

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>

FACILITATOR NOTE: We’ve giving you a lot of teaching material. Don’t feel like you should cover everything here. You know your group better than anyone. Choose the material that will best fit your students and skip over the rest.

OPENING

PRAYER

1–2 minutes

Start your small group by asking the Lord to bless your discussion and time together.

OPTIONAL: Give students an opportunity to lead the prayer.

OPENING QUESTIONS

3–5 minutes

- How was the week? What’s the best thing that’s happened? Anything major going on?
- Who is someone you follow or admire, and why?



EXPLORE

EXPLORE GOD’S WORD

3–5 minutes

The Pharisees in Jesus’s day were primarily concerned with their popularity and positions within the community. They enforced strict and harsh rules that made themselves look good and also put a heavy burden on the people. But Jesus pointed out—again—that their hearts were in the wrong place. They had placed themselves at the center, but Jesus says that following him requires humbling ourselves.

Read Matthew 23:1–3 and discuss 1–2 of these questions:

7–10 minutes

- **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.
- **Who has actually obeyed the Law perfectly?**
Jesus! He is both fully God and fully human. The Pharisees couldn't keep the Law perfectly (even though they might have thought they did), and neither can we. But Jesus is completely perfect and never sinned.
- **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!



Say something like: Sin causes us to exalt ourselves over Christ. Thankfully, Christ died for our sins and fulfills the law perfectly for us!

Read Matthew 23:4–7 and discuss 1–2 of these questions:

7–10 minutes

- **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.



Say something like: We are called to live our lives not seeking the place of popularity but to live like Jesus and humbly follow him.

FACILITATOR NOTE: If you have extra time, go through the next set of questions. If not, skip to the **Connection** section.

Read Matthew 23:8–12 and discuss 1–2 of these questions:

7–10 minutes

- **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.



Say something like: When we put Jesus first in our lives, we point people closer to Jesus and avoid the trap of exalting ourselves.



CONNECT & APPLY

CONNECTION

5-7 minutes

Show your students how Scripture connects to their lives: Use the example below OR share a personal story of when you struggled to humble yourself.

Example: Megan was asked to be the captain of her volleyball team. It was a huge honor, and as a senior, it was one of her last chances to be the captain. Her goal was to win it all and go out as a champion. So she pushed everyone on the team hard and was frustrated when they didn't do what she wanted. Eventually, the coach pulled her aside and reminded her that a captain's job was to elevate and encourage the people on the team. As a senior, her job was to get the new juniors ready to take over one day. But she had been making it all about herself and her goals.



- How can you remind yourself this week that *you* are not the center of your life?

Answers will vary but may include reading Scripture, looking for ways to serve someone else, praying, and asking God to humble you.

MARK OF A DISCIPLE

2-3 minutes

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

Use the Mark of a Disciple to reinforce the lesson and challenge students to apply it to their lives.

APPLY IT

5-10 minutes

John said about Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). How can you pursue that this week?

Be specific:

- What are you going to do?
- When are you going to do it?
- Is there someone who can keep you accountable?



FACILITATOR NOTE: Allow students who are comfortable to share their plans for application. This may encourage or spark ideas for other students, plus add a level of accountability.



CLOSING

PRAYER

2–3 minutes

Take a moment to ask for prayer requests. Spend some time praying that you will make Jesus primary in your life and work to serve him before yourself.

Write down any prayer requests mentioned and ask your students about them at your next meeting.

MEMORY VERSE

Send the memory verse graphic included in your download to your students later this week to keep the conversation going.

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Luke 14:11 (ESV)

NOTES

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

