

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?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Matthew 4:4*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Realize that many of the things Jesus said did not fit in with the norm of the times.

Feel: Sense the need to apply the underlying principles of Jesus' words to our everyday living.

Do: Follow the sayings and teachings of Jesus—even those that are untraditional.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. The “Sayings” of Jesus

A Jesus said many things that were puzzling and contrary to popular beliefs and traditional behaviors.

B One of the hard-to-understand “sayings” of Jesus deals with the issue of divorce. (*See Matthew 19:3–12.*)

C We should not allow controversies or disputes to arise over the sayings of Jesus that are hard to understand or interpret.

II. Messiah

A Jesus taught unconventional things in regard to such topics as forgiving others, obtaining wealth, and achieving perfection.

B The Lord stressed the importance of loving God more than loving one's family.

C Jesus also spoke of putting the kingdom of heaven above earthly concerns.

▶ **Summary:** Many of the sayings of Jesus were very controversial because they did not fit in with popular traditions. Even today some of the words of Jesus seem hard to follow and difficult to apply to our “normal” way of life. Controversial issues over these unusual sayings should be avoided as we attempt to apply the principles behind the words to our everyday lives.

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 (Whom did this include? The Roman soldiers? Caiphas? Pilate? Herod? The chief priests and scribes?), should we not forgive everything? Bring your thoughts to class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Just for Teachers: Many who heard Jesus teach found His sayings hard to understand and harder to accept (*John 6:60*). The position is no better today. Why is it important that we pay heed to all the teachings of Jesus, including the ones considered difficult?

Jesus did not present some soothing palliatives. His teaching was tough, and it often opposed what was considered normal. Consider the Beatitudes, for example. How do they challenge our culture and our time?

Discuss some possible attitudes one can take toward the teachings of Jesus: (a) admire them as the musings of an idealist; (b) dismiss them as setting standards too high for any mortal to reach; (c) take what agrees with you and ignore the others; (d) accept them as the principles of His kingdom and seek His empowerment to follow them.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: His sayings are challenging because they expect a radical change in us. His was not a pulpit that massaged the soul; His was a message that demanded transformation and often death to the past. As your class reviews some of these difficult sayings, focus on what Jesus was really trying to say—not on whether His teaching is realistic in today’s context.

Bible Commentary

Two thousand years after He spelled out His message, Jesus’ sayings continue to comfort, baffle, and mystify. “Except you eat My flesh and drink My blood,” Christ said to His disciples. Their reaction was the same as ours: This is a hard saying. “Blessed are the poor,” He said, but our world looks down upon the poor and seeks its blessedness in material abundance. So, how are we to relate to these difficult sayings? Consider a few of them pertaining to discipleship, lifestyle, and relationships.

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**I. The Challenge of Discipleship**

Discipleship begins with death and denial. “ ‘You must be born again,’ ” Jesus said (*John 3:7, NIV*). Nicodemus responded for the world, “ ‘How can this be?’ ” (*vs. 9, NIV*). The call to a new birth is a call to death of the old self. Without giving up the old, we have no possibility of embracing the new. Death precedes discipleship, and hence the Jesus ultimatum: “ ‘And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple’ ” (*Luke 14:27, NIV*). Why is this demand so hard to accept? Was Jesus expecting too much? Is there no alternative to carrying the cross?

Discipleship involves placing Jesus above all interests, including one’s family. Jesus defines family not in terms of blood but in terms of doing God’s will (*Luke 8:19–21*). If this is a hard saying, consider the following: “ ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple’ ” (*Luke 14:26, NIV*). Does this mean that Jesus wants us to actively hate our family? Far from it. Did not Jesus Himself provide for His mother even as He hung on the cross (*John 19:25–27*)? And did He not command us to love everyone? What, then, is meant by this passage? Christ demands our absolute, unconditional loyalty to Him as the Lord of our lives. Nothing—not parents, not children, not self—can take the place of Christ in a disciple’s life. He is life’s first priority.

II. The Challenge of Christian Lifestyle

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (*Matt. 5:48*). At the heart of the Sermon on the Mount is this command. Did our Lord expect us to be sinless, to be morally and ethically perfect? Can anyone ever be perfect like God? If no one can, why did Jesus say what He did? From this passage some argue for a sinless life here on earth. To them, sinlessness is an attainable objective. Such a call to moral perfection can indeed be a hard saying. Yet, the context (*vs. 43 onward*) makes clear what Jesus was driving at: Be like the Father. Love everyone even as He loves. Be merciful like Him (*Luke 6:36*). Life is not a battle of wits; it is a relationship to be lived. Viewed thus, the saying is not difficult after all; but practicing it certainly is.

Forgiveness is another challenge in discipleship. Yet, forgiveness is what makes the Christian life possible. The gospel is God’s message of

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

forgiveness, and forgiveness plays a significant part in Christ's teaching. He placed it as an essential part of prayer life (*Matt. 6:12*). Indeed, there and in Matthew 18:35, Jesus linked God's forgiveness of us to our forgiveness of others. The gospel makes no room for revenge. To Peter's question as to whether seven times is a reasonable limit for forgiving someone, Jesus answered, " 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times' " (*Matt. 18:22, NIV*). Both this and His earlier statement of turning the other cheek (*Matt. 5:39*) make Christian life not particularly easy. Yet, in these sayings, is Jesus outlining the impossible as a guide to Christian conduct? Or is He saying that if God's love dwells in one's heart, such love can do what is humanly impossible? Are His sayings a measure of human ability or divine empowerment?

III. The Challenge of Relationships: Marriage

Marriage and divorce. The saying of Jesus on marriage and divorce (*Matt. 19:3–9*) is an increasingly difficult one at a time when divorce is so common within the faith community. More than the legality of divorce, Jesus was interested in the divine sanctity of marriage. He finds in the inspired Word that (a) God established marriage; (b) marriage creates one indivisible unity out of two; (c) what God has brought (or joined) together no one has the right to separate; and (d) infidelity is the only ground for divorce. What Jesus said was so hard even for His disciples that they gave up in despair, saying " 'it is better not to marry' " (*vs. 10, NIV*). Here are some reasons why we find some of Jesus' sayings difficult: They are inconvenient; they uphold what the Scriptures consider as the ideal; and they run counter to what we perceive as acceptable conduct. Social norms, current laws, or common agreements of the parties may justify divorce on grounds not endorsed by the Bible. The dilemma produces a tension between the ideal and the real, and it takes the wisdom and justice of God to uphold the ideal and "suffer" (*vs. 8*) the reality.

► STEP 3—Practice

Just for Teachers: Mark Twain once said that what bothered him most about the Bible were not the things that he could not understand but the things that he could understand. What does this say about human nature?

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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: Matthew 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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Thought Questions:

- 1 Consider Jesus bidding us to take up the cross and follow Him (*Mark 8:34*) and Paul’s saying that we must die daily (*1 Cor. 15:31*). What should I do today to fulfill this demand of discipleship?
- 2 How did Jesus practice what He taught? Cite some examples.
- 3 While the “common people heard him gladly” (*Mark 12:37, NKJV*), the establishment leaders, the rich, and the powerful found Him offensive and a disturber. Why? Have you ever found Jesus offensive?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Just for Teachers: We learned this week the high standards that Jesus sets for discipleship. How should we relate these standards to our witness?

Application Questions:

- 1 “Show me a Christian, and I will become one” is often said by those who admire the teachings of Jesus but do not choose to follow Him. What is our responsibility to counter this argument?

- 2 Choose a particular hard saying of Christ, such as turning the other cheek (*Matt. 5:39*) or selling all and giving it to the poor (*Luke 18:22*). Do you know of anyone who has practiced such a principle? Will following such a principle lead to salvation?

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?