the parable at either its beginning or end. Those contextual clues are the keys to unlocking the meaning.

For example, in The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus closes the parable with this line:

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." - Matthew 18:35 (NIV)

That single line unveils the theme of the entire parable—it's all about forgiveness. That theme provides an anchor for the reader, tying them to an accurate understanding of the story.



Matthew 13 records seven parables. Every single one of them, except for The Parable of the Soils, opens with the phrase, “The kingdom is like...”

That refrain provides the theme of these parables—the kingdom of God. Any interpretation that wanders from this cannot be the actual meaning, because Jesus gave them to teach about the kingdom.

Tonight, we’re studying the Parable of the Weeds, which Jesus does provide an interpretation for. By gaining a deeper understanding of it, we’ll learn more about the kingdom into which Jesus has invited us all.

Group Study Guide

The Parable of the Weeds - Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

V. 24-30

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-What is the theme of this parable? How do we know already, even before hearing the interpretation Jesus gives?

(Jesus’ opening line establishes the theme—the kingdom of God)

V. 36-43

-Read the passage

-Who, or what, are the following:

-The Farmer - (Jesus)

-The Field - (The World)

-The Good Seed - (The People of the Kingdom)

-The Weeds - (The People of the Evil One)

-The Enemy - (The Devil)

-The Harvest - (The End of the Age)

-The Harvesters - (Angels)

-Have some open discussion on the passage.

-What does this parable teach us about the world? (see below)

This parable teaches us that, right now, the world is a mixed bag of people. There are those who belong to the kingdom because they’ve received the gospel, the message of the kingdom, upon good soil.



However, there are also those who have received a different message. A message that is fundamentally evil in nature. A message that leads not to delight, peace, and joy, but to pain, loss, and suffering.

The promise of this parable is that one day, at the end of the age, Jesus will sort out everything, and remove all evil from this world. The promise includes the understanding that Jesus will extract the evil even from within those who've trusted him.

This is good news.

Until then, things will remain as they are. Notice, in the meantime, we're not instructed to sift through the mess and sort people out, scrutinizing whether they've trusted Jesus or not, and casting them out if they haven't. The parable actually teaches us the reverse. We should NOT do that.

Because if we take matters into our own hands, the result will likely include tearing out wheat and leaving behind weeds. It will include harming people in their journey with God.

So, the best thing we can do is trust him and join the work he's invited us into of spreading the message of the kingdom and living according to it as best we can, knowing that one day, he will remove all evil from this world and from those who've trusted in him.

This is a promise worth clinging to.

Group Discussion Questions

1. A common proverb says, "You reap what you sow." How have you seen that play out for good in your own life?
2. The Final Judgment isn't something that we often consider good news. Yet, that's exactly how the Bible portrays it. So, what is the good news in this parable? Discuss how this is good news. (One day all evil will be removed from the world and ourselves).
3. Have you ever felt "sifted" in your experience of church, where someone judged and scrutinized your beliefs with an aim to punish you if you didn't meet some standard? How does it help to know that Jesus instructs us to not do that?
4. What's the difference between sharing the gospel and its implications versus attempting to "sift" the faith of others? (The first sees a deeper understanding and trust in the gospel as the path to transformation and allows that process to happen. The second demands a certain level of performance, and if that isn't met, punishment follows).



Week Three - The Small Group Meal

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome and Setup, Meal & Sharing - 5-10 minutes**
 - Explain the Plan for the Night
 - Setup Note - On Heart
 - Origin Stories
- **Meal & Sharing - 75 minutes**
 - Pray for the Meal & the Time Together
 - Once Everyone's Eaten, Begin Sharing the Origin Stories
- **Closing Prayer - 5 minutes**
 - Ask someone to open and someone to close the prayer time, allowing opportunity for others to pray in the middle. Pray as one large group.

The Group Meal

The Small Group Meal is all about growing in heart, by growing in our relationships with one another. It can be potluck style. One person can host and provide the meal, while others supplement. You can even order out and split the cost.

As long as you spend time together, sharing a meal and each other's stories, you've hit the target.

Setup Note - On Heart

In order to be equipped as disciples, we need to be equipped in our heads, hearts, and hands. There's overlap, for sure, but small groups are tailored to bring about next steps in Heart.

Maybe you're asking, what is my heart?

Your Heart is the place where your identity abides.

Overall, your identity is like a deck of cards. You have all of these different roles that you fill—friend, co-worker, coach, son or daughter, husband or wife, mother or father, etc. But of all of them, one is primary—your top card. The card you play first in any situation.



Growing in Heart is about learning to let your identity in Christ be your top card. This means before anything else, your identity in Christ is what determines your value and worth.

As we grow in our ability to let that be our top card, we're enabled to grow relationally as well. We're able to be vulnerable, to let down our guard, and to let others know who we really are, because we're secure in our identity in Christ, in his love for us.

For that reason, the goal tonight is to spend an evening together sharing both a meal and each other's stories.

Origin Stories

- Go first, as the group leader. Model vulnerability here, and set the tone for how the stories will go. If you don't, people might short-circuit their stories.
- There are three pieces to an Origin Story.
 1. Origins - where you grew up and what it was like.
 2. Catalyst - the catalyst that led them to one of the following:
 - Jesus, Utah, or SMCC - let people self-select.
 3. Resolution - what has happened since the catalytic moment; where are you now in your journey?

*give people a chance to follow up with questions.

- 5-8 minutes per person (don't be afraid to use a timer, or give 1-minute warnings).

Questions to Ask

- what did your parents do for work?
- what was it like growing up there?
- did you grow up going to church?



Week Four - The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome - 10-15 minutes**
 - Share one high and one low from the past week. Go around the circle.
- **Bible Study - 60 minutes**
 - Fun Opener - Pop Quiz (5-10 minutes)
 - Setup Note - On the Gospel & the Kingdom
 - Group Study - The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast
 - Group Discussion Questions
- **Prayer - 10 minutes**
 - Prayer Cards
 - Prayer Cards: one praise & one prayer request.
 - Shuffle the cards among the group.
 - Spend a few minutes praying for whoever wrote the card each received.

Fun Opener

Pop Quiz

1. Matthew, one of the twelve disciples, is the author of the gospel of Matthew. What was his other name? (Levi)
2. What was Matthew's vocation prior to following Jesus? (tax collector)
3. What did Matthew do directly after meeting Jesus? (he threw a party)
4. In the gospel of Matthew, what does Jesus' father, Joseph, say in response to the angel's words? (trick question—nothing!)
5. The gospels of Matthew and Luke both offer us genealogies of Jesus—what is the person Matthew starts with? Bonus: who does Luke start with? (Matthew starts with Abraham; Luke goes all the way back to Adam—this is because of their audiences).

Have someone read Matthew 9:9-13 - what do we learn about our author?
(former tax collector, disciple of Jesus, etc.)

Setup Note - On the Gospel & the Kingdom

Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught about the kingdom constantly.



For some, this could be cause for confusion, because the emphasis of many churches nowadays admittedly does not center on the kingdom.

Instead, many churches focus on communicating the gospel.

However, this distinction, between gospel and kingdom, gives rise to a question. The question is, are these things actually different?

In the first century, the word “gospel” meant good news. But not good news in the sense that coffee is a dollar off today or your favorite football team won over the weekend.

Gospel news was life-changing, world-impacting news. The kind of news that forever divided your life into a before and after.

The gospel, or the good news, that Jesus taught was about the arrival of his kingdom. He himself is its king.

As it says in Matthew 4:23,

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming **the good news of the kingdom**, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” - Matthew 4:23 (NIV)

The good news was not only that this kingdom offered joy, rest, and abundant life, but that the offer was extended to everyone. None were excluded from the opportunity to belong.

The same holds true today.

Jesus’ further teaching on the kingdom, what we’re studying tonight, delves deeper into the nature of the kingdom he’s invited into.

This is a significant study for us because the gospel we’ve received is an invitation not only to a king but also to a kingdom. In studying these parables, we’re learning more about the kingdom that Jesus has offered us.

Tonight, we’re looking into two parables that deal with the humble origins of the kingdom, and also the size and influence that it will inevitably come to have. May the following study and discussion help us all to understand the kingdom better, and to understand the fullness of the gospel we’ve been offered.



Group Study Guide

The Parable of the Yeast - Mt. 13:31-35

V. 31-32

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-What do we learn about the kingdom's origins?

(The kingdom's origins will seem small and insignificant).

-What do we learn about the kingdom's growth?

(Despite the kingdom's small beginning, it will grow in size beyond anyone's expectations).

V. 33-35

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-Again, what do we learn about the kingdom's origins?

(Its beginning will seem small and insignificant).

-What do we learn about the kingdom's influence?

(Its influence, as well as its size, will be larger than anyone dreamed or expected).

-What are the kingdom's actual origins?

(A Jewish rabbi from a small kingdom in the 1st century that was ruled over by the Romans, who died and rose again. He trained a total of twelve young men, one of whom abandoned and betrayed him, to carry his gospel, the message of his kingdom. These are the origins of the kingdom).

-When you consider the growth and influence of that kingdom, what comes to mind over the past 2,000 years?

(It's incredible that the kingdom both transformed and transcended the Roman Empire, to the extent that it's continued on even today and impacted many of us who are so far removed from the humble, small, and seemingly insignificant origins from which it stemmed).

Group Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had something in your life, be it a hobby or a friendship, that started small but then grew larger than you ever expected? Share about that.
2. These parables teach that while the kingdom's origins may be small, it will continue to grow in size and influence. How has the kingdom, and the gospel, impacted your own life? (a few examples include hospitals, the printing press, and widespread literacy).
3. What might it look like to help the kingdom grow through you, by living according to it in your own life?
4. In what area of your life would you like to see the kingdom have greater influence?



Week Five - The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome - 10-15 minutes**
 - Share one high and one low from the past week. Go around the circle.
- **Bible Study - 60 minutes**
 - Fun Opener - Pop Quiz (5-10 minutes)
 - Setup Note - On the Cost of the Kingdom
 - Group Study - The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl
 - Group Discussion Questions
- **Prayer - 15 minutes**
 - Prayer Cards
 - Prayer Cards: one praise & one prayer request.
 - Shuffle the cards among the group.
 - Spend a few minutes praying for whoever wrote the card each received.
 - Next Week - Highest Highs & Lowest Lows. No prep needed, just a heads up.

Fun Opener

One Thing (30 seconds per person)

Everyone shares one thing about themselves that no one else in the group knows (except for spouses). Give 30-60 seconds per person.

This is a great way to get to know each other, and learn things about one another you'd never know otherwise.

Setup Note - On the Cost of the Kingdom

What is something you'd give anything for?

Truth be told, we don't encounter too many things with that kind of value.

Yet this is Jesus' exact claim about the kingdom—that it is worth selling everything you have in order to attain.



Thankfully, such a purge of possessions isn't actually required to take hold of it. Because the only sacrifice that was necessary for us to receive the invitation is the one Jesus already made.

From us, really, only one thing is required: TRUST.

Yet trust often leads directly to sacrifice. As we learn the culture of Jesus' kingdom and embrace it within our lives, sacrifice is involved. Yet, every sacrifice given is another step taken in trust and towards joy.

The promise is that what we receive on the other side of sacrifice so far outweighs anything lost that it's nearly unimaginable. This is why the kingdom is worth giving up everything to attain.

However, we can't know this firsthand until the sacrifice has been made, the next step taken, and joy is found on the other side.

These parables give us the opportunity to weigh the cost of Jesus's invitation, to consider the pros and cons of placing our trust in him, and even to appraise what we've lost and how much more we've gained in following him.

Group Study Guide

Matthew 13:44-45 - The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

V. 44

-Read the Passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-What does the man do when he discovers the pearl?

(He buries it, to hide it. Then sells everything he has to buy the field that contains it, just so he can have the treasure).

-What emotion characterizes the man as he does this?

(Joy)

-Can you imagine giving up everything you have in order to gain something and being able to do so joyfully? What does this parable communicate about the worth of the kingdom?

(The parable stresses the point that if we only understood the kingdom's true worth, we'd be able to give up everything to attain it, just like the man and the parable and do so joyfully—if we had to).

V. 45

-Read the Passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-What is the merchant looking for? What does he do when he finds one of great value?



(The merchant is looking for fine pearls. When he finds one of great value, he sells everything he has just to be able to buy it).

-What do both of these parables communicate about the value of the kingdom?

(It is worth more than anything else we could ever possess in life. So much so that if the kingdom could be bought, which it can't, it would be worth selling everything you have in order to buy it).

Group Discussion Questions

1. What was the first big purchase you made growing up? What emotions were involved in saving for and making that purchase?
2. How have you grown in understanding the value of Jesus' kingdom throughout your life? Was there ever, or is there even difficulty now, in trusting that it is worth it?
3. What have you lost in trusting Jesus? What have you gained?
4. Is there any next step before you now that would require greater trust in Jesus? What's your hesitation in taking it?



Week Six - Highest Highs & Lowest Lows

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome & Setup - 5 minutes**
 - Setup Note - On Presence
- **Sharing - 75 minutes**
 - Explain the Plan for the Night - Highest Highs & Lowest Lows
 - Pass Out Cards
 - Give Everyone Five Minutes to write their answers
 - Begin Sharing the Highest Highs & Lowest Lows
- **Closing Prayer - 10 minutes**
 - Pray for all those who shared their highs and lows.

Setup Note - On Presence

As a culture, we're often ill-equipped to handle the negative emotions of others. Because of this, we can feel unsure about what to do when others share difficult pieces of their story with us. It's uncomfortable to know someone is hurt or upset and not know how to fix it.

In these kinds of situations, our instincts often lead us to try to fix it anyways or to find some way to move past the negative emotions as quickly as we can.

Tonight, our goal is to share some of the best and some of the most difficult pieces of our lives with one another. This will include joy, and it will include sadness.

As the desire arises within you to somehow fix things or to alleviate the emotion in the room, remind yourself **to just be present**. To listen, to give space for negative emotion, and to be present with each person as they share their story. Practice the skill of **Attunement**, tuning your emotions, like the strings on a guitar, to the emotions of the person sharing.

This is an opportunity to grow as disciples of Jesus together, and to be equipped in our Hearts. Remember, **your heart is the place where your identity abides**. And identity is always shaped and reinforced by community. See tonight as a chance to help each other remember what our real identity is and where our real worth continues to be found—in Jesus Christ alone.



This exercise takes time to do well. Therefore, **both this week and next are dedicated to it.** At the close of the evening, there will be an opportunity to pray for those who've shared.

Highest Highs & Lowest Lows

- Pass out cards.
- Give everyone 5 minutes to write down their four highest highs and their four lowest lows, across the entirety of their lives.
- Then, begin sharing. Have people share just two from each list. So, two of their top four, and two of their low four.
- As the leader, thank each person for sharing at the close of their time. This can be as simple as saying, "Thank you for sharing."



Week Seven - Highest Highs & Lowest Lows

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome & Setup - 5 minutes**
 - Setup Note - On Presence
- **Sharing - 75 minutes**
 - Explain the Plan for the Night - Highest Highs & Lowest Lows
 - Have those who didn't get the chance to share last week begin sharing their Highest Highs & Lowest Lows.
- **Closing Prayer - 10 minutes**
 - Pray for all those who shared their highs and lows.

Setup Note - On Presence

As we said last week, our culture often leaves us ill-equipped to handle the negative emotions of others. This exercise is a chance for us to grow in that ability.

Tonight, our goal is to continue sharing some of the best and some of the most difficult pieces of our lives with one another. This will include joy and sadness.

As the desire arises within you to somehow fix things or to alleviate the emotion in the room, remind yourself to just be present. To listen, to give space for negative emotion, and to be present with each person as they share their story. Practice the skill of Attunement, tuning your emotions, like the strings on a guitar, to the emotions of the person sharing.

This is an opportunity to grow as disciples of Jesus together, and to be equipped in our Hearts. Remember, your heart is the place where your identity abides. And identity is always shaped and reinforced by community. See tonight as a chance to help each other remember what our real identity is and where our real worth continues to be found—in Jesus Christ alone.

At the close of the evening, there will be an opportunity to pray for those who've shared.



Highest Highs & Lowest Lows

- Begin sharing, giving opportunity to those who didn't get the chance to share the previous week. Have people share just two highs and two lows. So, two of their top four, and two of their low four.
- As the leader, thank each person for sharing at the close of their time. This can be as simple as saying, "Thank you for sharing."



Week Eight - The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome - 10-15 minutes**
 - Share one high and one low from the past week. Go around the circle.
- **Bible Study - 60 minutes**
 - Fun Opener - Would You Rather? (10 minutes)
 - Setup Note - On the Character of the King
 - Group Study - The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant
 - Group Discussion Questions
- **Prayer - 15 minutes**
 - Prayer Cards
 - Prayer Cards: one praise & one prayer request.
 - Shuffle the cards among the group.
 - Spend a few minutes praying for whoever wrote the card each received.

Fun Opener

Would You Rather?

Have each person form a "Would You Rather question." Go around the circle, having each person pose their question to the group and having the group respond.

A few example questions would be the following:

- Would you rather skydive or scuba dive?
- Would you rather be trapped in a room with a mouse or a snake?
- Would you rather never eat pasta again or eat it every dinner for the rest of your life?

End with this question—would you rather have the opportunity for vengeance or the ability to forgive? (rhetorical question)

Setup Note - On the Character of the King

Forgiveness is costly.

So much so that in order for forgiveness to be possible some measure of debt must be acknowledged. Otherwise, there is nothing to forgive.



The very idea of forgiveness implies that some price must be paid. Forgiveness is the decision to pay that price on behalf of the one to whom the debt belongs. Whether they asked for it or not. Whether they receive it or not. Forgiveness is paying the price for another.

This is why it's true to say that forgiveness is costly.

Yet without it, not a single one of us would have ever received the invitation to join Jesus in his kingdom and to receive him as our king. Because before any of us could receive that offer, our debt of sin had to be paid.

Thankfully, that was a price Jesus willingly and gladly paid with his life.

This reality impacts not only our relationship with him but also with others. Because of his sacrifice, we've received the ability to forgive the debts of others. And truly, the kingdom that he's invited us into is one that has a culture defined by forgiveness.

Today, we'll study the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant and learn more about forgiveness and the central role it plays in the culture of the kingdom we've been invited into.

In doing so, we'll learn more about Jesus as a king as well. Because whatever the culture of the kingdom is, it flows directly from the character of its king.

Group Study Guide

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant - Mt. 18:21-35

V. 21-22

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-How does this conversation between Jesus and Peter set us up to understand what the parable is about?

(Peter asks Jesus a question about forgiveness. Jesus responds with this parable. Therefore, we know the parable is teaching about forgiveness in the kingdom).

V. 23-35

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-How much money is the servant forgiven for?

(a talent is one year's wages for an average working-class job. Take that number and multiply it by 10,000. Some have estimated that number, according to today's standards, as \$400 billion. That's how much the servant owes. Jesus is exaggerating to make a point).



How much does he have the other man arrested for?

(a denarius is one day's wages. Therefore, the man owes him wages for a little over three months—a minuscule debt in comparison with what he was forgiven).

-Why, after being forgiven of his own enormous debt, does the man treat the other so harshly?

What does this indicate about his own understanding of being forgiven?

(This indicates that he has not internalized or understood the nature of his own forgiveness).

-How does the final line drive home the point of the parable?

(The final line makes the parable's intention clear—to emphasize the importance of forgiveness. It isn't that we need to forgive in order to be forgiven, but that if we refuse to forgive, that refusal indicates something lacking in our understanding of the forgiveness we've received).

Group Discussion Questions

1. Did you ever get in trouble growing up? Share with the group.
2. How does understanding forgiveness through the lens of relational debt change your perspective on it?
(the perspective of debt allows us to see we're not just excusing people or being excused. The debt always has to be paid by someone. Jesus paid it for us, and it's likely that others have too. Because of Jesus, we have the opportunity to do the same for others).
3. What's a time somebody else paid the price for you, to offer forgiveness?
(Jesus is one answer, since that's one point of the parable. This question is also looking for answers from other human relationships).
4. What's a time you've paid the price to forgive somebody else?
5. Is there someone in your life that you've been struggling or even refusing to forgive? What might help you to trust Jesus in taking that next step of beginning to forgive them?



Week Nine - The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Suggested Flow

- **Welcome - 10-15 minutes**
 - Share one high and one low from the past week. Go around the circle.
- **Bible Study - 60 minutes**
 - Fun Opener - One Word (10 minutes)
 - Setup Note - On "The Kingdom Is Like"
 - Group Study - The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard
 - Group Discussion Questions
- **Prayer - 15 minutes**
 - Prayer Cards
 - Prayer Cards: one praise & one prayer request.
 - Shuffle the cards among the group.
 - Spend a few minutes praying for whoever wrote the card each received.

Fun Opener

One Word

Have everyone share one word, recapping their experience of the small group. As before, they can provide a short explanation as to why they chose the word they did.

Then, read aloud the words everyone chose at the beginning, in summarizing what they hoped to get out of the group. See the differences and similarities, from the beginning to the end.

End with this question—would you rather have the opportunity for vengeance or the ability to forgive? (rhetorical question)

Setup Note - On "The Kingdom Is Like"

Over these eight weeks, we've learned much about each other and the kingdom we've been invited into.



We shared dinner and snacks. We shared our origin stories, connecting the dots from where our lives began to where we are today. We shared our highs and lows across these weeks, and even our highest highs and lowest lows across our lives.

And together, we've studied and discussed parable after parable, delving deeper into Jesus's teaching to learn exactly what he's invited us into, and what he was willing to die for in order to make possible on our behalf. In doing so, we've learned that...

- The kingdom's culture is marked by forgiveness.
- The kingdom is of inestimable worth, more than all that we have in this life.
- The kingdom had humble origins but has grown, and will continue to grow, in size and influence beyond anyone's imagination.
- The kingdom is at the center of the good news Jesus taught and proclaimed.

Tonight, we bring this formal study to a close, by examining one more parable. One that deals with the notion of rewards in the kingdom.

It can be difficult to rid ourselves of the desire to earn. For example, maybe we've accepted that our entrance into the kingdom is a gift from Jesus. But now that we're in, we feel pressure to climb the ranks through our own efforts, believing we can earn a higher place.

This final parable teaches that we have already received every blessing within the kingdom of God. Therefore, we serve and follow Jesus, not to earn anything more from him, but simply for his glory and our joy. That is the foundation of our motivation.

So, let this final discussion further ground your motivation concerning why the kingdom is worth it. Not for the sake of any greater reward, but for the sake of the rewards we've already been given.

Group Study Guide

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard - Mt. 20:1-16

V. 1-16

-Read the passage

(give people time to read privately; have two different people read it aloud; etc.)

-At what times does the landowner hire different workers? How many hours have the different groups worked?

(he hires workers at the beginning of the day, three hours in, six hours in, nine hours in, and again even eleven hours into the work day. That means some worked twelve hours, nine hours, six hours, three hours, and finally, some worked only one hour).



- Why are the workers upset when everyone gets paid?
(some worked twelve hours and received the same wages as those who worked only one. At first, it doesn't seem fair).
- What is the landowner's response to their grumbling?
(he demonstrates that he hasn't been unfair to them, but has only been generous to others).
- What does this teach us about God's generosity to us?
(sometimes we think God owes us because of how long and how much we've served him. This parable illustrates the reality that God has been generous to all of us because none of us have earned anything from him).
- How does this challenge the motivation we sometimes have to serve God in order to gain things from him?
(it shows that our serving can't earn anything from God. We can only serve as a way of communicating love, honor, and praise, in response to his generosity to us).

Group Discussion Questions

1. What was your first job? Do you remember how it felt to get paid? Share with the group.
2. Payment, as a reward, is often the primary motivation when it comes to work. But when it comes to serving Jesus, what other motivations are at play?
(Examples: obedience to Jesus as our authority, gratitude in response to Jesus, for the sake of our own joy, for the sake of positively impacting the lives of others, etc.)
3. Sometimes, it can be easy to serve because we think we're earning credits with God. Has that ever described your own motivation in serving God? If so, how did that impact your joy in serving?
4. Maybe having the motivation to serve is something you're struggling with even now. What might it look like to serve in response to Jesus' grace, rather than to earn something? Even more so, what might it look like to serve for the sake of your own joy?



Appendix I - The 22 Relational Nutrients

Grace

Quadrant 1: Be Present

- **Acceptance:** Connect without judgment
- **Attunement:** Be aware of what another is experiencing and respond to it
- **Validation:** Convey that a person's experience is significant and not to be dismissed
- **Identification:** Share your similar story
- **Containment:** Allow the other to vent while staying warm without reacting
- **Comfort:** Provide support for someone's loss

Quadrant 2: Convey the Good

- **Affirmation:** Draw attention to the good
- **Encouragement:** Convey that you believe in someone's ability to do the difficult
- **Respect:** Assign value
- **Hope:** Provide reality-based confidence in the future
- **Forgiveness:** Cancel a debt
- **Celebration:** Acknowledge a win, both cognitively and emotionally

Truth

Quadrant 3: Provide Reality

- **Clarification:** Bring order to confusion
- **Perspective:** Offer a different viewpoint
- **Insight:** Convey a deeper understanding
- **Feedback:** Give a personal response
- **Confrontation:** Face someone with an appeal to change

Quadrant 4: Call to Action

- **Advice:** Recommend an action step
- **Structure:** Provide a framework
- **Challenge:** Strongly recommend a difficult action
- **Development:** Create a growth environment
- **Service:** Guide engagement to giving back

Adapted from John Townsend's People Fuel



Appendix II - The Blue Card

GREAT GROUPS REQUIRE GREAT COMMUNICATION

AS A HEALTHY, GROWING PERSON, I STRIVE TO:

1. Ask for what I need, want, or prefer - clearly, directly, honestly.
2. Recognize, manage, and take responsibility for my own thoughts and feelings.
3. When under stress, state my own beliefs and values without becoming adversarial.
 4. Respect others without having to change them.
 5. Give people room to make mistakes and not be perfect.
6. Appreciate people for who they are: the good, the bad, and the ugly.
7. Accurately assess my own limits, strengths, and weaknesses and freely discuss them with others.
8. Be deeply in tune with my own emotional world and to be able to enter into the feelings, needs and concerns of others without losing myself.
9. Have the capacity to resolve conflict maturely and negotiate solutions that consider the perspectives of others.



HOW TO BE A GROUP MEMBER EVERYONE LOVES

YOU CAN COUNT ON ME

I commit to make our group time a priority. There will be times that I can't come. Those times are the exception and not the rule. If I can't make it I will let you know ahead of time.

YOU CAN TRUST ME

I commit to make our group a safe place where people can be heard and feel loved (no quick answers, snap judgments, or simple fixes). Furthermore, unless someone's health or safety is at risk, I will keep anything that is shared strictly confidential.

YOU CAN ASK ME

I commit to have a positive attitude toward Next Steps and vulnerability. When you ask me about my journey with Jesus Christ it's because you want something for me, not something from me.

YOU CAN LEAN ON ME

I commit to care for the needs of the group and individuals in the group. Love costs something. Whether it is bringing snacks or supporting others in times of difficulty, it's my joy to do so.



Appendix III - The Kingdom Is Like... Devotional Guide

The Kingdom Is Like - A Study in Matthew Devotional Guide

This devotional guide is tailor-made to help you foster your own relationship with Jesus and to grow towards greater devotion and greater delight in Him.

Each week has four days' worth of instructions for short times of Bible reading, reflection, and prayer. You'll find the passage for each day listed below and the steps for engaging with those passages on the next page.

We invite you to use this guide in structuring your own time with Jesus.

Maybe spending time like this with Jesus is something you've practiced for years. Maybe you've never done it before in your life.

We all start somewhere.

By following this guide, you'll be laying a foundation upon which your relationship with Jesus can grow across a lifetime, to greater devotion and greater delight in Him.

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
Week 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 13:1-23	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 3
Week 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 13:24-30; 36-43	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 4	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 5	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 6
Week 3	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 13:31-32	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 7	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 8	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 9
Week 4	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 13:33-35	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 10	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 11	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 12
Week 5	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 13	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 14	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 15	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 16
Week 6	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 13:45-46	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 17	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 18	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 19
Week 7	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 13:47-52	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 20	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 21	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 22
Week 8	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 18:21-35	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 23	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 24	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 25
Week 9	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 22:1-14	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 26	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 27	<input type="checkbox"/> Mt. 28



THE SMCC METHOD OF JOURNALING

1. Observe (Bible reading)

Read the passage and spend time contemplating it.

Make observations. Jot down notes and questions. Find something from what you read that seems interesting or profound, and roll that thought over in your mind.

When we meditate on God's word, we invite the Holy Spirit to convince us of something that's true and important.

2. Apply (Something I will believe or do)

A conviction is a firmly held belief.

When we meditate on Scripture, we often learn things we didn't know before about God, ourselves, or our world. These new ideas become convictions when we make them personal.

We can do this by taking what we've learned and asking the question, "So what? How does this change the way I understand God, myself, or the world? Does it affect who I trust to be my authority, where my identity is found, or even the activities that fill my life?"

When we ask and answer these questions, we're applying what we've learned from the Bible and forming convictions upon the Bible's teachings.

3. Pray (Conversation with God)

The most important person we can connect with each day is God. Prayer is one way to do this.

A helpful practice for all of us is to write down a short prayer each day. Your prayer could include any or all of the following:

- something you appreciate about God (perhaps something you learned from the Bible).
- something you're thankful for.
- something you've learned about yourself.
- something that you want to ask God to do for you.

All in all, this practice might take 10-15 minutes. That's 10-15 minutes spent each day connecting with the God who created all things, including you. The God who loves and delights in you, and desires to spend time with you.

By forming this regular practice of spending time with Jesus, you're investing in your relationship with him and your joy.

