



SESSION 1

Is There Truth I Can Trust?



THE PARABLES OF JESUS AREN'T DESIGNED TO GIVE US NEW INFORMATION BUT RATHER TO GIVE US NEW STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS THROUGH WHICH WE VIEW GOD, OUR NEIGHBORS, AND THE WORLD AROUND US. THE PARABLES OF JESUS GIVE US NEW WINDOWS TO PLACE IN OUR MINDS AND SOULS SO WE CAN LITERALLY SEE IN A DIFFERENT WAY.



Perspective is important. As Christians we know this to be true because of the times we see Jesus developing the perspective of His followers. When you think about it, a lot of Jesus' teachings weren't so much direct commands as they were stories, insights, and questions designed to influence and shape our perspective.

Look at the types of questions we see Jesus asking:

**Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye
but don't notice the log in your own eye?**

Matthew 7:3

**What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world
yet loses his life? Or what will a man give in exchange
for his life?**

Matthew 16:26

Why do you call Me “Lord, Lord,” and don’t do the things I say?

Luke 6:46

If then you’re not able to do even a little thing, why worry about the rest?

Luke 12:26

If I have told you about things that happen on earth and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about things of heaven?

John 3:12

As you’ve probably noticed, these were all rhetorical questions. Questions like these were intended to bring you to a fork in the road. You would either confront your faulty belief system or ignore the question altogether. These questions were designed to shape a certain perspective—leading to a deeper understanding of Christ’s mission and our role in it.

Why do you think the concept of perspective is important?

How can a proper perspective lead us toward a deeper understanding of our role in Christ’s mission?

How is God currently trying to shape your perspective?

STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS

We used to think the mind worked like a filing cabinet. We were given information and we would assign it to a particular file in our mental cabinet. When we needed to retrieve the information, we would reach into the appropriate file and pull it out.

Now we understand the mind works much more like a picture gallery. We hold onto our memories not in lines of data but in images. If I ask you to think of an important day, say the day you got your driver's license, you don't think back on it as, *Roman numeral 1: I woke up. Roman numeral 2: I got dressed to get my license.*

No, you think back to the moment when you first saw your face laminated on the new card.

Most of our important memories in life are recorded as images. What makes these images both unique and important is they don't just hang on the walls of our minds for us to see and recall from time to time. Instead, these images work more like stained-glass windows we look through to view the world around us. The windows not only determine *how* we see the world, they filter *what* we see as well.

All of us have a mind full of these stained-glass windows we've constructed over our lives. We have pictures of all kinds of things: ourselves, Christ, the universe, our families, truth, and goodness—really everything we encounter in our world and in ourselves.

The reason these windows are so important is we literally view the world outside of us and everything within us through these stained-glass windows. These windows will both distort and enhance how we see the world around us. As a result, they will determine how we live in the world. In other words, if you want to change, you have to change the windows in your mind.

Name three things a believer might view differently than a nonbeliever because they are seeing them through different stained-glass windows? (Ex. relationships, serving the poor, etc.) Explain the possible differences.

1.

2.

3.

Knowing the *why* is often more important than knowing the *what*. This is why Jesus told so many stories. The parables of Jesus aren't designed to give us new information but rather to give us new stained-glass windows through which we view God, our neighbors, and the world around us. The parables of Jesus give us new windows to place in our minds and souls so we can literally see in a different way.

Take, for instance, the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. According to Luke, an expert in the law asks Jesus how he can be sure he will find eternal life. Jesus asks the lawyer to quote and interpret the law. The lawyer replies by quoting the two great commands found in Matthew's Gospel:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Matthew 22:37-39

Jesus agrees with the man and commends his interpretation. "Do this," Jesus says, "and you will live" (Luke 10:28).

The lawyer, being a good lawyer, wanted to clarify the terms of the commandments. How does Jesus define “neighbor”? In reading the conversation, you get the impression the lawyer was looking for an exact definition. For instance, our neighbors live on either side of our house and across the street, but if they live two streets over, they aren’t our neighbors.

But Jesus does something interesting. He changes the question. The question for Jesus isn’t, “Who *exactly* is my neighbor” but rather, “*Am I* a neighbor to those around me?” Jesus gave the lawyer a new window to look through. Jesus answered the question not by giving the lawyer new information, but by giving him a new perspective—a new way to see himself and the world around him.

What are other examples in Scripture of Jesus giving new stained-glass windows to look through instead of more information and laws to live by?

One example in Scripture was Jesus’ continual dealings with blindness. Several of the miracle stories involve Jesus healing the blind. But as powerful as these stories are, the issue of blindness runs throughout the ministry of Jesus. There were those around Him who, for various reasons, either couldn’t see or wouldn’t see. They remained blind to the truth of who Jesus is. Healing blind eyes is more than recovering the ability to physically see; it’s the ability to perceive and to understand how God is working in the moment. It’s the ability to understand how God is thinking in a particular situation and then to align our choices and actions with His desires.

GOD IS LOVE

One of the most important of those stained-glass windows in our minds is the image we have of God. I’ve always found it interesting that John, in his first letter to the local church, described God as love. First John 4:16 he writes, “God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him.”

Here's what I find interesting about that passage. John could have chosen a lot of words to complete his thought. He could have said "God is holy." He could have written "God is righteous." Any of these words would have been right. Any of them would have given us a different insight into the character and person of God. But John chose *love*. Not only that, he chose a particular word for love that describes the essence of God—*agape*. There are three words used in the Greek language of the New Testament for love: *Eros* describes romantic love. *Phileo* is the word used for the love between friends. And *agape* is the word that's used to describe the love of God.

Here's the main difference. *Agape* seeks the best of the beloved—God's people—without looking for anything in return. Every action of God, every desire of God is summed up in this one word, *agape*. God has no other motivation. Creation, salvation, and even judgment is driven by a love determined to rescue the beloved.

What's your reaction to the previous statement?

How is *agape* love different from the kinds of love we typically think of?

This love in action surprised and impressed both the followers and enemies of Jesus. While trying to arrest Jesus, a soldier's ear was cut off by Peter. Jesus not only healed his ear, He also reprimanded Peter. To Peter's amazement—and everyone else's amazement—Jesus embraced the very soldier sent to arrest Him.

Jesus defended the woman caught in adultery and the woman who anointed His feet with nard in Simon's house. After the resurrection, Jesus told the women to tell Peter He was looking for His disgraced disciple. The apostle Paul was found on the road to Damascus on his way to persecute followers of Jesus.

Jesus was true to His own stories. He was the shepherd willing to leave the 99 sheep in the fold to go and look for the one lost sheep. The love of God compels Him to reach out to us who are lost. He doesn't wait on us to come to Him. God comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Most of us see a disconnection between love and truth. Truth is hard, unchanging, made of steel and concrete. On the other hand, love is seen as soft and unstable—an emotion that can't be trusted as a reliable guide for our lives. But with God, there is no such conflict. God is love. God is truth. They are both descriptions of His character and His essence.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul describes "love," but most of us would agree the "love" described by Paul in this familiar chapter is unlike any kind of love that we have known about. Paul introduces this chapter on love by telling the Corinthian church he will show them a "more excellent way."

The love Paul describes is:

- strong enough to bear all things.
- strong enough to overcome death itself.
- strong enough to give a second life to dying humanity.

This is a much different kind of love than the weak and sensitive love depicted by most cultural poets.

This is the love that defines the essence of God. This is the love that we'll see when we know God. This is the love that defines and motivates everything God desires and does.

God is love. Everything He does is done in this same love—creation, redemption, and the establishment of an eternal kingdom of our Lord Christ. This is the love shown to us in Christ Jesus.

Are the ways Paul describes *love* difficult for you to believe? Which of the ways is most difficult for you to believe? Why?

How is this love Paul speaks of different—or a more excellent way than the love you have experienced from life’s relationships?

“In the beginning,” John writes, “was the Word” (John 1:1). The Greek word *logos* can be interpreted as “meaning” also. “In the beginning was the *meaning*.” And what was this meaning? This meaning was the essence of God—agape—Christ is the agape of God in human form.

The agape message Jesus taught to His disciples is what He knew from the Father. God-love, agape, is a love that always seeks the best for the beloved. God-love doesn’t seek its own pleasure, but sacrifices itself for whatever the beloved needs. This is how Jesus teaches us to love our world.

LOVING OTHERS

Jesus said there are two great commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul” (Matt. 22:37). And the second is like the first: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 39). According to Jesus, all of the teachings of the Law and the Prophets were contained in these two commandments.

Most of us can see how He established a triangle of relationships. The way Jesus laid out this teaching, a disciple can’t keep one without keeping all three, and the three can’t be kept without keeping each one. To love God requires us to love our neighbors, and we can’t love our neighbors without authentically loving ourselves. In order to love ourselves, we have to know God’s love in our own lives. Like the Trinity itself, these three commandments can’t be separated if they are to be obeyed.

Look at how John puts it in his first letter:

Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His One and Only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and His love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:7-12

The story of the Good Samaritan tells followers of Christ to be aware of those who are wounded around us. When we see them, Christ wants us to take the initiative to bind up their wounds and care for them. We're to treat others in the same way Jesus, seeing us in our distress, healed our wounds and provided us a safe place to recover. In loving others, we return our love to Jesus. By taking care of the "least of these," Jesus says we are, in fact, offering a ministry to Him.

**Have you ever thought of loving others as synonymous with loving God?
How should this impact our relationships?**

How should this impact our interaction with the "least of these"?

Being transformed into the likeness of Christ means we're transformed by and into the God-love agape. Our character is being conformed to the character of Christ. As He is filled with God-love, we also become filled with God-love. As a result, whatever circumstance confronts us, we respond with God-love.

Whenever we're squeezed by life, anytime we have to deal with a tough issue, we respond to that moment with the God-love of Christ.

Why? We do because it's what's in us.

If you squeeze a tube of toothpaste, toothpaste comes out. Why? Because that's what's inside. In the same way, whenever life knocks us around, it only knocks the love of Jesus out of us because that's all that's inside.

One reason Christianity is so difficult sometimes is because Christ never gives His followers permission to react. We're never allowed to act one way because somebody else acted another way first. We can't say to Jesus, "I'm sorry I lost my temper, but You should have seen what the other guy did."

Jesus *did* see what the other guy did, and as Christ followers, we only act out of obedience to Jesus, not in reaction to the actions of another. Jesus never gives us permission to disobey. We're always called to live out of the God-love Christ has put into our lives. The love of God, the essence of God, is to be our essence as well.

Do you find this concept intimidating or difficult—to live out a God-love when life knocks us around? Why or why not?

Where, specifically, are you failing to live out this God-love in your relationships?

What does it mean that the essence of God should be our essence as well?

What do you think when you hear, “What Would Jesus Do?” Many of us have worn these WWJD bracelets. The reason for this bracelet is for the wearers to see the initials and be reminded to think about how Jesus would respond to a particular situation before simply acting out our feelings.

More than thinking “What Would Jesus Do?” the believer needs to think through “Who Would Jesus Be?” That is, Christ followers should seek to become like Jesus to the point that we live out of His essence in us the way He lived out the essence of the Father before us. Like Christ, everything about us—our thoughts, our actions, our dreams and desires—must flow from our essence, which is agape, the God-love of Christ.

LOVING SCRIPTURE

The best way to know Jesus is through the study of His Word. Most of us assume this goes without saying, but if I’ve learned anything as a pastor it’s that there isn’t anything that goes without saying. Let me be plain. If you want to know Jesus, you have to love and study His Word. Notice I said “study,” not “read.” Christ’s followers should cultivate a deep hunger and love to know the Scriptures. For in knowing the Scriptures, we know Christ Himself.

Reading the Bible for rules to live by is fine, but it’s the shallowest way to read the Bible. We read the Bible, not so much to know the rules, but to know Christ. Think about it. When we open the Scriptures, we open this divine book in the presence of the Author and Subject of the book.

Read Hebrews 4:12. How does the author of Hebrews describe the Word of God? How is this different than viewing the Bible as a set of rules to live by?

Christ has given us His Spirit to walk beside us and guide us into all truth. As we encounter His Word, it shapes us more and more into His likeness—the same way His word formed the universe in creation. His heart becomes our heart. His thoughts become our thoughts. His desires are ours. We have been crucified with Christ and are now dead to our sins. It's not we who live, Paul reminds us, but Christ.

This is the divine perspective that allows us to find the wisdom of Christ in how we face the world. Following Christ, we engage the world in those places where brokenness and confusion rob lives of meaning and hope. We stand in the places where relativism and individualism muddle morality to a place where no one can understand it. This is the place we dig in. This is where we identify the gray areas and begin to speak truth into them. But as we speak this truth, we do it with a God-love in mind.

As Paul comments on this in Ephesians when he says,

**Speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way
into Him who is the head—Christ.**

Ephesians 4:15

See, it's not enough to be right; we have to be truthful and loving at the same time—and this is not easy.

Agape is the perspective from which we view the world. God's love determines what we value, how we respond, and what actions we'll take and not take. Agape not only determines what questions we hear, but how we address them. Our answers, to be faithful to Christ, must come from the essence of God Himself—agape. The mystery of the faith, according to Paul, is the reality of Christ in us. Christ in us means agape in us. When the hard questions are asked, agape will be our answer. This is the good news of Jesus. Love is the essence of God—the essence of all that matters and lasts.

When confronted with gray areas in the past, what has typically been your starting point or motivation in addressing these issues?

If we understand that agape is to be our perspective, our essence, and our answer, how should this reshape the way we approach gray areas?

How is studying Scripture with the love of Christ in mind different from studying with a motivation to find a specific answer? Give an example.

In the end, there is no shortcut. In order to deal with these complicated issues of our post-modern culture, a disciple of Jesus must study Scriptures in the presence of the Divine Author so that the disciple understands not only the literal meaning of the text, but the heart of the One who gave us the text. For instance, what if we were able to understand the First Commandment as a command of mercy and grace?

Let me explain. When we first read the commandment, “Do not have other gods besides Me” (Ex. 20:3), the commandment sounds demanding and judgmental. But what if we were to understand this command is given to us because of God’s love for us?

Another word for *glory* is *weight*. Scientists describe objects in terms of “atomic weight.” An object has to have a certain weight to have the gravitational pull to hold everything else in orbit. What if God is saying to us He is the only One who

has the “atomic weight” to hold our lives in their proper orbit? What if God is telling us that if we put anything or anyone else in the place where only He can be, our lives will spin out of control?

See the difference? Yes, there is a literal interpretation, but there is a deeper truth in the text as well. It’s a truth based on the love God has for His children that, in turn, informs us how we’re to react—not only to Him, but to the world around us.

Why does it matter that we work this hard in dealing with the complicated issues of our time? Because the salvation experience involves the total person: heart, mind, and body. Every aspect of our lives—the way we think, the things we desire, how and what we love—has been scarred and disconnected from God’s intentions, and needs to be redeemed.

As Paul reminds us:

**Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed
by the renewing of your mind, so that you may
discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will
of God.**

Romans 12:2

One place the salvation process begins is with a renewal of our minds. A mind filled with Christ-formed stained-glass windows will see His kingdom purposes in our decisions and bring kingdom wisdom to these issues and others like them.