



Hard Sayings of Jesus

An Adult Bible Study

by Joel C. Seifert

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Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 1 Translations! Traditions! and Troubles!

Worship

Speak or sing the following hymn stanzas:

Speak, O Savior; I am list'ning, As a servant to his lord.
Let me show respect and honor To your holy, precious Word,
That each day, my whole life through, I may serve and follow you.
Let your Word e'er be my pleasure And my heart's most precious treasure.

Lord, your words are waters living Where I quench my thirsty needs.
Lord, your words are bread life-giving; On your words my spirit feeds.
Lord, your words will be my light Through death's cold and dreary night;
Yes, they are my sword prevailing And my cup of joy unfailing.

(CW 283:1,3)

Introduction

Jesus was a teacher. The crowds realized that as they hung on his every word and drank in his parables. His enemies realized that, even if they sneered when they called him *teacher*. Speaking in beautiful sermons, using simple parables and illustrations, Jesus taught people the truths of heaven that he came to fulfill on earth. He spoke his truths to be understood. As the psalmist wrote, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (119:130).

List at least one or two of your favorite sayings of Jesus and be prepared to explain why they are dear to you.



Notes

Now take a minute to list some of the words of Christ you struggle with most. What about them makes them difficult for you?

So why, then, did so many in Jesus' day misunderstand him? Why do so many still misunderstand him?

Studying God's Word

The great majority of Jesus' words are clear, simple, and immediately understandable. They were spoken mainly to Aramaic-speaking Jewish people living in Palestine two thousand years ago.

We have the pure Word of God preserved for us, but we read it in translations—and often with two thousand years of interpretation shaping how we think. Those translations and interpretations are usually wonderful blessings and tools for us. Usually!

Sometimes poor translations add difficulty to Jesus' words.

Matthew 5:32 *"But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" (KJV).*

1. What does it sound like Jesus is saying in these words?
2. Explain why this passage might be considered a difficult saying.
3. This actually is a difficult passage to translate. One of the verb forms Jesus uses is rare, but it has a parallel in Deuteronomy. It would seem a more accurate way of rendering the translation would be that if a man wrongly divorces his wife, he "causes her to be seen as an adulteress." What's the point of what Jesus is saying then?

Notes

4. Identify the potential damage that could come from the KJV translation of those words.
5. As we care for one another, wanting no one's reputation to be damaged, what's to be one of our main concerns? Use **Ephesians 5:3** to help answer that question.

Ephesians 5:3 *Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.*

Sometimes traditions render Jesus' words difficult to understand.

Incorrect interpretations can become so associated with Jesus' words that they're often accepted as fact—changing or obscuring Jesus' intended meaning. The following is a good example of this:

Matthew 19:24 *"Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*

6. There's an often repeated tradition about the "eye of a needle" that Jesus is referring to. If you've heard it, share it.
7. That traditional interpretation isn't based on fact at all! But in some ways, it leads to a tradition that, while incorrect, seems *easier* to understand. What would seem to be Jesus' point?
8. Take away that traditional interpretation, and it gets a lot harder! What does Jesus seem to be saying now?
9. Use the context of the Bible to help you understand these words.
 - a. Name rich people in Scripture who were faithful believers.

Notes

b. What do **Matthew 6:24** and **1 Timothy 6:9,10** add to your understanding of what Jesus means?

10. Consider Jesus' exchange with the rich man that took place immediately before he spoke these words (**Matthew 19:16-22**). Analyze why Jesus would say what he did this strongly.

Summary

Key Points:

- Misleading translations can obscure the point of Jesus' sayings—and at times cause great damage in doing so!
- Sometimes misleading or inaccurate traditional interpretations need to be exposed before we can understand what Jesus is saying.
- Not everyone is able to evaluate every translation or see through every interpretation. Don't be afraid! Use the context of the rest of Scripture to help shed light on Jesus' meaning.

During the Week

1. Choose one of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) for your home devotions. Don't feel the need to read a great deal each night—one chapter (or even one portion of a chapter) is plenty. Take your time as you read. Keep a pen and paper handy, and jot down anything that Jesus says that's difficult for you to understand. As you think about it during the day, try to pinpoint what makes it difficult. Can you think of other portions of Scripture that help add clarity? Consider asking your pastor or another Christian for help.
2. If you don't already have one, consider purchasing a study Bible. Ask your pastor for some recommendations.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 2 Does Jesus Contradict Himself?

Worship

Read responsively 2 Peter 1:19-21.

Leader: We have the word of the prophets made more certain,

Group: and you will do well to pay attention to it,

L: as to a light shining in a dark place,

G: until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

L: Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.

G: For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Compare the following proverbial statements:

Good things come to those who wait.

The pen is mightier than the sword.

Look before you leap.

Time and tide wait for no man.

Actions speak louder than words.

Strike while the iron is hot.

Which ones contain some good advice?

What happens if you try to follow both sets of advice at the same time?



Notes

Studying God's Word

It's only natural that bits of human advice contradict one another. We're human! We're fallible! But we certainly have a higher expectation from God himself. His counsel and direction is sure and certain.

Yet sometimes Jesus says things that seem to contradict some of his other words. How do we properly understand those sayings?

Read Luke 22:36.

1. What clear words of Jesus does this passage seem to contradict?
2. Look at the context of Luke chapter 22.
 - a. When is Jesus saying this?
 - b. See verse 35. What time is Jesus contrasting this to?
 - c. Read verses 37 and 38 (and look ahead to vv. 49-51). Does it seem that Jesus literally wants them to take up arms to defend themselves? Why or why not?
3. Instead of telling them to use violence, Jesus tells them to change their expectations. Make a list of things we should expect as we live and work in this world as servants and followers of Jesus.
4. Recall examples of this from history—or from your own experience.

Notes

Read Luke 9:59-62.

5. Jesus is calling people to follow him, and they're listening and willing to go! Yet what's so difficult about Jesus' response to their requests?
6. What clear words of God do these responses seem to contradict?
7. Look over the entire section again (starting with v. 57). As people followed Jesus, what did he want them to understand?
8. Agree or disagree: Following Christ means that he always comes before our family obligations.

Read Matthew 5:20.

9. What does Jesus say is necessary in order for one to enter the kingdom of heaven?
10. What are some clear words or teachings of Jesus that this would seem to contradict?
11. This time, the immediate context will *help* us, but won't give us the whole "solution." Read verses 17 and 18. Explain what Jesus wants the people to understand about the salvation he's bringing?

Notes

12. The Sermon on the Mount is a preaching of law. God's law shows us how to live—and as it points out our sins, it shows us our need for a Savior. When you keep that in mind, why does Jesus say what he does in verse 20?

Summary

Key Points:

- When Jesus' words seem difficult or seem to contradict, slow down and pay attention to the context. Make sure you're not reading into the words something that isn't there.
- While we are to live peaceably in this world, we shouldn't forget: this world will regard us as enemies.
- While we are to love our families, we can only truly do so when we place God first.

During the Week

Set aside a quiet hour or so. Write out the priorities in your life. Consider if they're an expression of your faith or if any of them are actually taking priority over your faith. Thank God for the ways he gives you to follow him, and think of ways you can change any priorities that are getting in the way of your doing so.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 3 The Upside-Down Kingdom

Worship

Read responsively the selected verses of Psalm 73.

Leader: Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

Group: But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

L: For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

G: They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.

L: This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth.

G: Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

L: When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me

G: till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

L: Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

G: My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Introduction

Looking at Asaph's words above in Psalm 73, note what he was struggling with as he looked at life in this world.

List some examples from life now that might make you feel the same way.



Notes

Where did Asaph's comfort come from?

Why is it surprising that God records Asaph's words for us? What makes it wonderful that he did?

Studying God's Word

The Beatitudes are easily misunderstood. They've often been viewed as a manual of how to "get right with God"—after all, this is the way that God tells us to be or a summary of what it means to be a Christian.

The Beatitudes are Jesus' words to people who had begun to follow and believe in him. They were part of the kingdom of heaven. In the Beatitudes, Jesus explains that life in the kingdom works differently than life in this world. It's a kingdom of grace, forgiveness, and mercy, instead of a world of power struggles and self-reliance.

But more than that, this is *reality* for a believer in Christ. It's the way existence *truly* works, even though much of it is hidden from our eyes for now. After all, it's life by faith in the Son of God.

Read Matthew 5:1-12.

1. In groups of three to five, pick one of the Beatitudes that's particularly difficult for you to hear and understand. Share with those in your group what makes it so hard.
2. Try rewriting some of the Beatitudes from the perspective of this world.

Notes

3. Just as Asaph learned, having the right perspective on this life makes all the difference. Living according to the Beatitudes seems to bring pain, not blessings! Yet what does Jesus clue us into that we need to remember at those times? List some other Bible passages that help reinforce the same truth for you.
4. Get practical: How can you help remind yourself of the way the world *really* works for a believer?

Read Matthew 5:38-42.

Consider especially Jesus' first words here. Where was this "said"? It was said in Scripture! You can find those words in Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21.

5. Jesus wasn't contradicting God's Word. To understand these words, an important distinction is necessary. This was originally part of God's "civil law code" for the nation of Israel. It was a way to make sure *the punishment fit the crime*. Who were these words really meant to protect? But how were people using them?
6. Jesus isn't forbidding self-defense. You could paraphrase his words this way: Your first concern shouldn't be about getting _____ but showing _____.
7. This is hard! What do you need to remember as you try to put this into action?

Read Matthew 5:43-48.

8. Let's start at the end of this section. How does Jesus make these difficult tasks even harder?

Notes

9. Fill in the blank: If you show love to the people in your life who love you (and that's it!), you're acting like a wonderful _____.
10. How do the words "your Father in heaven" comfort and encourage us when we realize that we haven't kept the commands of the Sermon on the Mount perfectly?

Summary

Key Points:

- Jesus says life in this world doesn't work the way it *seems* it should. Because that's true, much of what he says can seem upside down to us.
- God's will for our lives is summed up in *love*. Our first concern is to love those around us. This isn't hard because *love* is bad but because this means loving people who hurt us.
- A Christian can find the reason and strength to do this in God's love for us.

During the Week

1. Consider keeping a private "forgiveness journal." Record some hurts against you and pray for the strength to forgive the person. Write out some concrete ways that you can show love to the one who hurt you. From time to time, burn or shred these pages, so it doesn't become a "keeping a record of wrongs"!
2. While the world doesn't operate according to the Beatitudes, God still gives us glimpses of their fulfillment. Pick one long-standing relationship in your life. Can you think of any times when your patience and meekness brought blessings to it when you had been hurt? Can you think of times when a fellow Christian showed these attitudes when you didn't deserve it and it brought blessings?



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 4 Jesus Challenges Our View of Ourselves

Worship

Read responsively the selected verses of Psalm 51.

Leader: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;

Group: according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

L: Wash away all my iniquity

G: and cleanse me from my sin.

L: For I know my transgressions,

G: and my sin is always before me.

L: Against you, you only, have I sinned

G: and done what is evil in your sight.

L: Surely I was sinful at birth,

G: sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

L: Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;

G: wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

L: Hide your face from my sins

G: and blot out all my iniquity.

L: Create in me a pure heart, O God,

G: and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Introduction

People hold very different views of what human beings are like “by nature.” Name three of the most common views the world has on what humans are like by nature.



Notes

Out of all the views, which one seems to be dominant in our culture today? Give some examples of what leads you to say this.

Why do you think this is such a popular view?

Studying God's Word

Without a doubt, Jesus speaks some surprising words about what this world is like and the nature of the things we do. But more difficult and surprising than those, at times, are what Jesus has to say about *who we are*.

The Lord knows! The one who made us understands what our hearts are like. He speaks to us about them so that we understand them too—and know where true renewal is found!

Read Mark 7:1,2,14-23.

1. The Pharisees noticed that Jesus' disciples had eaten without giving their hands a traditional ceremonial washing. Why was this such a big deal? What did they believe this did to the disciples?
2. Jesus used this as a chance to address the Pharisees' misunderstanding of the dietary laws of the Old Testament too. The Pharisees saw eating the wrong food in the wrong way as separating one from God and making the person "unclean." Explain Jesus' argument against that.
3. Identify where Jesus says the root of the problem is.
4. This teaching is largely rejected by our world. What difficult truth about ourselves does Jesus call us to face?

Notes

5. What evidence do you see that what Jesus says is true?

Read Matthew 6:19-24.

6. Jesus says that we can either serve God or money, but not both. Explain what makes this saying so hard.
7. Look closely at Jesus' words in verse 24. What might be some warning signs for a Christian who professes love for God that his heart might not be in the right place?
8. Look a little further into verses 25 and 26. What difficult (but wonderful!) thing does God want to accomplish in us?
9. As someone to whom God has given faith in Jesus, you have a new heart. As you consider how God talks to us about money (or adultery, or hatred, etc.), define God's greatest concern for us.

Summary

Key Points:

- Jesus' words make us face the difficult truth that our hearts are, by nature, wellsprings of evil.
- As believers, our new hearts are daily faced with choices of what (and whom!) we'll love.
- God gives us encouragement to keep our focus on him because he wants to give our hearts true peace.

Notes

During the Week

1. Pay attention to the news you hear and conversations you're a part of. Consider how easy it is for this world (and for us!) to assign blame to everyone and everything else while insisting that we're basically good people.
2. Spend time in thought this week about some of the conflicts in your life. How many have you blamed on others? on your circumstances? These may be real factors. But give real consideration to the ways your own stubbornness, jealousy, self-righteousness, or fear might play a role in the conflict. If you feel comfortable, consider putting the situation in front of a trusted friend and asking for his or her insight as well. Repent of any sins you realize, take comfort in God's forgiveness, and seek to make amends.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 5 Jesus Is Coming Back . . . Soon?

Worship

Read responsively the selected verses of Revelation chapter 22.

Leader: The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!”

Group: And let him who hears say, “Come!”

L: Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes,

G: let him take the free gift of the water of life.

L: I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book:

G: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book.

L: And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy,

G: God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

L: He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

G: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

L: The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people.

G: Amen.

Introduction

Name some broken promises that can shake a person or that have really shaken you.



Notes

Why are broken promises so hurtful?

That's all the more true of Jesus' promises. If Jesus made a promise that didn't come true, what would that mean?

Studying God's Word

Jesus—as well as the rest of the writers of Scripture—gives us quite a bit of information about the end of the world and the circumstances leading up to it. The message is clear: God wants us to be ready at any time (and *all the time*) for Christ's return.

In recent years, however, many critics of the Bible have begun to teach that Jesus and the apostles insisted that the Last Day would take place within the first generation after Christ. They go on to teach that since Jesus did *not* return at that time, the church began to change its teaching to what we believe today: that we should always be ready for Christ's imminent return.

It's important to remember that one of the main reasons for this false teaching from modern critics is that they start with an assumption that the Bible isn't true, and they look for ways to undermine its message. But they often quote Scripture in their defense, and at first glance, their arguments could lead us to struggle with what Jesus is saying.

Jesus promised the imminent coming of his kingdom.

Read Mark 8:34–9:1.

1. Jesus had just predicted his death (something Peter actually rebuked him for!) and now tells the disciples that following him will come at a cost. To encourage them as they follow him, what promise did Jesus make?
2. Some people point to this as a clear expectation that some of the original disciples would still be living when Christ returned (this promise is also recorded in Matthew 16:28 and Luke 9:27). Examine this section of Scripture and discover what might lead people to think that.

Notes

3. One of the reasons people draw that conclusion is because they believe that “the kingdom of God [coming] with power” is a reference to Jesus’ coming on the Last Day. How do the following passages help give you a different understanding?
 - a. **Luke 17:20,21 ESV** *Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”*
 - b. **Luke 24:46-49** *[Jesus] told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”*
 - c. **1 Thessalonians 1:4,5** *We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.*
4. How was Jesus’ promise fulfilled? Why is this important to remember?

Jesus promised the signs of his return already in his day.

Read Mark 13:5-31.

5. Jesus spends the first portion of this reading telling his disciples about the signs of the end of the world. List some of them.

Notes

Though people still struggle with Jesus' "delay," it shows us God's love.

6. Jesus' words in verse 30 have convinced people that he taught he would be returning within that current generation. But what do you notice about those signs? (Give examples if you can.)
7. All of those signs *were* fulfilled within the lifetime of that generation and continue to be so now. For those who think that Jesus is saying that his return would take place during the next generation, it's clarifying to read the following verses, Mark 13:32-37. How does Jesus make it clear that he wasn't setting a time line for the end of the world?
8. Again, explain the point Jesus is making.
9. We wouldn't be the first to misunderstand Jesus' words about his return.
 - a. Read John 21:20-24. What misunderstanding had come up?
 - b. Misunderstandings like this can cause great pain! Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15. Can you tell what fear the Thessalonians were struggling with?

Read 2 Peter 3:6-13.

10. What *isn't* the reason for (to our minds) the long span of time since Jesus' resurrection? What *is* the reason?
11. When we recognize this, what does it help us do?

Summary

Key Points:

- The “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” isn’t the same as heaven itself. It’s the preaching of the gospel here on earth and has been present since the days of Christ and the apostles.
- Jesus calls us to eagerly expect his return at any moment.
- Though God’s “soon” and our “soon” aren’t always the same thing, we know God will come back at just the right time.

During the Week

1. Spend some time reading through the signs of the end of the world in Matthew chapters 24–25. As you watch the news or go about daily life, think of some particular ways you see those being fulfilled. Pray for those who are suffering—and pray all the more eagerly for Jesus to return quickly!
2. It’s good to realize that the end is near and drawing nearer all the time. Think of ways to encourage your fellow believers with this truth.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 6 Unbelievable Faith

Worship

Speak or sing the following hymn stanzas:

Oh, for a faith that will not shrink
Though pressed by many a foe,
That will not tremble on the brink
Of poverty or woe.

Lord, give us such a faith as this,
And then, whate'er may come,
We'll taste e'en now the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.

(CW 405:1,6)

Introduction

Over the last few decades, increasing numbers of Americans have identified themselves as “spiritual,” but not “religious.” They’re leaving churches and rejecting doctrinal formulations. List some reasons why you think that might be taking place.

Why is it sometimes difficult for you to hold on to your faith?



Notes

Studying God's Word

Sometimes it seems wise to treat faith like a poker game: only gamble what you're willing to lose. If you put too much trust in any particular promise, it's just going to hurt so much more if it doesn't come true.

It's interesting to see that Jesus goes in the other direction. He doesn't want us to lower our expectations of what he'll do in us and through us and for us. He raises them. When it comes to the promises Jesus attaches to faith, he "ups the ante."

*Jesus makes
unbelievable
promises about
faith.*

Read Matthew 17:14-20.

1. What “failure” had the disciples had?
2. Identify what Jesus says the source of the problem was.
3. Explain the unbelievable promise Jesus makes about faith. Why might this be one you struggle with?
4. In groups of three to five people (or on your own if you prefer), discuss the following about faith:
 - Agree or disagree (and why): Jesus means that as long as we believe, we’ll be able to make anything happen.
 - For a little more help understanding what Jesus means by this “faith,” look at **Matthew 8:8-10**. When is something truly “faith”?

Notes

5. In the following passages, circle the words that are most comforting to you in your life of prayer. Explain why they comfort you.
 - a. **John 14:14** *You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*
 - b. **John 15:7** *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.*
 - c. **John 15:16** *Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.*
6. Describe what Jesus seems to be offering in these passages. Is he serious?
7. If Jesus is clearly saying that as long as we're connected to him in faith, we can pray for anything and God will give it, there are only a few possible reactions we can have. List them.

Jesus' own faithful prayer helps ease our struggles.

Read Matthew 26:36-46.

8. Analyze the content of Jesus' prayer. How do you know that he earnestly meant it?
9. Explain what was at the heart of Jesus' prayer.
10. How does this remind us what the heart of our prayer always is?
11. Agree or disagree (and why?): God granted Jesus prayer.

Notes

12. Connect this to the “blank check” that Jesus gives us in John chapters 14 and 15.

Summary

Key Points:

- Faith is a living, active, powerful thing. Through faith, God moves mountains.
- The heart of a believer’s prayer is “Lord, bless me the way you know is best.”
- Knowing God’s loving response to us is an encouragement for our faith.

During the Week

Sometimes one of the most harmful things is to take our disappointment about what our faith and prayers *don’t* seem to accomplish and internalize them. Consider doing the following this week:

- a. Read through Psalm 73, Abraham’s pleading with God in Genesis chapter 18, and Jesus’ prayer in Matthew chapter 26. Where do you see agony and testing of faith going on? Where do you see frustration? What peace can you have?
- b. Talk with a pastor, elder, or fellow believer about these frustrations. Be honest about your disappointment or fears, let them share their experiences, and comfort each other with God’s promises.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 7 Who Is Jesus?

Worship

Speak or sing the following hymn stanzas:

Of the Father's love begotten Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending he,
Of the things that are, that have been, And that future years shall see
Evermore and evermore.

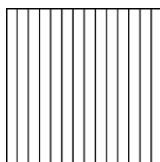
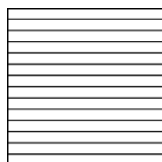
Oh, that birth forever blessed When the virgin full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, Bore the Savior of our race,
And the babe, the world's Redeemer, First revealed his sacred face
Evermore and evermore.

(CW 35:1,2)

Introduction

For the visual learners among us:

Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Using the two shapes, make a drawing that orients the two shapes in a way that correctly shows the relationship between Jesus' two natures.



The correct answer is:

What options did you consider? What were the theological ramifications of each?



Notes

Studying God's Word

In Jesus' day, people were confused about who he was. A prophet? A resurrected leader from the past? The promised Messiah? That confusion still exists today. While some of that confusion simply stems from unbelief, some of it also comes from the reality that Jesus' statements about himself can be confusing for us at times. How do you really answer the question, "Who is Jesus?" If God wants us to know who Jesus is, why did Jesus speak the way he did?

At times, Jesus spoke as if he were less than God.

Read John 20:13-17.

1. Describe the context surrounding this section of Scripture.

2. Pick out Jesus' words that are surprising, and explain what about them makes them difficult for us to understand.

3. What "problems" do the following words of Jesus raise?
 - a. **Mark 10:17,18** *As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."*

 - b. **John 14:28,31** *"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. . . . The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me."*

 - c. **John 8:28,29** *Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him."*

Notes

4. Read **Philippians 2:5-8** to help sort some of this out.
 - a. What is true of Jesus' nature?
 - b. Did Jesus ever give up that nature as God? Explain.
 - c. We call this Jesus' *humiliation*. Define what this means. Whose decision was it?
5. Think of some times it can be especially comforting or helpful to know that Jesus is fully human. Be specific.

Read Mark 2:5-11.

6. Answer Jesus' question in verse 9. Why is that easier?
7. Explain what Jesus' healing of the paralytic proved.
8. How do the following passages give witness to Jesus' divinity?

- a. **John 8:58** *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"*
- b. **John 10:17,18** *"The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."*

*At other times,
Jesus clearly
witnessed to his
divinity.*

Notes

c. **Matthew 26:63,64** *But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

9. Was Jesus always fully and completely divine during his human ministry? Another way to get to the heart of the question: Did *God* die on the cross? Defend your answer!
10. One of the truths of Christ's nature is that his human nature fully shares in all the attributes of his divine nature. What comfort does that give you?

Summary

Key Points:

- Jesus has a true human nature. According to that nature, he is *less* than the Father.
- Jesus has a true divine nature. According to that nature, he is *equal* to the Father.
- While Jesus' two natures are impossible for our minds to reconcile, the truth brings us great comfort: He really is our brother, who faced the challenges of our lives and died our death. And he really is our God, whose life paid the price for our sins and who continues to reign over all things for our good.

During the Week

1. Do some devotional reading from the gospels this week. As you read through the life of Christ, actively ask yourself: *How do I see Jesus' human nature here? How do I see his divine nature here? And what comfort comes from each?*

Notes

2. Use these truths to shape and inform your prayer life. Are you facing sadness or suffering? Take some time to think about what it means (and thank God) that Jesus chose to endure that pain right along with you. Are you facing a problem that's outside of your control? Take some time to think about what it means (and thank God for the fact) that the one who loved you enough to die on the cross is the same one who controls all things in the universe.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 8 More Righteous Than Teachers of the Law?

Worship

Speak or sing the following hymn stanzas:

Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

(CW 379:1,3)

Introduction

During the last lesson, we looked at words of Scripture which explained that Jesus is true God and true man at the same time. Explain why both of these had to be true in order to secure our salvation. Use the diagram below to help with your explanation.



God's Great
Exchange



Notes

How does this truth emphasize that salvation comes by God's grace, not by a person's works?

Studying God's Word

The teaching of *justification by grace alone through faith* has often been called the *doctrine on which the church stands or falls*. It's the heart of Christianity. If we hold on to all of the moral standards of Christianity but remove justification by grace, we don't have Christianity anymore!

So why, then, does it sound like Jesus is saying the opposite at times? Today we'll look at Jesus' words that seem to emphasize *works*. May God give us insight to better understand his love.

At times, Jesus spoke about righteousness to reveal our sins.

Read Matthew 5:17-20.

1. How do Jesus' words seem to deny salvation by grace?
2. Scan the verses in chapter 5 that follow verse 20. How does Jesus emphasize the need for this righteousness?
3. These words serve as a mirror to show our sinfulness. Consider Romans 3:20: "No one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." Think of other passages in which Jesus and the Bible speak this way.
4. The law speaks a hard message, but one we all need to hear. Discuss ways to share this truth with others in our society. How do you know when someone needs to hear it, and how can you share it?

Notes

Jesus boldly proclaims grace as something that DOES change our lives.

Jesus boldly proclaims that salvation is by grace.

Read Matthew 25:14-30.

5. You could be forgiven for considering the “master,” Jesus, the villain of the story! What does he seem to be interested in?
6. This parable isn’t simply about *actions*; it’s about *attitudes*.
 - a. What does the unfaithful servant think the master cares about?
 - b. Look at the master’s reaction to the faithful servants. Identify his real goal for them.
 - c. When do we need to hear words like this?
7. In groups of three to five people (or on your own if you prefer), list reasons why the following is an important truth: Understanding grace is the most powerful thing for living our Christian lives. Compare group responses.
8. Even when Jesus preaches the law that shows our sins, his goal is to proclaim our salvation. How do the following passages proclaim grace?
 - a. **Matthew 21:31,32** *Jesus said to [the temple leaders], “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”*

Notes

- b. **John 3:16** *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*
- c. **Luke 23:43** *Jesus answered [the criminal], "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*

Summary

Key Points:

- Jesus preaches that perfect righteousness is necessary because it is. When he does this, his words reveal the sin that we like to ignore.
- Grace, when properly understood and received in faith, changes our lives and moves us to action.
- In the clearest terms possible, Jesus preaches the gospel that salvation comes by God's grace.

During the Week

1. Jesus' teachings at times point out our self-righteousness, at times our complacency. He calls us to struggle against both. Consider sitting down with a Christian whom you trust. Ask that person to honestly (and gently!) see places in your faith life where you may need to renew your struggle against sin in response to God's love. This conversation may be with your spouse, an adult child of yours, or a close Christian friend.
2. Grace is harder to understand when we refuse to show it in our own lives. There's a reason why Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Think of one person in your life right now who has hurt you. Think of one concrete way you can show grace to him or her. (A note of caution: Our obligation to show grace doesn't obligate us to put ourselves in a position for others to harm us.)



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 9 Unless You Hate Your Father and Mother . . .

Worship

Read responsively John 15:9-14.

Leader: As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Group: **Now remain in my love.**

L: If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love,

G: **just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.**

L: I have told you this so that my joy may be in you

G: **and that your joy may be complete.**

L: My command is this:

G: **Love each other as I have loved you.**

L: Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

G: **You are my friends if you do what I command.**

Introduction

Give a few synonyms for *love*, and discuss the differences between them.

What do you consider the biblical definition of *love*?



Notes

List some guiding words from Jesus that show how important it is to God that we show love to one another.

Studying God's Word

Jesus was all about love. He came as the agent of the Father's love and was willing to sacrifice his own life to give us peace with God. The most beautiful statements and teachings about love—recognized as wonderful and encouraging by Christians and even non-Christians alike—are found in the words of Christ.

But sometimes, he doesn't sound so loving. How do you understand those hard words of Jesus?

Read Luke 14:25,26.

1. List as many things as possible that make these words of Jesus *hard* to hear and understand.

2. Context helps us understand these words. Read the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:16-24. Skim also the words in verse 27 and following. What sin is Jesus addressing in this context?

3. Why is it not possible that Jesus actually calls us to *hate* our families here? (See **Matthew 5:43,44** and **1 John 3:15**.)

Read Matthew 10:34-39.

This isn't a true parallel passage to the Luke account, but it addresses the same instruction.

4. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. How do Jesus' words in Matthew help you understand what he means in Luke by "hating" your family?

Notes

5. Agree or disagree (and why?): Jesus' words in Luke are a hyperbole (excessive exaggeration).
6. Agree or disagree (and why?): Understanding that Jesus isn't calling on us to literally hate our families makes these words easier to accept.
7. In groups of three to five people (or on your own if you prefer), give three examples of when you would see a Christian put this command from Jesus into practice.
8. Discuss this: What might it look like when people put their family before Jesus? And how is that a danger to our faith?

Read Mark 9:43-48.

9. What makes these words hard to understand?
10. How can you know that Jesus isn't literally calling for you to maim yourself?
11. What, instead, is Jesus' point?

Notes

12. In groups of three to five people (or on your own if you prefer), give three examples where you would see putting Jesus' words into practice.

13. This passage helps pull together how all of these statements are about Jesus' love. Connect it to the First Commandment. Why does God want us to fear, love, and trust him above all things—even our families, even ourselves?

Summary

Key Points:

- Jesus does want us to love all people.
- Because Jesus loves our families and us, he doesn't want anything to come between him and us.
- To hold on to Christ's love, we need to be ready to let go of anything that comes between him and us.

During the Week

1. Read through Hebrews chapter 11, the "great faith" chapter. Take your time, and remember that these are real people you're reading about. What do their examples teach you about priorities in this life? What do they teach you about why God's love calls you to focus on him?
2. Examine your schedule, your budget, and your relationships. Are there any things that are taking priority over your relationship with God? What would Jesus call you to adjust and correct?



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 10 Be Like Snakes!

Worship

Read responsively Psalm 19 (selected verses).

Leader: The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.

Group: The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

L: The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

G: The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

L: The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.

G: The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.

L: They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

G: they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

L: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing
in your sight, O LORD,

G: my Rock and my Redeemer.

Introduction

Read each of the following passages:

2 Corinthians 4:2 *We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*

Matthew 5:37 *"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."*



Notes

2 Corinthians 1:12 *Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.*

Colossians 3:9,10 *Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

Explain the general impression these passages give about the way God calls Christians to live and conduct themselves.

Studying God's Word

Christians are to be characterized by *truth*. We don't follow opinions or the changing tides of society, but the truth of God's Word. And we're to live by the truth, as we speak plainly and honestly. Deceit doesn't have a place in a Christian's words or actions.

So what, then, does Jesus mean when he calls us to be as shrewd as snakes?

Matthew 10:16 *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."*

1. How do you define what it means to be *shrewd as snakes*?
2. Why might some of those connotations lead Christians to struggle with these words?
3. Look at the following examples. How do you see shrewdness displayed in each?
 - a. **1 Kings 3:16ff** (Solomon's judgment to find out the true mother)

Notes

b. **Luke 24:15,16,28** *As [the two disciples on the way to Emmaus] talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther.*

c. **Proverbs 9:8** *Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.*

4. Being shrewd—crafty, even—is not out of place for the Christian. However, what reminder does Jesus give us as he calls us to live this way?

5. Agree or disagree (and why?): All deception is sinful.

6. List some circumstances from your own experience where the church or individual Christians have needed to be particularly shrewd.

Read Luke 16:1-9.

7. Summarize Jesus' parable. In what way does he call us to be like the shrewd manager? (And what *isn't* the point of comparison?!)

8. There are some translation difficulties in verse 9. This seems to be the best way to translate Jesus' words: "Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, *they will welcome you* into eternal dwellings." What, then, is Jesus' point?

Notes

9. List some ways you can put this shrewdness into practice.

Summary

Key Points:

- Christians are to exercise shrewdness as we deal with the people of this world.
- Being aggressively crafty does *not* mean Christians have a license to sin.
- Exercising shrewdness is all the more important because of the precious goals we are pursuing: the salvation of other souls.

During the Week

Consider reading the book of Proverbs this week in your devotional reading over the next two weeks. Reading two chapters a day will help you finish on time. The book is a collection of wonderful encouragements towards practical godly wisdom. As you read, take note of

- a. passages that surprise you.
- b. passages whose wisdom seems relevant to a particular situation you are facing.
- c. passages that advise a different application of the truth than you would normally expect.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 11 Pearls Before Swine and Bread to Dogs

Worship

Read responsively 2 Peter 1:19-21.

Leader: We have the word of the prophets made more certain,

Group: **and you will do well to pay attention to it,**

L: as to a light shining in a dark place,

G: **until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.**

L: Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.

G: **For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**

Introduction

Among churchgoers, what would you guess is the most quoted Bible passage?

Which passage do you think is known and often quoted by those who know little about the Bible?

Why do you think it's so often quoted?



Notes

Studying God's Word

Jesus talks about judgment a lot. He says that he'll judge the world. He says that believers will have a role in judging the world—even in judging angels (1 Corinthians 6:2,3).

Yet Jesus clearly tells us *not* to judge in Matthew chapter 7. So what does he mean? What role does judgment have in the thoughts and life of a believer?

Read Matthew 7:1-5.

1. How does Jesus (very seriously!) communicate to us that we shouldn't judge others?
2. Verses 3-5 add a little more clarity for us. What kind of judgment is Jesus warning us about? Explain what this kind of judging looks like.
3. Read **Matthew 7:5,6**. How can you be sure that Jesus does want you to do some judging? (And what's so hard about these words?)
4. Agree or disagree (and why?): The judging that Jesus calls us to do shows no love or respect for people.
5. Give an example of a time when you might have to put this into action.

Read Matthew 15:22-28.

Again, Jesus seems to speak in a way that shows very little love or respect for someone. In Matthew chapter 7, he called some people

swine in judgment of the way they treated his Word. In Matthew chapter 15, he refers to a dear, hurting mother who came to him for help as a dog!

6. What's so hard to understand about Jesus' reaction in these verses?
7. This woman was a "Canaanite." If you can, give some cultural explanation for what's going on and for Jesus' reply to her.
8. Translators often note that the word Jesus used for "dog" doesn't mean a "street cur" (a mongrel dog), but more like a "house dog"—a pet. (Small comfort, perhaps!) Luther described Jesus' reply as "More yes than no. Yea, it appears to be nothing but no, though in reality it's nothing but yes." Look at the situation. How was Jesus using this as a blessing for her—and for many others?
9. Think of any times in your life when it felt like Jesus was treating you in a similar way. Did a blessing come from it? Share, if you are willing.

Summary

Key Points:

- Even when Jesus seems harsh or disrespectful, he's acting in love and to further the gospel's purpose.
- Though God clearly condemns hypocritical judging of others, he still calls Christians to use an honest, scriptural judgment out of love for God's Word and our fellow human beings.
- When God seems to be presenting a cold face to us, faith has the opportunity to hold him to his grace and to grow.

Notes

During the Week

1. It's easy to build up resentment toward God without realizing it—especially over seemingly unanswered prayers. Do some honest self-evaluation. If there's a time when it felt like Jesus was cold and distant when you went to him for help, has it hindered your prayer life or sent you all the more to his Word?
2. Judging is a dangerous, but important, matter for a Christian. Jesus warns about hypocritical judgment. Consider starting and ending your day by reading through the Ten Commandments and reciting the Apostles' Creed. Renew a sense of your sins and also acknowledge how God stepped into history to save you. Pray God that both will help you exercise loving, Christian, scriptural judgment in all things.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 12 Words From a Hard Place

Worship

Read responsively these verses from Psalm 16.

Leader: LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;

Group: you have made my lot secure.

L: The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;

G: surely I have a delightful inheritance.

L: I have set the LORD always before me.

G: Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

L: Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;

G: my body also will rest secure,

L: because you will not abandon me to the grave,

G: nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

L: You have made known to me the path of life;

G: you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Introduction

A key scene in the movie *Saving Private Ryan* is an exchange between the title character and the man who was giving his life for him. Explain what is striking about what was said.

What's your reaction to it?



Notes

How is that different from the words Jesus speaks to us?

Studying God's Word

Jesus sacrificed his life for us. As he did so, he spoke “seven words”—seven statements from the cross that tell us so much about his love for us and his will for us. Some of them are hard to understand; some, hard to believe; some, hard to put into practice. Yet in all of them we can find God's amazing love.

Today, we'll take a brief look at those words.

Read Luke 23:32-34.

1. What's so difficult about these words? (Consider also **John 12:9,10** and **John 3:2**.)
2. What makes this difficult for you to believe?
3. Jesus calls us to love and forgive as he does. Identify the difficult implication(s) this has for the way God calls us to live.

Read Luke 23:38-43.

4. Often we point to these words as words of comfort. Yet, explain why these words to this dying criminal can be hard for us to understand.
5. Give some examples of why these words can be hard to believe or practice in our own lives.

Notes

Read John 19:25-27.

6. Identify what makes these words hard to hear.
7. How do they help you understand some amazing truths about your Savior?

Read Matthew 27:45,46.

8. List as many things as possible that make these words hard to understand.
9. What was Jesus expressing?
10. How do these hard words help you understand God's love for you?

Read John 19:28,29.

11. Perhaps it's hard to understand why words like this would be recorded for us. What key things do they tell you about your Savior's suffering and death?
12. When are words like this a comfort to you?

Notes

Read John 19:30.

13. These words are simple and straightforward. Sometimes the real challenge is *to believe them*. Explain why that is.

14. How does the rest of the verse help show that the price for sins truly was paid for?

Read Luke 23:44-47.

15. It's a beautiful end to a terrible sacrifice. Yet consider the centurion's words. What will always be a difficulty for people when it comes to Christ's death?

Summary

Key Points:

- Jesus' words from the cross bring us face-to-face with how terrible God's anger over sin is.
- Jesus' words from the cross bring us face-to-face with the love of God that's so deep, it's almost unbelievable!

During the Week

Take some time every day this week (perhaps during morning or evening prayers) to read again through some or all of Jesus' words on the cross. Incorporate the truths you find there into your prayers. One possible example:

Dear Savior, when you were dying on the cross, you still loved and thought of others. I confess that so often I'm so consumed with my own worries and hardships that I forget the needs and pains of others. Help me pray for them and look for ways to show them your love. And when I falter or fail, renew and uplift me with the knowledge that on the cross, you also thought of me and loved me as you gave your life to forgive me. Amen.



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 13 Hard Sayings—So That We *Won't* Hear?

Worship

Read responsively Isaiah 55:8-11.

Leader: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

Group: neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

L: “As the heavens are higher than the earth,

G: so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

L: As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish,

G: so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

L: so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

G: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Introduction

God says his thoughts are not our thoughts. Give some examples of how that's true.

God does say that his purpose is always accomplished. Sum up what God's will for mankind is.



Notes

How do you know that's true?

Studying God's Word

God clearly tells us that he wants all people to be saved. He won that salvation by the death of his Son, and he brings that salvation to us by his Word.

But as our study closes, Jesus tells us some words that are difficult to understand and seem to fly in the face of those truths.

Read Matthew 13:10-15.

1. Jesus had just told his parable about a sower scattering seed (verses 1-9). Some grows, but most does not. Jesus gave the people an urgent call to hear at the end of the parable. What question were the disciples left with?
2. Explain why Jesus' answer is so difficult to hear.
3. Give the two purposes that Jesus indicates he has for speaking in parables.
4. Agree or disagree (and why?): Sometimes the purpose of God's Word is to harden the hearts of unbelievers in their unbelief.

Read Isaiah chapter 6.

This section of Isaiah serves as the source of the words Jesus quoted in Matthew chapter 13.

5. The source of Jesus' quote is equally hard. Recall, if you can, something about the people of Israel in Isaiah's day. Was the problem that God didn't want the people to believe and be saved?

Notes

6. It's a terrible thing to think of God using his Word to harden hearts! Should we ever be afraid it could happen to us?
7. It's important to keep in mind God's purpose. Connect God's hard words here to his love and gospel promises.

Read Matthew 13:18-23.

8. Jesus explains the meaning of his parable now—but it's one that people still often misunderstand. What is the point?
9. What should this parable lead us to
 - a. be on guard against?
 - b. strive to do?
 - c. give glory to God for?

Summary

Key Points:

- God's chief purpose in sharing his Word is to lead people to faith.
- A secondary purpose of God's Word is to harden the hearts of persistent unbelievers.
- God's chief purpose in sharing his Word is to lead people to faith.