



## Sermon on the Mount Study Guide—Week 1, September 9-15 Introduction

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard calls something to our attention. He noticed that Christianity is struggling to have an effect on the world today; and it is because to some, actual obedience to Christ seems irrelevant. More and more people who call themselves Christians have forgotten how to obey Christ. The irrelevance of obedience to Christ makes room for something else to be primary – politics or social justice issues. The increasing tendency is for Christians to emphasize other actions as primary– making actual obedience to Christ secondary.

### Cliff Notes:

The point that Dallas Willard is trying to make is that it seems like modern Christianity isn't taken seriously. And with good reason, because many Christians don't obey what Christ commands. Obedience is ignored because it's unpopular, it's inconvenient, or it doesn't match our shoes. Consequently, people ignore Christians, and soon Christianity is practically irrelevant. Willard notes that social and political action take the place of Christianity as a guiding force in people's lives (instead of obedience to Christ). But this has implications for how you develop your character. Instead of developing your character according to obedience to Christ, your character is instead shaped by your political and social agendas. This, says Willard, is troubling for the Christian community.

He argues that when we don't actually obey Christ, the gospel just becomes a program of "sin management." The gospel is reduced to a program to help us sin less instead of transforming our lives.

The gospel as "sin management" is not the way it's supposed to be. And it seems as if we have it all backwards sometimes - letting our political priorities cloud gospel truth, or allowing our views on social justice be our only Christian witness. Somehow, what it means to be human has become more about the public choices you make rather than about being a child of God. When Christ returns, everyone will come to see him or herself rightly. Everyone will be faced with the irresistible reality of God's kingdom.

Willard points out that Jesus' sermon (Sermon on the Mount) in Matthew 5-7 is *one* place in scripture where we can see what it looks like to be a disciple of Christ. If we are to be disciples of Christ, then we are co-workers in God's kingdom now. Reading the sermon from this perspective is key to understanding our work as disciples in the here-and-now. God calls us to be more than "sin managers," and beckons us to obey Christ.

### Discussion:

1. Discuss your thoughts on how obedience to Christ takes a backseat to political agendas or single issues of social justice. Is Dallas Willard right? In what ways could he be wrong?
2. Consider the things on which we base our security. How do we try to secure ourselves? A good moral reputation? National defense? Piety? Good grades? How often does obedience to Christ take a backseat to these things?
3. Talk about the gospel reduced to “sin management.” Are you guilty?
4. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount describes spiritual disciplines and how they are essential parts of becoming disciples of Jesus. It’s Jesus’ explanation of “the good life.” Discuss how “the good life” in our culture is similar and dissimilar to what Jesus presented.
5. Should the Sermon on the Mount actually be obeyed?
6. Talk about the Kingdom of God. What is it? Where is it? When is it?

*Leader: please encourage people to offer their thoughts not just their feelings. If there is some disagreement about what, where, and when, encourage people to look at the Kingdom with fresh eyes this semester.*

### Action:

In the *Divine Conspiracy* and other works, Willard makes it clear that the Spiritual Disciplines (such things as fasting, silence, solitude, simplicity, study, worship, prayer, celebration, etc.) are essential parts of becoming disciples of Jesus and members of his kingdom. As a group, consider discussing and practicing a discipline throughout the week in order to introduce us to a way of living “the good life.” These suggestions are not meant to guilt anyone into following disciplines they wouldn’t normally. They are simply options for introducing us to their potential benefit.

- For further resources on the disciplines:
  - see pages 341-369 of *The Divine Conspiracy*,
  - Dallas Willard’s *The Spirit of the Disciplines*,
  - Richard Foster’s *The Celebration of Discipline*, or
  - John Ortberg’s *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*.