

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: The Mission of the Twelve

Matthew 10:1-42

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Matthew 10 is the second of the great discourses in this Gospel, and what is doctrinally at stake is the nature of the kingdom and the unique place of the apostles within it. Jesus does not merely recruit volunteers; He confers His own authority on twelve men and sends them as His official representatives. This is the seedbed of the apostolic office that will come to full flower in Acts. Your students need to grasp that the apostles occupied a one-time, foundational role (Ephesians 2:20), bearing Christ's authority and, after Pentecost, guided into all truth by the Spirit. Their inspired witness is now complete and preserved for us in the New Testament, which is our authority today. There are no continuing apostles, no new revelation; the work these men began is finished and written down. Teach this with clarity, because it guards the church from every claim of fresh authority that competes with the completed word.

At the same time, this chapter was never meant to be read merely as ancient history about twelve men. Jesus speaks here to every disciple who will ever carry His name into a hostile world. The warnings about wolves and floggings, the call to fearless confession, the sober word about division, the summons to take up the cross, all of these press directly on the heart of the ordinary Christian. Matthew is forming disciples who will not be surprised by the cost, will not be silenced by fear, and will not love anything, not even family, more than they love Jesus.

So teach for both targets. Help your students see the apostles clearly, and so rest in the sufficiency of the Scriptures the apostles left us. And then turn the chapter on their own hearts, until they feel the weight and the wonder of being sent ones themselves, fearless because the Father numbers their hairs, willing to lose their lives because they have found a King worth dying for.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus calls the Twelve to Himself and gives them His own authority to heal, to cast out demons, and to preach that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (10:1, 7). What does this tell us about the unique role of the apostles in establishing the kingdom, and how does that role relate to the authority of Scripture we live under today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by helping students notice the deliberate language of authority. Jesus "called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority" (10:1). The word for the Twelve as He sends them is

“apostles” (10:2), which means sent ones, those dispatched with the full authority of the one who sends them. This is not a casual outing. Jesus is investing these men with His own power and His own message, and the list of their names in verses 2 through 4 reads like a founding charter.

Set this in the larger story. The Twelve correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel; Jesus is constituting the nucleus of a renewed people of God. After His resurrection He will widen the mission to all nations (28:18–20), and at Pentecost these same men will stand up and preach the first gospel sermon, with Peter holding “the keys of the kingdom” (16:19; Acts 2). The kingdom that is “at hand” here will be fully established then. So this chapter is the apostles in training for a role no one else will ever occupy.

Press the doctrinal point gently but firmly. The apostles were uniquely chosen, uniquely authorized, and uniquely guided into all truth by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). The church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20), and a foundation is laid once. Their witness now comes to us complete in the New Testament, which is breathed out by God and able to make us “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Draw the practical conclusion for today. Because the apostolic foundation is finished and written, we do not look for new apostles, new revelations, or new authority. We submit to what these men were sent to deliver. This is not a poverty but a gift: we hold in our hands the very teaching Christ authorized, sufficient and secure. Marvel with your class that the message handed to twelve unlikely men on a Galilean morning has reached all the way to your classroom.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The apostles as Christ’s uniquely authorized representatives, sent ones bearing His authority (10:1–2)
- The Twelve as the foundation of the church, a role laid once and never repeated (Ephesians 2:20)
- The Holy Spirit’s promise to guide the apostles into all truth, fulfilled in their inspired witness (John 16:13)
- The completed New Testament as our authority today, sufficient and equipping (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- No continuing apostleship and no new revelation; the foundation is finished and preserved in Scripture
- The kingdom “at hand” here, established in Christ’s church at Pentecost (Mark 9:1; Acts 2)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it good news, not a loss, that the apostolic foundation is complete and written down for us?
- How does anchoring our faith in the apostles’ inspired writings protect us from confusion and false claims of authority?

- What changes in how you read the New Testament when you remember it carries the very authority Christ gave the apostles?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus sends the disciples out with almost nothing, trusting that “the laborer deserves his food” (10:10). Where in your life are you holding tightly to security and provision, and what would it look like to step out in obedience while trusting God to supply what you need?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the chapter toward the heart. Jesus sends the Twelve out with strikingly little: no gold, no extra bag, no second tunic (10:9–10). They are to travel light and trust God to provide through the hospitality of those who receive them, “for the laborer deserves his food” (10:10). The instruction was partly suited to that first, urgent mission, but the principle behind it reaches every disciple: obedience often means stepping out before we can see the provision.

Help students see what this exposes in us. Most of us build a margin of security around our lives, and then we let the size of that margin decide how far we are willing to obey. We will follow Jesus as long as the savings hold, as long as the plan is safe, as long as the risk feels manageable. The Twelve were asked to go without the cushion.

Move from the general to the specific. Ask each person to name one area where the grip is tight: finances, career security, a comfortable routine, an anxious need to control outcomes. Then ask what one obedient step would look like there, taken in trust rather than waiting for certainty.

Keep the tone hopeful, not guilt-ridden. The aim is not recklessness but trust. Jesus is not against provision; He promises it. He is against letting our craving for security become the lord that overrules His call. Point students to the God who has never once failed to feed the sparrows or clothe the lilies (6:26, 28).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Trusting God’s provision as a mark of genuine faith (Matthew 6:31–33)
- The principle that those who labor in the gospel are worthy of support (1 Corinthians 9:14)
- The danger of letting financial security become a rival lord
- Obedience that steps out before the provision is visible

Discussion Prompts

- What is the “security blanket” you are most reluctant to let God touch?
- Where might God be asking you to obey before you can see how it will work out?
- How has God provided for you in the past in ways that can strengthen your trust now?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus tells the Twelve they are being sent “as sheep in the midst of wolves” and must be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (10:16). What does this teach us about realistic expectations for those who carry the gospel, and how do wisdom and innocence work together rather than against each other?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus is refreshingly honest with His workers. “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” (10:16). He does not promise a friendly reception. He promises danger. And then He gives a memorable pairing: “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Disciples are to be shrewd without being sinful, careful without being corrupt.

Unpack the two images. The serpent represents clear-eyed wisdom, the ability to read a situation, anticipate hostility, and avoid needless harm. The dove represents purity and harmlessness, a refusal to fight dirty or to compromise integrity in order to survive. Jesus rejects both naive foolishness and worldly cunning. The Christian in a hostile setting is to be neither a doormat nor a manipulator.

Show how the two hold together. Wisdom without innocence curdles into scheming; innocence without wisdom becomes carelessness that needlessly endangers the mission and others. Jesus wants both at once: streetwise saints, harmless but not helpless, sharp but not sharp-elbowed.

Apply this to the realities your students face: a workplace that mocks faith, a culture suspicious of Christian conviction, a family member hostile to the gospel. Wisdom asks, when do I speak and when do I stay silent, how do I answer with grace, where is the wolf and where is the open door? Innocence asks, am I keeping my own conduct above reproach so that any opposition is for Christ and not for my sin?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Realistic expectation of opposition for those who carry the gospel (John 15:18-20)
- Wisdom and innocence held together as marks of mature discipleship
- Integrity that ensures suffering is for righteousness, not for our own failings (1 Peter 3:16-17)
- Discernment in knowing when to speak, when to be silent, and when to move on

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you tend to err: toward naive carelessness or toward worldly cunning?
- What would it look like to be both wise and innocent in your hardest relationship right now?

- How can you make sure that any opposition you face is for Christ and not for your own conduct?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus warns that the gospel will divide even families, setting “a man against his father” (10:35). Have you ever felt the sting of being misunderstood or opposed by people close to you because of your faith, and how did you respond?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Few of Jesus’ words are harder to hear than this: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” setting family members against one another (10:34–36). This is jarring, because we rightly love peace and family. So begin by clarifying what Jesus does not mean. He is not commending strife or telling us to provoke conflict. Elsewhere He blesses peacemakers (5:9) and calls us to honor father and mother (15:4).

What He means is this: the gospel, by its very nature, forces a decision, and that decision divides. When one person in a household bows the knee to Christ, the allegiances of that home are reordered, and not everyone will follow. The division is not Jesus’ goal; it is the unavoidable result of some saying yes to Him while others say no. The sword is the cutting edge of a choice that cannot be dodged.

Now make space for honesty. Many believers carry private wounds here: a parent who scoffs, a spouse who resents their devotion, a sibling who calls their faith fanaticism. The sting of being misunderstood by the people whose approval we most crave is real, and Jesus does not pretend otherwise. He names it so His followers will not feel abandoned or assume they have done something wrong when it comes.

Guide students toward a faithful response. Division because of Christ is not a license for harshness; we are still to love, honor, and pursue peace as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18). But we are never to purchase peace by betraying our Lord. Help them see the difference between picking fights and refusing to deny Christ, and encourage them to keep loving the very ones who oppose them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel as a call to decision that inevitably divides (Luke 12:51–53)
- The difference between pursuing peace and purchasing peace through compromise
- Loving and honoring family without giving them an allegiance owed only to Christ
- Suffering misunderstanding from loved ones as a real cost of following Jesus

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you felt the “sword” of the gospel within your own family or close relationships?
- How can you keep loving and honoring someone who opposes your faith?
- What is the difference between needless conflict and faithfully refusing to deny Christ?

Question 5

Student Question:

Three times in this chapter Jesus says, “do not fear” or “have no fear,” grounding it in the Father’s intimate care, even numbering the hairs of our head (10:26, 28, 31). What does Jesus teach here about the right kind of fear and the wrong kind of fear, and how does the Father’s care free us from the wrong kind?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This chapter is saturated with the command, “do not fear” (10:26, 28, 31). Jesus knows He is sending frightened men into frightening places, so He does not merely tell them to be brave; He gives them reasons rooted in the character of God. Help students see that Jesus is not abolishing fear but redirecting it.

First, He relocates fear to its proper object: “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (10:28). The fear of man shrinks when we hold a deeper reverence for God. The world can take a great deal from us, but it cannot touch the soul; God holds eternity. A right fear of God is the cure for a paralyzing fear of people.

Second, He grounds courage in the Father’s intimate care. Not one sparrow “falls to the ground apart from your Father,” and “even the hairs of your head are all numbered” (10:29–30). The God who attends to a falling sparrow has not lost sight of you. “Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (10:31). Notice the logic: because the Father knows and values you completely, you can face opposition without terror.

Bring this home pastorally. Most of our spiritual cowardice is, at root, a fear of people that has grown larger than our trust in God. The believer who truly reveres God and rests in the Father’s care is set free to speak, to obey, and to stand, because the worst the world can do is not the last word. Lead your class to trade the wrong fear for the right one.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fear of God as the antidote to the fear of man (Proverbs 29:25; Matthew 10:28)
- The Father’s detailed, personal providence over His children (10:29–30)
- The eternal value God places on each person (10:31)
- Courage rooted in trust rather than mere willpower

Discussion Prompts

- Whose disapproval do you fear most, and how does reverence for God reframe that fear?
- How does knowing the Father numbers the hairs of your head change the way you face your worries?
- Where do you most need courage right now, and what truth from this passage can fuel it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus says, “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (10:37). Be honest: what or whom are you most tempted to love more than Jesus, and what would reordering that love actually require of you this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus presses to the very center of the heart: “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (10:37). These are some of the most demanding words in all the Gospels, and they should not be softened. Jesus claims a love that outranks even our dearest human bonds.

Clarify what this is and is not. Jesus is not asking us to love our families less in any cruel sense; He is asking us to love Him more, supremely, so that every other love is ordered beneath Him. When Christ holds first place, we actually love our families better, not worse, because we love them in their proper place rather than as idols. Disordered love damages everyone; rightly ordered love blesses.

Now make it personal and concrete. The rival to Christ’s throne is rarely a villain; it is usually something good loved too much. For one person it is a child whose approval rules every decision. For another it is a spouse, a parent, a career, a reputation, a comfort. Ask students to name, honestly, what most often wins when it competes with Jesus for their obedience.

Then ask what reordering would require this week. It may mean a hard conversation, a changed priority, a refusal to let a loved one’s expectations override Christ’s clear call. The aim is not guilt but freedom: when Jesus is truly first, every other love finds its right and healthy place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ’s claim to supreme love above every human relationship (Luke 14:26)
- Rightly ordered love as the path to loving others well, not less
- The subtlety of idolatry that turns good gifts into rivals to God
- Worthiness of Christ measured by undivided allegiance to Him

Discussion Prompts

- What good thing or person most often competes with Jesus for first place in your heart?
- How might loving Jesus most actually help you love your family better?
- What is one concrete way you can reorder that love this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus declares, “whoever acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father” (10:32–33). Why does Jesus tie our confession of Him so tightly to His confession of us, and what does this mean for the Christian life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Jesus binds our witness on earth to His witness in heaven: “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father” (10:32–33). To acknowledge, or confess, is to openly own Jesus as Lord before others; to deny is to disown Him to protect ourselves. The stakes could not be higher.

Explain why confession matters so deeply. Confessing Christ is woven into the very response of faith by which we come to Him; with the mouth one confesses and is saved (Romans 10:9–10), and the Lord requires that we own Him before a watching world. This is not about flawless courage in every moment, for Peter himself denied Jesus and was restored. It is about the settled direction of a life: do we belong to Him openly, or do we hide Him to keep the world comfortable?

Help students feel the searching nature of this. There is a quiet form of denial that never says “I do not know the man,” but simply goes silent when it counts, blends in, lets the moment pass, edits the faith down to something inoffensive. Jesus says our willingness to own Him before others is bound up with His willingness to own us before the Father.

End in grace and resolve. The point is not to terrify tender hearts who have stumbled, but to call all of us to open, glad allegiance. The One who confesses us before the Father is the same One who went to the cross to make us His. Loyalty to Him is simply the response such love deserves. Encourage students to live, speak, and be known as people who belong to Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confession of Christ as part of the believer’s response to the gospel (Romans 10:9–10)
- The link between our acknowledging Christ now and His acknowledging us before the Father (10:32–33)
- Denial of Christ as a real and serious danger, yet not beyond restoration (Luke 22:61–62; John 21:15–19)

- Open, unashamed allegiance to Jesus as the normal shape of discipleship

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted toward the “quiet denial” of going silent when Christ should be confessed?
- What would it look like this week to be openly and gladly known as a follower of Jesus?
- How does Christ’s promise to acknowledge you before the Father strengthen your courage?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus promises that even “a cup of cold water” given to a disciple will not lose its reward (10:42). What is one small, hidden, unglamorous act of service God may be calling you toward, and why are we so prone to overlook the value of small faithfulness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After all the talk of swords, crosses, and lost lives, Jesus ends on something startlingly small: “whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (10:42). The kingdom is launched by twelve apostles, but it is carried forward by a thousand quiet kindnesses done in Jesus’ name.

Help students see the dignity Jesus gives to small service. We tend to assume that only big, visible, impressive acts matter to God. Jesus says otherwise. A cup of cold water, the humblest possible gift, offered to a disciple for Christ’s sake, is seen, remembered, and rewarded by heaven. Nothing done in His name is wasted or overlooked.

Explore why we so easily despise small faithfulness. We crave recognition; small acts go unnoticed by people. We crave impact; small acts feel like they accomplish little. We are impatient; small faithfulness is slow and ordinary. But the kingdom of God grows largely in hidden, unglamorous obedience that no one applauds but God Himself.

Move toward the specific. Ask each person to name one small, hidden act of service before them this week: a meal, a note, a ride, a visit, a quiet word of encouragement, time given to a child or a struggling believer. Then remind them whose eyes are watching and whose reward is sure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The eternal value God places on small, hidden acts of service done in Christ’s name (10:42)
- Faithfulness in little things as the heart of kingdom living (Luke 16:10)
- Serving Christ by serving His people (Matthew 25:40)
- God’s sure reward for what people never see or applaud

Discussion Prompts

- What small act of service is in front of you this week that you might be tempted to overlook?
- Why do we so easily despise faithfulness that no one notices?
- How does knowing God sees and rewards the hidden things change your willingness to serve?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus says, “whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (10:39), and calls us to “take his cross and follow me” (10:38). What does it actually mean to take up the cross and lose your life for Christ, and how is this paradox at the very heart of true discipleship rather than an extreme reserved for a few?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest call of the chapter, and it deserves the fullest treatment. Jesus says, “whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (10:38–39). To the first hearers, the cross was not a piece of jewelry or a religious symbol; it was an instrument of public execution. A man carrying a cross was a man walking to his death. Jesus is asking for nothing less than the surrender of the whole self.

Unpack the paradox at the center of discipleship. The world’s wisdom says: grasp your life, protect it, indulge it, build it up, and you will be happy. Jesus says the opposite: clutch your life and you will lose it; surrender it to Me and you will truly find it. The way up is down. The way to life runs straight through death to self. This is not a fringe teaching for spiritual heroes; it is the basic shape of following Jesus at all.

Make clear what taking up the cross does and does not mean. It is not primarily about external hardships we did not choose, the “crosses we bear” in common speech. It is the deliberate, daily decision to put our own will to death and to live for Christ instead (Luke 9:23). It means saying, with each choice, not my will but Yours; not my comfort but Your call; not my kingdom but Yours. Every Christian is summoned to this, not just martyrs and missionaries.

Then show why this is good news, not grim news. Jesus does not ask us to lose our lives into nothingness, but to lose them into His hands, where they are kept for eternity. The one who dies to self in following Christ discovers a life deeper, freer, and more joyful than the cramped little life he was clutching. We surrender a life we cannot keep to gain a life we cannot lose. The cross is the door, but resurrection is on the other side.

Close by linking it to the whole chapter. The fearless confession, the willingness to be divided from family, the loving of Christ above all, the trust in the Father's care, all of it flows from this one decision to take up the cross and lose our life for His sake. Let your class feel both the weight of the cost and the wonder of the King who is worth it, the same King who took up His own cross first, for them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Taking up the cross as the daily death to self that defines discipleship (Luke 9:23-24)
- The paradox that surrendering our life to Christ is the only way to truly find it (Matthew 16:24-25)
- Cross-bearing as the calling of every Christian, not an extreme for a few
- Christ's own cross as the ground and pattern of our self-surrender (1 Peter 2:21)
- Self-denial that leads not to loss but to abundant and eternal life (John 12:24-25)
- Worthiness of Christ defined by willingness to follow Him all the way to the cross

Discussion Prompts

- What does taking up your cross look like concretely in your ordinary, daily decisions?
- Where are you still clutching a life that Jesus is asking you to surrender to Him?
- How does Christ carrying His own cross first change the way you hear this call?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole chapter, from the sending of the Twelve to the promise of reward. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, not to admire discipleship from a distance, but to take up your cross and follow Him this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole chapter and press it toward action. Matthew 10 has shown us the King who sends, the cost He is honest about, the fear He drives out, the love He demands, the confession He requires, and the cross He calls us to carry. The danger now is that students admire all of this from a safe distance and leave unchanged.

Press for the specific. A vague intention to "be a better disciple" evaporates by Tuesday. A concrete answer sounds like: "I will speak openly about my faith with the coworker I have been hiding it from," or "I will stop letting my child's approval override what I know God is calling me to," or "I will take that one small act of service I keep putting off, this week."

Let the question land personally. Consider giving students a moment of silence to write a single sentence before sharing. The goal is for each person to leave with one clear way they are taking up the cross and following Jesus, not in theory but in their actual life.

Close in worship, not just resolve. Remind your class that the King who sends us out as sheep among wolves is the same King who went before us, took up His cross first, and promises to be with us. Our courage is a response to His love. Lead them to marvel that He still entrusts His mission to ordinary people like them, and to go gladly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of doctrine and daily discipleship
- Specific, concrete obedience as the fruit of genuine encounter with Christ
- Following Jesus as a present, active calling rather than an admired ideal
- The lifelong process of being formed into a faithful, fearless disciple

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from Matthew 10 that God most wants to work into your heart?
- What specific step will you take this week to take up your cross and follow Him?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?