

MARK OF A DISCIPLE

Disciples of Christ exalt the Lord over themselves (Luke 14:11).

SCRIPTURE

MATTHEW 23:1–12

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The term *Pharisee* means “to separate.” They separated themselves from the unclean and those who didn’t follow the Law or went against the traditions the Pharisees valued so highly. They were a group focused on rules. They even seemed to make rules about the rules. Many people of the day saw these religious leaders as righteous, but the Pharisees often used their religion to “promote themselves and their material gain. No wonder Jesus denounced them.”¹ It’s important to note that not all Pharisees were hypocrites (see John 3 and 19), but for the most part, they were a group that strongly opposed Jesus and his ministry.

Check out the *Teacher Prep Video* for this lesson: <https://vimeo.com/1064810921>



OPENING

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

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GAME or ICE BREAKER

Based on your group’s size, choose a **Game** from **Deep Discipleship Games** OR use the **Ice Breaker** prompt.

- **Game**—We recommend **President or King?** or choose another screen game from **Deep Discipleship Games**
- **Ice Breaker**— Who is someone that inspires you and why?

WORSHIP

Craft a time of worship with a live band or sing along to a playlist.

- Check out our curated Spotify list. We understand that every church has a different theological view of worship. These songs are suggestions, please pick what works best for your church.
- <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2xmeIKGUjkEE7bJYScbRwe?si=d254ec715a4749e5>

MEDIA AS STUDENTS ARRIVE

1. Play background music (optional)
2. Display **SERIES TITLE Slide** and announcement slides in a loop or customize the provided **PowerPoint**.
3. Play a 5-minute Countdown Timer 5:00 minutes before you start.

DEEP DISCIPLESHIP GAMES

Find free games in **Deep Discipleship Games**. It’s already included with your Deep Discipleship subscription. View the game in advance in case you need supplies or slides.

SLIDES (optional)

Use **SERIES Background & Blank Slides** or **PowerPoint** to create lyric slides.

TRANSITION TO MESSAGE

Include a brief element that transitions students from worship to teaching time, like a prayer or video. This will keep students focused and prepared for the message while the band leaves the stage.

VIDEO (optional)

Show **SERIES Promo Video** or **LESSON Intro Video** after the last worship song.

MESSAGE

Use the following teaching points and suggested illustrations as a starting point to build your message.

POINT 1: Faith without works is dead

Read or have someone in your group read Matthew 23:1–3

Jesus had much to say about his day's Pharisees and religious leaders. They often preached a hardline view of the Old Testament and were ridged and unchanging. In Matthew 23:3, Jesus goes as far as to say that "they preach, but do not practice."

The implication is that they held tightly to their traditions and often taught and spoke about faith but lacked the work that goes hand in hand with it. James would later say in James 2:17, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." We are not expected to just talk about what we believe; our actions should reinforce those beliefs.

SLIDES (optional)

Use the **SERIES PowerPoint** OR the **Background & Blank Slides** to create these slides to support your message:

- Matthew 23:1–3
- Point 1

POINT 2: It's not about you

Read or have someone in your group read Matthew 23:4–7

Jesus pointed out that the Pharisees' work and preaching did, in fact, create a "burden" on people and that they were using their power and position to seat themselves in a place of honor. Their belief system became legalistic, and they were positioning themselves to be the gatekeepers of what was right and wrong.

ILLUSTRATION: Share a story about a time you took advantage of your position or an opportunity for personal gain.

Sometimes we use our power and position to put ourselves in a "place of honor" so everyone can see us and say, "Look at how amazing they are."

SLIDES (optional)

- Matthew 23:4–7
- Point 2

POINT 3: It's about Jesus

Read or have someone in your group read Matthew 23:8–12

Jesus is clear that following God is not about the position, power, or place of honor; it's about him. He is the primary Rabbi or teacher, not us. Our job is to humble ourselves and point people closer to him by modeling Jesus to others. The model is to live our lives like Jesus, who came as a servant. He humbled himself by taking up the cross and dying for our sins. We didn't deserve it, but he gave up his throne so you and I could be saved.

SLIDES (optional)

- Matthew 23:8–12
- Point 3



ILLUSTRATION: Share a story about when you intentionally pointed someone to Jesus.

We are called to submit to Christ in a world that desperately wants to make themselves the most important people. But Jesus is clear time and time again: He is the center, and we are called to follow him humbly.

CLOSING

MARK OF A DISCIPLE

Disciples of Christ exalt the Lord over themselves (Luke 14:11).

SLIDES (optional)

- Mark of a Disciple

FACILITATOR NOTE: DO YOU HAVE SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION RIGHT AWAY?

- If YES, then **STOP HERE**, divide into groups, and provide Small Group Leaders with the **Small Group Breakout Questions** on the next page.
- If NO, then end your gathering with the **Reflect & Respond** questions and **Prayer** prompt below.

REFLECT & RESPOND

Give the students time to silently think through what they have heard and contemplate these questions:

- What is one way you have been guilty of putting yourself before others?
- What is one way you served someone else this last week?

SLIDES (optional)

Use the **SERIES PowerPoint** OR the **Background & Blank Slides** to display the **Reflect & Respond** questions.

FACILITATOR NOTE: Don't rush this part. Give the students a few minutes to consider if they truly put others before themselves or if they are, in fact, the center of their worlds.

PRAYER

Take time to pray that your students will make Jesus primary in their lives and work to serve him first before themselves.



SMALL GROUP BREAKOUT (OPTIONAL)

Pick a few questions from each section to discuss. Close with prayer.

BREAKOUT QUESTIONS

Build Meaningful Relationships

- **Why do you think it's so easy to place ourselves at the center of our worlds instead of others?**
We are sinners by nature. Without Jesus's transforming power in our lives, we act as if we are the center of the universe instead of God. Even once we have been saved by God, it can be a struggle to humble ourselves and serve Jesus.
- **When has someone come alongside you in a time of need and given you their time, energy, or resources?**
Answers will vary. Come prepared to share a personal example to help get the conversation started. Explain how you felt when someone put you first, then remind your students that they are called to do the same for others.

Share Personal Stories & Ask Intentional Questions

- **What do your friends and family think about the Bible?**
Answers will vary, but often, people view the Bible as a big book of rules that cannot be followed. Help your students understand that the Bible helps us know who God is and who we are. It points us to Jesus as the Savior of the world, the one who has followed all of God's commands perfectly for us!
- **Share a story about a time you took advantage of your position or popularity for personal gain.**
Come prepared with a personal story, but also help your students see how easy it is to use our gifts and abilities to position ourselves in the best seat, on the right team, with a particular group of friends, etc.
- **Why do you think Jesus wants to be first in your life?**
Because he loves us more than we can understand and knows what is ultimately best for us. Jesus deserves the place of honor in our lives because of who he is and the sacrifices he made for us. He knows that everything else will make sense once we place him first in our lives.
- **When you read Matthew 23:11–12, what stands out to you and why?**
Answers will vary. Help your students create a definition for what it means to be humble.

Make Life Application & Hold Students Accountable

- **What can you do this week to demonstrate that Jesus is first in your life?**
Answers will vary but may include: praying or reading the Bible before playing video games or spending time online, considering the needs of your sibling or someone at school above your own, etc.
- **What is one way you can serve someone else in your life this week?**
Come prepared to share your own answer to get the conversation started. Write down everyone's action step, and ask them about it the next time you meet.

PRAYER

Take time to pray that your students will make Jesus primary in their lives and work to serve him first before themselves.

Use this space to keep track of any prayer requests.

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¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 1:83.

