

The Challenge of His Sayings



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:48; 18:21, 22; 19:3–12; Luke 12:32–34; John 19:25–27.*

Memory Text: “‘No one ever spoke the way this man does’”
(*John 7:46, NIV*).

Some of Jesus' sayings present a whole host of values radically at odds with what often is viewed as normal. We are, He says, to turn the other cheek; that is, we are not to resist evil. Of course, almost everyone assumes that evil should be resisted, often by every means possible. *And to love those who are our enemies?* Are enemies not to be hated? It is friends and families we are to love, right? Not according to Jesus.

It gets even more confusing. According to Jesus, it is the outcasts, the harlots, and others like them who will enter the kingdom of God before so many of the so-called *righteous*. How can that be?

Jesus says that the blessed ones are the ones who weep, who are merciful, who are pure in heart. We thought the blessed ones were the rich, the powerful, those who have good looks and plenty of friends, right?

Yet, even those sayings were not the most challenging to come from the lips of Jesus. This lesson examines a few of Jesus' pronouncements that fall into the category of *sayings*, since they are not *teachings* in the strict sense of the term.

What did Jesus mean by these *sayings*? And how are we expected to apply them to our lives today?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 10.*

About Marriage and Abstinence

Some of Jesus' hardest sayings deal with the question of marriage and divorce. Read the following passage. What things are clear? What things are not so easy to understand? Even with what is not clear, what is the essential message that Jesus is giving here?

Matt. 19:3–12

There is much to chew on in the Pharisees' question. Note, for example, the male-oriented nature of the question, " 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' " (*vs. 3, NIV*). Of course, the answer is no, and Jesus makes that clear (*vs. 4–6*). But the questioners' real motive emerges as we come to verse 7: " 'Why then . . . did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?' " Going beyond Moses, Jesus tightens the terms for a marital split, coming down hard on those men with a yen for ditching wives. On one condition only, He says, marital infidelity. Any other grounds would constitute adultery (*vs. 8, 9*). Shocked, the disciples jump into the discussion: " 'It is better not to marry' " (*vs. 10, NIV*), they state.

Their response provides the impetus for one of the most difficult statements to come from the lips of Jesus.

Read again Matthew 19:11, 12. Who are those that cannot accept Jesus' tough line?

Does Jesus mean to exempt them? Who are included in " 'only those to whom it has been given' " (*vs. 11, NIV*)? Are these a special group of morally (sexually) gifted people? What are we to make of Jesus' eunuch reference? How are the three categories of eunuch to be explained, and how do they apply to us? Jesus' most puzzling line comes at the end: " 'The one who can accept this should accept it' " (*vs. 12, NIV*). Is this a Divine concession for people too weak to comply with the high standard He outlined? And if a concession, does it apply to the whole discourse about divorce?

As is sometimes the case, there are things in the Bible that are hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). Why is it so important not to get hung up on those things, but rather to focus on and live out what we do understand?

About Forgiveness (*Matt. 18:21, 22*)

Jesus, we saw in an earlier lesson, is the embodiment of forgiveness. We return to the subject in this lesson, however, to grapple with the issue as to whether Jesus' statements about forgiveness (in the above passage, for example) are as simple as we sometimes make them out to be.

Reflect on Matthew 18:21, 22. What kind of offenses does Jesus have in mind here? How do we apply Jesus' words in cases of repeated sexual or physical abuse, such as within the home? Did Jesus have very egregious offenses in mind, such as when someone kills a pregnant woman, opens up her womb, and steals her unborn baby (as happened in Melvern, Kansas, in December 2004)? Could it be that Jesus, speaking to ordinary people about ordinary offenses, mistakes, and hurts that we experience in our normal interaction with one another, gives a command that does not envision the more complex and sinister cases of human criminality? What do you think?

Known in the media as Girl X, she came to a Chicago court in a wheelchair. Raising her head and making eye movements to communicate, the 13-year-old testified "about the attack in 1997 that left her severely disabled. She was the third witness in the trial of Patrick Sykes, 29, who is accused of raping her, beating her and pouring roach killer down her throat in the attack."—Mike Robinson, Associated Press, *Washington Post*, March 24, 2001, p. A22.

Is Jesus asking the victims of heinous acts to forgive not only the first occurrence but also the seventh? And is He saying that God will never forgive those who find themselves unable to absolve the demons in human flesh that commit them? The point here is not that we should not forgive. Rather, it is whether we may press the gracious counsel of the Lord too far when we apply it to the kind of ghastly, mind-numbing atrocities listed above.

As you think about the questions above, do not forget Jesus' words on the cross: " 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' " (*Luke 23:34, NIV*). If Jesus is asking God to forgive those who crucified Him (Who did this include? The Roman soldiers? Caiphaz? Pilate? Herod? The chief priests and scribes?), should we not forgive everything? Bring your thoughts to class on Sabbath.

About Wealth and Giving *(Luke 12:32–34)*

To the rich young ruler who came to Him, Jesus said, “ ‘Sell everything you have and give to the poor’ ” *(Luke 18:22, NIV)*. Our explanation of this radical command usually has been that Jesus’ stipulation was specific to this young man, based on a prophetic insight into the ruler’s need. Here Jesus put His finger on the one big obstacle between the ruler and salvation: money. But does He not give that same directive to everyone?

In Luke 12:33 Jesus seems to apply to everyone with means the same injunction He gave the rich young ruler: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted” *(NIV)*.

How should we understand this saying? Was Jesus advocating a redistribution of wealth for all Christians in all times and places? What practical problems would arise if we literally carried out His injunction? Take any given community, in which all Christians have sold all their property and given the proceeds to the poor, what now is the economic status of those Christians? How do they support themselves and their own families? And how do they now get the means to carry forward the rest of Jesus’ mission—to take the gospel to new frontiers, for example?

Three considerations may be helpful here. One is to note what actually happened during the course of Jesus’ own ministry: His little group seemed to have had funds on hand—Judas kept them *(John 12:6, 13:29)*. A second is to take a careful look at what happened in the early church, among those Christians closest to the life setting of Jesus’ statement. (In Acts 4:32–37 we witness what appeared to be an orderly, voluntary process as they sought to follow Jesus’ injunction.) A third consideration is to examine what happened in the early church beyond the book of Acts (in the letters of Paul, John, Peter, etc., we see no wholesale selling of property).

When you take all these things, as well as the whole Bible (which does not condemn wealth, per se), into consideration, what do you think was Christ’s point? How does Luke 12:34 catch the essence of His message?

About Perfection *(Matt. 5:48)*

For many people, one of Jesus' most puzzling statements comes in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Matt. 5:48, NIV*). Across the centuries, conscientious Christians have struggled to reach the standard to which they thought Jesus Christ was pointing, a state of complete victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. Some have flagellated and beaten themselves; some have gone on pilgrimages; others have sought it through stringent keeping of the law. The goal is altogether worthy in every case. But is that what Jesus was calling for in Matthew 5?

Compare the following pairs of scriptures. Notice how they inform and balance each other:

Matt. 10:34–39 and Luke 14:26, 27

Matt. 7:7–11 and Luke 11:9–13

Matt. 5:48 and Luke 6:32–36

The seemingly harsh language of Jesus in Luke 14 is mollified by its parallel in Matthew 10, which gives us, we think, a better grasp of what Jesus was trying to say. And whereas the Matthew 7 passage on prayer has Jesus promising us, upon the asking of "good gifts" (*vs. 11, RSV*; "good things," *KJV*; which can inadvertently focus the mind on the material), Luke has Jesus pledging, instead, "the Holy Spirit" (*Luke 11:13, NIV*)—a considerable shift in perspective.

The same kind of synthesis takes place in respect to the final pair of texts. Where Matthew has Jesus saying, "Be ye therefore perfect," (*Matt. 5:48*), Luke reports His words as, "Be ye therefore merciful" (*Luke 6:36*), which, according to both contexts, comes closer to what Jesus meant. In Luke the context speaks about loving our enemies, and lending without expecting anything back. Doing things like that, Jesus says, makes us "sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (*vs. 35, NIV*). Then follows immediately the statement, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (*vs. 36, NIV*). In Matthew the situation is identical, the verse on being perfect preceded by talk of love to enemies, prayer for those who mistreat us, and about God sending rain equally on the righteous and the wicked. Jesus thus wanted to encourage us to be just like our heavenly Father, who is kind to all and shows no partiality. That is what *perfect* in this context means. It is a high order, to be sure, but what higher ideal can a Christian strive for?

About Family *(John 19:25–27)*

A young woman joined David Koresh's ill-fated group back in the 1990s and was at the group's Waco, Texas, compound when her mother passed away in Canada. As she prepared to leave for the funeral, the charismatic guru intercepted her plans. No need, he said, to expend time and funds for such mundane purposes; there are more important things to do on the compound. She never went.

Read the following sayings of Jesus: *Matt. 10:34–37, 12:46–50, Luke 9:59–62, 12:49–53, 14:26*. **How would you answer the charge that they tend to give aid and comfort to charismatics like Koresh (and others) who denigrate natural family ties and loyalties?**

“This reconfiguration of family values—driving a wedge between earthly and heavenly, . . . becomes a major theme in Luke’s gospel. . . . In addition to statements embracing all who keep God’s word as true kinfolk (8:19–21; 11:27, 28), . . . Luke’s Jesus lays down the shocking mandate to ‘hate father and mother’—even to the point of leaving a dead father to bury himself!—as a condition for discipleship (9:57–62; 14:25).”—F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 35.

Jesus’ statements sound harsh to the modern ear, to be sure. But are they really so, when you understand what they mean? In the case of letting “the dead bury their own dead” (*Luke 9:60, NIV*) for example, had the father of the potential disciple actually died? Or was that person saying, in effect, “I will follow you after my father dies, and I have secured all the property”? And how should we understand Jesus’ statement in *Luke 14:26* that no one can be His disciple who “‘does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life’ ” (*NIV*)? As pointed out in yesterday’s lesson, the Matthew parallel throws light on Jesus’ meaning here, by Jesus talking in the Matthew text about those who love father and mother and wife, etc., more than Him (*see Matt. 10:37*). “In the Bible, ‘to hate,’ often should be understood simply as . . . ‘to love less.’ ”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 811. The idea Jesus was trying to get across was the importance of putting God first.

Oftentimes our familial bonds are the strongest earthly bonds that we know, and rightly so. Why, though, must God always come first, even before family, if need be?

Further Study: No question, some of Jesus' sayings are hard to understand, especially if taken in isolation. When, however, we view them in context, particularly with other *corrective* statements that balance them out, many of them become much easier to understand. Even then it becomes clear that following Jesus cannot be a halfway thing. Either we give ourselves to Him completely, regardless of the cost, or we do not give ourselves to Him at all.

“Celibacy is not the ordinary, normal state, and it is a deception of the devil that, of itself, it can lead to a superior state of holiness than would otherwise be possible. Among the Jews celibacy was frowned upon or pitied, and it was practiced only by extreme ascetic groups such as the Essenes. . . . The Scripture record states specifically that Peter was married, and probably the other disciples were as well. . . . Jesus never recommended celibacy, either for Christians as a whole or for Christian leaders. It is not natural, and does not contribute to the development of a symmetrical character in the way that normal married life can.

“The words of our Lord [in Matt. 19:12], if understood literally, would run counter to the whole tenor of Scripture. The idea of bodily mutilation is abhorrent. It seems proper to see this statement as analogous to Christ's declaration in Matthew 5:30” (about cutting off an offending limb).—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 455, 456.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The above statement on celibacy seems to have a particular religious culture in mind. But in what ways might it, unintentionally, bring discouragement to ordinary Christians who are single or widowed, or who for other reasons find it appropriate to be celibate? In what ways can we affirm people who have made that choice?
- ❷ Bring your answers to Monday's final question to class, and discuss the question of whether forgiveness does or should have limits.
- ❸ It is one thing to spout scriptures about how God has to come first, even before family; it is another, of course, to actually exercise the faith to do that. In most churches around the world, there probably will be people who have been alienated greatly by their families because of their faith. What about your own church? Is there anyone there who has lost family because of their adherence to Jesus? If so, how can you, as a church family, help make up the difference?

Thrown Into the River: Part 2

by SUNIL BIKAS TRIPURA

As a teen I gave up my belief in many gods and became a Christian, mostly by reading the Bible. But my decision angered many people. Friends forsook me, and the girl I hoped to marry left me to marry another. And when my grandfather died, the villagers refused to let me attend his funeral ceremony. Instead they grabbed me and threw me into the nearby river.

I had no Christian friends, no one to comfort or encourage me. I cried to Jesus, “Are You the true God? If so, where are You? I am persecuted. Have You no power to help me?” But I felt no answer to my prayer, so I stopped reading the Bible. I looked elsewhere for a god I could believe in, but other religions seemed full of confusion. Desperate, I picked up the Bible again and opened it at random. It opened to the book of Job. There I found courage.

I again met the man who had given me the Bible. I told him of my problem, and he encouraged me to be faithful. With his help I recommitted my life to God.

I wanted to continue my studies at the Adventist college in Bangladesh, but without my family’s support it seemed impossible. I searched for work, but the only job I could find was at a cigarette factory. I had only 500 *taka* (about U.S. \$8). It would not pay for even a week of school. Once more, discouragement set in.

I stopped at the church’s headquarters and received encouragement not to give up on my dream to study. Encouraged, I asked God for 1,000 *taka* (U.S. \$16) from my family, those who had turned from me when I became a Christian. That would be enough to at least enroll in school. I told my uncles about my need, and they gave me almost 3,000 *taka*, more than I had asked God for.

I enrolled in the school and supported myself by selling books. I want to become a pastor and work among my tribal people, only a few of whom are Christians. I have begun working among my people, and I see them listening and accepting God’s message of love. So far 35 people attend the little Sabbath School in my village and some nearby villages. They have no church in which to worship, so my goal is to provide a simple house of worship for them.

God has called me to this task, and I will not turn back. I have seen how God has led me in the past, so I have confidence He will provide for me as I follow His leading. Your mission offerings help me in my work of leading people who have never heard the name of Jesus to the foot of the cross.

SUNIL BIKAS TRIPURA *has completed his religion degree in Bangladesh Adventist Seminary and College and is working among his tribal group in Bangladesh.*

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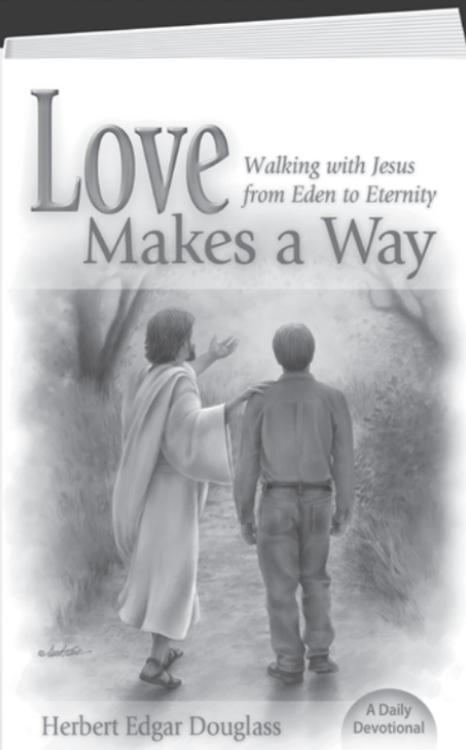
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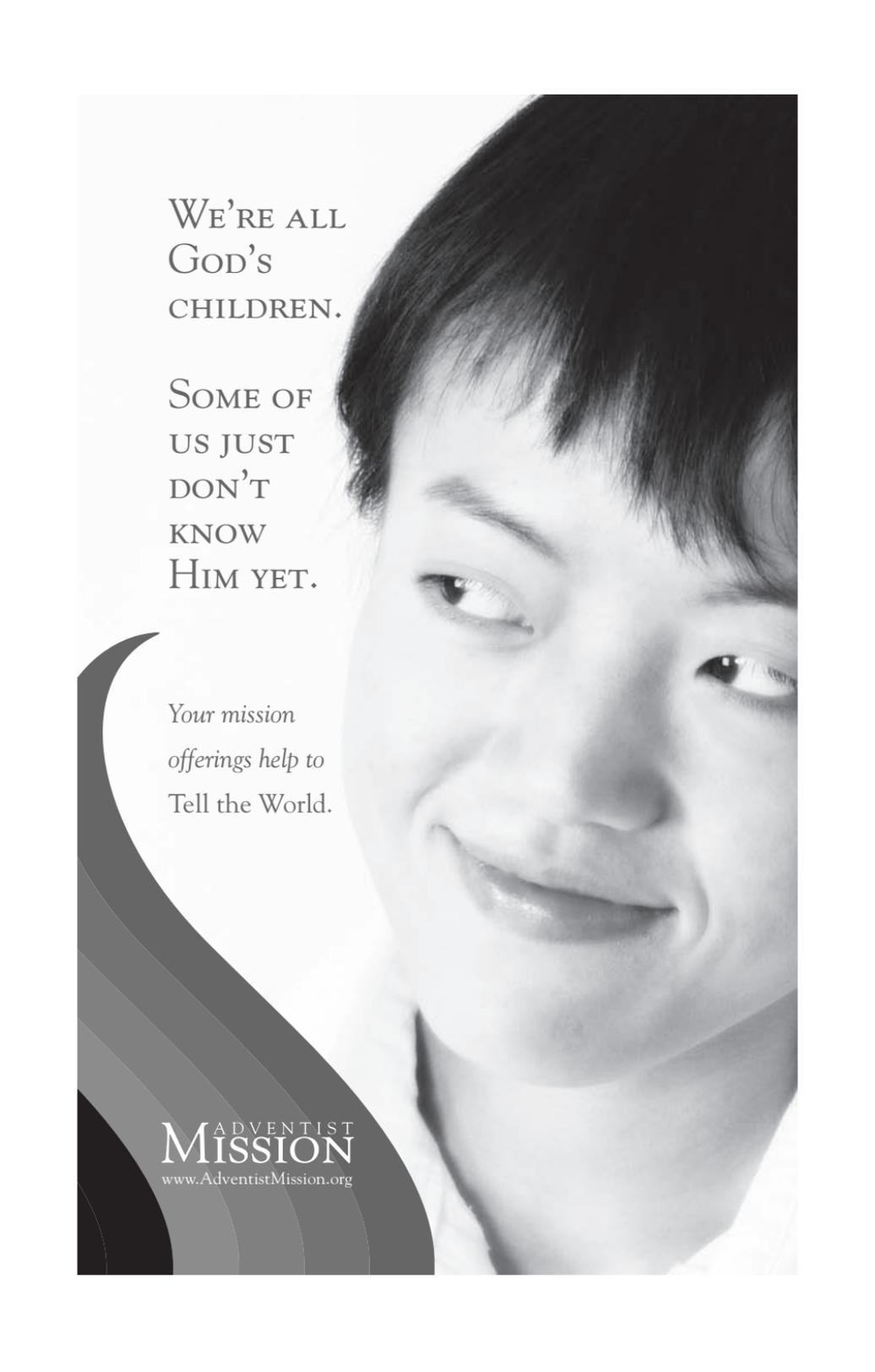
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Recently the pope ratified statements that Protestant "ecclesial communities" are "defective." He has stated that "we intensify our endeavors towards 'the holy objective' of reconciling all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ."

Surely it's time to read again the messages for these last days that have been given to us from God through Ellen White.



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