

“What Did Jesus Teach?” (A Walk through the Gospels)

A young couple, both blind, were walking arm in arm across a busy intersection. Cars were whizzing by in every direction. Each tapped the pavement with a white cane as they attempted to cross the street. To the horror of all who witnessed it, the blind couple began veering into the middle of the intersection. Oblivious to the danger, they were walking directly into the path of oncoming cars. At that moment, every car in every direction came to a simultaneous screeching halt. A driver stuck his head out of his car window and yelled, “To your right! To your right!” Other people joined in shouting, “To your right!” Without missing a step, the couple turned back to the right and got back on course, tapping with their canes and listening to the shouts from the drivers. They made it to the other side of the road without incident, still arm in arm.

That story makes me think of Jesus. He came to earth because He loved us. Not only were we lost, but we were marching off a cliff to certain death. In that situation, Jesus did not teach with the excitement of a new teacher. He did not come to impart knowledge He loved, to students. He did not say, “Now, class turn to your reading lesson for today. There you will find a story that you will greatly enjoy.” He taught with the urgency of all those drivers trying to keep the blind couple from getting killed! He shouted to humanity, “To your right! To your right!”¹

Last Sunday we learned that Jesus claimed to be more than a prophet, a teacher, or a great man. He claimed to be God. Therefore, if Jesus is truly “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16), we ought to be sitting on the edge of our seats, hanging on His every Word. If He is who He claimed to be, we should want to know what He taught during His earthly ministry. In fact, this should be the most important pursuit of our lives. As we learn what Jesus taught and allow it to infect our lives, we will begin to live the radical life that He lived.

[The most important truth that Jesus taught during His earthly ministry was...]

1. Humanity needs to be rescued (John 3:1-18). In John 3, the apostle John records, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.’”

Clearly, Jesus taught that man is separated from God and hopelessly lost because of sin. Unless one believes in Jesus, he or she will be separated from God forever. The ultimate consequence of rejecting Jesus is spending eternity in a place called hell. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus made it clear that hell was prepared for Satan and his angels. Yet for those who reject Jesus' provision, they will meet the same fate. By the way, did you know that Jesus spoke more about hell than heaven?² He considered matters pertaining to the afterlife to be of eternal consequence. Humanity is lost and needs to be saved. Jesus came to reconcile us to God.

- Until we see our sin, we will not see our need for a Savior.
- Every sinner must either be pardoned or punished.
- Salvation cannot be achieved; it can only be received.
- Life's biggest decision is what you do with Jesus.
- What you do with Christ now will determine what He will do with you later.
- To get to heaven, you must go by the way of the cross.
- Sinners are the only people who can be saved.
- We are not saved by what we do but by what Christ has done.
- Salvation is not a matter of trying but trusting.
- We are saved by Christ's dying, not by our doing.

2. True righteousness is internal, not external (Luke 18:9-14). In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus told an incredible story. After giving a parable on prayer (18:1-8), Jesus told another parable **“to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt.”** He then said, **“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’”** In 18:14, Jesus concluded His parable with these striking words: **“I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”** This parable serves to inform each one of us that you can have tons of religion without one ounce of salvation. Salvation and Christian growth are not based on what we do but who we are.

3. Love is life's top priority (Matthew 22:37-40). In Matthew 22, Jesus was speaking to a group of religious leaders when one of them, an expert in the religious law, asked Him what the greatest commandment was. He asked this question to try to trip Him up on an answer. Jesus replied, **“YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.”³ This is the great and foremost commandment.** What does it mean to love God? Does it mean to have great swells of emotion race up and down your spine like a finger ripping up and down the piano keyboard? Does it mean to live with goose bump pimples on the back of your neck? Does it mean to be filled, at all times, with warm thoughts about God? The apostle John recorded Jesus' answer to the question in John 14:21, **“He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.”** He wrote also, in 1 John 5:3a, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.”

Jesus also taught that we should love our fellow man. After identifying love of God as the first and great commandment, Jesus added, **“The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”** (Matt 22:39-40).

In John 13:35, Jesus told disciples of all time that if we love one another; all men will know that we are Christ's disciples. Love is the badge of the Christian faith.

[While love is life's top priority, Jesus also emphasized specific expressions of love.]

4. Grow by manifesting Christian character.⁴ In His teaching, Jesus highlighted numerous qualities of significance for growth. The following lists some of the most significant.

- 1) Humility: The ultimate expression of humility is being broken before Jesus (Matt 5:3-5; Luke 6:20; 18:14); simply depending upon Him to meet our daily needs (Matt 6:11). Humility is characterized by coming before Jesus as a little child (Matt 18:2-5; Luke 9:47-48; 18:17). It is most frequently expressed by serving others (Matt 23:5-12; Luke 14:8-11; 22:24-27; John 13:5, 14-15) and living a life of gratitude (Luke 17:10).
- 2) Righteousness: Jesus calls us to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" so that we might be satisfied (Matt 5:6). This is best expressed when we desire God's kingdom agenda over our own goals and desires (Matt 6:1-18, 33).
- 3) Mercy: To the degree that we exude mercy, we will receive mercy (Matt 5:7, 9). Jesus expressly states that He desires "mercy" or "compassion" over sacrificial works (Matt 9:13; 12:7; Luke 6:36).
- 4) Purity: Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8). Later in this same passage, speaking figuratively, Jesus challenged His readers to cut off hands and gouge out eyes to remain pure. For Jesus, amputation is the answer to impurity. Jesus' bottom line is: Be willing to do whatever is necessary to keep from falling into sin (5:27-32).
- 5) Peace: Jesus proclaimed peace was only available through Him and His Father (Matt 5:9; Mark 9:50b; John 14:27; 16:33). Man's soul finds no rest until it rests in God.
- 6) Sacrifice and non-retaliation: Perhaps Jesus' most extraordinary statement in the Sermon on the Mount was to "love your enemies" (Matt 5:43-45; cf. Lev 19:18; Prov 25:21). Throughout the Gospels Jesus compelled His disciples to suffer because suffering can prepare ordinary Christians for extraordinary service (Matt 5:10-11, 38-42; 10:37-39; 16:24-25; 19:29-30; 20:25-28; Mark 12:41-44; Luke 6:22, 27-30; 9:57-62; 14:26-33; 18:28-29; John 12:25; 15:20; 16:2-4, 22).
- 7) Joy: Sherwood Wirt wrote a book entitled, *Jesus: Man of Joy*. This title accurately expresses the life of Jesus. While Jesus suffered enormously throughout His entire life, He was always characterized by joy. Jesus made it clear that even in the midst of persecution and suffering, we can rejoice because our reward is great in heaven (Matt 5:11-12). Joy should characterize the Christian life (Luke 6:23; 10:20; John 15:11; 16:22; 17:13).
- 8) Forgiveness: Jesus continually emphasized the necessity of forgiving others who sin against us. He made it clear that we can't fellowship with God unless we're in harmony with other people (Matt 5:21-26; 6:12, 14-15; 18:15, 21-35; Luke 17:3-4).
- 9) Honesty: Jesus was and is the greatest example of integrity that has ever lived. He calls us to follow in His footsteps in thought, word, and deed (Matt 5:33-37).
- 10) Generosity: Many Christians conduct their lives on the cafeteria plan: self-service only. Yet, Jesus taught that sacrifice is the true measure of our giving (Matt 5:42; 7:2; 10:8; Mark 4:24; Luke 6:3, 38). Your use of money provides evidence of the state of your heart.

- 11) Concern for the poor: Jesus frequently referred to ministering to those who are poor (Matt 6:2; Luke 6:20; 12:33-34; 18:22; 19:8). In Luke 14:12-14, He urged His listeners to “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” because they will not be able to repay. Yet, Jesus says He will repay those who prioritize the poor and hurting at “the resurrection of the righteous.”
- 12) Faith and faithfulness: Faith and faithfulness pleases Jesus (Matt 18:3-5; 25:14-30; Mark 9:20-22). Those who exercised faith in Jesus were commended by Him, including the centurion (Matt 8:10) and the Canaanite woman of Syrophenicia (16:28). The faith of these two non-Israelites stands in stark contrast to that of the disciples, whose limited faith Jesus reproved on several occasions (8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). Jesus is interested in both our faith and faithfulness, in our time, treasures, talents, truth, and relationships. The world crowns success; God crowns faithfulness (Matt 6:24; 23:23b; 25:21, 23; Luke 12:42; 16:8-13).
- 13) Trust without worry or fear: Fear and worry are not just bad habits, they are sins committed against God. They demonstrate a lack of faith and confidence in the Lord (Matt 6:25, 28, 31, 34; 10:26-31; 13:22; Mark 4:19; 5:36; Luke 8:14, 50; 10:41; 12:4-7, 22, 25-26, 29; John 6:20; 14:27). In principle form, Jesus reminds us frequently that one of the best things about the future is that it comes one day at a time.
- 14) Non-critical spirit: Jesus does not want us to judge others on non-essential issues. Even when we must judge because sin is involved, He requires us to first deal with our own sin before approaching another person (Matt 7:1-5; Luke 6:37; John 7:24). Instead of putting others in their place, put yourself in their place. As you and I do so, we will be putting ourselves in our place and we will be able to approach someone else in a Christlike manner.
- 15) Gratitude: (Luke 17:11-19). A good attitude toward life begins with gratitude toward God. A complaining Christian is a contradiction in terms. If you pause to think, you’ll have cause to thank.

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Notes

¹ This story has been revised from Max Anders, *New Christians Handbook* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 31-32.

² See Matt 5:22, 29; 10:28; 23:33

³ The parallel passages, Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27, add “and with all our strength.”

⁴ Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 101.