

TEN
THINGS WE WISH
JESUS
NEVER SAID

2009 SUMMER SERMON SERIES

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***Dedicated to my fellow faith wrestlers
at Trinity Lutheran Church
Sherman, Texas***

“Show me a Christian who is not struggling with sin,
and I will show you someone who is not a Christian.”

— *Martin Luther*

10 THINGS WE WISH JESUS NEVER SAID

The Difficult Sayings of Jesus

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PREFACE

I've entitled this series, "Ten Things We Wish Jesus Never Said." We will be considering some of the stranger, more controversial and challenging things Jesus said. This booklet promises to be thought-provoking.

As we consider each provocative saying of Jesus, I will attempt to clarify what Jesus actually meant (and didn't mean). But my main goal is to challenge us to try to live out these sayings in our daily lives, to strive for greater faithfulness.

Mark Twain once said, "It's not what I *don't* understand about the Bible that bothers me; it's what I *do* understand." Most of the difficult sayings of Jesus are frightfully understandable. The difficult part comes when we try to live out these teachings in daily life.

When Jesus says that we shouldn't hate those who mistreat us, but rather pray for them, that's not difficult to understand. But it's very difficult to live that out when we become angry with someone. Actually praying for someone who has hurt us is usually the farthest thing from our mind.

Being a faithful follower of Jesus sometimes seems impossible or downright scary, especially when Jesus says things like, "Gouge out your eye if it causes you to sin" or "Unless you hate your father and mother, you cannot be my disciple." I have chosen ten eyebrow-raising statements of Jesus for us to consider, but the gospels are full of such sayings. They serve as a reminder to us that following Jesus is not easy. Jesus makes heavy demands upon all who wish to follow him.

When I listen to some of the televangelists who, with a smile on their face, proclaim that Jesus greatest desire is for us to be happy and wealthy, I think to myself, "Are these guys reading the same Bible I'm reading?" In the gospels, Jesus is not the promoter of happiness. Jesus is not a preacher of convenience. Jesus is one who calls us to a radical, new way of living. Jesus challenges our natural, selfish, self-centered ways.

If you study the Scriptures closely, Jesus is not the promoter of prosperity and comfort, but of hardship and servanthood. Jesus says blessings and peace and fulfillment come only by living according to his teachings. Let's face it: Jesus' teachings ain't easy! In fact, many things Jesus said we wish he *wouldn't* have said because it makes our journey with him way too difficult, too costly, too risky.

Yet in all things God's grace overcomes — if only we trust in his ways.

1

***“God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.” – Matthew 5:3***

This first difficult saying of Jesus appears in what is called the Beatitudes. *“God blesses those who are poor, who realize their need for him.”* Why is that so difficult, you might ask? What’s so hard about God *blessing* people? What makes this saying so difficult is who God blesses. God bless the *poor*; God blesses those *who realize their need for him*. Trouble is, by our very nature, we are neither of those things.

Although the economy is not the best right now, we are still among the richest people of the world. If you had your own means of transportation to worship this morning, consider this: Only 10% of the world’s population have their own car. 10%! And many own at least 2 cars! We are indeed rich!

And as Americans, we pride ourselves on being self-supporting individuals. What’s wrong with that, you ask? Think about it: those who are self-sufficient, who have access to everything they need usually go to God only when the going gets tough. Most other times we let God know that we have it all under control. God becomes nothing more than our rip cord that we pull in emergency situations.

That is **not** the kind of relationship God intended for us to have with him. Jesus wants us to think of God as our Father, one with whom we have a personal relationship, one who provides for our every need, both in abundant times and in times of need. God wants us to put our trust in him alone, so that when the stock market goes tumbling down or sickness comes or tragedy happens, we can still have hope. Why? Because our ultimate trust is in God our Father, who always has everything under control, whose riches never run out, whose love for us never waivers.

Giving up control and entrusting our lives into God’s hands is a terrifying proposition. It means that we must fully trust God to do what God has promised to do. The Israelites were faced with this exact situation. They were wandering in the desert where food was non-existent. God said that he would rain down from heaven a bread-like substance called manna and quail so that they would have something to eat. There would be enough for each day, God assured them. Gather just enough for what you need this day. I will provide you food again tomorrow, God promised.

But as the Israelites starting gathering food, they started asking one another, “What if, by chance, God *doesn’t* send any food tomorrow, then what will we do?” They did not trust in the promise God had given them. And so just to be safe, they decided to gather enough food for a couple of days, just in case God wouldn’t come through. They took matters into their own hands. They were not, as Jesus says in the Beatitudes, realizing their need for God.

When the Israelites opened their food containers the next morning they found that the extra food they had gathered was rotten. It was crawling with maggots. It was descriptive of what happens to our lives when we don’t trust in the promises of God. Our lives rot. If we are incapa-

ble of fully trusting God, then we will not experience the blessings God desires to give us. To use similar language that Jesus uses in the Beatitudes, God **does not** bless those who trust only in themselves, who have no need for God, who do not acknowledge that all of the blessings and riches in their life come from God Almighty. The kingdom of heaven will not be theirs.

Let's face it, we would rather Jesus not have said such a thing. It hits too close to home. It exposes our selfish, self-centered, sinful ways.

If we continue on in the Beatitudes, it doesn't get any easier. "God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted." A question that comes to mind is this: "If God blesses those who mourn, then does God want us to be happy?" Of course, the answer is "Yes," but for the right reasons. If we believe that we will find happiness in a bigger home, or fancier car, or grander vacation, we are sadly mistaken.

In fact, later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Seek the kingdom of God above all else, and God will give you everything you need." To believe that earthly, material things can bring us true happiness means that we will constantly find ourselves feeling unfulfilled, unsatisfied. Only when we seek God and his will for our lives will we be blessed with peace and contentment.

Although I am not a Greek scholar, I was curious what Greek word was used when Jesus said, "Blessed are the *poor*." The word for poor is *patochos*, which means "one who crouches and begs." The image Jesus uses is someone whose hand is extended, looking for a handout. "Blessed is the one who begs," Jesus says. The image is shocking, I agree. But it is very similar to the image I see each and every week as we gather for communion around the Lord's Table. We come to God empty handed, with nothing to offer. We come with our hands extended needing a handout from God. We kneel or bow our heads because we know that we are dependent upon, and at the mercy of, God Almighty.

But we do not gather in fear, at least I hope we don't. We gather in faith, trusting and believing that God's love for us is so great that he provided his own Son as a sacrifice for our sin. Out of love, God provided *everything* we needed for forgiveness and salvation because we could not pay the debt ourselves. God blesses us who are spiritually poor because, realizing our need for God's mercy and grace, we come to him, our empty hands extended, believing and trusting that God will provide.

That is not just the way Jesus encourages us to approach the communion rail. That is the way Jesus encourages us to approach all of life – believing that God will richly provide for our every need if we just trust in him. God blesses those who are poor, who realize their need for him.

In the 3rd chapter of Revelation, Jesus says, "*You say, 'I am rich! I have everything I want! I don't need a thing! But you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked! All that you have is useless, temporary!'*" If we attempt to provide ourselves with everything that we need, ultimately we will be left empty-handed. But if we choose to allow God to provide for our every need, then, as Psalm 23 puts it, our cup will overflow.

That is the difficult challenge Jesus gives us. Can we, dare we, will we choose to live our lives in this way? To realize our poverty and to trust that God will provide all that we need? Can we, dare we, will we surrender our entire lives – our schedules, our checkbooks, our own wants and desires – can we surrender it all to God and say, “Here I am, Lord. How can I be of service? What do you need me to do?”

It’s risky; it’s downright terrifying. It takes a bold, courageous faith to live in such a way. But until we can live in such a way Jesus informs us that we will not fully experience the goodness of God. “Only those who live in this way,” Jesus says, “will see God.”

Blest are those who fully entrust their lives into God’s hands. Blest are those whose greatest desire is to seek God’s will and then to live it out in their daily lives.

Can we, dare we, will we choose to live our lives in this way? “Here I am, Lord, entrusting my life into your hands. How can I be of service? What do you need me to do?”

Can we, dare we, will we?

2

“If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.”
– Matthew 5:29

Did you hear about the man who spoke frantically into the phone: “My wife is pregnant, and her contractions are only two minutes apart!”

“Is this her first child?” the operator asked.

“No, you numbskull!” the man shouted. “This is her *husband!*”

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Read Matthew 5:23-30.

In the last chapter, we discussed how Jesus calls us to a radical way of life. Jesus told us that we must give up the need to control our lives. We must fully surrender our hearts and minds to God. We must believe and trust that God has a plan for us, and that he will richly provide for our every need.

That’s scary enough, but if we continue on in Matthew’s gospel, the words become even more difficult — gory even! Jesus says, *“If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. Or if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away!”* Has Jesus lost his mind? Why in the world would Jesus even suggest such a thing?

You probably remember Andre Thomas, the local man who brutally killed his wife and children. After arriving at the jail, he literally ripped his eyeball out of the socket. When the jail medical staff asked him why he self-mutilated himself, he quoted passage in the gospel today: “If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.”

Let’s set the record straight: Jesus never meant for us to take those words literally. Jesus uses that shocking figure of speech to make sure that he has our full attention, to help us realize that we need to drastically deal with the sin in our lives.

Jesus is specifically addressing the sin of adultery in this passage, but Jesus could have been talking about *any* sin, because the consequence is the same. If we are honest with ourselves, we find a certain amount of pleasure in sin. Just as Adam and Eve found the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden “pleasing to the eye,” we, too, often find that which God forbids pleasurable. Instead of shunning sin as the Bible teaches us to do, we have become very comfortable with sin.

Many of the top rated TV shows and movies portray lifestyles that are contrary to biblical teachings, and yet we faithfully watch them, without any sense of guilt whatsoever. And although God forbids sex before marriage, our society declares such a command as outdated, even going so far as to encourage it, to “test the waters.”

Our eyes love to gaze upon that which we should not look at; our ears long to listen to that which we should not hear; our tongues say things that they should not utter; our feet are swift to take us to the destination of our desire. As the familiar confession in *The Lutheran Book of Wor-*

ship puts it: “We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.”

Jesus addresses our sinful tendencies head-on. We would rather Jesus not bring up such topics. Believing that God will forgive us anyway, we would rather just keep living life by our own set of rules and let Jesus fix it all later. But to live in such a way will only cause hardship and confusion in our lives. It’s like playing Russian Roulette with your life, Jesus implies. You must avoid sin at all cost, Jesus says. We should never tolerate sin in our lives. Once we realize we are living in sin, we should do whatever is necessary to eliminate it.

This is why Jesus says, “If you realize that your eye is causing you to sin, then pluck it out.” Jesus could have said,

“If the friends you hang around with are causing you to get in trouble, find new friends.”

“If the bar you frequent is causing you to become an alcoholic, then avoid it at all costs.”

“If you have too many obligations that are hindering you from spending some quiet time with God each day, cut out some obligations.”

“If the negative thoughts in your head are causing you to question whether you are loved and cherished by others and by God, get rid of them.”

Why must we be so radical when it comes to sin? Because sin is so deceitful. Before we know what is happening, it will quickly overtake us. If we take sin lightly, it will quickly become like a monster that we cannot control.

The Bible teaches us that Jesus was without sin. Jesus never sinned — never! If Jesus would have sinned – say one small indiscretion or a slip of the tongue – his death on the cross would have been entirely meaningless for us. If Jesus was sinful, he would not have been able to accept our sins and die on the cross in our place. So the fact that Jesus lived a perfectly sinless life is one of the make-it-or-break-it doctrines of the Christian faith.

There are some who argue that Jesus was incapable of sinning in that he was God in the flesh. God, being who God is, is not even capable of sinning. So if Jesus is God in the flesh, some argue, that means Jesus was not even capable of sinning. That is not what the Bible teaches, however. The Bible teaches that Jesus was fully human (born of the human woman, Mary). That means that sin was just as tempting and real to Jesus as it is to us. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the devil, he needed angels to come and strengthen him afterwards. That’s how *real* sin was to Jesus. Jesus was tempted by sin to the same degree that we are tempted with sin. But each and every time Jesus was tempted to sin, he chose not to. Whenever Jesus was given the opportunity to go against his Father’s will, he always chose to obey it. Jesus *could have* sinned, but never did.

Why do I make this point? Because Jesus becomes an example our of what is possible. Jesus becomes our coach in the game of life where temptation lurks around every corner. Jesus becomes our hope of never giving up in our battle against sin.

The writer of Hebrews in the 2nd chapter says: “Since Jesus himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested.” Jesus knows *exactly* what we are going through when we are being tempted with sin. When Jesus talks about sin, we can be

sure he knows exactly what he is talking about. Because Jesus never submitted to the powers of sin, Jesus is able to show us the way to not let sin overtake our lives.

Jesus' first line of defense is this: remove the temptation. Those who try to quit smoking tell me that if someone around them lights up a cigarette, it is nearly impossible for them not to succumb to the urge of lighting up themselves. So they try their best to stay away from smoky environments. They remove the temptation.

Jesus shares the same advice when it comes to our salvation: remove anything and everything that is causing your heart not to be true to the faith. For as Jesus says, "it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." Or stated differently, it is far better to give up an earthly, sinful pleasure than to lose out on heavenly salvation.

Because "sin" no longer seems to be sin anymore in our society, this teaching from Jesus is not welcome. Case in point: It is sometimes impossible to tell the difference between Christians and non-believers in this world. Christians all too often have the same desires and the same motivations as non-believers. We waste our money and time on the same frivolous things. We enter and exit marriages at the same unheard of rate. All of these choices lead to the path of heartache and pain. Because we are God's beloved children, God wants to protect us from going down that path. Rather than flirting with sin, Jesus calls us to flee from it. Complacency is our worst enemy when it comes to dealing with sin.

We need to go to battle with sin, knowing that Christ our Lord and Savior went to battle with sin on the cross of Calvary. As Ephesians 6 puts it: *"Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."*

The devil is on a mission to win us over and to direct our hearts away from what is true and important in life. Jesus knows that if we decide to play sin's game, and allow it the least bit into our lives, then we open ourselves up for complete destruction. Sin is like a single spark that quickly becomes a raging forest fire, consuming acres and acres of land. This is why Jesus tells us that we must draw the line from the very beginning. If we feel ourselves being tempted, Jesus encourages us to deal with it immediately and completely. Otherwise, it can quickly grow into something that we can no longer handle or control.

The book of James puts it this way: *"Temptation comes from our own sinful desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death."*

Practicing self-control is not easy. We need help. We need to immerse ourselves in God's Word for wisdom and guidance. We need the Holy Spirit to give us the courage to resist temptation. We need our brothers and sister in Christ for mutual support and accountability. As members of the body of Christ, we should be looking out for each other's spiritual well-being. Those who are exhibiting signs of weakness should be protected and cared for, not criticized or judged.

There *is* some good news in all of this: despite our rebellion against God, the Bible tells us that God is faithful. In the 10th chapter of 1 Corinthians, St. Paul tells us that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can endure. When you are tempted, he says, *“God will show you a way out so that you can endure.”*

Jesus calls us this day to radically deal with the sin in our lives. Nip it in the bud. The main desires of our heart should never be on the pleasurable temptations of this world, but rather on eternity. The 11th chapter of Hebrews reminds us that *“there is a greater pleasure than sin. Sin’s joy lasts but a season, but godliness lasts an eternity.”*

Jesus was tempted in all of the ways that we are, and yet he did not sin because he knew full well the joys that awaited him in heaven. May it be the same in your life and in mine.

3

“Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.” – Luke 9:62

Three boys in the school playground start bragging about their fathers. The first boy says, “My Dad types a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a poem, and they give him \$25.”

The second boy says, “That’s nothing. My Dad types a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a song, and they give him \$250.”

The third boy says, “I’ve got you both beat. My Dad types a few words on a piece of paper, he calls it a sermon, and it takes four guys to collect all the money!”

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I share that joke to remind us that even though we are dealing with the difficult sayings of Jesus, we need not take ourselves too seriously. Yes, the words of Jesus are often times challenging and difficult to live up to in our daily walk of faith. But God intends our walk with him to be full of joy and delight. Let’s not forget that.

Read Luke 9:57-62.

The difficult saying of Jesus we will consider next is, *“Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God.”* Jesus uses that agricultural image because he knows that his hearers would instantly relate. After all, they lived in an agricultural society. Their hands had been put to the plow many times. But most of our current culture is far removed from the farming experience. This expression doesn’t instantly speak to us. So what did Jesus mean?

Imagine yourself at the edge of a cultivated field. It is ready to be plowed. You are standing behind a strong ox who is harnessed to a plow. As you encourage the animal forward, your responsibility is to keep the row straight. The only way to do that is to find a landmark – a tree or a building – at the other end of the field, and keep your eyes glued to that landmark as you make your way down the field. If you glance to the side, or look down — or worse yet turn and look behind you — it’s inevitable that the row will begin to gradually curve.

When farmers put their hand to the plow and then look back, they are thrown off course. It becomes obvious that their head is not fully in the game, that they are being distracted by other less-important things. The owner of the farm will soon deem them unfit for this kind of work and turn the assignment over to someone else.

Jesus tells this story to help us understand the high expectations he has for us. Being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ requires us to stay fully focused on the tasks of faith. Having one eye on the kingdom and one eye on the things of this world just doesn’t cut it. Jesus demands total commitment from us.

Lance Armstrong always comes to mind when I think of someone being totally committed. Lance has won an unprecedented seven consecutive titles in the Tour de France. Talk about commitment! How does he do it? He once told an interviewer, "I live for the Tour. Everything I do has the Tour in mind. I allow the Tour to mold me into who I need to be."

Lance Armstrong is a man of absolutes, of unwavering commitment and devotion to his game. I marvel at that level of commitment. When Lance is in training, he constantly asks himself, "Will this aid me in winning the Tour?" If it won't, then he doesn't do it. No exceptions.

Can you imagine if all baptized Christians had that same level of commitment when it came to loving and serving the Lord? Can you imagine if each and every one of us — before speaking any word, before accepting or declining any obligation, before deciding how to budget our finances — would ask ourselves, "Will this aid me in living out the God-given command to love and serve my neighbor?" That's a high calling – a calling that we often disregard or don't take seriously.

But it is precisely that level of commitment that Jesus demands of us when he says, *"Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."* There's no room for half-heartedness when it comes to following Christ. Christ tests our level of commitment by saying that he must have our whole heart or none. Chew on that for a while. It's either all or nothing.

We quickly come to the conclusion that we would rather Jesus not have said such a thing. Why? Because we know all too well that we fall short of that expectation. How many times have we enthusiastically placed our hands on the faith plow only to find an excuse and bailed because it became too difficult, too costly, too inconvenient, or too demanding?

Instead of fully committing ourselves to God and his ways, we all too often choose our own path. If we can work God in, then so be it. But to surrender our whole lives – ourselves, our time, and possessions – and say, "All that I am, and all that I have is yours, O God," that's a bit too much for us to handle.

It's all too easy to say, "There's no way I can attain that level of commitment. Besides, God understands me. God knows my flaws, my limitations, my fears. And the Bible promises that God loves me just as I am."

If you have ever told yourself that, beware! God may love us just as we are, but God's Word is clear that God loves us too much to just leave us as we are. God has great plans for us. God desires for us to grow daily in our faith and to trust in him by embarking on an exciting yet challenging journey – along paths which no one has yet ventured, where the destination is unknown — and yet, by faith, we sense the hand of God leading us.

Putting our hand to the plow, as Jesus put it, means willingly and joyfully embarking on a journey we call Christian discipleship and never looking back. Jesus calls us to always keep our eyes focused on God and God's ways. But, if in fear or self-centeredness or uncertainty we look back, if we do not take seriously God's command of total obedience to his ways, then we quickly veer off course missing out on the incredible blessings God has in store for us. God sets the bar high – seemingly unreachable – to encourage us to live our lives by faith and not by sight. To live

in such a way means that we must be willing to fully entrust our lives into the hands of God.

Full obedience to God must become not just a lofty concept that we try to successfully obtain on a good day. Rather, full obedience to God must become a daily life principle. At the end of each day, we must ask ourselves, “Did my every intention, my every thought, my every deed reveal my obedience to God?” If the answer is no, then, to use the image Jesus uses, we have looked back and have not fully committed ourselves to the kingdom of God. In order for true obedience to become natural for us, Jesus instructs us to live out God’s kingdom principles each and every moment of our lives.

So what are some ways that can help us strive to live fully obedient lives? Martin Luther said that a good place to start is with our checkbook. His exact quote was, “The last thing of a man to be converted is his wallet.” How we handle our money gives great insight into our relationship with God. A church poll from the Barna Group reveals American Christians give between 1 and 2 percent of their income to the work of the church. But the Bible clearly states that God instructs us to give 10%.

This is a prime example of us not taking God’s Word seriously, of not being fit for the kingdom of God. Those fit for the kingdom of God, Jesus says, are those who fully live out God’s commands, no matter how difficult or challenging they are. Worldly folk use their wealth to obtain a better life in this world. Kingdom of God folk focus on something far greater than this world, and invest their God-given riches in the kingdom of God.

Early on in our marriage, my wife and I were evaluating our finances and we realized that each month we were giving more to local restaurants by eating out than we were to Christ’s church. In doing that, we realized, we were telling God that our own enjoyment, our own needs were more important than what God was asking of us. Instead of making God a priority in our giving, we were simply making God yet another expenditure on our long list of budget items.

We wanted God to be first in our family – not just in word, but in deed – and so we radically changed the way our monthly budget report looked, making sure that God was at the top of the list. By doing that, something interesting happened. The act of making God a priority in our giving habits inspired us to make God a priority in other parts of our lives, such as the way we spent our time, and our willingness to share our talents. We learned first hand what Jesus meant when we said, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” Fully invest your financial riches in the kingdom of God, Jesus says, and your heart will follow suit.

Another way to live fully obedient lives is to keep things in perspective – *eternal* perspective. We should always have our thoughts focused on the eternal life that God has promised us. Why? Because it keeps things in perspective. A man once told me that he was worried his retirement funds would (to use his words) “dwindle out before he would.” It’s a real fear, don’t get me wrong. But if that man could set his thoughts not just on this world, but on the world to come, I believe he would have a much, different perspective.

Think about how the hymn *Amazing Grace* describes heaven:

*When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun;
We've no less days to sing God's praise, than when we first begun.*

In other words, after 10,000 years in heaven, we will still have an eternity left of pure bliss!

When we keep our eyes focused on that faith landmark, it helps us cope with the last few years of our earthly life, no matter what they bring. Instead of worrying whether or not we have stored up enough for ourselves, we plan the best we can and then place our hope in God, trusting that God will provide for our every need.

In the 9th chapter of Luke, the gospel writer provides three examples of people who want to follow Jesus but cannot bring themselves to fully commit their hearts and minds to Christ. The first person approaches Jesus wanting to follow. Jesus reminds him that such a commitment is not easy. Jesus says, *"Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head."* In other words, becoming a faithful follower of Jesus Christ does not guarantee lots of perks that one might expect. Even Jesus himself does not have a regular place to rest. Discipleship is about sacrifice, not luxuries. Only those willing to surrender their "must haves" list should apply for discipleship.

A second person is invited to follow Jesus. Sadly, this person's father has just died. Understandably, he wants to attend the funeral. "Once I bury my Dad I will come with you, Jesus," the man promises. Jesus' reply sounds coldhearted: *"Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead. Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God."* Even the best excuses do not relieve us from sharing God's love with others. Everything must become secondary to our one true calling: to let our faith light brightly shine at all times and in all places. You know as well as I that opportunities to follow Christ usually come at the most inopportune times.

The third person realizes the commitment that Jesus is asking of him and makes the reasonable request to say goodbye to his family. Jesus responds to him with our focus verse: *"Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God."* Jesus finds all three people unfit to follow him because they have not totally committed themselves to serve.

Another word the Bible uses to speak of commitment is *devotion*. We usually speak of "devotions" as personal, quiet time when we read God's Word and pray. However, that mindset creates a separation between what is "sacred" and what is "secular." As I've stated before, God never intended us to just work him in to our busy schedule. God wants every moment of our lives. God wants us to keep our eyes focused on him alone rather than just glance at him occasionally. The farming imagery that Jesus uses reminds us that if we take our eyes off of God, if we choose to look away, then our lives are destined to get off track.

Our entire lives should be devotional. Devotion to God is a twenty-four-hour activity, not just something we do on Sunday mornings, or for a few, brief minutes each day. Christ will not consider us fully committed Christians if one eye is on God and the other is looking elsewhere. God demands our whole heart. We cannot fully serve the Lord if our mind is focused on God but our heart only longs for worldly things. We must be fully dedicated; single-minded.

To help us understand the high level of commitment that is necessary to follow him, Jesus uses the image of a farmer trying to plow a straight row, but who keeps looking over his shoulder causing him to stray off course. A more modern-day analogy that conveys the same truth is the young parent driving down the highway while looking to the back seat to deal with the children. We all shake our heads because we've seen it before. We know the danger. To paraphrase the words of Jesus, "No one who puts her hand on the steering wheel and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Jesus demands our complete attention, for he know the dangers that result from not fully focusing upon him. Only when we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus will we plow a straight line forward for Christ and his kingdom.

4

“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me.” – Mark 8:34

A Sunday School teacher was teaching a group of kindergarteners and she asked the question, “Where is Jesus today?”

One girl blurted out, “He’s in my heart!”

Little Johnny, waving his hand furiously, blurted out, “I know, I know! Jesus is in our bathroom!!!”

The whole class got very quiet and looked at the teacher who was at a complete loss as to what Johnny meant.

Finally, she asked Little Johnny why he would say such a thing. “Well,” he said, “Every morning my father gets up, bangs on the bathroom door and yells, ‘Good Lord, are you still in there?!!!’”

✦ ✦ ✦

Read Genesis 22:1-12, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 and Mark 8:34-38.

The Bible contains many difficult sayings and stories that often times we don’t know what they mean nor do we know what to do with them. Take, for instance, the Old Testament story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). I wonder what was going through Abraham’s mind when God commanded him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. I wonder what was going through Isaac’s mind as he made his way up the mountain with his Dad to offer a sacrifice to God, but with no animal to offer. I wonder how long it took before Isaac realized something was fishy. I visualize the trust draining from Isaac’s eyes as his father binds his hands and feet. I see a look of terror upon Isaac’s face as his father lays him upon the altar and raises the knife.

We normally consider the binding of Isaac story from the perspective of Abraham – the devastated yet faithful father who is willing to do the unthinkable to prove his faith to Almighty God. But what if we consider the story from Isaac’s perspective? Did Isaac try to run away when he figured out the plan? Did he show any resistance when his father bound him with rope? When Isaac saw the knife, did he cry out?

Unfortunately, the Bible does not record any emotion in the story. But when I put myself in Isaac’s shoes, to think that there wasn’t any struggle at all – no plotting to run away – it seems rather unbelievable. I mean, what would *you* do? If someone bound your hands and feet and was holding a knife over your head, wouldn’t you be kicking and screaming, fighting for freedom? We would do everything in our power *not* to be sacrificed.

It makes perfect sense, until we get to the words of Jesus today: *“If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.”* Believe it or not, just as God asked Isaac to give up his life for the glory of God,

so, too, God asks us to willingly give up our lives. God is calling us to position our whole selves onto the altar of sacrifice, to give it all up for the glory of God.

How do we respond to such a difficult request? We naturally begin to kick and scream, fighting for our freedom just as I envision Isaac doing. Give up everything? Even our very lives? Sure, we want to be a part of God's kingdom and plans, but we're not quite sure whether we are willing to make that big a commitment. We need some time to think about it.

But it is to our own detriment to wait in making such a decision. As odd as it sounds, it is precisely in giving our whole lives away that we find true freedom. True freedom comes when we are willing to scrap the plans that *we* have made for our lives and say, "Here I am, Lord. I'm all yours. I'm willing to go where you want me to go, do what you want me to do, say what needs to be said." True freedom, according to Jesus, comes when we are willing to release our grasp from the life we have planned for ourselves and to take hold of the plan God intends for us.

Take, for instance, my calling as a pastor. I wish I could say that all I ever wanted to be was a pastor, but it just ain't so! When I was in high school and my pastor told me that he thought I would be a good pastor, I laughed in his face – literally! "Me, do what *you* do?" I responded. "I don't think so! I notice how many hours you work. I see the difficult situations you must deal with. I know how many years of schooling you had to endure and how little pay you receive." "No thanks!" I told my pastor. "I'll acolyte any Sunday you need me, but I assure you this pastor thing is *not* for me!"

Jesus says, *"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it."*

Until I was willing to let go of the life I had perfectly planned out for myself, I was not able to truly see the life God had planned for me. I now know that my life came into being because Christ needed a shepherd for his people. And when I surrendered my life to that calling, when I was willing to carry the cross that God has given me to bear, I experienced a freedom that I had never experienced before. My life became richer, the journey all the more enjoyable, the presence of God all the more evident – all because I was doing what God had created me to do.

At first, I didn't want to become a pastor because I knew how much I would have to give up. I soon realized that what I had to give up, paled in comparison to the blessings that flowed into my life by accepting the calling God had given me.

When Jesus told his disciples to carry their cross, I wonder what went through their minds? Today, crosses are usually referred to as "beautiful pieces of jewelry that we wear around our necks," or "meaningful artwork displayed in sanctuaries." But in Jesus' day, crosses were neither beautiful nor meaningful. Crosses were despised and feared because they were the means of public execution, of a tortuous death. One avoided the cross at all costs.

So you can imagine the people's shock when Jesus tells them that they should not only carry the cross, but willingly embrace it. I imagine the crowd felt a lot like I did when my pastor asked me to consider becoming a pastor. It was like every dream they had, every comfort they desired suddenly floated away. By Jesus asking people to take up their cross, he was calling them

(and us!) to a life of full commitment – to be willing to accept any task or deed that was necessary for the sake of Christ’s church.

“Turning from our selfish desires,” as Jesus put it, does not mean simply giving up something like many of us do during Lent. It means saying a decisive “No” to anything and everything in our lives that hinders us from fully surrendering our hearts and lives to Christ. When God called me to become a pastor, it wasn’t like I could choose to do it on the side, in my spare time, whenever I felt like it. No, I had to totally surrender my life and my own plans in order to fully accept the plans God had in store for me. I had to give it my all.

Now, you know as well as I that God doesn’t call all people to be pastors. But I do believe that God has a plan for each of our lives, so the same holds true: it is necessary for you to continually discern what God’s plan is for your life, then surrender your own plans and desires so that you can fully accept God’s plan. If we are not willing to do that, then Christ speaks some strong words to us, words that we wish Jesus would have never said: *“turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me.”*

Although those words sound harsh and judgmental, they are actually words of love. Christ desires to give us true freedom and eternal salvation. But the only way for us to fully experience those two precious gifts is to fully commit our lives to following Christ so that he can show us the way to our heavenly Father. In order for us to experience what Jesus calls *“the true life,”* we have to learn how to not become so preoccupied with all of our accomplishments, possessions, and the pleasures of this world, and instead focus our full attention on what the Bible calls *“the treasures of heaven.”*

Such a task does not come naturally for us. We have to become intentional about putting the focus where it truly belongs. We have to find ways to participate in kingdom activities, purposefully living out in our daily lives what Christ commands in the Bible. This is what it means for us to *“turn from our selfish ways, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.”*

No matter what our calling in life is – whether it be a pastor, teacher, manager, caregiver, parent – each and every one of us is called to the same task. Instead of being driven by the world’s goals and desires, we must claim Jesus as Lord of our lives. We must not only confess Jesus as Lord with our lips, but we must make Jesus Lord of our lives by the words we use, the choices we make, the deeds we do.

I have come to know that our love and commitment for Jesus is best shown not in the big acts of Christian service that we do from time to time, but in the small, day-to-day choices we make as we go about our lives. To commit to revealing the glory of God in each moment of life, that is what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Dedicating each moment to Christ causes us to concentrate on God. We concentrate on God not so that we can figure out what God can give us or do for us. No, we concentrate on God simply to have a relationship with Him. That relationship in and of itself will give us the courage and the strength we need to claim the tasks God will ask of us. In order for us to be able to faithfully carry the cross in our journey of faith, we must be able to place our trust in God and not in ourselves. We must reach a point where we can fully rely on God without reservation, without second guessing.

Committing each moment to Christ also allows us to rely on his strength and wisdom, rather than our own. We may find ourselves saying to Jesus, “There is no way possible that I will be able to do all that you ask of me.” And Jesus will turn right around and say, “I know.”

Depending on just our strength and wisdom will often times leave us feeling unqualified and overwhelmed. But fully relying on God’s strength and wisdom will open doors that we didn’t even know existed. As the Lord told St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, “*My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness.*” As Christ beckons us to take up our cross and follow him, Christ reminds us that we will need to fully rely on God in our journey. You can remember that by the acronym **F R O G: Fully Rely On God**.

Can you imagine the difference in our lives, in our congregation, if each and every one of us lived our lives fully relying on God? Excuses and fear and half-heartedness would be no more! For as the Bible proclaims, “*all things are possible with God.*” We would be people filled with faith and excitement, determination and courage — people who would stop at nothing to share the story of Jesus Christ and his love with all people. We would be people who would gladly take up the cross of faith, despite the cost.

“If any of you wants to be my follower,” Jesus says, *“you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.”*

When Jesus watches us living out our daily lives, does he find us fully relying on God?

5

“What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man. When that happens, be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven!” - Luke 6:22-23

A congregation was in the process of calling a new pastor. When it was revealed that the best new candidate was a woman, one very vocal male member of the church made his objection known.

After the new woman pastor had been there a few weeks, a member of the congregation offered to take her fishing. The vocal objector reluctantly agreed to allow them to use his boat, and he decided to go along. After the trio had gone out a little ways on the lake, they realized that they had left all of their tackle back on the dock. One of the men commented that he guessed they would just have to go back and get it. The woman pastor informed them that wouldn't be necessary, and she got out of the boat and started walking across the water toward the dock.

The grouchy old man said, “See, I told you we should have never hired that woman. She can't even swim!”



As we continue on in this ‘difficult sayings of Jesus’ series, Jesus tells us, *“What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man. When that happens, be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.”* Surely I misheard what Jesus said! Did Jesus just say that when people mistreat me, make fun of me and exclude me that I should (as the song puts it), “Don't worry, be happy?” Are you kidding me?

Come on, Jesus, *rejoice* in our suffering? Who enjoys suffering? True, suffering is a universal human experience. We all suffer. Sickness and tragedy are a natural part of what it means to be human. But that's not the kind of suffering Jesus is referring to in the gospel today. Jesus speaks of a kind of *spiritual* suffering, implying that if we faithfully live out his teachings in our daily lives, we should expect some trials in our journey of faith.

Suffering for Christ can come in a number of ways. Missionaries who travel to foreign countries and give up luxuries like automobiles and air conditioned houses endure suffering for the sake of Christ in order to share the story of Jesus with those who have not yet heard.

Chinese Christians suffer for Christ in that it is illegal to be a Christian in China. Those who are found attending Christian services in Chinese “underground churches” are heavily fined and sometimes even tortured in public places. Recently the Chinese government went so far as to cut off the water and electricity to homes of suspected Christians.

We who live in a country of religious freedom often take that freedom for granted, and we wrongly assume that our religious freedom will protect us from any kind of religious persecution. Public prayer being forbidden in schools and the Ten Commandments being removed from public places are just two examples of Christians being mocked and excluded for our beliefs. And I knew we were in trouble when the Christmas tree was renamed the “Holiday Tree.” In many ways, our Christian faith is even challenged here in the United States.

The fact that some people have devoted themselves to removing all Christian symbols and practices from American society should concern us, but it shouldn’t surprise us. For Jesus himself warns in the Holy Scriptures that others will hate us, exclude us and mock us because of our Christians beliefs.

It is interesting to note how differently Martin Luther understood hardships and sufferings from how we think of them today. Luther taught his congregations to “ungrudgingly accept pain and suffering as God’s useful agents.” Welcome them into your life, Luther encouraged. For Luther, trials and sufferings had a divine purpose, namely, to help us realize our inadequacies and limitations and to force us to turn to God for strength, courage and direction.

Although I would never suggest that God purposely sends sufferings into our lives as a way to judge us or to teach us a lesson, I do know that God can use the trials, insults and unloving actions that get slung our way. God uses them as teaching moments where we are given the opportunity to trust in the truth of God’s Word and the goodness of God’s love. In other words, when we face difficult times, God gets to see whether or not we are willing and able to place our complete trust in him to pull us through. If we can, Jesus says, “*then be happy, leap for joy!*” If we are willing to put our complete hope and trust in God, we will never be disappointed. We will be blessed beyond our wildest dreams, in this world and in the world to come.

The flip side is that Jesus is teaching us that if we don’t at times feel excluded, if people aren’t ever questioning our beliefs and actions, then perhaps we aren’t truly living out the Christian faith in daily life. Since the manner in which Christ calls us to live is so counter-cultural (such as loving and praying for our enemies, or giving a large portion of our income to the work of church) — since such things are so different from the normal ways of the world, if other people aren’t ever questioning our actions, then we must not be faithfully living them out in daily life. We might claim to be Christians, but in the real world we are living the same as everyone else. We are blending in, where there’s no real difference between us and a non-believer.

Do you remember the gunman who shot and killed ten young children in the Amish school house in 2006? After those shootings, the leaders from the Amish community made a statement and publicly forgave the killer for his horrific acts — even going so far as to reach out to the family of the killer. The world was stunned. How could they even think of forgiving the man who so violently murdered their very own children?!? Their response? “Our faith demands that we forgive others. Judgment is in the hands of God. Judge not, and ye will not be judged.”

It is an excellent example of how when we truly live out our faith in daily life the world will question, judge and criticize. Or to use the words of Jesus, “*the world will mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man.*”

Sufferings become crossroads in our journey of faith. When we are faced with temptations and trials, we are forced with a choice as to whether to live by faith or by sight, to live by the words of Jesus or by the ways of the world. When we can boldly choose the more difficult path – the path of faith – *“be happy,”* Jesus says, *“leap for joy. For a great reward awaits you.”*

St. Paul puts it this way: *“We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment”* (Romans 5:3-5).

Realizing that suffering can ultimately bring about such wonderful gifts in our lives, we should not totally dread or question why we must deal with problems and trials when they come. Rather, we should see them as opportunities for God to mold us into greater faithfulness. The truth is, the more Christ-like we become, the more the world will question and criticize us. Instead of shunning such negative reactions, Jesus says we should welcome them as a sign of a job well done in faithfully living out our Christian faith. Because the world persecuted Jesus, the world will also persecute his followers; if we are being persecuted by the world, that usually is a sign that we are faithfully following Christ.

If each and every one of us is not raising a few eyebrows in our daily lives, then we just might have a discipleship crisis on our hands. Just think about it: everywhere Jesus went, everything he did caused people to question him. Jesus was so sure of his Father’s will that he boldly did it, despite the fact that others judged him and tried to silence him.

Jesus asks us some pointed questions: Are you standing up for the Christian faith in your daily life? Do people experience Christian values simply by watching you live your life? Are you willing to remain faithful, no matter what the cost? Are you strong enough in your faith to withstand a little scrutiny and ridicule without caving in or fleeing?

Jesus teaches us that we must become comfortable with a little resistance when it comes to living out Christian principles in our daily lives. Rather than trying to always avoid any kind of spiritual suffering, Jesus tells us we must learn to embrace it, as yet another part of our journey of faith. For the questions and the judgments and the battles will come. They are proof that we are being true to the one, true faith.

In the first chapter of James, the Bible says we should consider it *“pure joy”* when troubles come our way. *“For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow... and when it is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.”* Times of trial and suffering provide us with opportunities to mature in our faith. They lead us to a place of greater joy and peace, so we should view them as actual blessings.

“So take heart!” Jesus says. Stand firm! Stand up for what you believe in. God is with you when trials and sufferings come your way. *“Come to me,”* Jesus says, *“all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”* Thanks be to God, we are not alone in our suffering. God is with us.

The words of the hymn "Be Still, My Soul" say it so eloquently:

*Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

6

“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you. In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.” – Matthew 5:43-45

One week in Sunday School the kindergarten class was learning how God created everything, including human beings. Little Johnny seemed especially intrigued when the teacher told him how Eve was created from one of Adam’s ribs.

Later in the week his mother noticed Little Johnny lying down as though he were ill. She asked, “Johnny, what’s the matter?” Little Johnny responded, “I have pain in my side. I think I’m going to have a wife!”



Read Matthew 5:43-48 and Luke 10:29-37.

In the last chapter, Jesus told us that if we are truly living out Christian values in our daily lives then we should expect people to question and criticize us. Why? Because the ways of Christ are so counter-cultural. If we choose to take a stand for Christ, persecution will surely come.

Persecution, then, produces enemies. Show me a person who is trying to mock me, exclude me or harm me because of my faith and I will show you a spiritual enemy. If we are genuinely taking a stand for Christ in a world that so often is working against our Christian values and beliefs, we can fully expect to have spiritual enemies in life.

So how are we to deal with those enemies? That is what Jesus addresses in 5th chapter of Matthew. Jesus says, *“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!”*

This is surely one of the most difficult things Jesus ever uttered!

When I am teaching the Bible to teenagers, one Scripture passage that always fluffs their feathers is when Jesus says, *“If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek as well.”* When the kids figure out that Jesus is teaching that we should never return violence for violence, most kids say, “I don’t think so! Jesus is crazy if he wants me to just stand there and get punched! I’m punchin’ back! My parents even said I could!”

Dealing with hate and violence through more hate and violence is surely the way of the world. Unbelievers seek revenge, but not disciples of Jesus. Jesus, our Lord and Savior, hold us to a higher ideal, a more loving model of behavior. Jesus expects us to show love and respect to all people, no matter what.

Why on earth would Jesus expect us to show love to our enemies?

This difficult saying of Jesus is found in his long sermon commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. In his sermon, Jesus addresses many of the misconceptions we have concern-

ing the Christian faith. Jesus covers things like murder, adultery, and divorce. Then Jesus tackles loving our enemies. He says, *"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" The Old Testament book of Leviticus (Ch. 19) asks a simple question: How do you want people to treat you? Do you want people to hold a grudge against you, seek revenge against you? Or would you rather people forgive you and be kind towards you even when you have done something wrong? Of course, we would rather people forgive us and be kind to us.*

So, the Bible responds, if you desire your neighbor to treat you that way, you should be willing to treat them in the same way. You should do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's the great Golden Rule.

Love your neighbor, Jesus says. But many people during biblical times wrongly assumed that our *neighbor* only included those who were close to us, say a friend, co-worker, or someone who lived nearby. Our *neighbor* surely didn't include everyone, especially those with whom we didn't get along or those who mistreated us. In fact, during biblical times, the Jews thought that they were honoring God by despising anyone who was not Jewish!

To challenge that misunderstanding, Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan where a man traveling to Jerusalem was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Many people passed by and saw the man in need, but only one man – a Samaritan, the hated outsider – stopped and offered the man aid. Jesus' point was this: *neighbor* encompasses anyone with whom we come into contact.

This is why Jesus says, *"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" Jesus challenges that mindset head on by saying, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute you."*

Wanting to do what Jesus asks of me, I pray, "Dear Lord, make that person quit persecuting me!" Jesus quickly informs me that's a prayer for *me*, not for my enemy. When Jesus commands us to pray for our enemies, he expects us to ask God to bless and watch over them just as much as we ask God to watch over and bless our loved ones. Leave the judging to God, Jesus tells us. Or as 1 Peter puts it, *"For God has called us to do good, even when we are suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. Christ is your example, and you must follow in his steps... For he did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly" (2:21-22).*

Think back to when Jesus was on the cross. Remember all of the insults, the beatings, the mockery he endured. How did Jesus respond? With prayer: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"* Jesus prayed for his enemies. Jesus asked God to extend mercy and forgiveness upon his enemies. Jesus is not asking us to do anything he wasn't willing to do.

Another reason Jesus commands us to love our enemies is this — because we are God's own children, we should want to emulate the loving character of our heavenly Father in our daily lives. Knowing full well that God loves and cherishes all people should make us want to do the same. God does not show favoritism. As Matthew 5 says: *"God gives sunlight to both the evil and the good, and God sends rain on the just and the unjust alike."* For Christ to consider us faithful followers, we must live our lives in the same way.

If all we ever do is return evil for evil, then the only thing we can ever expect from our enemies is more personal attacks, hateful comments, and name calling. An old African proverb says, “Those who bite get bitten.”

Think of all of the emotional energy we waste by stewing in anger and bitterness over those who have wronged us. Such stewing also zaps us spiritually because our struggles and needs become our ultimate concern. It is impossible to serve the Lord when we think the world owes us something. Until we can see all people – including ourselves – as lost sinners, we will not be able to bring ourselves to sincerely pray for those who have lost their way.

Do we dare want God to tell us one day that our hate-filled actions had something to do with our enemy’s hardened heart? Wouldn’t we rather hear from God that our decision to choose love over hate was instrumental in changing a person’s heart and bringing them to Christ?

If all we ever do is hate our enemies, they will always remain our enemies. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “The best way to eliminate your enemies is to make them your friends.” Treating our enemies the same way they treat us is the way of the world. Jesus expects more of us. Jesus expects us to always treat others the same way he has treated us – with mercy and love, even when we didn’t deserve it.

The God who has claimed us as his very own people is the God of grace, mercy and love. Christ calls us to live our lives with the exact same principles. We cannot say that we love God and then hate our enemy. God is love, period. How willing we are to love and pray for our enemies is a direct reflection of our commitment to God.

Loving our enemies will perhaps never come naturally, but it is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. We simply have to take Jesus at his Word, and at his command, and entrust all people – even our enemies – into the gracious, forgiving hands of Almighty God. That is our calling. That is the command of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

May the prayer our Savior prayed for his enemies become our very own: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

7

***“If you forgive those who sin against you,
your heavenly Father will forgive you.
But if you refuse to forgive others,
your Father will not forgive your sins.” - Matthew 6:14-15***

Read Jonah 3 & 4, Matthew 18:21-35 and Luke 15:11-32.

It was George Burns who said, “The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, then having the two as close together as possible!”

It was Charlie Brown who said, “Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask God, ‘Where have I gone wrong?’” Then God answers back, “This is going to take more than one night!”

And it was Jim Carey who said, “When I was a kid I used to pray every night for a new bicycle. Then I realized that the Lord doesn’t work that way, so I stole one and asked God to forgive me!”

In the 6th chapter of Matthew, we are confronted with Jesus’ difficult teaching on forgiveness. Jesus spoke often about forgiveness. It is one of the most prominent topics in his teachings. Jesus knew forgiveness would be something that we would often struggle with in our lives. To help us better understand what true forgiveness is, Jesus told parables like the Prodigal Son. The incredible forgiveness shown by the gracious father towards his wayward son warms our heart. We are grateful that the Father (who represents God) does not demand that his son get what he deserves!

If our God was the kind of God who demanded that we get what we deserved, we would live in fear and without hope. There would be no such thing as good news. But thanks be to God, our God is the God of grace and love. God chooses to have mercy upon us whether we deserve it or not. It’s why we call it, “amazing grace.”

So if God treats us in this incredibly forgiving manner, how should we treat others? Deep down, we know the answer to that question, but forgiving others as graciously as God has forgiven us is not that easy. Our selfish human nature has a double-standard built right in. We expect (dare I say demand?) that God show us mercy, but when it comes to other people, we demand justice. When it comes to our sins, we rest securely in the promise that God is “*slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*” But when it involves other people’s sins — especially when they have sinned against us — we expect God to hold them accountable, to reveal his anger and judgment. We expect mercy for ourselves, but justice for everyone else.

In the Old Testament book of Jonah, God calls Jonah on this very thing. Jonah doesn’t want to go to the people of Nineveh and speak God judgment against them for fear that they might actually repent and God would have mercy upon them. Truth be told, Jonah believes that the Ninevites are beyond God’s mercy. They are just too awful for God to love.

In so many words, God says, “I love *you*, don’t I?” bluntly implying that Jonah is just as much of a wretched sinner as the Ninevites! I had mercy upon you, God reminds Jonah; why shouldn’t I have mercy upon the people of Nineveh? God reminds Jonah, “*Salvation is mine alone.*” In other words, salvation is the Lord’s to give to whomever he pleases.

Those who have received God’s mercy must not try to restrict the flow of God’s mercy and love to others, even to their enemies. In fact, it should become our mission, our great joy, to tell other people about the love and forgiveness that is available through Jesus Christ, the Savior of all people. Forgiveness is God’s plan for all people, no matter how pitiful they are, how awful the sin.

The 5th chapter of Romans tells us that when we were at our worst (our **WORST!**), God sent Christ to earth to die for us. Think about that: if God showed us such great love and mercy when we were at our *worst*, will there ever be a time when God will choose not to love us or show us mercy?

Our hearts should overflow with thanksgiving and praise when we truly realize the amazing, unconditional manner in which God loves us! But God hopes that the incredible mercy he shows us will cause something else to happen in our lives. It is God’s hope and plan that we would shower the same kind of mercy and forgiveness upon others, at all times, even when people don’t deserve it. It is the best, most gracious way we can thank God for loving and forgiving us at our worst – to love and forgive others when they are at their worst.

We are reminded of this call to radical forgiveness each time we pray the Lord’s Prayer: “*forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*” We are to model the way we forgive others by the way God has forgiven us. Such forgiveness has no limits.

Remember when the disciple Peter asks Jesus, “*Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?*” Peter thought he was being generous in that the Law of Moses only required one to forgive someone three times. But Jesus responds, “*No, not seven times, but seventy times seven.*” We shouldn’t keep track of how many times we have to forgive someone. Rather, in Christian love, we should willingly and graciously offer forgiveness to all people, just as God has offered limitless, free forgiveness to us. Once we realize that *our* relationship with God is all undeserved grace – favor shown to us when all we deserved was punishment and wrath – once we come to that realization, offering forgiveness to others becomes easier. To harbor an unforgiving spirit is to take for granted what God has done in our lives.

So what does the Bible say about how God will deal with those who take his forgiveness for granted, who choose to show bitterness and grudges rather than forgiveness? The 6th chapter of Matthew proclaims God’s plan loud and clear. Jesus says, “*If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.*” God will withhold his forgiveness from people who withhold forgiveness from others. And that’s no small matter! Without forgiveness, our relationship with God is broken. Without forgiveness, we will never truly experience the gifts of peace, hope and salvation. Without forgiveness, all of the promises we read about in the Bible are beyond reach. It’s that important!

But wait a minute, you say. I thought you just assured me that no matter what, God will always love and forgive me. Now you put a stipulation on it? That doesn't sound *unconditional* to me! Unfortunately, it's not that simple. To help us understand the ways of God, Jesus does what he always does: tells another parable — the parable of the unmerciful servant. A servant owes the king so great a debt that it is impossible for him to repay it. Shockingly, the king forgives the man's entire debt. The parallel to our own lives, of course, is that God has completely forgiven the debt of our sin through the death of his sinless Son, Jesus Christ — a debt so great it would have been impossible for us to repay.

That's the good news of the parable. Begging for mercy, the servant is shown underserved kindness by the king who completely cancels all of his debts. You would think that such an incredible act of mercy would have a life-changing effect on this servant. One would hope that he would act accordingly, should he find himself in a similar situation. However, on the way home, this forgiven servant runs into someone who owes him such a small amount that it is not even worth mentioning. But the servant physically accosts the man and says, "Pay up or else!" The forgiven servant who was shown such great mercy acts unmercifully.

Like us, God is rightly shocked at the man's behavior. Realizing that the man has not taken to heart the great mercy he has been shown, God holds him accountable. God freely and willingly offer us mercy and forgiveness unless we take those gifts for granted. In other words, if we confess our sins to God but never change our ways, God will continue to hold us accountable for those sins. God only forgives those with truly repentant hearts.

True repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry" but it is a total change of lifestyle. If we confess to God, "I'm sorry for not always forgiving others," but then continue to show bitterness and hold grudges against those who have wronged us, that is not true repentance. To live in that way is to live just like the unmerciful servant in the parable – freely accepting the mercy and forgiveness of God without any willingness to extend it to others. In religious lingo, we call that "cheap grace." It is abusing the good and gracious nature of God. And God, being the righteous judge that he is, will not allow that to happen.

Jesus is teaching us that as forgiven people we should in turn be forgiving people. And Jesus commands us to "forgive from the heart," meaning the forgiveness must be real and genuine. All too often we go through the motions – we smile and wave nicely, we shake hands, even have a polite little chat – all the while our heart is filled with contempt and bitterness. That's not true forgiveness. True forgiveness means that your relationship with the other person is genuine and loving.

True forgiveness is truly difficult. That's why it made my top 10 list of "Things We Wish Jesus Never Said." Many of us, myself included, have a hard time forgetting the hurtful deeds others have done to us. We just can't forgive and forget.

But here's the good news. We do not have to *forget* the deed in order to *forgive* the offense. To forgive someone does **NOT** mean that we have to forget what happened. Once in my ministry someone made a comment that insinuated something that simply was not true. Understandably, I was hurt. It affected the relationship I had with that person. I had a choice: hold a

grudge or choose to forgive that person; allow anger and bitterness to get the best of me or choose to put it behind me; treat that person as graciously as God has treated me, or choose to act in ungracious, unloving ways. I chose to forgive. For as the Scriptures declare: How can we dare expect God to continue to shower us with love and mercy when we are not willing to show it to others?

By the grace of God, I was able to fully forgive that person. But I haven't forgotten the incident. But by choosing to forgive, that incident that caused the rift in the first place no longer defines the relationship I have with that person. The tension is gone; the need to avoid that person has disappeared. Things are OK. We now see each other for who we really are: friends in Christ, co-workers in the kingdom of God.

That is the power of forgiveness. It ensures that hurts and disagreements will not have the last word. Forgiveness allows love to once again enter into a relationship. As difficult as forgiveness is, it ends up being a gracious gift to us, if we are willing to offer it. Ultimately, by refusing to forgive that someone who has wronged us, we only end up hurting ourselves.

If you were to argue that it seems like God is commanding us to do the impossible by asking us to forgive others as freely as God has forgiven us, I would say you have a point. God is perfect; we are sinful human beings. To forgive as God forgives doesn't even seem possible. That is why Christ *commands* us to forgive. Such a command, in that it is an impossibility for us, demands that we trust our lives to the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

It might be impossible for us, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, true forgiveness can be achieved. When tension exists in a relationship, to invite the Spirit to come and to remove anything and everything that is not good and loving is something that we all too often forget to do. Through the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, even the most evil deeds can be truly forgiven. By the power of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness and peace are possible in all circumstances.

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." May the Spirit's power and influence be with us as we strive to live out these difficult words in our daily lives.

8

“If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison — your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters — yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple.” – Luke 14:26

Read Luke 14:25-33.

I am totally confused. There, I said it. I just don't get it! We have already learned how Jesus insists that we learn how to *love* our enemies. Now Jesus tells us that we must learn how to *hate* our family. Love our enemies; hate our family. Come on Jesus, this is never gonna fly! You're never going to get us to hate those we naturally love, and to love those we naturally hate.

When Jesus says that we must hate our family in order to be his disciples, a natural opposition wells up inside us. It sounds offensive. Jesus has gone too far this time! Besides, isn't Jesus all about *love*?!?!"

Knowing some Greek (the original language of the New Testament) helps clarify what Jesus actually means. When Jesus says, "*you must hate everyone else*," the word "hate" (*misei* in Greek) means "to make a choice." *Hate* in the Greek is not an emotionally-charged word like it is in the English language. In the Greek, *misei* does not express anger or distaste. Rather, it is a word that means "to choose one thing over another." It demands one to make a choice, to put one's priorities in order.

All of the things in our lives that we treasure – our loved ones, our possessions, our comforts and desires, even life itself – all of these things must never become more important than our relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ must always be at the center of our lives. Our journey with Jesus must always be our first priority. Everything else must ultimately take the back seat.

I remember sitting in a Bible study and the teacher asking, "What do you cherish most in life? If your house was on fire," she asked, "what one thing would you make sure and grab as you dashed outside?" My family, of course, first came to mind. Pictures of special occasions, like wedding and baptisms, also entered my mind. But I will never forget what one, elderly gentleman said. He said that his hands would be empty as he left his house, but his heart would be full, because what he cherished most in life was his relationship with Jesus Christ. It was obvious to everyone that the man wasn't trying to impress anyone. He was simply speaking from his heart.

That kind of love and commitment to Christ is what Jesus desires from all of us – to desire Christ more than anything in this life. When anyone or anything starts to draw our hearts away from God, we have a choice to make. Will we choose the ways of God or the ways of the world?

In so many ways we are tempted not to put God first in our lives. Kid's sporting games, medical tests, even children's birthday parties are all now routinely scheduled on Sunday mornings. It forces us to make a choice. Will we honor God's command to worship him on the Sabbath or will we succumb to the ways of the world and simply say, "I have no control over this," or "that's just the way it is these days?"

In these times when the economy is uncertain and sluggish, it is all too easy to want to scale back the ministry and mission of this congregation. We have a choice: will we choose to operate with the mindset of human scarcity or will we trust in the abundance of God? Will we choose to give less of our time, talents and treasures, not knowing what the future will hold, or will we realize how abundantly God gives to us even in these uncertain times and generously give from that abundance?

When you think about it, proceeding with our fellowship hall renovation during these uncertain financial times is an act of faith. We all see how God continues to bless this community of faith with new families, making it necessary for us to increase the size of our fellowship area. Believing that God will continue to faithfully provide more families and more funds to the ministry and mission of this congregation, we proceed with our renovations in faith, believing that God has some marvelous things in store for us. This is what it means to put Christ first in our lives: to surrender ourselves – our fears, our own dreams and desires – and to claim the plans God has for us. It is this kind of mindset that Jesus desires us to have when he says that we must hate everything in comparison to the will and purposes of God.

Jesus expects us to continually examine our motives and priorities. Case in point: In today's culture, there is something called "church hopping." It is common for families to visit church after church — sometimes for over a year — to find the church that will perfectly suit their needs. I take no issue with visiting different churches to find one where you feel comfortable. In fact, I encourage that. But I do question the "what can your church offer me" attitude that accompanies church hopping. What programs can your church offer me? How does the worship service make me feel? Are people accepting of me? Me, me, me.

The more demanding, disciple-like question to consider is this: I wonder if God is leading me to this congregation because I have gifts and talents and energies that this faith community presently does not have? Is being a part of this congregation my new calling from God?

Dare I say it: Far too many Christians show up on Sunday just to get fed but then do very little feeding of others. We become consumers rather than disciples. We expect the church to serve us rather than using our God-given talents and treasures to serve others. But the Bible is clear: we are blessed by God in order that we might be a blessing to others. Christ expects us to serve not just be served. To paraphrase that famous statement made by one of our Presidents: "Ask not what your church can do for you; ask what you can do for your church."

Are we truly committed to doing the Lord's work? Are we willing to fully surrender ourselves and say, "Here I am, Lord; send me where you need me; when I can be of service to your kingdom, use me." If we aren't willing to live our lives in this way, then Jesus informs us that we aren't fully ready to be his disciples. Being a faithful disciple of Christ involves much more than worship on Sunday morning. True discipleship involves a total change of priorities and loyalties. It means that we are willing to put Christ and his church first at all times and in all places.

Someone once said, "Christianity is a way of walking not a way of talking." To be true disciples of Jesus, we have to be willing to live out the truths we speak with our lips on Sunday mornings. It's easy to say, "Jesus is Lord," but it is much more difficult to live out those words in

our daily lives. So many other things in this world are competing for top billing.

If we have not fully surrendered our heart, soul, mind and strength to Christ, if we aren't committed to living a Christian lifestyle, if we are not willing to allow Christ to be our guide in life, if we are only interested in following Jesus when it is convenient or when it won't demand too much of us, then we haven't fully given our lives to Christ. There's no use coming along, Jesus says to us; you'll be overwhelmed and frustrated the whole time. Only when we have placed our complete trust in Jesus Christ can we fully follow. For all too often we don't know the destination nor the complete game plan, so we must simply trust and believe that Jesus can and will lead us to a place brimming with joy, life and peace.

Anytime I consider what it means to be a faithful disciple of Christ I think of rock climbers who scale those vertical rock cliffs. If you have ever watched someone climb those rock walls, it quickly become apparent that the difficult part of rock climbing is not grabbing hold of the rocks. The difficult part is letting go of them. In order to get anywhere, you have to let go of the rock you're holding on to so that you can reach higher and grab hold of yet another rock.

Jesus tells us the same holds true for faithful discipleship. We have to be willing to let go of those things in life that make us feel safe, things we hold dear – things like family, friends, possessions, our dreams and desires – we have to be willing to let go of such things in order to get anywhere in our journey with Jesus. To muster up enough courage to let go of that which is familiar and comforting and to reach out for something higher and greater, that takes trust. We must have complete trust in God to be able to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Anything less, Jesus says, you might as well not even gear up because you'll never get very far up the wall of faith.

Jesus demands that we consider some difficult questions this day. Do we completely trust God? Is our faith in Jesus Christ strong enough to journey with him into unknown, sometimes uncomfortable places? Is our faith bold enough to fully entrust our lives to God's care and guidance? What is it in life that we are not willing to let go of so that we can climb high with Jesus up the wall of faith? And are we willing to surrender everything else, even the people and things that we love so dearly, so that we may love and depend upon God all the more?

Can our hearts honestly declare the words of the familiar hymn:

*I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;
I'd rather be His than have riches untold;
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands,
I'd rather be led by His nail pierced hand.*

*I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause;
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause;
I'd rather have Jesus than world-wide fame,
I'd rather be true to His holy name.*

If we are able to live our lives with that mindset, then we will find ourselves naturally fol-

lowing Jesus in daily life. There is no greater joy than to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world. When there is a need, we will find a way to satisfy it. When there is a tear on someone's cheek, we will wipe it away. When someone is searching for meaning and purpose, we will boldly share our own story of faith.

Through our words and deeds, may our lives proclaim, "I'd rather have Jesus."

9

***“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.
For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging
is the standard by which you will be judged.” – Matthew 7:1-2***

Did you hear about the Great Dane who went into a telegram office, took out a blank form and wrote, “*Woof, Woof, Woof, Woof, Woof, Woof, Woof, Woof, Woof,*” and handed it to the clerk.

The clerk took one look at it and politely told the dog, “There are only nine words here. You could send another ‘Woof’ for the same price.”

The dog replied, “But then my message would make no sense at all!”

✦ ✦ ✦

Read Matthew 7:1-5.

Now let us consider the topic of judging others. Jesus says, “*Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.*”

Have you ever met someone who was super critical about everything? There was once a member that I just could not please. She would complain when my sermons were longer than usual. When she thought my sermon was too short she would accuse me of not being adequately prepared for the important task of preaching. She was the most critical parishioner I have ever known.

If we are honest with ourselves, all of us wrestle with judgmental tendencies. Instead of appreciating people for who they are, we criticize their personal habits, their political views, their choices in life. It’s human nature to see ourselves better than everyone else. All too many of us suffer from what one theologian refers to as an “unholy sense of superiority.” We are quick to judge others but we rarely see flaws and shortcomings in our own lives, even when they are the same kind of fault. We judge how well we are doing by how badly everyone else is doing.

Such an attitude causes us to lose our way, to lose sight of the purposes and plans of God. The Bible teaches us to model our words and deeds after the perfect Son of God, Jesus Christ. That is our standard.

In the second chapter of Romans, St. Paul says, “*You may think you can condemn sinful people, but you are just as bad. When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things.*” Paul reminds us that we should concern ourselves only with our own lives. Instead of judging others for actions that are not Christ-like, we should deal with the sinful behaviors and attitudes in our own lives.

As he always does, Jesus calls his followers to a different standard. Jesus says, “*Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.*” Knowing how many imperfections and poor choices there are in our lives, Jesus calls us to turn the judgmental finger first on ourselves and to deal with the sin in our own lives before being critical of others. We are all too quick to judge people

for the way they treat us, without ever considering how much other people suffer from our foolish ways. We don't gossip like other people, we just catch up with one another. We question other people's priorities without truly examining our own.

Before holding others accountable, we need to learn to be accountable ourselves. Jesus says, "*How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye?*" By acknowledging our own shortcomings, we can better understand and look past the shortcomings of others.

Jesus is not commanding us *never* to judge. Jesus is just guarding us against hypocritical judgments. That's the important point unbelievers seem to miss. This passage from Matthew 7 about not judging is often slung in the face of Christians, especially by unbelievers, when we choose to speak out against certain behaviors and beliefs. Unbelievers claim that when we speak out against certain things we are breaking Jesus' command *not* to judge. Let's be clear: If we judge someone simply because they don't have the same point of view or way of life as we do, then Jesus has some strong words for us: "*Do not judge and you will not be judged.*"

However, as we study the Bible, we come to realize that God has some pretty strong opinions as to how we are to live our lives. When we inform others how God wants us to live and they disagree with that, we are not judging them, we are simply speaking the truth in love. We are telling others the truth that God's Word proclaims: ultimately, God alone determines what is right and wrong. God is the Supreme Judge in all matters.

When Jesus tells us not to judge others, that doesn't mean that anything goes. Truth is not relative. Truth is not just what *we* think it is or should be. Truth is determined and spelled out by God in the Holy Scriptures. Truth is fully revealed through the person of Jesus Christ. This is what Martin Luther meant when we said that the Lutheran faith is *sola Scriptura*. The "Scriptures alone" determine what is right and wrong. Everyone has an opinion, but it is God's opinion that ultimately counts. To tell others the message of God's Word with a proper balance of truth and love, that is not passing judgment; that is living out our God-given calling to proclaim the message of God's Word to the world.

Our church, the ELCA, is currently considering a social statement on human sexuality, namely, where does the Lutheran church stand on the issue of homosexuality. As you can imagine, lots of different voices are speaking out on the issue. One comment that was recently made was, "I just don't understand how homosexuals can worship a God who hates them." Is that what the Bible teaches? That God *hates* homosexuals? I assure you it is not. By challenging that man's statement, I am not judging him. I am simply asking him to critically consider his statement in light of the entire biblical message. In other words, if he is going to speak for God, then he better know what God would say and how God would respond.

The truth of Scripture is this: God's unconditionally loves each and every one of us. That's the undeniable truth that the Bible proclaims. No matter where you stand on the issue of homosexuality, it doesn't change the truth that God is love. Period.

Others argue that the issue of homosexuality should be dealt with on the synod or congregational level because the Word of God does not specifically address the issue of same-sex com-

mitted relationships that we experience in today's society. We could have conversations about the repercussion of such a position, but the more important issue is that we must discern how God, through the Holy Scriptures, defines sexuality and marriage. The Scriptures and the Scriptures alone must be our guide, rather than the opinions or "bound consciences" of certain bishops or pastors, no matter how well-intentioned they are.

To guard us from making hurtful, judgmental comments, and to keep us from going down paths that the Lord never intended we must allow God alone to define truth and his will for our lives. God has revealed certain truths to us and promises that if we choose to live by those truths we will experience blessings and peace in our lives. But when we choose to disregard those truths, our lives quickly become very complicated and full of uncertainties.

Granted, there is sometimes a fine line between love and truth, between tolerance and discernment. This is one of the reasons why this saying of Jesus to "judge not" is so difficult to discern. The Lutheran faith is well aware that life cannot always be understood in terms of black and white. Grey areas exist as we strive to know and do God's will. But to never take a firm stand on anything (in the name of political correctness) is to rob God of his authority and power when it comes to determining truth.

Jesus calls us not to judge others because that's God's job. God and God alone is the only one who can make perfect judgments because only God sees and knows all things. The consistent theme of both the Old and New Testaments is that judgment belongs in the hands of God.

Certainly, we are called to speak the truth of God's Word when we see that the Scriptures are being disobeyed or dishonored. But God never gives us the authority nor permission to be judgmental of others.

Surely the best way to speak the truth in love is to do it with great humility, sharing with others our own struggles in being faithful to God's Word. In fact, if we look at Jesus' words closely, Jesus allows us to judge others only when we have truthfully examined ourselves. He says, *"First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye."*

With this difficult saying about judgment, more than anything, Jesus is calling us to seek truth – truth about our relationship with God and our relationship with others. That's language of the heart. Fully consider the desires of your own heart, Jesus tells us, before you jump to conclusions about someone else's heart.

Jesus also calls us to truth by inviting us to the serious study of God's Word that we may fully know the difference between right and wrong, between that which is life-giving and that which hinders and ultimately destroys our relationship with our heavenly Father.

In the 12th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, *"I tell you this: You must give an account on Judgment Day for every judgmental word you speak. The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you."* Such words should make us think twice about ever speaking a harsh, judgmental word against anyone. Let's allow God, the true Judge of the World, to do the judging. Our main desire should be to diligently examine our own heart, to carefully consider our own ways in hopes that anything that strains our relationship with God and our neighbor would be overcome.

10

“Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.” – Matthew 7:21

Read Matthew 7:21-27.

What a journey this has been! We have discussed everything from the difficult task of putting our complete trust in God and never looking back, expecting others to judge us for our Christian beliefs, to loving and forgiving our enemies. If we are truly committed to living out the teachings of Jesus, then this series has made us acutely aware how much of a struggle it can be to faithfully follow in the footsteps of Christ.

The last difficult saying of Jesus we will consider is another doozy! It makes us squirm in our seats. Jesus says, *“Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.”*

At first, this statement from Jesus sounds like pure works righteousness, meaning that we have to *do* something in order to receive salvation. But the Scriptures are clear: salvation is a free gift to us from God our Father. Such a gift was offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ, the sinless Lamb of God, was sacrificed on behalf of sinful humanity, once and for all, making our relationship with God right. Our salvation is not dependent upon whether we do something or don't do something. To those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, salvation has been secured.

But then why does Jesus drop this bomb shell upon us: *“Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of Heaven; only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter?”*

Martin Luther is instrumental in helping us understand that God not only saves us *from* sin and death, but God also saves us *for* service. In other words, since we know that forgiveness and salvation has been secured for us, we are now free to love and serve our neighbor. Faith and good works are two sides of the same coin. One presupposes the other. If we truly understand the loving sacrifice God offered by giving us his Son, then we are naturally inclined to live our lives in a way that brings glory to God, out of simple gratitude. Grateful for the good news that we are justified by faith, we respond with works of love.

Jesus is reminding us of a simple truth: We are called not to just *listen* to Christ's words but to *act* upon them. For faithful Christians, one presupposes the other. Christ is taking note of the way I live my life to see if I am practicing what I preach. Christ is taking note of the way you live your life to see if you are walking the talk. For if we have truly given our hearts over to Christ, then our main desire will be to do that which he has called us to do: listen and obey.

If we consider ourselves Christians because we attend church regularly and put something in the offering plate but then show no other signs of Christian commitment in our daily lives, Jesus has some harsh words for us today: *“I never knew you.”*

Even though God loves us unconditionally, even though our salvation has been secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God still takes note of how we live our lives. I think we often avoid passages in the Bible that depict Jesus as Judge. We much prefer Jesus as the Loving Shepherd, as the Healer, as the Faithful Friend. When the Bible speaks of Jesus as the One who will come again to judge his people at the end of time, we would rather not think about such things. We find that image troublesome. But by not embracing Jesus as Judge, we live in denial and we put ourselves at risk in being among the group who call out, “Lord, Lord” with nothing to back it up.

In order to completely comprehend the biblical witness of who Jesus the Messiah is, we must learn to embrace Jesus as Judge. Jesus, the True Shepherd, not only watches over and provides for his sheep but he separates the sheep from the goats. Jesus who calls us to fish for people not only provides an abundant catch but sorts through the fish and discards the ones he finds unacceptable. These seemingly opposite portrayals of Jesus need not be set against one another. Rather, they need to be understood as the total picture of who Jesus is. We must learn to embrace all of Jesus or none of him.

The same Savior who named and claimed us in the waters of Holy Baptism will, in the end, review our lives to judge how brightly we let our faith light shine in our daily lives. On the day we were baptized, the light of forgiveness was given to us freely; the cost becomes apparent as we strive to keep our faith light lit in this dark world. To use the words of Jesus, *“Only those who strive to do the will of my Father,”* only those who actively involve themselves in spiritual activities that provide oil for their faith lamps will enter heaven. We are called not just to hear the good news; we are called to act upon it.

Right after Jesus informs us that only those who do his Father’s will enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus speaks of two builders: one wise, one foolish. The wise builder builds his home on solid rock while the foolish one builds his house on sand. The wise builder took the time to dig deep, beyond the surface sand until he found solid rock on which to build. The foolish man was too lazy and complacent to do that. He thought the sand would be good enough. When the first storm came rolling in, the house built on the solid rock stood firm, but the house built on the sand collapsed. Jesus uses this example to characterize two types of people: those who listen to the teachings of Jesus and live them out in daily life, and those who know what is expected but never get around to actually doing it.

For Jesus to consider us his true followers and welcome us into the kingdom of heaven, we not only have to listen to his instructions but we have to follow them. That is not an easy task. We know from this series that many of Jesus’ teachings are quite difficult to live out.

We often have selective listening when it comes to living out Christ’s teachings in our daily lives. We get into a bad habit of picking and choosing which teachings of Jesus we will obey and which ones we will choose to ignore. The Bible has a word for that: sin. Sin is choosing our own path rather than submitting to God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures.

Sin has real, eternal consequences. That is the lesson Jesus is teaching us. The consequences of sin are so dire, Jesus says, that it would be better for us to cut off a hand or gouge out

an eye in order to escape them. Like a meteorologist who warns of an impending severe storm, Jesus stands before us and warns of disaster that will come if we do not listen to and follow his commands.

Growing up on the Gulf Coast, I never liked the meteorologists who announced that a hurricane was barreling our way. I was tempted to just turn off the television so that I wouldn't have to think about it. But that would have been foolish. The weatherman was informing me of the truth so that I could appropriately prepare for the coming disaster.

Jesus speaks the same truth. Yes, Jesus could have always reported warm, sunny weather. But then Jesus would not have been telling us the whole truth. As frightful as it sounds, the coming judgment is indeed coming. Jesus informs us of this fact so that we can fully prepare ourselves for its coming. How do we prepare? Jesus tells us we must do two things: listen to him and act on his words.

We have very little problem with the first part. It gives us great joy and peace to hear the good news of God's Word. But all too often that's where it ends. It enters into our ears and mind, but doesn't always make its way into our heart where it has the opportunity to take root and grow and shape our words and deeds.

Many of you have expressed to me how good and meaningful this sermon series has been. I'm grateful for such comments. I am glad that you are being spiritual fed. But I also realize that what makes a sermon faithful and good is its capacity to transform hearts. In other words, will this summer series make a true difference in the way we live our lives?

Were we simply reminded that we are to entrust our whole lives into God's hands, or have we actively taken steps to surrender our whole lives to the will of God? Were we just surprised about the power sin has in our lives, or have we truly begun to address those things in our lives which lead us away from God? Did we just resolve to be more forgiving, or have we actually forgiven someone who hurt us?

Does the Word of God just go in one ear and out the other, or does it radically change the way we live our lives? That's the same question Jesus asks us this day: Do you just claim me as Lord with your lips, or do you live your life in such a way where I am always your ultimate concern?

Each of us stands at a fork in the road, but we do not stand there alone. Christ stands with us, pointing us in the right direction. The truth that the Scriptures proclaim is that judgment not only falls upon those who choose the wrong path, but judgment also falls upon those who, for whatever reasons, do not choose one path or the other. Lukewarm Christians receive the same judgment as non-believers. That's a difficult truth to accept. We wish Jesus would have never said such a thing.

Let us not only be *hearers* of the Word; let us be *doers* of the Word. When we read or hear God's Word, we should always ask ourselves, "How can I live this out in my life? What is Christ calling me to be and to do?" It's much like receiving a prescription from the doctor. That prescription has no effect until we actually take the medication. In the same way, the words of Jesus must be taken, ingested, applied, lived out in our lives. Only then we will experience the blessings that Jesus promises.

Jesus' words today serve as both a warning and a blessing. First, Jesus warns us that if we refuse to listen to and act upon his words, we will be judged. To live in that way is to be like the fool who built his house upon the unstable, sandy ground. Yet Jesus' words also serve as a blessing. Jesus promises that when we truly listen to him and when we put what we hear into practice, we will be able to handle any storms that come our way. Nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of Christ.

Let us faithfully live out the faith that we speak with our lips. When we say, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior," may others know that it is so by the words that we speak, the choices that we make, the love that we show.

May God give us wisdom and grace to know and do his will, that we may enter his glorious kingdom.



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