

The Puzzle of His Conduct



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 4:12, 13; 8:28–32; 11:18, 19; 21:12, 13; Luke 2:41–51; 5:32; 1 Cor. 1:26–28.*

Memory Text: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners” ’” (*Matthew 11:19, NIV*).

Last week's lesson focused on sayings of Jesus that leave contemporary people scratching their heads. This week's lesson probes similar issues, but in respect to His conduct.

One of our problems with Jesus is our perennial temptation to recreate Him in our own image. The revolutionary makes Him out to be one of them; social conservatives believe they have Him in their corner. To an extent, that is unavoidable. After all, our own culture and situation form the matrix through which we both consciously and even unconsciously view reality. But to be conscious of this fact offers some hope that we can begin, at least in some limited way, to transcend it and attempt as objective an approach as we can to the Jesus we find in the Gospels.

Once we do that, we discover that it is not easy to pigeon-hole Him, not easy to place Him in a tidy little package with the word *solved* on top. Instead, we find ourselves genuinely puzzled by aspects of His conduct, wondering, *Does He expect us to do that, and in the same way?*

This week we will look at some of the more puzzling actions of Jesus in order to learn what we can apply and, perhaps, not apply to our own lives.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 17.*

Neglecting Parents?

As stated earlier, the Gospels are almost totally silent on the first 30 years or so of Jesus' life. Though not much is given, there is one account of this time frame that gives us pause.

Read Luke 2:41–51. At first sight, what impression does the passage leave about Jesus' regard for His parents? On the other hand, what else might have been going on here? What hint could be found in verse 47?

The incident, on the face of it, gives the impression of an irresponsible lad, utterly uncaring about the pain and anxiety of his parents. What parents would not be terribly angry at such apparently callous disregard for their convenience and the rules of their home?

This is one of those events that show the limits of using Jesus' conduct as a model in every case. What is happening here, it would seem, is that Jesus' Messiahship has already begun to shine through at the tender age of 12. He is becoming conscious of an allegiance to a Power infinitely higher than His parents, however much He respected them. The brevity of Luke's account leaves a dozen questions unanswered, such as who fed and housed the lad those three days? Did the priests have any concern to find His parents?

Read Jesus' response to His parents. What was He telling them, at least indirectly?

“But,” Luke reports, “they did not understand what he was saying to them” (*Luke 2:50, NIV*). Jesus would return home with them and, as a child, be subject to them (*vs. 51*); but He had taken pains to establish the position of a higher loyalty. Nor is there any indication that He ever apologized for the terrible inconvenience He had caused His anxious parents.

Jesus' entire life was guided by the supremacy of God and God's kingdom, even at the cost of being misunderstood. In what ways might your loyalty to God be misunderstood by others? If this has ever happened to you, what did you learn that could, perhaps, help someone else going through a similar experience?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 5:30*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Discuss how Jesus' faithfulness in doing the will of the Father in heaven came before all else. And He knew that God's will for Him was to save humankind.

Feel: Nurture a desire to demonstrate personally that each believer is accepted into God's family, regardless of status.

Do: Reach out to everyone, regardless of their status.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Son of Man—Son of God

A Jesus knew that He was the Son of God and understood, even in His youth, what His purpose was for coming to the earth.

B Although He had respect for His parents, Jesus' loyalty to God was greater than His loyalty to them.

II. Jesus, Our Brother—Our Example

A In many cases Jesus expressed human emotions much as we do.

B In many situations, Jesus was silent or, seemingly, gave no response at all.

C We must follow Christ's example by applying the underlying principles behind His own words and behaviors.

III. Friend of the Outcast

A Although Jesus mingled with ordinary people, He also interacted with (and welcomed) the unacceptable, the outcast, and the lower class of society.

B Many people who did not understand the Lord's conduct in associating with "sinners" misjudged Him or accused Him wrongly.

► **Summary:** The Savior's ministry and purpose to bring salvation to humankind were far-reaching and all-inclusive. He therefore reached out to "whosoever" would come—from prostitute to preacher, from leper to lawyer. In all that He did, He always put His loyalty to the Father and His purpose for saving humanity above all else.

Displaying Anger?

When Jesus descended the Mount of Transfiguration, a man emerged from a crowd at the base with a request that Jesus heal His son. He had taken the boy to the disciples, the man explained, but they had been unable to cure him. Jesus' response, as it comes through in translation, gives the impression of being peeved by the request. "O unbelieving and perverse generation," He replied, ". . . how long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me'" (*Matt. 17:17, NIV*). At the very least, such words seem uncharacteristic of the One we have come to know as the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." How might we explain Jesus' tone here? It is a difficult call. The Gospels mention other occasions when Jesus certainly appeared angry, as well.

How do you understand the following passages? *Matt. 21:12, 13; Mark 3:1-5.*

Many Christians consider that the way for us to proceed with choices in our complex, contemporary world is to ask, What would Jesus do? It sounds simple enough, until one asks the logical preliminary question, What *did* Jesus do? Here we discover that the answers are not always as simple as we may think. What, for example, are the implications of the above passages for our own conduct today?

"Presuming that what Jesus would do today has some correlation with what he actually did then—in first-century Roman Palestine . . . —how in the world might a contemporary Christian go about replicating and applying these bizarre incidents of tree-cursing and temple-disrupting? If our favorite grocery store happens not to stock a particular fruit we are craving—because it's out of season!—do we proceed, with Jesus' blessing, to curse the fruit bin, the produce manager, and everything else in sight? And if the preacher goes on too much about money one Sunday or if we are just generally miffed at various church personnel and programs, do we bust in during a worship service and start upending pews, pulpits, altars—anything not nailed down—and bouncing ushers from the premises?"—F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?* p. ix.

What principles should we bring to bear upon such questions? Where does spiritual common sense come in? Jesus came as the Messiah, the Savior of humanity. How do we distinguish what He did strictly in that role from that which He intends for us to follow?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Just for Teachers: “We are to copy no human being. There is no human being wise enough to be our criterion. We are to look to the man Christ Jesus, who is complete in the perfection of righteousness and holiness. . . . He is the pattern man. . . . His character is our model.”—Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 166.

Jesus is indeed our model. Yet, His conduct at times is puzzling. For example, when a Gentile woman approached Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter, His first reaction was silence, compounded later by a seemingly harsh derision of her race as dogs (*Matt. 15:21–26*). Did Jesus possess such contempt for those of another culture? Or was He using this incident to show that racial hatred has no place in His kingdom?

Jesus is unique in His person and mission. He is both God and Man, and as such His approach to His work at times seems so different from the options open for us. However, there are certain things in which we ought to imitate Jesus without any hesitation. What are they?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: As we study incidents in Jesus’ life that may seem puzzling, encourage the class to (a) remember that He is different from us; (b) view His mission as Messianic; and (c) see a purpose behind each puzzling conduct.

Bible Commentary

Observe the puzzling conduct of Jesus in three areas—His childhood, His associations, and His attitudes—and discover behind each puzzle a purpose.

I. The Puzzle of His Childhood

The only recorded incident of Jesus’ childhood (*Luke 2:41–51*) leaves us with amazement and a query. We wonder at the ability of the 12-year-old Jesus to debate with the learned. We are puzzled by His response to the anxiety of His parents: “‘Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My

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Destroying Personal Property?

An underlying concern of this week's lesson centers on the way we use Jesus as our model. How straightforward is the goal of "following His example"? And what we are noticing is that it is a matter that calls for the most careful thought and discrimination. There are certainly cases—the majority, in fact—in which we detect a clear, ethical example to follow; in others the principle is not very clear. Two cases:

Read **Matthew 8:28–32** (*compare Mark 5:1–20, Luke 8:26–39*) and **Matthew 21:18, 19** (*compare Mark 11:12–14, 20, 21*). **Why do you think Jesus allowed the demons to enter the herd of swine? Would He have done the same thing if the animals had been sheep? Where is the sympathy in Jesus' action here? Was there a concern on His part that, regardless of His own dietary strictures, the herd, nevertheless, represented the livelihood of one or more families in the town? How would the idea of compensation fit into this picture?**

"If these swine were owned by Gentiles, we should be left without a real explanation for their destruction. To say that the devils were ordered merely to leave the men, and that their entering the swine was their own act, contradicts their request to Jesus and the plain statements of Mark and of Luke that Jesus gave them permission."—R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), p. 353. Another Bible scholar sees in Jesus' action "a powerful protest." "The name 'Legion' and the pig mascot," he says, "both signify Roman military occupation." Thus Jesus' intention was to "protest against oppressive Roman possession of Israel."—F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?* p. 101.

Ellen G. White says that "it was in mercy to the owners of the swine that this loss had been permitted to come upon them. They were absorbed in earthly things, and cared not for the great interests of spiritual life. Jesus desired to break the spell of selfish indifference, that they might accept His grace."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 338. While these comments might help us to understand certain calamities that come upon us personally, how do you see it setting any precedence in regard to our own action? Or is this one of those actions pertaining to Jesus' role as Messiah-Prophet and not intended as an example for us to follow, as such? How would you make the case that the same is true in regard to the cursing of the fig tree (which probably had a personal owner)?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Father's business?" (vss. 49, 50, NKJV).

Was Jesus careless and irresponsible in so responding to His parents' anxiety? Was He arrogant because of sudden eminence bestowed upon Him by His audience in the temple? Should He not have felt bad that He caused His parents so much pain? The incident is puzzling. But behind the puzzle is the divine purpose: to unfold to Jesus and His parents His Messianic mission, that even as He is growing up as their Son, He has an eternal Father, and His work will soon consume His life.

Consider This: Was Jesus insensitive toward His parents? See *Luke 2:51*.

II. The Puzzle of His Association

"One's character is known by the friends one keeps" is a common saying. The scribes and the Pharisees applied this saying to Jesus and passed a judgment: Jesus could not be good and could not qualify to be the Messiah because He associated with sinners, tax collectors, and the undesirable of society (*Matt. 9:10–13; Luke 5:31, 32*).

Jesus met His accusers with a profound answer: It is the sick who need a doctor, the sinners who need the Savior. The healing and saving mission of Jesus considers not the status of whom He met but their need. The deeper a person is in sin, the more longing is the Savior's love. No one is alien to His redemptive search. So, what is the divine purpose behind Jesus' association with the undesirables of society? Simply this: to reveal to all humanity that God hates sin but loves the sinner; that sin's oppression cannot place one beyond the reach of divine grace; that what is considered scandalous by human opinion is precisely the object of divine mission. Hence, come Zacchaeus, come Mary Magdalene, come leper, and also come Nicodemus, come Peter, come Paul—there is room for all in Christ's kingdom.

Consider This: Suppose you see your pastor walking around in the bad part of town where prostitutes and drug dealers hang around or find him coming out of an all-night bar. What would you conclude?

III. The Puzzle of His Attitudes

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Neglecting the Persecuted?

In His most dramatic depiction of the last judgment, Jesus tells about when He will divide the nations gathered before Him into two groups, the sheep and the goats. To the sheep He says, among other things, “‘I was in prison and you came to visit me’” (*Matt. 25:36, NIV*).

Read the following texts in the light of Jesus’ judgment pronouncement. Give your immediate impression on how you think the text relates to His prison reference in the judgment.

Matt. 4:12, 13

Matt. 11:2, 3

Matt. 14:1–13

How is Jesus’ conduct during the imprisonment of John to be explained? Upon first hearing of John’s incarceration, He returns to Galilee (*Matt. 4:12*). And all the evidence suggests that John did not receive a visit from his illustrious contemporary while in the dungeon, a clear implication of Matthew 11:2, 3. According to the passage, John dispatches his disciples to Jesus with a question; that being, apparently, the only means of contact available to him. Following the visit of John’s people, Jesus launches into high praise for the embattled prophet but does not visit him.

One of the most persistent questions we face as human beings centers around the issue of suffering: Where is God when we hurt? In the experience of John, we have a partial answer, in terms of Jesus’ conduct. Though He was God in human flesh, with power to act, Jesus does not intervene to rescue the one who had helped prepare the ground for His own ministry. And following John’s murder, all we get from Jesus (who, we suspect, felt it keenly) is silence. Nor is it likely that He or His disciples attended John’s funeral.

How would you explain Jesus’ conduct during this dark time for John? What were the probable extenuating circumstances that might have played a role in His decision? (See *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 316, which suggests that the authorities were attempting to silence both John and Jesus.)

And how can His behavior during the entire episode with the Baptist help us understand the silence of God in our own times of trouble?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Does Jesus care? Caring for the oppressed, saving the lost, being a friend of the friendless, weeping with those who weep, feeding the hungry: Don't such instances of love and tenderness show that Jesus cares? And yet, is it not puzzling to note that while John the Baptist was languishing in prison Jesus never paid Him a visit (*Matt. 14:1–12*)? After all, Jesus taught that visiting those in prison is a characteristic of the citizens of His kingdom (*Matt. 25:31–46*). How are we to understand, then, Jesus' attitude toward the imprisoned and the beheaded Baptist? Does it reflect insensitiveness, neglect, and inconsistency?

Matthew says that John's disciples "told Jesus" all that had happened to the Baptist (*Matt. 14:12*). Was this a hint? "Beware, don't let this come to you."

Consider This: "Jesus did not interpose to deliver His servant. He knew that John would bear the test. Gladly would the Saviour have come to John, to brighten the dungeon gloom with His own presence. But He was not to place Himself in the hands of enemies and imperil His own mission. Gladly would He have delivered His faithful servant. But for the sake of thousands who in after years must pass from prison to death, John was to drink the cup of martyrdom."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 224.

Did Jesus respect property? When Jesus healed two men possessed by demons, He allowed the demons to enter a herd of 2,000 swine, causing the pigs to drown in a nearby lake (*Matt. 8:28–34, Mark 5:1–19*). The miracle had caused much discussion about Jesus' attitude toward property rights and animal welfare. Are His critics right to charge Him as uncaring and insensitive?

We can be sure of certain things. First, Jesus could not have deliberately destroyed the pigs. Second, He could not have wished any economic loss to the owners of the pigs. Third, He who spoke of a little sparrow or the one lost sheep with such intense feelings could not have wantonly caused cruelty to animals.

And so why did Jesus allow the demons to enter the swine? One reason is the saving of the two oppressed men. Salvation is always His first priority: Is it not His mission, even to the point of His own death on the cross? Another is to awaken the villagers to the reality that they were too preoccupied with material things that they did not care for the spiritual and that now in seeing the salvation of two of their own neglected

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Hanging Out With *Undesirables*

Most of us have a doctored image of Jesus. And however often we hear that He associated with those whom His own society considered unacceptable, our imagination either holds back from going all the way or goes too far. Often, rather than quietly coming to grips with what that aspect of Jesus' life should mean for us today on a personal basis, we use His behavior to beat one another on the head, for being too exclusive, too conservative, in regard to the more seedy elements of society. One suspects, however, that a careful examination of Jesus' relations with the *undesirables* of His day would leave most (if not all) of us feeling at least a tad uncomfortable.

Examine the following passages. What message can we take from them? *Matt. 9:10–13; 11:18, 19; Luke 5:32; 1 Cor. 1:26–28.*

If we apply these passages to our times, our imagination should see Jesus sitting down with people of questionable morals in settings of deepest fellowship (as was mealtime in the ancient world). Eating and drinking are taking place; loud and raucous music is heard; practicing prostitutes lurk in the shadows. That is the setting, and that is precisely where Jesus went.

Interestingly, it is from Jesus Himself that we learn about the most pejorative labels His enemies promulgated about Him: that He was “a glutton and a drunkard” (*Matt. 11:19, Luke 7:34, NIV*). “These slurs would never work against a John the Baptist or a Gandhi, but for one who spends as much time as Jesus does frequenting and talking about dinner parties and banquets, they make a point, even if exaggerated.”—F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?* p. 90. However exaggerated, it was nothing short of extraordinary for the Savior of the world to be charged with inebriation and overeating.

What can we learn from these texts that we can apply to our own lives? What should we not apply? As you answer, think about what purpose Jesus had for being with these people. How does that answer help us understand what practical principles we can take away?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

men, they may turn to their own salvation. With Jesus there is always a balance and a priority.

► STEP 3—Practice

Thought Question:

Jesus overturned the moneychangers' tables because He did not approve of their actions (*Matt. 21:12, 13*). Is this an act of righteous anger, targeted at cleansing a religious institution, as part of His Messianic mission? Or is it a revolutionary model for us to emulate?

Application Questions:

1 Consider an imaginary situation in your church. For some time rumors have been floating that an elder has been behaving inappropriately with members of the opposite sex. There has also been talk of two deacons misappropriating some church funds. You feel concerned about it. Will you be justified in exposing this during a divine service and demanding action? If not, why not?

2 In situations such as the above, why is it that we cannot assert the same rights as Jesus did? What sets Jesus apart from us in taking certain actions such as He took?

► STEP 4—Apply

Just for Teachers: The conduct of Jesus as seen in the Gospels shows how compassionate, merciful, and caring He is. In some cases (such as we have noted in this lesson), His conduct also is puzzling. Ask your class to jot down illustrations of both kinds and invite them to discuss in which ones they should be more involved, and why.

Application Question:

Jesus was righteously indignant when He saw unbelief (*Matt. 17:17*) and when He saw God's temple abused (*Matt. 21:12, 13*). How would you apply such righteous anger in your personal life?

Further Study: “Jesus saw in every soul one to whom must be given the call to His kingdom. He reached the hearts of the people by going among them as one who desired their good. He sought them in the public streets, in private houses, on the boats, in the synagogue, by the shores of the lake, and at the marriage feast. He met them at their daily vocations, and manifested an interest in their secular affairs. He carried His instruction into the household, bringing families in their own homes under the influence of His divine presence. His strong personal sympathy helped to win hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 151.

“Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with [people] as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What is *righteous anger*? When is it legitimate, and when is it not? Take your thoughts to class for discussion.
- ❷ How is Jesus’ relationship with the *undesirables* of society a guide for us? Under what conditions might our association with sinners become a peril to our own souls? In all His social contacts, Jesus seemed to be in charge. What should that say to us in our own attempts to penetrate the more questionable areas of society?
- ❸ To what extent is Jesus’ conduct a model for us today? To what extent is it not? What are other examples of His conduct here that might be problematic for us to follow?
- ❹ Think more about this idea of being misunderstood by others as we seek to follow God’s will. Though we see examples of this, such as in Jesus’ early life, why must we be careful? That is, some people have done some very damaging things to themselves and to others, all because they believed that God told them to. How do we know for sure that God is calling us to do certain things that might cause us to be misunderstood? Why should we be open to the counsel of others before we do things that we are convinced that God told us to do? At the same time, how can we be careful not to impede someone who is being led by God in ways that might seem strange to us?