

back to the center

A Study in the Words of Jesus

Volume 1 · twelve lessons in what Jesus said and did

by Carlos C.



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A note before you begin

You should know who wrote this. I spent more than twenty-five years in church, most of them alongside someone I love who believes deeply. Over time I stopped believing, but I never stopped thinking that the teachings of Jesus were good, and that much of what is taught in his name has little to do with them. My letter about how this began is at the back of this book.

I'm not trying to take your faith from you. I learned that lesson the hard way. I'm only asking what you would ask of anything: does this start with Jesus? Measure this book against him, not against me.

Carlos C.

Before you begin

Every Christian, in every church, agrees that Jesus is the center. This book is built on that one point of agreement. It asks a single question about everything Christians are taught: **does this start with him?**

Over two thousand years, a great deal has grown up around the center: letters, creeds, councils, traditions, denominations, movements and media. Some of it grew from faithful attempts to understand him. Some of it took on purposes of its own. Each lesson tells that history honestly, prints the words of Jesus in full, and then measures the teaching against him.

Be ready for some hard news. If Jesus is truly first, then some of what many of us were taught does not hold up, and this book will say so plainly when it does not. That is not an attack on your faith. It is the oldest instruction in it: *"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."*

Each lesson takes about twenty minutes. Read slowly, check every verse in your own Bible, and give yourself room to write and pray at the end.

HOW EVERY LESSON WORKS

The center	One saying of Jesus that anchors the lesson
Read it · 3 min	The passages, printed in full
The world behind the words · 4 min	What his first listeners heard
How it drifted · 5 min	The history, with dates and sources
Objections · 3 min	The strongest case on the other side, answered

Measured against the center · 2 min	The verdict: contradicts Jesus, added to Jesus, or Jesus was silent
Reflect and **Practice** · 3 min	Questions to write on, one thing to do this week
Talk it over and **A quiet moment**	Questions for a group, and a short prayer
Remember it	A picture, a hook for the verse, and a self-test

ABOUT THE BIBLE TEXT

Every verse is quoted in full from the **World English Bible**, a modern translation in the public domain, so this book can be shared freely. Compare it with your own Bible as you go; the meaning is the same, though the wording will differ.

When a lesson points you to a passage, it gives the usual Bible reference and, after it, a § number, such as *Follow Me* §19. That is where the same passage sits in *Follow Me*, the companion book of Jesus' own words. Its passages are numbered straight through, so you can find one without knowing the chapter.

Using this book

ON YOUR OWN

Set aside twenty minutes once a week. Each volume is twelve lessons, one season. Keep a pen nearby: the Reflect questions leave room to write, and your answers are worth rereading later.

READING WITH FRIENDS

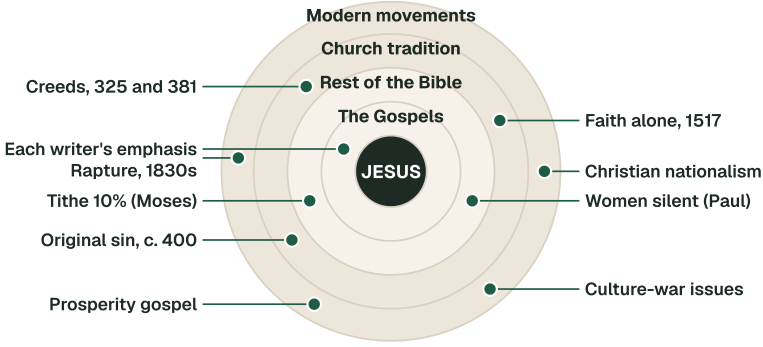
This works well with one or two friends, or a few people around a kitchen table. Read the lesson on your own during the week, then meet and work through "Talk it over." Let people disagree. The goal is not to win an argument; it is to keep coming back to what Jesus said.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY

> **ASK IT OF EVERYTHING:**
> Did Jesus say this himself, or did someone add it later? If he never said it, and he did say this, which should come first?

The drift map

Picture Jesus at the center of a set of rings. Each ring is one step further from his own words: the Gospels that record them, the rest of the Bible, centuries of church tradition, and modern movements. Every lesson marks where its idea sits on this map. The further out an idea sits, the more it needs a reason to outrank the center.



The rings measure distance from his own words, not age. Paul wrote before the Gospels, but his letters are Paul's words.

Remembering the lessons

Every lesson opens with one image: a few shapes of cut paper, built around a single idea from that lesson. The image for Lesson 1 is two great rings fading while one small point remains, because the lesson is about listening to one voice. The image for Lesson 10 is a disc far too wide for the narrow slit beside it, the camel and the needle's eye.

The images are there to help you remember. At the end of each lesson, "Remember it" shows the image again with a short hook for the key verse. Picture it once more before you close the book. After a few weeks, the images alone will bring the lessons back.

Volume 1: The Center

Twelve lessons, one a week for a season. It stands on its own: by the end you will have the whole argument of this series, and a verdict on what you found.

The first nine lessons start where every Christian already stands: Jesus at the center, and the teachings he put first. You will likely agree with almost everything in them, and each one still shows where that center has been crowded out over time. Lessons 10 and 11 measure two common teachings against him, and the verdict is not easy. Lesson 12 gathers what you found.

Go slowly, and check every verse in your own Bible. If a lesson unsettles you, stay with it; the aim is to give you back the center of your faith.

THE TWELVE LESSONS

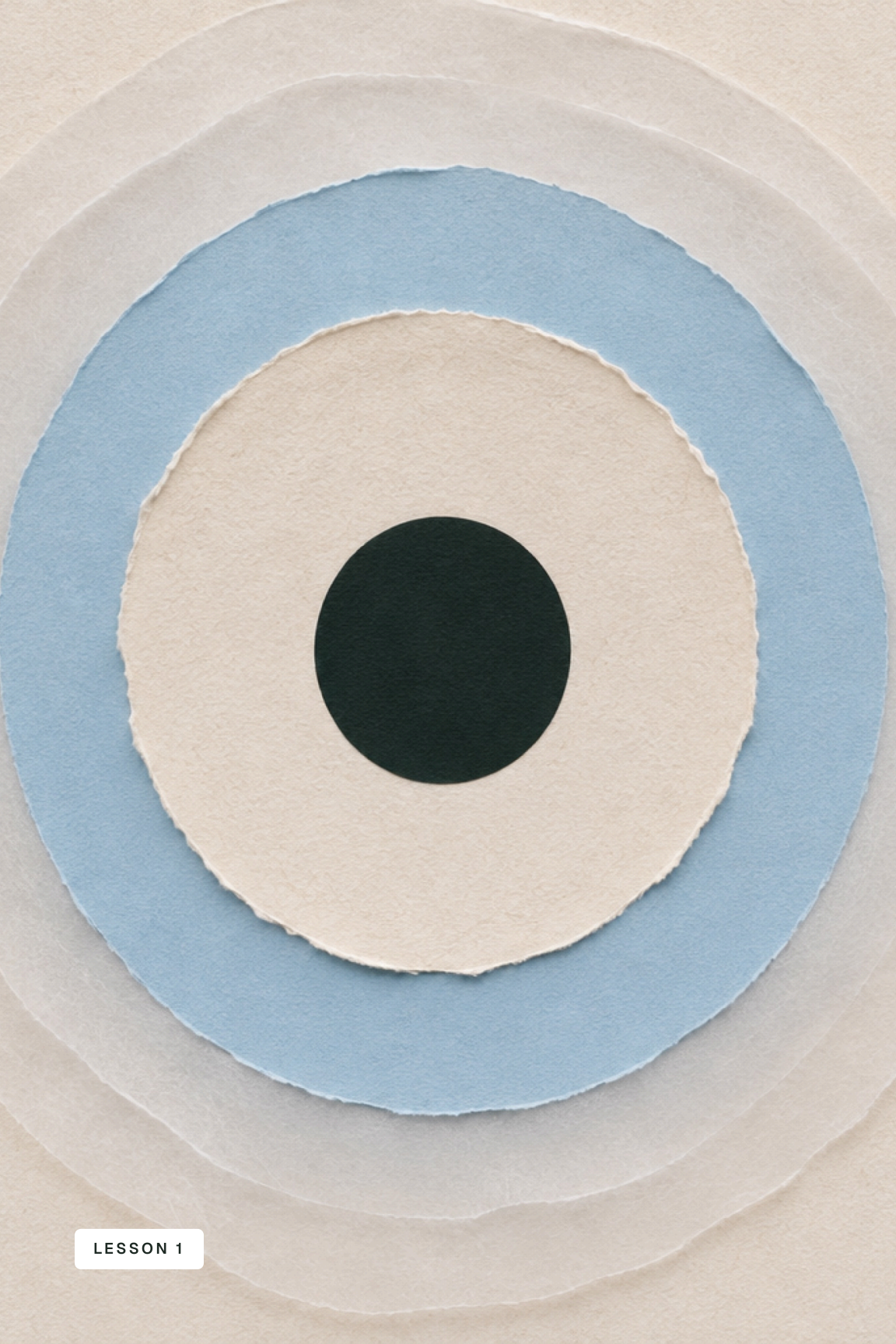
1–4 · The center	Who is at the center · The clearest picture of God · Hearing and doing · How Jesus read the Bible
5–9 · What he put first	The two greatest commandments · Blessed · Love your enemies · In secret · The least of these
10–11 · Measured against him	Wealth as blessing · Judging others
12 · What we found	The drift map so far, and where the road goes next

This is the first of four volumes, twelve lessons each: **The Center**, **How We Got Here**, **Bring It Back** and **The Hard Questions**. Every lesson has a free audio version. *Follow Me*, a companion book, gathers the words of Jesus alone.

PART 1

The Center

Before anything else: why the words and life of Jesus come first, and how he read the rest of Scripture.


LESSON 1

1

Who Is at the Center?

LISTEN About 25 minutes

If you could hear only one voice on everything that matters, whose would it be?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/01

MARK 9:7

A cloud came, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

Every church, every denomination and nearly every Christian alive agrees on one thing: Jesus is the center. Catholics and Baptists, Pentecostals and Presbyterians, people who pray in cathedrals and people who pray in storefronts all say it. It may be the only sentence they would all sign.

This book takes that sentence seriously. It won't tell you where to sit on Sunday, or whether to sit anywhere at all. You don't need anyone's permission to follow him, inside a church or outside one. It asks one question, over and over, about everything: if Jesus is the center, does this belief start with him?

Fair warning: some of what follows may be uncomfortable. If he is truly first, then some of what many of us were taught will not survive being measured against him. That is not an attack on your faith. It is an invitation to put him where you already say he belongs.

People who choose to do that, to keep Jesus and set down what was built on top of him, are what this book calls **Centered**. His teachings are so good that people who don't share your faith admire them; that alone says how much they belong at the center. Each lesson takes about twenty minutes. Read slowly, open the verses, and give yourself room to think.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

---

Read it

3 min

Start with the moment the Gospels describe as the clearest instruction God ever gave about Jesus. Three disciples are on a mountain with him. Moses, who gave the Law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, appear beside him. Peter, not knowing what to say, offers to build three shelters, one for each, as if they were equals. Then a voice interrupts.

> **MARK 9:7-8**
>
> 7 A cloud came, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” 8 Suddenly looking around, they saw no one with them any more, except Jesus only.

Matthew and Luke tell the same story, and all three record the same command: "Listen to him." Not to Moses or Elijah, and not to Peter's good idea. The rest of the New Testament says the same thing in its own words.

HEBREWS 1:1-2

[1] God, having in the past spoken to the fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, [2] has at the end of these days spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds.

COLOSSIANS 1:18

[18] He is the head of the body, the assembly, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he might have the preeminence.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:11

[11] For no one can lay any other foundation than that which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ.

And when Jesus sent his followers out at the end of Matthew's Gospel, he told them what to pass on. It was not a list of beliefs about him. It was what he had taught.

MATTHEW 28:19-20

[19] Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you. Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

The world behind the words

4 min

To the first people who read these words, "listen to him" was startling. Jesus' world was full of voices with authority. There was the Law of Moses, read every Sabbath. There were the prophets, the teachers who

explained the Law, the priests who ran the Temple, and the Roman governors who ran everything else. A Galilean carpenter's son with no school, no title and no army was not supposed to outrank any of them.

Yet the Gospels say again and again that people noticed something different about the way he spoke. When he finished the Sermon on the Mount, his longest recorded teaching (Matthew 5–7), Matthew writes that the crowds "were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them with authority, and not like the scribes" **Matthew 7:28-29.** The scribes quoted earlier teachers. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said... but I tell you."

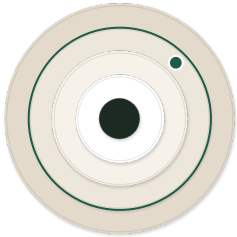
That is the setting for the mountain scene. Moses and Elijah were the two greatest names in Israel's history. Peter's instinct was to honor all three equally. The voice from the cloud corrected him, and when the cloud lifted, Mark says, "they saw no one with them any more, except Jesus only" **Mark 9:8.**

The early followers carried that conviction everywhere. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, called Jesus the only foundation anyone can lay. The letter to the Colossians said he should have "the preeminence," first place, "in all things." The letter to the Hebrews said God spoke in many ways through the prophets, but has now spoken "by his Son." None of these writers was trying to make Jesus one important voice among many. They put him at the center and measured everything else from there.

> NOTICE:
> Every passage in this lesson comes from the Bible itself. You do not need to accept anything outside it to agree that Jesus comes first. The Bible already says so.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

Creeds that move from his birth straight to his death

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

If everyone agrees Jesus is the center, how could anything drift? The answer starts early and quietly, with good intentions.

In the first centuries, Christians wrote short summaries of their faith, called creeds, to teach new believers and to settle arguments. The best known is the Apostles' Creed, which grew from a baptism statement used in Rome in the 100s and 200s and reached its final wording centuries later. Millions of Christians still say it every week. Read its middle section and notice what is missing.

“I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.”

The Apostles' Creed, middle section

The creed moves from his birth straight to his death. Everything in between is missing: the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, the healings, the meals with outcasts, the command to love enemies, everything he spent his life teaching. The Nicene Creed of 325 and 381, the most widely shared statement of faith in Christianity, does the same thing: "for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven… he was crucified."

The people who wrote the creeds were answering the questions of their day: who Jesus was, and how he could be both human and divine. Those were serious questions, and the creeds answered them. But a habit formed. Being a Christian came to mean holding the right beliefs

about Jesus, more than living by what Jesus said. Over the centuries, the beliefs grew longer and more detailed, and the teachings moved to the edges.

c. 30	Jesus teaches in Galilee and Judea: "Listen to him."
50s–60s	Paul's letters call Jesus the foundation and the head.
70–100	The four Gospels record his words and acts.
100s–200s	A Roman baptism creed, the root of the Apostles' Creed, summarizes faith from birth to death.
325 and 381	The Nicene Creed is written and expanded. It also moves from his birth to his death.
Today	Many churches recite a creed every week. Few read the Sermon on the Mount every week.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

No one set out to push Jesus' teachings aside. The creeds were written to defend the faith against real confusion about who Jesus was. But what we repeat every week shapes what we think matters most, and the creeds never mention a single thing he taught.

Honest objections

3 min

"All Scripture is inspired. Why put the words of Jesus above the rest?" Paul wrote that every Scripture is "God-breathed" **2 Timothy 3:16**, and this book does not ask anyone to set that aside. But the Bible itself ranks its voices. On the mountain, Moses and Elijah were present, and the voice still said "Listen to him." After his resurrection, Luke says Jesus explained "in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" **Luke 24:27.** Christians have always read the rest of the Bible through him. Starting with him keeps the rest of it in its place.

"What matters most is his death and resurrection, not his teaching." For Christians, the cross and the empty tomb are the heart of the faith, and nothing here argues otherwise. But Jesus did not treat them as rivals. His last instruction in Matthew was to teach "all things that I commanded you." And he asked a pointed question of people who honored him without following him: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do the things which I say?" **Luke 6:46**

BE FAIR:

The creeds were not written to hide anything, and many churches that recite them also teach the Gospels faithfully. The question is not whether the creeds are true. It is whether we have let the summary replace the story.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Both objections deserve real answers, and notice where each answer ends: at his own words. If a belief can only be defended by setting his words aside, it is not the center.

Measured against the center

2 min

AN ADD-ON

The creeds are not false, but treating them as the whole of the faith has replaced what Jesus taught with beliefs about him.

Measured against the center, the creeds do not contradict Jesus. They do something quieter: they leave him out. A faith that can recite its creed perfectly without mentioning a word he said has drifted from the one it

is named after. Jesus told his followers to teach "all things that I commanded you." A summary that skips them is incomplete, however true its other lines are.

This may be hard to hear if you have said a creed all your life. It does not mean your faith is false. It means it may be missing its middle. Following him here is simple: keep confessing what you believe about him, and start learning and doing what he said.

A keeper

1 min

Whatever you believe about who Jesus was, the teaching he told his followers to pass on holds up on its own. Settle quarrels quickly. Tell the truth without needing to swear to it. Don't return harm for harm. Give without announcing it. Stop letting worry about tomorrow run today. Treat people the way you want to be treated, a rule Jesus said sums up the whole of Scripture.

> **MATTHEW 7:12**
>
> 12 Therefore, whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

People far outside the church have recognized it. Mohandas Gandhi, a lifelong Hindu, wrote that when he first read the New Testament, "especially the Sermon on the Mount," it "went straight to my heart."

For you as a believer, these are not optional extras attached to a correct faith. They are what he told you to pass on, and the reason the world should be able to recognize his followers.

LIVING IT NOW:

Pick the one that is hardest for you this month. If it's not returning harm for harm, start online: the next time a post makes you angry, don't answer it in kind. If it's giving without announcing it, give something this week that no one will ever know about. Being Centered is not a set of beliefs to defend. It's a handful of things he said, done on an ordinary Tuesday.

Reflect

2 min

When you think of what it means to be a Christian, what comes to mind first: beliefs about Jesus, or things Jesus said to do?

If someone who had never heard of Jesus watched your week, what would they guess he taught?

Peter wanted to honor Moses, Elijah and Jesus equally. What voices compete with Jesus in your own life?

Practice this week

1 min

Read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapters 5 through 7 (in *Follow Me*, §19–40), once a day for seven days. It takes about fifteen minutes. Don't study it; just read it. Each day, underline one sentence that surprised you. At the end of the week, look at the seven sentences together and ask what they have in common.

Talk it over

1 min

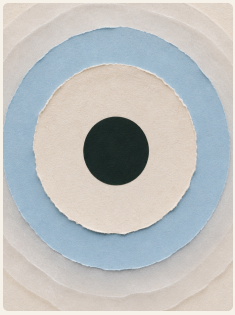
- If you grew up saying a creed, what did it say about Jesus' life between his birth and his death?
- Why might it be easier to agree on beliefs about Jesus than on how to follow him?
- What would change in your own week if you read Matthew 5–7 (*Follow Me* §19–40) every day for a month?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, you are the center. Help me to listen to you first, before every other voice, even good ones. Show me what you said, and give me the courage to do it. Amen.

Remember it



The whole book in three words: **"Listen to him."** Mark 9:7. When the cloud lifted, they saw "Jesus only."

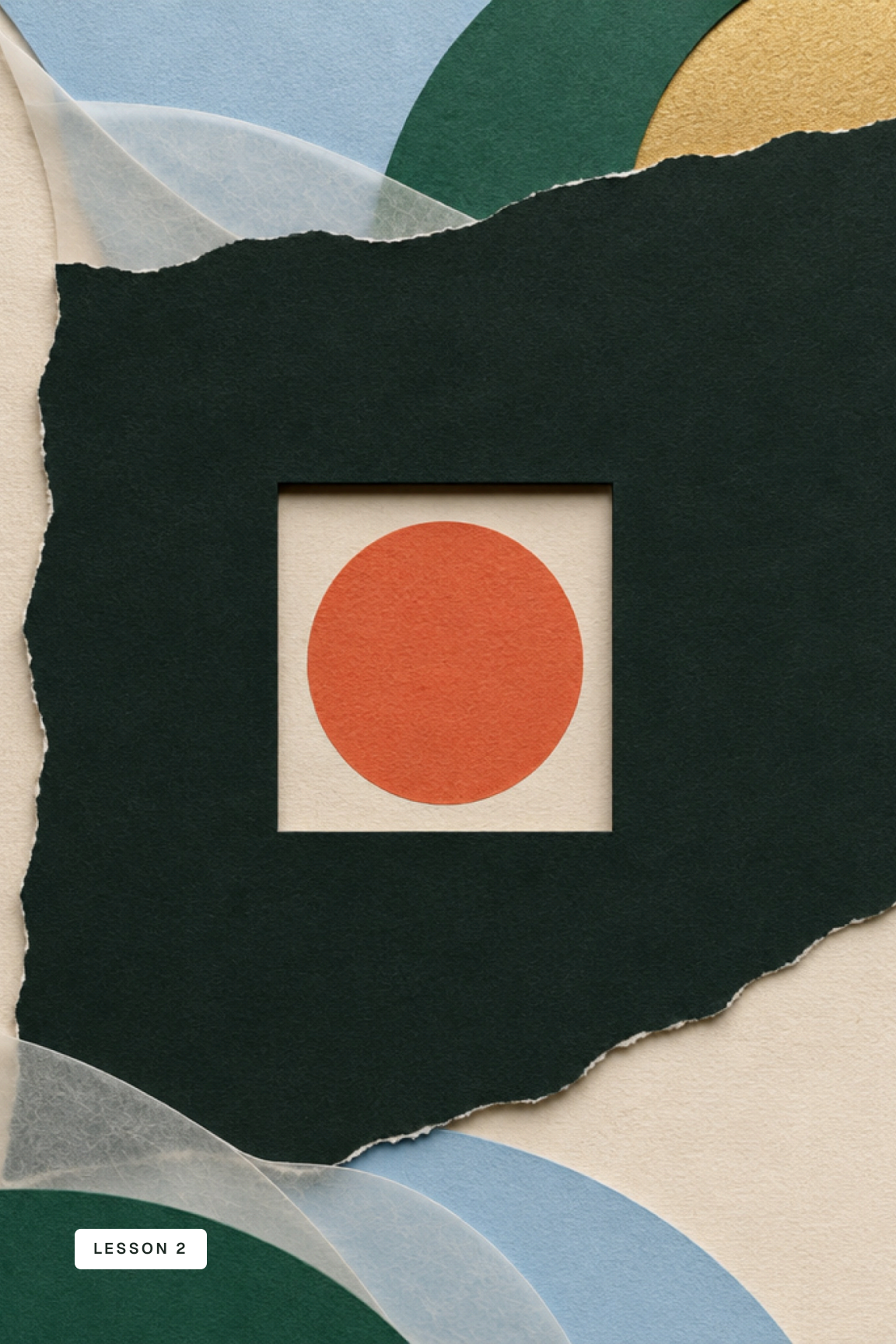
Two rings, one point: pale paper rings fade outward, and one small dark point holds the center. Listen to him.

1. What did the voice on the mountain say?
2. What do the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds leave out between Jesus' birth and death?
3. What did Jesus tell his followers to teach in Matthew 28:20?

1. "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7). 2. Everything he taught and did in his life. 3. "All things that I commanded you."

Sources

1. The Apostles' Creed developed from the Old Roman Symbol (2nd–4th century); its final form is attested in the 8th century. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed., 1972).
2. The Nicene Creed: Council of Nicaea (325), expanded at the Council of Constantinople (381).
3. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai, Part I, ch. 20, "Acquaintance with Religions."


LESSON 2

2

The Clearest Picture of God

SEEN About 25 minutes

When you picture God, whose face do you see?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/02

JOHN 14:9

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you such a long time, and do you not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. How do you say, 'Show us the Father'?

Everyone carries a picture of God. For some it is a stern judge keeping score. For some it is a distant power, or a kindly grandfather, or a voice that sounds a lot like a parent. Most of us never chose our picture. We absorbed it from sermons, paintings, movies and the people who raised us.

Christians have a remarkable answer to the question of what God is like, and it comes from Jesus himself. This lesson asks you to set your picture of God next to his and see whether they match. If they don't, it is your picture that needs to change. Being Centered starts here: if you want to know what God is like, you look at Jesus, not at whatever picture you were handed.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

On his last night with his disciples, Jesus told them he was going to the Father. One of them, Philip, asked for what every religious person has wanted.

JOHN 14:8-10

8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and that will be
enough for us.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you such a
long time, and do you not know me, Philip? He who has seen me
has seen the Father. How do you say, ‘Show us the Father’?
10 Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?
The words that I tell you, I speak not from myself; but the Father
who lives in me does his works.

The opening of John's Gospel says the same thing in other words. No one has ever seen God; the Son has made him known.

JOHN 1:18

18 No one has seen God at any time. The only born Son, who is in
the bosom of the Father, has declared him.

The letter to the Hebrews and the letter to the Colossians use two striking images: Jesus is the "radiance" of God's glory, and the "image of the invisible God."

HEBREWS 1:3

3 His Son is the radiance of his glory, the very image of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, who, when he had by himself purified us of our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high,

COLOSSIANS 1:15

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

The world behind the words

4 min

Philip's request made sense. His Scriptures taught that no one could see God and live. When Moses asked to see God's glory, he was told, "You cannot see my face, for man may not see me and live" **Exodus 33:20**. People knew God through the Law, through the prophets and through mighty acts in their history, but always at a distance.

So Jesus' answer was astonishing. "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Philip had already been looking at God for three years: at the meals, on the roads, at the bedsides of the sick. He just hadn't recognized what he was seeing.

That changes how to read everything Jesus did. When he was "moved with compassion" for crowds who were "harassed and scattered, like sheep without a shepherd" **Matthew 9:36**, that was God's compassion. When he grew indignant at disciples who shooed children away **Mark 10:14**, that was God's indignation. When he wept over Jerusalem **Luke 19:41-42**, those were God's tears.

One scene shows the point sharply. A Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus, and two of his disciples wanted to call down fire on it. They had a precedent: the prophet Elijah had once called down fire on sol-

diers sent to arrest him **2 Kings 1:10**. Jesus turned and rebuked them.

LUKE 9:54-56

54 When his disciples, James and John, saw this, they said, “Lord,
do you want us to command fire to come down from the sky and
destroy them, just as Elijah did?” 55 But he turned and rebuked
them, “You don’t know of what kind of spirit you are. 56 For the
Son of Man didn’t come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”
They went to another village.

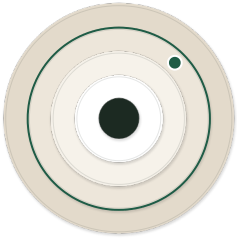
The disciples reached for a picture of God from an older story. Jesus corrected it with his own.

NOTICE:

Jesus described himself in only a few words: "I am gentle and humble in heart" **Matthew 11:29**. If he is the clearest picture of God, then God is gentle and humble in heart.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

A picture of God drawn from somewhere other than Jesus

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

If Christians agree that Jesus shows us what God is like, how did so many end up picturing God so differently from him? The history shows two drifts, in opposite directions, and the church itself named the first one a mistake.

Around the year 140, a wealthy ship owner named Marcion taught in Rome that the God of the Old Testament was a different, harsher god from the Father Jesus revealed. He threw out the Jewish Scriptures and kept only an edited Luke and ten of Paul's letters. The church in Rome rejected him around 144. Christians insisted that the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus are one and the same God. This book agrees with them: Jesus does not replace the God of the Old Testament. He shows us that God most clearly.

The second drift went the other way and lasted much longer. Over the centuries, Christian art and preaching often pictured God, and even Jesus, mainly as a terrifying judge. Medieval churches carved scenes of the Last Judgment over their doors. Michelangelo's great fresco of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel, finished in 1541, shows Christ with his arm raised to cast the damned down. In colonial New England in 1741, the preacher Jonathan Edwards delivered the most famous sermon in American history.

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked."

Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Enfield, Connecticut, 1741

Generations of children learned to picture God that way. It is worth setting that picture beside the one Jesus gave of a father who sees his runaway son "still far off," and runs.

LUKE 15:20

20 "He arose and came to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and ran, fell on his neck, and kissed him.

c. 30	Jesus: "He who has seen me has seen the Father."
c. 90–110	John's Gospel: the Son "has declared him."
c. 144	The church in Rome rejects Marcion, who split the God of the Old Testament from the Father of Jesus.
1100s–1200s	Carved Last Judgment scenes over the doors of great churches.
1541	Michelangelo finishes the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel.
1741	Jonathan Edwards preaches "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

Preachers who stressed God's anger usually meant well: they wanted people to take sin seriously and turn to God before it was too late. But over time the picture of the angry judge crowded out the picture Jesus gave of himself. God is just; the real question is whether we learned what God is like from Jesus or from somewhere else.

Honest objections

3 min

"God is also a judge. Jesus himself warned about judgment." He did, and often. This lesson does not say God never judges. It says that the judge is the same one who wept over the city that would reject him, who refused to call down fire, and who prayed for the people killing him. If Jesus is the clearest picture of God, then God's judgment looks like his: honest about evil and full of mercy at the same time.

"Isn't this just Marcion again, picking a nice God over a harsh one?" No, and the difference matters. Marcion said there were two gods and threw out half the Bible. Christians have always said there is one God, and that Jesus is the clearest window onto him. When an older picture of God

seems to clash with Jesus, the Christian answer has been to read the older picture through him, the way Jesus read it himself on the road to the Samaritan village.

BE FAIR:
Jonathan Edwards also wrote at length about the beauty and love of God, and one sermon is not the whole man. Notice which of his words people remembered.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:
Both objections deserve real answers, and both answers end in the same place: with the man who rebuked his disciples for wanting fire from heaven. If your picture of God would have sided with the disciples, it did not come from him.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Picturing God mainly as an angry judge contradicts the picture Jesus gave of himself and of his Father.

Measured against the center, the angry-judge God does not hold. Jesus said that whoever has seen him has seen the Father. He refused to call down fire, wept over the city that rejected him, and described a father who runs to a son who wasted everything. A God who holds people over the fire like a loathsome insect is drawn from somewhere else.

This may be hard news if fear has been part of your faith for a long time. It does not mean God takes evil lightly. It means God is like Jesus, all the way through. Following him here means letting his face replace any other picture, and treating people the way he treated them, even the ones who reject you.

A keeper

1 min

Be merciful. Jesus put the whole idea in one sentence, and it works whether or not you believe in the Father he mentions.

LUKE 6:36

36 “Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is also merciful.

In practice it looks like the scene in the Samaritan village: when people reject you, don't reach for the fire. Treat the people who disappoint you the way you would want to be treated on your worst day.

For you as a believer, mercy is the family resemblance, and it takes sin seriously. If God is merciful, his children should be recognizable by the same thing.

LIVING IT NOW:

Mercy gets tested in small places. The next time someone posts something that makes your blood boil, or a relative says something at dinner you can't stand, remember the village that turned Jesus away, and his answer to the men who wanted fire. You can disagree without calling down fire, online or off.

Reflect

2 min

What picture of God did you grow up with? Where did it come from?

Which scene from Jesus' life best shows you what God is like? Why that one?

Is there a way you treat people "in God's name" that Jesus would not recognize?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, read one short scene from the Gospel of Mark each day. After each one, finish this sentence in writing: **"If Jesus shows me what God is like, then God is..."** By the end of the week you will have seven sentences describing God, all drawn from his life. Compare them with the picture of God you started with.

Talk it over

1 min

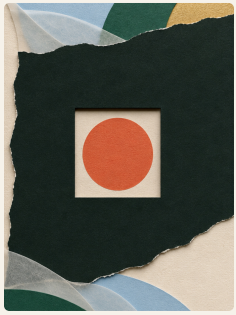
- What picture of God were you handed growing up? Was it closer to Jesus or further away?
- Why do you think fear-based preaching has been so common, even among sincere people?
- If you started every conversation about God with "God is like Jesus," what would change?

A quiet moment

1 min

God, I want to know what you are really like. Thank you for showing yourself in Jesus. Where my picture of you came from somewhere else, gently replace it with his face. Make me gentle and humble in heart, like him. Amen.

Remember it



"Seen me, seen the Father." John 14:9. On his last night, Philip asked to be shown God, and Jesus told him he already had been.

A window to the center: a square cut through dark paper, and through it the center plainly seen. Seen me, seen the Father.

1. What did Philip ask, and how did Jesus answer?
2. What did Jesus do when his disciples wanted to call down fire on a village?
3. Why did the early church reject Marcion?

1. "Show us the Father." "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:8-9). 2. He rebuked them (Luke 9:55). 3. He taught that the God of the Old Testament was a different god from the Father of Jesus.

Sources

1. Marcion's teaching and his break with the church in Rome (c. 144): Tertullian, *Against Marcion*; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27. See also Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (2003), ch. 6.
2. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, painted 1536–1541.
3. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached at Enfield, Connecticut, July 8, 1741.



LESSON 3

3

Hearing and Doing

ROCK About 25 minutes

What is the difference between agreeing with Jesus and following him?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/03

MATTHEW 7:24

"Everyone therefore who hears these words of mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock.

Most people who admire Jesus agree with him. They agree that loving your neighbor is good, that forgiveness matters, that the poor deserve care. Agreement is easy. It costs nothing, and it changes nothing.

Jesus knew the difference, and he ended his most famous sermon with a story about it.

As you read, notice how often Jesus talks about doing, and ask honestly how much of your faith is agreement and how much is practice. Being Centered is what you build on, not a set of beliefs to defend.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

The Sermon on the Mount, three chapters of the most demanding teaching Jesus ever gave, ends with two builders.

MATTHEW 7:24-27

24 "Everyone therefore who hears these words of mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 The rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it didn't fall, for it was founded on the rock. 26 Everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 The rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell—and its fall was great."

Luke tells the same story, and adds a question Jesus asked first.

LUKE 6:46-49

46 "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do the things which I say? 47 Everyone who comes to me, and hears my words and does them, I will show you who he is like. 48 He is like a man building a house, who dug and went deep and laid a foundation on the rock. When a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it was founded on the rock. 49 But he who hears and doesn't do, is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great."

Jesus made the same point with another short story, about two sons.

MATTHEW 21:28-31

28 But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to
the first, and said, 'Son, go work today in my vineyard.' 29 He an-
swered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind, and
went. 30 He came to the second, and said the same thing. He an-
swered, 'I'm going, sir,' but he didn't go. 31 Which of the two did
the will of his father?" They said to him, "The first." Jesus said to
them, "Most certainly I tell you that the tax collectors and the
prostitutes are entering into God's Kingdom before you.

And on his last night, after washing his disciples' feet, he said it plainly.

JOHN 13:17

17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

The world behind the words

4 min

Galilee is dry most of the year. Its valleys are cut by wadis, streambeds that sit empty for months and then fill in a single afternoon when the winter rains come down from the hills. A patch of flat, sandy ground beside a dry wadi looks like an easy place to build. It is easy, until the first storm.

Jesus' listeners knew this. Luke's version adds a detail any builder would recognize: the wise man "dug and went deep and laid a foundation on the rock." That takes longer. It is harder work, and from the outside, the two houses look exactly alike. The difference only shows when the flood comes.

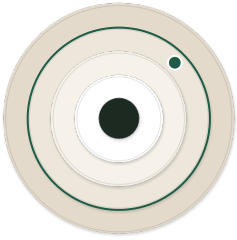
Notice what the two builders have in common. Both heard the same sermon. Both admired it enough to build on it. The only difference is that one of them did what it said.

The story of the two sons pushes the point further. One son says "no" to his father and then goes to work. The other says "Yes, sir" and stays home. Jesus asked which one did his father's will, and the religious leaders listening had to admit it was the first. Then he told them something that must have stung: tax collectors and prostitutes, who had said "no" to God for years and then changed, were entering God's Kingdom ahead of them.

> **NOTICE:**
> In both stories, the people Jesus praised were the ones whose lives changed, whatever words they started with.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

Following Jesus treated as optional for believers

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

How could a faith built on these words come to treat doing them as optional? Part of the answer lies in an argument that was really about something else.

In the 1500s, the Protestant reformers fought against a church that, in their view, taught people to earn God's favor with good works and paid indulgences. Martin Luther's answer was that people are put right with God by faith, as a gift. That argument shaped Christianity for five hundred years. But it also made some Christians nervous about any talk of

doing. Luther himself, in the preface to his 1522 German New Testament, called the letter of James, which says "be doers of the word, and not only hearers" **James 1:22**, "an epistle of straw" compared with Paul's letters.

Four hundred years later, a German pastor watched what that nervousness had become. Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw churches in Nazi Germany full of people who believed the right things and did nothing as their neighbors were persecuted. In 1937 he published *The Cost of Discipleship*, and gave the problem a name.

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937)

Bonhoeffer joined the resistance against Hitler. He was arrested in 1943 and hanged at the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, weeks before the war in Europe ended. Christians across nearly every tradition now honor him. His question still stands: what is a faith worth if it never builds on the rock?

c. 30	Jesus: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them..."
1522	Luther's preface calls James "an epistle of straw."
1522	In the same year, Luther writes that true faith "is a living, busy, active, mighty thing."
1937	Bonhoeffer names "cheap grace" in *The Cost of Discipleship*.
1945	Bonhoeffer is executed at Flossenbürg on April 9.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

No one set out to make following Jesus optional. The reformers wanted to protect the truth that God's love is a gift, not a wage. But in protecting it, many churches stopped asking what that gift is for. Bonhoeffer, himself a Lutheran pastor, saw the result and called it cheap grace.

Honest objections

3 min

"We are saved by grace, not by works." This lesson does not argue about how a person is saved; a later lesson looks at that history. It makes a smaller point that nearly every church accepts: grace is meant to change a life. Paul, the great teacher of grace, wrote that what counts is "faith working through love" **Galatians 5:6.** And Luther himself wrote that true faith cannot help doing good works. The builders in Jesus' story are not earning anything. One of them simply built on what he heard.

"No one can live the Sermon on the Mount perfectly." True, and Jesus did not tell a story about perfect people. One of his two sons said "I will not" before he went. The wise builder did not have a perfect house; he had a house on a foundation. What matters is the foundation you are building on.

BE FAIR:

Luther's "epistle of straw" line is famous, but he also wrote some of the strongest words in Christian history about faith that cannot stop doing good. He was arguing about what saves; he never said good works don't matter.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Neither objection changes the story Jesus told. Grace and imperfection are both real, and the builder on the rock still dug. If your faith has never cost you anything, which house are you standing in?

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Treating faith as agreement, with following Jesus left optional, contradicts the test he set: hearing and doing.

Measured against the center, a faith of agreement alone does not hold. Jesus did not praise people for believing correctly. He praised the builder who did what he heard and the son who changed his mind and went, and he asked, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do the things which I say?" A religion that asks for a decision and never for a changed life has kept his name and set aside his test.

This is hard news if your faith has mostly meant believing the right things. It does not mean grace is a wage you earn. It means grace is meant to build something. Following him here means choosing one thing he said and doing it this week, and then the next.

A keeper

1 min

Judge people, starting with yourself, by what they do more than by what they say. That is the plain point of both stories.

JOHN 13:17

17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

The son who said "I will not" and then went did the right thing; the one who said "Yes, sir" and stayed home did not. Promises are cheap. A changed habit is worth more than a hundred good intentions.

For you as a believer, this is the difference between admiring Jesus and following him. Pick one thing he said and build on it.

LIVING IT NOW:
Agreement is cheap online. Liking a verse, sharing a sermon clip or arguing about doctrine costs nothing. This week, trade one of those for a single act from Matthew 5–7 that no one will see: settle a grudge, give something quietly, keep a promise you'd rather break.

Reflect

2 min

Which of Jesus' teachings do you agree with but rarely do?

Think of someone whose faith you admire. Is it their beliefs you admire, or what they do?

If a storm hit your life tomorrow, what would you find your house is built on?

Practice this week

1 min

Read Matthew 5 through 7 again (in *Follow Me*, §19–40) and pick **one** command you agree with but are not doing. Keep it small and specific: pray for one person who has wronged you, or give something quietly without telling anyone, or settle one quarrel before Sunday. Do it this week. Next week, write down what happened.

Talk it over

1 min

- Where do you see "cheap grace" in your own life, and where do you see costly following?
- Why is agreeing with Jesus so much easier than doing what he said?
- What is one thing from Matthew 5–7 that you and a friend could each do this week, and compare notes on?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, I have heard your words many times. I want to do them, not only admire them. Show me one place this week to build on the rock, and give me the courage to dig deep. Amen.

Remember it



Hear it and do it. Matthew 7:24, at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them" builds on the rock.

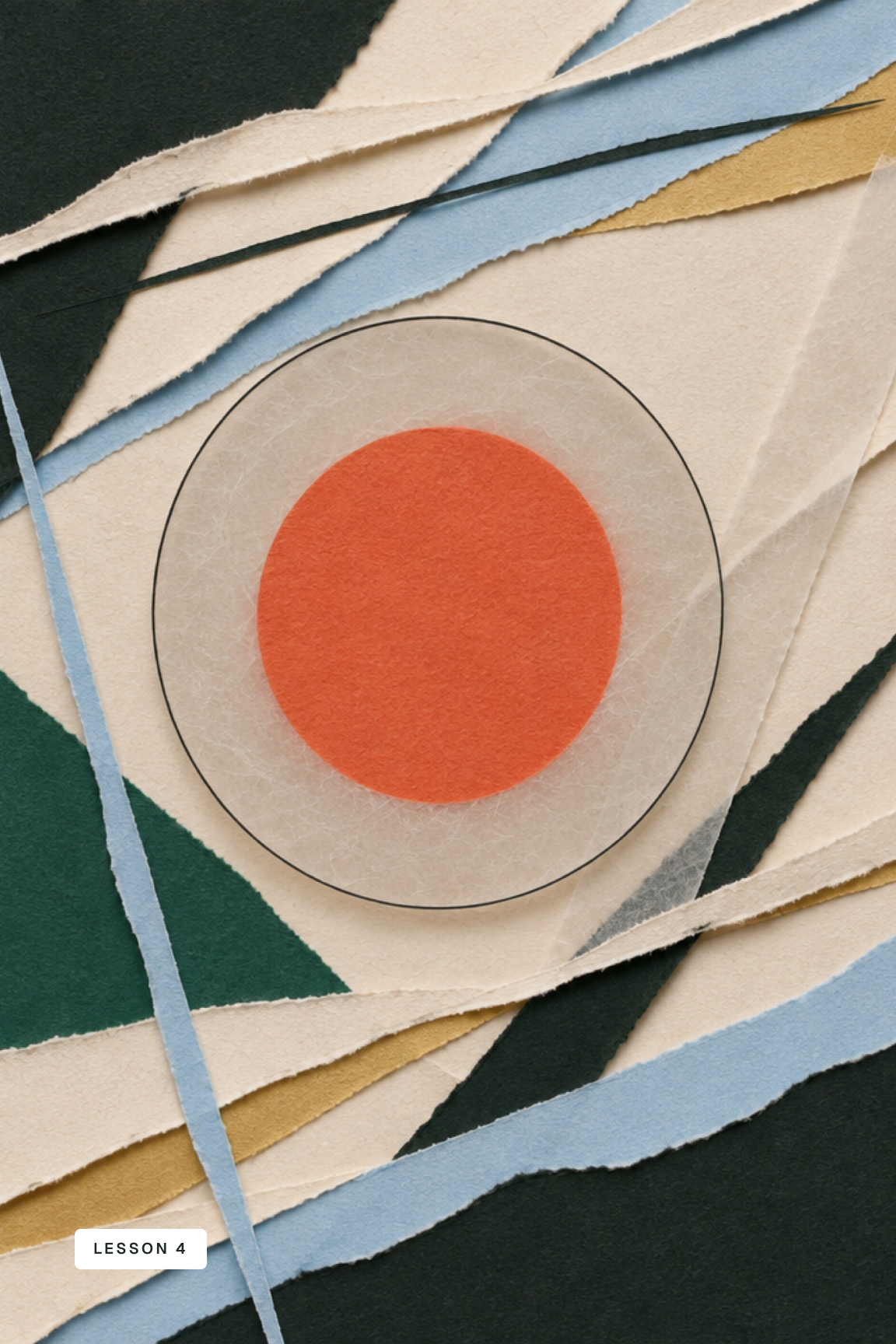
Solid and sliding: one dark shape stands firm while pale strips slide away beside it. The only difference was doing.

1. What was the only difference between the two builders?
2. What did Bonhoeffer call "grace without discipleship"?
3. In the story of the two sons, which one did his father's will?

1. One did what he heard; the other only heard (Matthew 7:24-27). 2. "Cheap grace." 3. The one who said "I will not" and then went (Matthew 21:29-31).

Sources

1. Martin Luther, Preface to the New Testament (1522), on James as "an epistle of straw"; Preface to the Epistle to the Romans (1522), on faith as "a living, busy, active, mighty thing." Luther's Works, vol. 35.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937; trans. R. H. Fuller, 1959), ch. 1. Arrest and execution: Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (2000).


LESSON 4

4

How Jesus Read the Bible

LENS About 25 minutes

If Jesus sat beside you with an open Bible, which parts would he read first?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/04

MATTHEW 9:13

But you go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Jesus had a Bible: the Law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms. He heard them read aloud every Sabbath and quoted them constantly. So it is fair to ask how he read them. Did every line carry the same weight, or did he have a key?

This lesson shows how Jesus read the rest of Scripture, so we can read it the same way. Be ready: he read it very differently from the way many of us were taught. Being Centered means reading your Bible the way he read his.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

In his hometown synagogue, Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah. He chose the passage himself.

LUKE 4:16-21

16 He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. He entered, as was his custom, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day,
and stood up to read. 17 The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He opened the book, and found the place where it was
written, 18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has
anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to
heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed,
19 and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” 20 He closed
the book, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of
all in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began to tell
them, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

He was asked which commandment in the whole Law was the greatest. His answer gave a key to all of it.

MATTHEW 22:36-40

36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”
37 Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all
your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is

the first and great commandment. [39] A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [40] The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

When the religious leaders objected to him eating with tax collectors, he sent them back to their own Bible with an assignment.

MATTHEW 9:10-13

[10] As he sat in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. [11] When the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" [12] When Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. [13] But you go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

In the Sermon on the Mount, he quoted the Law six times and went deeper each time. Here are two of them.

MATTHEW 5:38-39

[38] "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' [39] But I tell you, don't resist him who is evil; but whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.

MATTHEW 5:43-45

[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44] But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, [45] that you may be

children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

The world behind the words

4 min

In Jesus' day, the question of how to read the Scriptures was alive and argued over. Teachers debated which commandments mattered most, and how to apply ancient laws to new situations. The Pharisees, often pictured as villains, were serious, devout readers who wanted every part of life to honor God. Jesus argued with them precisely because they cared so much about the same Scriptures he did.

Notice what Jesus did with the Law in the Sermon on the Mount. He began, "Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill" **Matthew 5:17**. Then, six times, he quoted a command and took it further. "You shall not murder" became a warning about anger. "An eye for an eye," a law first given to limit revenge **Exodus 21:24**, became "turn to him the other also." "Love your neighbor" became "love your enemies."

He did not read the Law as a list of rules to be applied one at a time. He read it for its purpose. When his disciples were criticized for picking grain on the Sabbath, he pointed to David, who once ate the holy bread of the Tabernacle when he was hungry, and he quoted the prophet Hosea a second time.

MATTHEW 12:7-8

7 But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you wouldn’t have condemned the guiltless. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

In Mark, he put it in one sentence: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" **Mark 2:27**.

He did the same with divorce. When the Pharisees pointed to the law of Moses that allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce **Deuteronomy 24:1**, Jesus did not deny that Moses wrote it. He explained why.

MARK 10:5-6

5 But Jesus said to them, “For your hardness of heart, he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female.

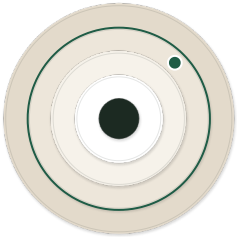
"For your hardness of heart." Jesus read even the words of Moses by asking what God intended "from the beginning," and he treated some laws as concessions to human weakness.

Look again at what he read in Nazareth. Isaiah's sentence ends: "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God" **Isaiah 61:2**. Jesus stopped reading in the middle of that sentence. He proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor, closed the scroll and sat down. He left the vengeance unread.

NOTICE:
Jesus never said the rest of the Bible doesn't matter. He said that loving God and loving your neighbor are what "the whole law and the prophets depend on." Everything else hangs on those two.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

Reading every verse as if it carried the same weight

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

Jesus was not the only teacher of his time to sum up Scripture this way. The Talmud tells a story about Hillel, one of the most respected rabbis of the generation before Jesus. A man came to him and asked to be taught the whole Torah while standing on one foot.

"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn it."

Hillel, in the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

Jesus said something very close: "Whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets" **Matthew 7:12.** Both teachers read the Scriptures with a center. Over the centuries, Christians often lost theirs, and the history runs in three stages.

Hidden meanings. Around 230, the brilliant scholar Origen of Alexandria taught that Scripture has layers, like a person has a body, a soul and a spirit: a literal sense, a moral sense and a spiritual one. Medieval teachers expanded this into four senses and taught it with a rhyme. Allegory produced beautiful readings, but it also meant almost any verse could be made to mean almost anything.

Single verses as weapons. Around 408, Augustine of Hippo defended using imperial force against a rival Christian group, the Donatists. One of the verses he leaned on was a line from a parable of Jesus about a ban-

quet: "compel them to come in" **Luke 14:23.** A sentence about a host filling his dinner table became a justification for coercion. Later centuries used the same verse the same way.

A flat Bible. The Reformers of the 1500s rejected allegory run wild and taught that "Scripture interprets Scripture": clear passages should explain unclear ones. Luther went further and gave a test for the whole Bible.

"All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books."

Martin Luther, Preface to James and Jude, 1522

In the modern era, many churches came to treat the Bible as a single, level collection of true statements. In 1978, more than two hundred evangelical leaders signed the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which affirms that Scripture is without error in all that it teaches. The statement itself asks readers to pay attention to each passage's literary form and to let Scripture interpret Scripture. But in popular use, the idea that every verse is equally true often slid into the idea that every verse is equally weighty, so that a line from Leviticus and a teaching of Jesus could be quoted as if they settled a question in the same way.

c. 20 BC–10 AD	Hillel teaches that love of neighbor is "the whole Torah; the rest is commentary."
c. 30	Jesus: "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."
c. 230	Origen describes literal, moral and spiritual senses of Scripture.
c. 408	Augustine uses "compel them to come in" to defend force against the Donatists.
1100s–1400s	Medieval teaching of the four senses of Scripture.
1520–1522	Luther: Scripture interprets itself; the test of every book is whether it preaches Christ.
1978	The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

Each step began as an honest attempt to honor the Bible: Origen wanted to find depth in every line, the Reformers wanted to free Scripture from human tradition, and modern defenders of inerrancy wanted to protect its trustworthiness. Along the way, the question Jesus asked about every passage, what is this for, often got lost. Luther's own test points back to it.

Honest objections

3 min

"Jesus said he didn't come to abolish the Law. You can't pick and choose." He did say that, and this lesson takes it seriously. But read the rest of the chapter: he "fulfills" the Law by going to its heart, not by applying each line the same way. He set aside the letter of the Sabbath for the sake of a hungry man and a sick one, and he treated the divorce law as a concession "for your hardness of heart." To read the way Jesus read is to follow his choices.

"All of the Bible is God's word, so all of it has equal authority." Many Christians believe the whole Bible is inspired, and this book does not ask anyone to stop. But even the Bible's own writers ranked its parts. Jesus named the greatest commandment and said the rest "depend on" it. He told the religious leaders to "go and learn" what "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice" means, putting one line from Hosea above the whole system of sacrifices. If Jesus weighed Scripture, then weighing it is not disrespect.

BE FAIR:

Origen was one of the most devoted scholars the church ever had, and allegory gave Christians many rich readings. The Chicago Statement does not tell anyone to ignore context. The drift lies in losing the center they all, in their own ways, were trying to protect.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Both objections end at the same place: Jesus weighed Scripture himself. If you read every verse as equally weighty, you are reading differently from the way he read.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Treating every verse as equally weighty contradicts how Jesus himself read Scripture: by its center, love of God and neighbor.

Measured against the center, the flat Bible does not hold. Jesus named the greatest commandment and said the rest depends on it. He sent experts back to learn "I desire mercy." He set aside the letter of the

Sabbath for hungry and sick people, called a law of Moses a concession to hard hearts, and closed the scroll before the day of vengeance. A way of reading that lets any verse settle any question is not his way.

This may be hard news if you were taught that "the Bible says it, and that settles it." It does not mean the rest of Scripture is worthless. It means Jesus is the lens. Following him here means asking of every passage what he asked: what is this for, and does it hang on love?

A keeper

1 min

When a rule and a person collide, choose the person. Jesus said it about the Sabbath, the most sacred rule of his day.

> MARK 2:27
>
> 27 He said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

Rules exist for people, not the other way around. "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice" works as a test in any setting: a workplace policy, a family rule, a church tradition. If keeping the rule means hurting the person it was meant to protect, mercy wins.

For you as a believer, this is how Jesus read your Bible. Read it the same way, and let mercy have the last word over any verse that seems to deny it.

LIVING IT NOW:

Verses fly around constantly: on social media, in political ads, in family group chats. Before you accept or share one, ask the two questions from this lesson. Does it hang on love of God and love of neighbor? How did Jesus read passages like it? If a verse is being used to hurt someone, mercy gets the last word.

Reflect

2 min

When you read a hard passage in the Bible, what question do you usually ask about it?

Is there a verse you have heard used to hurt someone? What would Jesus' "I desire mercy" do to that use of it?

Jesus stopped reading Isaiah before "the day of vengeance." Which parts of Scripture do you dwell on, and which do you skip past?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, whenever you read or hear a Bible verse, from a sermon, a post or a sign, ask two questions: **"Does this hang on love of God and love of neighbor?"** and **"How did Jesus read passages like this?"** Write down one verse where the answer surprised you.

Talk it over

1 min

- What would change if you read every passage through Matthew 22:40 (*Follow Me* §16)?
- Why do you think Jesus stopped reading before "the day of vengeance"?
- Can you think of a verse you've heard used the way Augustine used "compel them to come in"?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, you read the Scriptures with love at the center. Teach me to read them the way you did. When I come to a hard passage, help me ask what it is for, and lead me back to mercy. Amen.

Remember it



"Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy." Matthew 9:13. Jesus gave the religious experts homework, and the homework was one line from Hosea.

A lens over the center: a clear circle laid over the center, with loose strips scattered all around it. Read everything through him.

1. What did Jesus say the whole law and the prophets depend on?
2. What line did Jesus leave out when he read Isaiah in Nazareth?
3. What was Luther's test for every book of the Bible?

1. Loving God and loving your neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). 2. "The day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2). 3. Whether it preaches Christ.

Sources

1. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a (Hillel and the man standing on one foot).
2. Origen, *On First Principles* 4.2.4 (c. 230), on the three senses of Scripture.
3. The medieval four senses: the couplet "Littera gesta docet…" attributed to Augustine of Dacia (13th century). See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1 (1959; English 1998).
4. Augustine, Letter 93 to Vincentius (c. 408), and Letter 185 (c. 417), citing Luke 14:23 against the Donatists.
5. Martin Luther, *Assertio omnium articulorum* (1520), on Scripture as its own interpreter; Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude (1522), Luther's Works vol. 35, p. 396.
6. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (October 1978), Articles XII and XVIII. Accounts of the number of signers range from about 240 to 334.

PART 2

What He Put First

The teachings Jesus himself placed at the heart of everything, in his own words.


LESSON 5

5

The Two Greatest Commandments

TWO About 25 minutes

If everything you believe had to hang on two sentences, which two would they be?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/05

MATTHEW 22:40

The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Part one asked who is at the center. Part two asks what he put there. Jesus was asked that question directly, and he answered it in two sentences. Almost every Christian knows them by heart, and they are the most neglected.

You will probably agree with every verse in this lesson. That is the point. The question is not whether you believe the two greatest commandments. It is whether they are actually the greatest in the faith you were taught, or whether other things quietly took their place. To be Centered is to let these two sit above every other rule.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

In the last week of his life, Jesus was teaching in the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the religious experts were testing him with hard questions. One of them asked the hardest of all.

MARK 12:28-34

28 One of the scribes came and heard them questioning together,
and knowing that he had answered them well, asked him,
"Which commandment is the greatest of all?" 29 Jesus answered,
"The greatest is: 'Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
30 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all
your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is
the first commandment. 31 The second is like this: 'You shall love
your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment
greater than these." 32 The scribe said to him, "Truly, teacher, you
have said well that he is one, and there is none other but he;
33 and to love him with all the heart, with all the understanding,
all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as
himself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and
sacrifices." 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to
him, "You are not far from God's Kingdom." No one dared ask
him any question after that.

Matthew tells the same scene and adds one sentence that changes how to read everything else.

MATTHEW 22:37-40

37 Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all
your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is
the first and great commandment. 39 A second likewise is this,
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 The whole law and
the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

Both commandments come from the Law of Moses. Jesus did not invent them. He chose them, and put them above everything else.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-5

4 Hear, Israel: The LORD is our God. The LORD is one. 5 You shall
love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul,
and with all your might.

LEVITICUS 19:18

18 “‘You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the
children of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as
yourself. I am the LORD.

The world behind the words

4 min

The question was a live one. Jewish teachers counted many commandments in the Law of Moses; a later rabbinic tradition, recorded in the Talmud, numbered them at 613. Teachers debated which were "heavy" and which were "light," and whether the whole Law could be gathered into a few principles. The same Talmud passage tells how David and the prophets after him summed up the commandments in eleven, then six, then three, then two, then one. Asking Jesus for the greatest commandment was asking him to take a side in a serious argument.

His answer surprised no one in its parts and everyone in its shape. Loving God was the heart of the Shema, prayed twice daily. Loving your neighbor was a line from Leviticus, tucked between laws about fair wages and laws about mixing seeds. Jesus pulled the second up next to the first and said they belong together: "The second is like this." Then, in Matthew, he went further: "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." Every other command hangs from them like a door from its hinges.

The scribe in Mark understood. He answered that loving God and neighbor "is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices," which meant more important than the entire system of Temple worship he was standing in. Jesus told him, "You are not far from God's Kingdom."

Luke tells a version of the same exchange that ends with a question: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with a story.

LUKE 10:30-37

30 Jesus answered, “A certain man was going down from
Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both
stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.
31 By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he
saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 In the same way a
Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by
on the other side. 33 But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came
where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compas-
sion, 34 came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil
and wine. He set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn,
and took care of him. 35 On the next day, when he departed, he
took out two denarii, gave them to the host, and said to him,
‘Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay
you when I return.’ 36 Now which of these three do you think

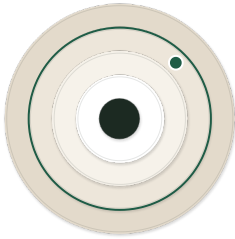
seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?”
37 He said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to
him, “Go and do likewise.”

The lawyer asked who counted as his neighbor, hoping for a limit. Jesus turned the question around. The neighbor is whoever acts like one, and the hero was the man everyone listening had been taught to despise.

CHECK IT IN YOUR OWN BIBLE:
Read Matthew 22:40 in your own translation, or §16 in *Follow Me*. Whatever the wording, the claim is the same: everything else in Scripture depends on these two.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

Rule lists that replaced the two commandments as the measure of faith

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

Two commandments are hard to measure. Did you love God with all your heart today? Did you love your neighbor as yourself? Rules are easier. You either did the forbidden thing or you didn't. Over the centuries, Christians kept returning to lists.

Between the 500s and 800s, monks in Ireland and Britain wrote handbooks called penitentials. They listed sins and the penance due for each one, often measured in days or years of fasting on bread and water. The handbooks spread across Europe. They were written to help priests guide people toward real repentance, but they turned the moral life into a ledger of offenses and payments. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council

required every adult Christian in the Western church to confess their sins to a priest at least once a year, and the ledger became a fixture of ordinary life.

Protestants rejected the confessional but kept the lists. Many churches in the 1800s and 1900s defined faithfulness by what members avoided: drinking, dancing, card playing, movies. Some lists went further and wrote prejudice into the rules. Bob Jones University, a leading fundamentalist school, banned interracial dating among its students until March 2000, defending the rule as biblical for decades.

c. 30	Jesus: "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."
500s–800s	Penitential handbooks list sins and their penances.
1215	The Fourth Lateran Council requires yearly confession.
1800s–1900s	Many Protestant churches define faithfulness by forbidden behaviors.
2000	Bob Jones University drops its ban on interracial dating.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

The penitentials and the behavior codes were usually meant to protect people and take sin seriously. But a list is easier to keep than a love, and over time, keeping the list began to feel like keeping the faith. The two commandments never left the Bible. They just stopped being the measure.

Honest objections

3 min

"Rules matter. Jesus didn't abolish the commandments." He didn't, and this lesson doesn't say he did. He said the rest of the Law hangs on these two. A rule that serves love fits. A rule that keeps people from loving, or treats outsiders as less than neighbors, hangs on nothing he said. Even

Paul, who wrote many of the rules churches quote, agreed: every commandment is "summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" **Romans 13:9-10.**

"Love is too vague. People need clear standards." Jesus did not leave it vague. When asked "Who is my neighbor?" he told a story with a specific answer: the person in front of you who needs help, especially if your group has taught you to despise them. Then he said, "Go and do likewise." That is a clear standard, and a harder one than any list.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Both objections are honest, and both answers land at the same place: Jesus named the two commandments everything else depends on. If any rule you were taught pulls against them, his words decide which one gives way.

Measured against the center

2 min

AN ADD-ON

Rule lists are not wrong in themselves, but making them the measure of faith has pushed aside the two commandments Jesus said everything depends on.

Measured against the center, most church rules are additions, not contradictions. Some come from the Law, some from tradition, some from a desire to protect people. But Jesus set a clear order, and wherever a list became the test of faithfulness, that order was reversed. Where a rule actually works against love, as the interracial dating ban did, it does more than add; it contradicts him.

This may be hard if you grew up measuring your faith by what you avoided. Those habits may have protected you, and you don't have to throw them out. But the question in his story is whom you loved, and

whether you crossed the road.

A keeper

1 min

The Good Samaritan works for anyone. The question it answers is not "who deserves my help?" but "who needs it, right here?" It asks you to cross the road, even toward someone your own side has taught you to dislike, and to treat their need the way you would want yours treated.

LUKE 10:36-37

36 Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?” 37 He said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

For you as a believer, this is the commandment Jesus said sits beside loving God. You cannot keep the first while skipping the second; as the First Letter of John puts it, a person who says "I love God" and hates his brother is "a liar" **1 John 4:20.**

LIVING IT NOW:

Your neighbor today includes the person on the other side of a political argument, the driver who cut you off and the coworker no one likes. Pick one of them this week and do one concrete good thing for them, the way the Samaritan stopped on the road. Then notice how little of your usual rule list you needed.

Reflect

2 min

If someone asked what your faith requires, what would you list first? Is it either of these two commandments?

Who is the "Samaritan" in your world, the person your group was taught to look down on?

Which rule from your upbringing has done the most good? Which has kept you from loving someone?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, do one thing for a neighbor you would normally pass by: someone outside your church, your politics or your comfort. Do it quietly. Then write down what it cost you and what it changed.

Talk it over

1 min

- Make a list of the things you were taught a good Christian must do or avoid. How many of them hang on the two greatest commandments?

- Who would be the Samaritan in a story told to people like you today?
- Why do you think lists of rules keep coming back, even among people who believe in grace?

A quiet moment

1 min

God, teach me to love you with everything I am, and my neighbor as myself. Show me the person on the road I have been passing by, and give me the courage to cross over. Amen.

Remember it



Two sentences, one hinge. Matthew 22:40: "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." Love God; love your neighbor. Everything else hangs from them.

Two bands, woven: one green band and one blue band, woven through each other. Love God; love your neighbor.

1. What two commandments did Jesus name as the greatest?
2. What did Jesus say depends on them in Matthew 22:40?
3. Who was the hero of the story Jesus told to answer "Who is my neighbor?"

1. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; love your neighbor as yourself. 2. "The whole law and the prophets." 3. A Samaritan, a man his listeners were taught to despise.

Sources

1. Babylonian Talmud, Makkot 23b–24a: Rabbi Simlai counts 613 commandments; David reduced them to eleven (Psalm 15), Isaiah to six (Isaiah 33:15), Micah to three (Micah 6:8), Isaiah to two (Isaiah 56:1), and Amos and Habakkuk to one (Amos 5:4; Habakkuk 2:4).
2. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (1938).
3. Fourth Lateran Council (1215), canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*.
4. Bob Jones University ended its interracial dating ban on March 3, 2000, announced by its president, Bob Jones III, on CNN's *Larry King Live*.


LESSON 6

6

Blessed

BLESSED About 25 minutes

Who do you think of when you hear the word "blessed"?



RATHER LISTEN?

Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.

backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/06

MATTHEW 5:3

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount opens with eight short sentences that begin the same way: "Blessed are..." They are among the most quoted words in history. They are also some of the most quietly ignored, because of who they call blessed.

Read them as if for the first time. Notice who Jesus names, and who he leaves out. Then ask whether the word "blessed," as it is used in your church and your family, still means what he meant by it. Being Centered means letting him define "blessed," not your feed.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

Jesus sat down on a hillside in Galilee, and his followers and a crowd gathered. Matthew records what he said first.

MATTHEW 5:1-12

1 Seeing the multitudes, he went up onto the mountain. When he
had sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 He opened his mouth
and taught them, saying, 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for
theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the gentle, for they
shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst
for righteousness, for they shall be filled. 7 Blessed are the merci-
ful, for they shall obtain mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they
shall be called children of God. 10 Blessed are those who have
been persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the
Kingdom of Heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people reproach
you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely,
for my sake. 12 Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your
reward in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets
who were before you.

Luke records a shorter version, spoken on a plain. It is blunter, and it adds four warnings.

LUKE 6:20-26

20 He lifted up his eyes to his disciples, and said: “Blessed are you
who are poor, for God’s Kingdom is yours. 21 Blessed are you who
hunger now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep
now, for you will laugh. 22 Blessed are you when men hate you,
and when they exclude and mock you, and throw out your name
as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap

for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven, for their fathers did the same thing to the prophets. 24 “But woe to you who are rich! For you have received your consolation. 25 Woe to you, you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 Woe, when men speak well of you, for their fathers did the same thing to the false prophets.

The world behind the words

4 min

The word translated "blessed" is the Greek *makarios*. It means fortunate, well off, to be congratulated. Jesus was congratulating the people no one congratulated. In a world where wealth, health and honor were widely taken as signs of God's favor, he said the opposite: the poor, the grieving, the hungry and the hated are the ones God is with.

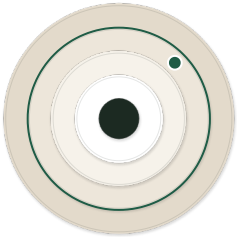
Matthew and Luke tell it differently, and the difference matters. Matthew has "the poor in spirit" and those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness." Luke has simply "you who are poor" and "you who hunger now," and then he adds four woes, to the rich, the full, the laughing and the well-spoken-of. Scholars debate which version is closer to Jesus' exact words. Read together, they show two sides of one teaching: God favors the humble heart, and God sides with people who are actually poor.

Then notice the qualities in Matthew's list. The gentle. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. None of these is a belief. Every one is a way of being with other people. This is Jesus describing the kind of person his Kingdom belongs to.

CHECK IT IN YOUR OWN BIBLE:
Count the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-10. How many describe something a person believes, and how many describe how a person lives?

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

Ways of setting his blessings aside: for monks, for later, for private life

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

The Beatitudes were never removed from the Bible. Instead, Christians found ways to admire them without having to live them. Three of those ways became official teaching.

For the specialists. Medieval theology distinguished commands binding on every Christian from "counsels of perfection," higher callings such as poverty and celibacy, meant for monks, nuns and others seeking a stricter life. Thomas Aquinas laid out the distinction in the 1200s. The most demanding parts of Jesus' teaching were often filed under counsels, admired in the monastery and treated as optional everywhere else.

For private life only. Martin Luther, preaching on the Sermon on the Mount in the early 1530s, argued that its commands govern a Christian as a private person, but not a Christian holding an office, such as a ruler, judge or soldier. In office, he taught, a Christian must use the sword. The Sermon was real, but its reach stopped at the door of public life.

For a later age. In the 1800s, a system of interpreting the Bible called dispensationalism, spread widely by the Scofield Reference Bible of 1909, taught that the Sermon on the Mount described the law of a future kingdom on earth. Its notes said the Sermon applied first to that future kingdom, and to the church today mainly as moral instruction. Millions of American Christians learned to read Jesus' longest teaching as being, first of all, for someone else.

And in the last generation, the word itself turned over. The prosperity teaching examined in Lesson 10 made "blessed" a word for money and comfort, and it is now common to see "#blessed" under a photo of a new car or a vacation. The word Jesus used for the poor and the grieving became a word for the comfortable.

c. 30	Jesus: "Blessed are the poor."
1200s	Aquinas distinguishes precepts for all from counsels for the few.
1530s	Luther: the Sermon governs private persons, not people in office.
1909	The Scofield Reference Bible teaches the Sermon is mainly for a future kingdom.
Today	"Blessed" means comfortable, and the poor are rarely called blessed.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

Each of these readings tried to answer a real question: can ordinary people live this, and how does it apply to government? Those questions deserve answers. But each answer moved the Beatitudes a step further from ordinary Christians, until it was possible to love these words and never be changed by them.

Honest objections

3 min

"'Poor in spirit' means humble, not actually poor." Matthew's wording does point to humility, and that reading is fair. But Luke records "you who are poor" and "woe to you who are rich," and both are in the same Bible. Christians don't get to keep Matthew's gentler version and drop Luke's. Read together, they say God is with the humble and with the poor, and that comfort can become a danger.

"The Sermon on the Mount is an impossible ideal, meant to show us we need grace." Many Christians have read it that way. But Jesus ended the Sermon with the builder who "hears these words of mine and does them" **Matthew 7:24**. He did not present it as a standard to fail. He presented it as a foundation to build on.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Every reading that delays or narrows the Beatitudes has a reason behind it. None of them comes from Jesus. He spoke to a crowd of ordinary people and told them who was blessed. They were meant to hear it as about them.

Measured against the center

2 min

AN ADD-ON

Treating the Beatitudes as for monks, for private life, or for a future age has added filters Jesus never gave, and they keep his blessings from reaching daily life.

Measured against the center, the Beatitudes stand exactly where Jesus put them: first, spoken to ordinary people, describing how his followers live. The filters added later do not contradict a single word of them; they simply decide the words are meant for someone else. And when "blessed" comes to mean prosperous, the meaning has been turned upside down.

This may unsettle you if you have read the Sermon as beautiful but out of reach. It was spoken to farmers and fishermen. Following him here means letting the Beatitudes describe your life, not just decorate your wall: merciful, gentle, making peace, and siding with the poor.

A keeper

1 min

The qualities Jesus called blessed are good ways to live for anyone. Be merciful. Be gentle. Make peace instead of keeping score. Sit with people who are grieving. Notice who the world forgets, and stand with them.

MATTHEW 5:7-9

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

For you as a believer, these are not distant ideals. They are the description of a disciple, given on the first page of his first sermon.

LIVING IT NOW:

Try a week without the word "blessed" for anything you bought or earned. Instead, look for the people Jesus called blessed: someone grieving, someone treated unfairly, someone trying to make peace. Do one thing for one of them, and don't post it.

Reflect

2 min

When your family or church says "blessed," what do they usually mean?

Which Beatitude describes you least right now? What would it look like to live it this week?

Have you ever treated the Sermon on the Mount as beautiful but not really for you? Why?

Practice this week

1 min

Choose one Beatitude and practice it every day for a week: make peace in one conflict, show mercy to one person who has wronged you, or sit with someone who is grieving. Write down what happened.

Talk it over

1 min

- Read Luke 6:20-26 (*Follow Me* §20) aloud together. Which line is hardest to hear? Why?
- Have you heard the Sermon on the Mount explained as "for later" or "impossible"? What did that do to how you read it?
- What would it look like for you and the people closest to you to be known for the Beatitudes?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, you called the poor, the grieving and the gentle blessed. Teach me to see people the way you see them. Make me merciful, make me a peacemaker, and keep me from calling comfort a blessing when you call it a danger. Amen.

Remember it



Blessed means the bottom of the ladder. Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Luke 6:20: "Blessed are you who are poor."

The ladder turned over: a stack of circles upside down, the largest at the top and the smallest at the point. Blessed are the poor.

1. What does the Greek word translated "blessed" mean?
2. What does Luke add after his four blessings?
3. Name one way Christians found to set the Beatitudes aside.

1. Fortunate, well off, to be congratulated. 2. Four woes: to the rich, the full, the laughing and the well-spoken-of. 3. Treating them as only for monks, only for private life, or only for a future kingdom.

Sources

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 108, a. 4, on precepts and counsels.
2. Martin Luther, sermons on Matthew 5–7 (preached 1530–1532, published 1532), *Luther's Works* vol. 21.
3. *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909; rev. 1917), note on Matthew 5:2: the Sermon "in its primary application gives neither the privilege nor the duty of the Church," though it has "a beautiful moral application to the Christian."


LESSON 7

7

Love Your Enemies

CHEEK About 25 minutes

Who is the person you would least want to be kind to?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/07

MATTHEW 5:44

But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you,

Of all the things Jesus taught, this may be the one most admired and least practiced. "Love your enemies" sounds noble in a sermon. It sounds very different when the enemy is real: a rival, an attacker, a nation, the other side.

This lesson asks you to read his words slowly and to take them as seriously as the first Christians did. You don't need anyone's permission to live them, inside a church or outside one; if you are Centered, this is simply where following him costs the most. Then the lesson asks how a faith founded on these words came to bless swords, crusades and contempt for opponents.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quoted the old rule of fair retaliation and went past it.

MATTHEW 5:38-48

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth
for a tooth.' 39 But I tell you, don't resist him who is evil; but who-
ever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.
40 If anyone sues you to take away your coat, let him have your
cloak also. 41 Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him
two. 42 Give to him who asks you, and don't turn away him who
desires to borrow from you. 43 "You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell
you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to
those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and
persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father who is
in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good,
and sends rain on the just and the unjust. 46 For if you love those
who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax col-
lectors do the same? 47 If you only greet your friends, what more
do you do than others? Don't even the tax collectors do the same?
48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is
perfect.

Luke records the same teaching, with a line that leaves no room for exceptions.

LUKE 6:27-36

27 “But I tell you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those
who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, and pray for those
who mistreat you. 29 To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer
also the other; and from him who takes away your cloak, don’t
withhold your coat also. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and
don’t ask him who takes away your goods to give them back
again. 31 “As you would like people to do to you, do exactly so to
them. 32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to
you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do
good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For
even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you
hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to
sinners, to receive back as much. 35 But love your enemies, and
do good, and lend, expecting nothing back; and your reward will
be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind
toward the unthankful and evil. 36 “Therefore be merciful, even
as your Father is also merciful.

The world behind the words

4 min

Jesus spoke these words in an occupied country. Roman soldiers were everywhere in Judea and Galilee, and the people listening had real enemies: soldiers, tax collectors, landlords, rival groups. Some of their neighbors wanted to rise up and drive Rome out by force, and within forty years of his death they did, and Jerusalem was destroyed.

Every example he chose came from that world. The scholar Walter Wink argued that a strike on the right cheek meant a blow with the back of the right hand, an insult, the way a master struck a servant. Being sued for your coat was the fate of the very poor, whose coat might be all they owned. And "Whoever compels you to go one mile" referred to Roman

practice: a soldier could force a civilian to carry his pack for a mile. Jesus said, carry it two. These were not abstract ideals. They were instructions for how to treat the occupying army.

Notice also what he quoted: "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." The first half is in the Law of Moses. The second half is not. It was a common attitude, and some groups wrote it down; one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in caves near the Dead Sea, instructs its members to love "all the sons of light" and hate "all the sons of darkness." Jesus named that attitude and overturned it. God, he said, "makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good."

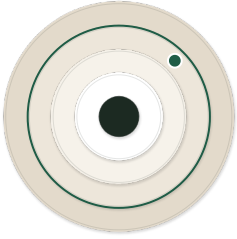
He lived it to the end. When Peter drew a sword to defend him at his arrest, Jesus stopped him: "Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take the sword will die by the sword" **Matthew 26:52**. And on the cross, Luke records him praying for the men executing him: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" **Luke 23:34**.

CHECK IT IN YOUR OWN BIBLE:

Read Luke 6:27-28 slowly (*Follow Me* §18). Count the commands: love, do good, bless, pray. Each one is aimed at someone who hates, curses or mistreats you.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

War blessed by the church, and opponents treated as enemies of God

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

For roughly the first three centuries, Christian writers whose words survive taught that Jesus' command ruled out killing. Justin Martyr, around 150, wrote that Christians who once killed one another now refused even to make war on their enemies. Tertullian, around 200, put it in one line: in disarming Peter, the Lord disarmed every soldier. Origen, around 248, answered a pagan critic by saying Christians served the emperor with prayer, not weapons.

Then the church met power. In 312 the Roman emperor Constantine won a battle after, by his account, seeing a Christian sign, and had it painted on his soldiers' shields. Within a lifetime Christianity was the favored religion of the empire, and the empire had wars to fight. Around 400, Augustine of Hippo, the most influential theologian of the Western church, developed what became the "just war" tradition: war could be right if waged by a proper authority, for a just cause, with right intentions.

The just-war idea was meant to restrain violence. Seven centuries later, it was stretched into something else. In 1095 Pope Urban II called the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont, promising crusaders the remission of their penance. In 1099 the crusaders took Jerusalem and slaughtered much of its population, Muslim and Jewish. Holy war had come full circle: the cross that had disarmed Peter was now sewn on soldiers' clothing.

The drift continues in a quieter form. In 2009, a Pew Research Center survey found that Americans who attended religious services at least weekly were more likely than those who seldom or never attended to say that torturing suspected terrorists could often or sometimes be justified.

c. 30	Jesus: "Love your enemies." "Put your sword back."
c. 150–250	Justin, Tertullian and Origen teach that Christians do not kill.
312	Constantine puts a Christian sign on his soldiers' shields.
c. 400	Augustine develops the just-war tradition.
1095–1099	The First Crusade; Jerusalem's people are massacred.
2009	A Pew survey finds weekly churchgoers more likely to say torture can be justified.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

Christians faced hard questions once they held power. What does a Christian ruler do when invaders come? The just-war tradition was an honest attempt to limit violence. But permission granted for hard cases spread, until churches blessed crusades and many believers came to see enemies as people to defeat, when he had told them to love them.

Honest objections

3 min

"Jesus told his disciples to buy swords." In Luke 22:36 he did say, "Whoever has none, sell his cloak and buy a sword." Two verses later the disciples show him two swords, and he says, "That is enough," and a few hours later, when one of those swords is used, he stops it and heals the wounded man. Whatever the sword saying meant, he did not let it be used to defend him.

"Loving enemies doesn't mean letting evil win. Governments must protect people." That is a serious argument, and Christians have made it in good faith for centuries. But it is an argument about governments, and Jesus was speaking to his followers. Even if a state may defend its

people, nothing in the just-war tradition permits a Christian to hate an opponent, wish them harm or cheer their suffering. That part of his teaching has no exceptions.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

You may hold that some force is necessary in a broken world. Many Christians do. But the burden falls on the exception, not on his words. "Love your enemies" stands without a footnote.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Teaching Christians to hate opponents, seek revenge or celebrate violence against enemies contradicts the plainest command Jesus gave about enemies.

Measured against the center, there is little room for argument, and this is a contradiction, not an add-on. Jesus said love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you, and put away the sword. The first Christians took him literally. Crusades, revenge and contempt for opponents in his name are not additions to his teaching; they are its reversal.

This is hard, because enemies are real and fear is real. But you cannot follow him and hate the people he told you to love. Following him here looks small and specific: pray by name for the person you most resent, and refuse to speak of opponents with contempt.

A keeper

1 min

"Love your enemies" is the hardest teaching here, and one of the most powerful in practice. It does not mean pretending wrong is right. It means refusing to return hatred, wishing your enemy well, and doing them good when you can.

LUKE 6:27-28

27 “But I tell you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those
who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, and pray for those
who mistreat you.

Martin Luther King Jr. built a movement on these verses. In his sermon "Loving Your Enemies," first preached in 1957 and published in *Strength to Love* in 1963, he wrote: "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

For you as a believer, this is the mark Jesus said would make you "children of your Father." It is the place where following him costs the most and shows the most.

LIVING IT NOW:

Pick one person you think of as an opponent: a relative across the political line, a coworker, a public figure you can't stand. This week, don't mock them online or at the dinner table, and do one concrete good for someone on the other side. That is what loving an enemy looks like on an ordinary Tuesday.

Reflect

2 min

Who is your enemy right now: a person, a group, a side? What would it mean to pray for them by name?

Have you ever cheered when someone you dislike suffered? What did Jesus say about that?

Where have you heard Christians bless violence or contempt? Did anyone question it?

Practice this week

1 min

Choose the person you resent most. Every day this week, pray for them by name, asking good things for them. Do one kind thing for them if you can. Write down how your feelings change, or don't.

Talk it over

1 min

- The first Christians refused to kill. Why do you think that changed after Constantine?

- How do Christians you know speak about their political opponents? How would Jesus speak about them?
- What would loving an enemy look like for the two or three of you this month, in one specific act?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, you prayed for the people who crucified you. I cannot love my enemies on my own. Give me your heart toward the person I resent, help me wish them good, and keep me from hatred, even when I feel I have a right to it. Amen.

Remember it



Love the enemy. Matthew 5:44: "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you." The one who said it prayed for his executioners.

Two circles, overlapping: a dark circle and a coral circle meet, and where they overlap the paper turns to gold. Love the enemy.

1. What did Jesus say to Peter when Peter drew his sword?
2. What did the earliest Christian writers teach about killing?
3. What did a Roman soldier have the right to make a civilian do, and what did Jesus say to do?

1. "Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). 2. That Christians do not kill; in disarming Peter, Jesus disarmed every soldier. 3. Carry his pack one mile. Carry it two (Matthew 5:41).

Sources

1. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress Press, 1992), ch. 9, on the backhanded slap and the soldier's mile; compare Mishnah, Bava Kamma 8:6.
2. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 39 (c. 150).
3. Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19 (c. 200).
4. Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.73 (c. 248).
5. Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 44, on Constantine's sign (312).
6. Augustine, *Against Faustus* 22.74–75; *City of God* 19.7.
7. Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont (1095), as reported by Fulcher of Chartres; the capture of Jerusalem (1099): Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade* (2004).
8. Dead Sea Scrolls, *Community Rule* (1QS) 1.9–10, in Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*.
9. Pew Research Center, "The Religious Dimensions of the Torture Debate," April 29, 2009.
10. Martin Luther King Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," in *Strength to Love* (1963). The sentence is in the 1963 published text; the earlier version preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, on November 17, 1957 (King Papers Project, Stanford) does not contain it.


LESSON 8

8

In Secret

DOOR About 25 minutes

If no one ever found out about the good you do, would you still do it?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/08

MATTHEW 6:6

But you, when you pray, enter into your inner room, and having shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Most religion is public. There are buildings with names on them, prayers said into microphones, giving announced from the front, and faith worn on shirts, bumpers and social media profiles. It can feel strange to learn that Jesus taught almost the opposite.

This lesson walks through one short passage where he tells his followers how to give, pray and fast. Read it slowly. It may be the most practical thing he ever said, and one of the most ignored. Being Centered starts here: faith between you and God, not a performance for anyone else.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes three things every devout person of his day did, giving to the poor, praying and fasting, and says the same thing about each.

MATTHEW 6:1-4

1 "Be careful that you don't do your charitable giving before men,
to be seen by them, or else you have no reward from your Father
who is in heaven. 2 Therefore, when you do merciful deeds, don't
sound a trumpet before yourself, as the hypocrites do in the syn-
agogues and in the streets, that they may get glory from men.
Most certainly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But
when you do merciful deeds, don't let your left hand know what
your right hand does, 4 so that your merciful deeds may be in se-
cret, then your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

MATTHEW 6:5-8

5 "When you pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites, for they
love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of
the streets, that they may be seen by men. Most certainly, I tell
you, they have received their reward. 6 But you, when you pray,
enter into your inner room, and having shut your door, pray to
your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret
will reward you openly. 7 In praying, don't use vain repetitions as
the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their
much speaking. 8 Therefore don't be like them, for your Father
knows what things you need before you ask him.

Then he gives a short prayer as a pattern. It takes less than a minute to say.

MATTHEW 6:9-13

9 Pray like this: “‘Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept
holy. 10 Let your Kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth
as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 Forgive us
our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. 13 Bring us not into
temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the
Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.’

MATTHEW 6:16-18

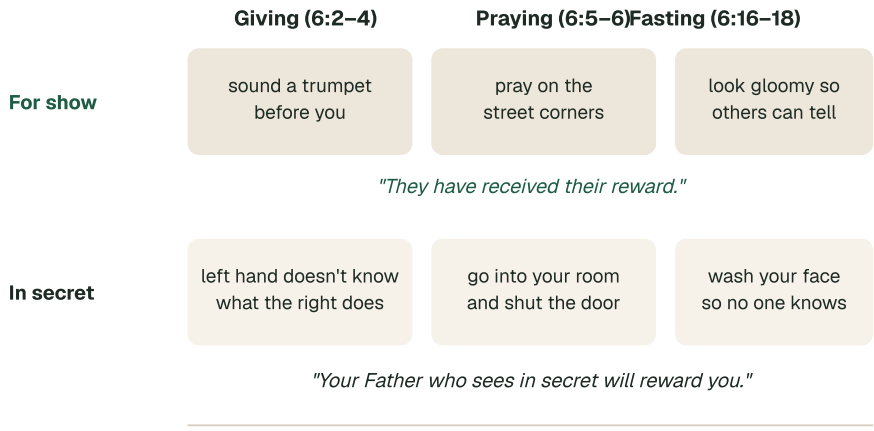
16 “Moreover when you fast, don’t be like the hypocrites, with sad
faces. For they disfigure their faces that they may be seen by
men to be fasting. Most certainly I tell you, they have received
their reward. 17 But you, when you fast, anoint your head and
wash your face, 18 so that you are not seen by men to be fasting,
but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father, who sees in
secret, will reward you.

He told a story about two men at prayer, aimed at people "who were convinced of their own righteousness."

LUKE 18:9-14

9 He also spoke this parable to certain people who were con-
vinced of their own righteousness, and who despised all others:
10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee,
and the other was a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and
prayed by himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like
the rest of men: extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even
like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that
I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far away, wouldn’t even lift

up his eyes to heaven, but beat his chest, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”



The same pattern three times: a public version, a hidden version, and two different rewards.

Matthew 6:1–18. Each practice has a version done for an audience and a version done in secret.

The world behind the words

4 min

In Jesus' world, giving, praying and fasting were the three pillars of a devout life, and they were good things. He never told anyone to stop doing them. What he attacked was doing them for an audience.

The Greek word he used for the people he criticized, *hypokritēs*, was the ordinary word for an actor on a stage. Actors wore masks and played to a crowd. Jesus' charge was that some religious people did the same: they prayed where they would be noticed, gave where it would be announced, and fasted so others could see it on their faces. His verdict on them is short and a little chilling: "they have received their reward." They wanted to be seen, they were seen, and that was all they would get.

He saved some of his harshest words for the same thing in religious leaders: "They do all their works to be seen by men... and love the place of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues" **Matthew 23:5-7**. In Mark he warned about teachers who "for a pretense make long prayers" while they "devour widows' houses" **Mark 12:38-40**.

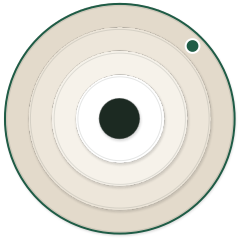
His own habit matched his teaching. Mark records that "early in the morning, while it was still dark, he rose up and went out, and departed into a deserted place, and prayed there" **Mark 1:35**. And the prayer he taught is remarkably short. Luke's version is shorter still **Luke 11:1-4**. The closing line many churches say, "For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever," is not in the oldest manuscripts of Matthew; it was added later for use in worship.

CHECK IT IN YOUR OWN BIBLE:

Many Bibles mark Matthew 6:13's closing line with a footnote saying it is missing from the earliest manuscripts. Look for it. Then count how long the Lord's Prayer takes to say.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 4: MODERN MOVEMENTS

Faith performed for an audience, and public prayer as a political badge

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

The pull toward performance started early. Within a century, a Christian manual called the Didache told believers to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day and to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, not on Mondays and Thursdays "with the hypocrites." The intent was devotion, but fasting had already become a matter of which days you were seen doing it.

By the Middle Ages, public giving had become a transaction. The church sold indulgences, certificates that promised to reduce punishment for sin, and the money paid for public buildings and church projects. In 1517 a preacher named Johann Tetzel was selling them to raise funds for the new St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. A young monk named Martin Luther objected in his Ninety-five Theses, and one of them is pure Matthew 6.

"Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences."

Martin Luther, Ninety-five Theses, Thesis 43 (1517)

In the twentieth century, public prayer became a matter of national identity. During the Cold War, American leaders wanted to set the country apart from the officially atheist Soviet Union. Congress established a National Day of Prayer in 1952. The first National Prayer Breakfast, with President Eisenhower attending, was held in 1953. "Under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, and "In God We Trust" became the national motto in 1956. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1962 that public schools could not lead students in official prayer, the fight over public prayer became one of the defining issues of American politics.

c. 30	Jesus: pray behind a shut door; give so your left hand doesn't know.
c. 100	The Didache sets prayer three times a day and fixed fast days.
1517	Indulgences sold for St. Peter's Basilica; Luther's Thesis 43 objects.
1952–1956	National Day of Prayer, Prayer Breakfast, "under God," "In God We Trust."
1962	The Supreme Court ends official school-led prayer (*Engel v. Vitale*).
Today	Public prayer and displays of faith are used as political signals.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

Most public expressions of faith began sincerely: a nation wanting to honor God, a church wanting to encourage generosity, believers wanting to stand up for what they believe. But each one moved prayer and giving toward an audience, and Jesus was specific about what happens then: you get the audience's reward, and that is all.

Honest objections

3 min

"Jesus said to let your light shine so people see your good works." He did, in the same sermon: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" **Matthew 5:16**. Read the end of that sentence. The light points people to God, not to you. Kindness that can't be hidden is one thing. Piety staged so you'll be admired is another, and Matthew 6 is about the second.

"Jesus prayed in public too." He sometimes did. He blessed the bread before feeding a crowd **Mark 6:41** and prayed aloud at a friend's tomb. What concerned him was the audience: who the prayer is really for. He

never asked the government to pray for him, and he never used prayer to show which side he was on.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:
Both objections are fair, and the answer to both comes from the same chapter: what matters is who you are doing it for. If a practice of faith only makes sense when someone is watching, it is aimed at the wrong person.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Performing faith for an audience, and using prayer as a public or political badge, contradicts Jesus' direct instruction to give, pray and fast in secret.

Measured against the center, this one is plain, and it is a contradiction, not an add-on. Jesus named three practices, described a public version and a private version of each, and said the public version has already received its whole reward. Faith displayed to be admired, and prayer used to mark which side you are on, are what he warned against.

This may sting if public faith has felt like courage to you. Standing for what you believe is not wrong. But following him here means letting the most important parts of your faith be the ones no one sees: the gift no one hears about, the prayer behind a closed door.

A keeper

1 min

Do good quietly. Give without announcing it. Help without needing credit. Let the best things you do be the ones no one finds out about.

MATTHEW 6:3-4

3 But when you do merciful deeds, don't let your left hand know
what your right hand does, 4 so that your merciful deeds may be
in secret, then your Father who sees in secret will reward you
openly.

The same wisdom runs through other traditions. The medieval Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides ranked the ways of giving to the poor, and placed near the top giving where the giver and the receiver do not know each other's names, so that no one is shamed and no one is praised.

For you as a believer, this is how he said your Father sees you: in secret. The quiet gift is not less faithful than the public one. By his words, it is more.

LIVING IT NOW:

This week, give something no one will ever hear about: not on a church form, not on social media, not mentioned at dinner. Then notice the urge to tell someone. Letting that urge pass is the practice.

Reflect

2 min

Which parts of your faith would continue unchanged if no one ever saw them? Which might not?

Have you ever given or prayed partly so that others would notice? What did that feel like?

The Lord's Prayer takes under a minute. What do you think Jesus meant by "don't use vain repetitions"?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, do one generous thing that no one will ever know about: not your family, not your church, not on social media. Then each day, spend a few minutes praying alone behind a closed door, using the Lord's Prayer as your pattern. Notice what changes when there is no audience.

Talk it over

1 min

- What would change in your own giving if no one ever knew about it?
- Why do you think public prayer became such a political issue after 1962?
- How could the two or three of you practice Matthew 6 this month, in a way no one else would ever see?

A quiet moment

1 min

Father, you see in secret. Free me from needing to be seen. Let my giving be quiet, my prayer honest, and my faith aimed at you, not at an audience. Amen.

Remember it



Shut the door. Matthew 6:6: "Enter into your inner room, and having shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret."

Behind the fold: a small green point almost hidden behind a folded flap of paper. Shut the door.

1. What does the Greek word for "hypocrite" originally mean?
2. What did Jesus say the people who pray to be seen have already received?
3. Which line of the Lord's Prayer is missing from the oldest manuscripts of Matthew?

1. A stage actor. 2. "Their reward" (Matthew 6:5). 3. "For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever."

Sources

1. *Didache* 8.1–3 (late 1st or early 2nd century).
2. Martin Luther, *Ninety-five Theses* (1517), Thesis 43; on Tetzel and the St. Peter's indulgence, see Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (1950), ch. 4.
3. National Day of Prayer: Public Law 82-324 (1952). National Prayer Breakfast, February 5, 1953. "Under God" added to the Pledge, June 14, 1954. National motto, July 30, 1956. See Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God* (2015).
4. *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962).
5. Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7–14 (12th century).



LESSON 9

9

The Least of These

LEAST About 25 minutes

Who is the person in your life who could never pay you back?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/09

MATTHEW 25:40

"The King will answer them, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

Jesus told one story about how people will finally be judged, and it surprises almost everyone who reads it closely. No one is asked what they believed, which church they attended or how often they prayed. They are asked whether they fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and the prisoner.

This lesson asks you to read that story slowly and let it measure you. Then it looks at how Christians, over the centuries, learned to sort the poor into those who deserve help and those who do not, a sorting Jesus never made. You need no one's permission to do what it asks.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

Near the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus describes the final judgment.

MATTHEW 25:31-46

31 "But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy
angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.
32 Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will sepa-
rate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep
from the goats. 33 He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the
goats on the left. 34 Then the King will tell those on his right
hand, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom pre-
pared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hun-
gry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me
drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. 36 I was naked and
you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison
and you came to me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer him,
saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or
thirsty and give you a drink? 38 When did we see you as a
stranger and take you in, or naked and clothe you? 39 When did
we see you sick or in prison and come to you?' 40 "The King will
answer them, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one
of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' 41 Then he will
say also to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed,
into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his an-
gels; 42 for I was hungry, and you didn't give me food to eat; I was
thirsty, and you gave me no drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you
didn't take me in; naked, and you didn't clothe me; sick, and in
prison, and you didn't visit me.' 44 "Then they will also answer,

saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn't help you?' 45 "Then he will answer them, saying, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you didn't do it to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.' 46 These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

He gave his hosts practical advice about whom to invite to dinner.

LUKE 14:12-14

12 He also said to the one who had invited him, "When you make a dinner or a supper, don't call your friends, nor your brothers, nor your kinsmen, nor rich neighbors, or perhaps they might also return the favor, and pay you back. 13 But when you make a feast, ask the poor, the maimed, the lame, or the blind; 14 and you will be blessed, because they don't have the resources to repay you. For you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous."

And he told a story about a rich man and a beggar at his gate.

LUKE 16:19-25

19 "Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. 20 A certain beggar, named Lazarus, was taken to his gate, full of sores, 21 and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Yes, even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The beggar died, and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far off, and Lazarus at his bosom. 24 He cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue! For I am in anguish in this flame.' 25 "But

> Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you, in your lifetime, received your good things, and Lazarus, in the same way, bad things. But here he is now comforted and you are in anguish.

At the very start of his public life, reading in his hometown synagogue, Jesus chose a passage from the prophet Isaiah to describe what he had come to do.

> **LUKE 4:18**
>
> 18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed,

The world behind the words

4 min

The people around Jesus knew poverty up close. Most of Galilee lived on small farms or by fishing and day labor, and one bad harvest or one illness could push a family into debt, then into selling their land, then into begging. The sick, the disabled and widows often had no income at all. Beggars sat at city gates and outside the homes of the rich, exactly where Lazarus lies in the story.

Many listeners had also absorbed a common belief: if you were poor or sick, you or your parents must have done something to deserve it. Jesus' own disciples once asked him about a man born blind, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" **John 9:2.** Jesus rejected the question.

Against that background, his teaching was startling. In the sheep and the goats, the king does not say the hungry represent him, or remind him of himself. He says, "I was hungry." Whatever is done to "the least of these" is done to him. And neither group knew it. The righteous are sur-

prised to learn they had served him; the others are shocked to learn they had ignored him. Both were judged by what they did for people who could give them nothing.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus makes the same point from the other side. Apart from Abraham, who appears in the same story, Lazarus is the only character in any of Jesus' parables who is given a name. The rich man is not. He is not accused of cheating anyone. He simply lived in luxury every day while a sick man lay at his gate, and he never crossed the few steps between them.

NOTICE:

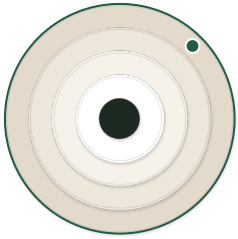
The dinner advice in Luke 14 has a reason attached: invite those who "don't have the resources to repay you." Jesus did not tell his followers to help the poor who deserved it. He told them to help the ones who could never pay them back.

CHECK IT IN YOUR OWN BIBLE:

Read Matthew 25:35-36 (*Follow Me* §134) and count the six needs Jesus names. Then notice what is missing from the list of questions the king asks.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 4: MODERN MOVEMENTS

The poor sorted into deserving and undeserving

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

The first Christians took these words literally, and it showed. The book of Acts describes the early church in Jerusalem selling property so that "neither was there among them any who lacked" **Acts 4:34.** Three centuries later, the Roman emperor Julian, who had abandoned Christianity and was trying to revive the old Roman religion, complained in a letter to one of his priests that the Christians were winning converts by their charity.

"For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galilaeans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us."

The emperor Julian, Letter to Arsacius (c. 362)

Around the same time, Basil of Caesarea, a bishop in what is now Turkey, built a complex outside his city with lodging for travelers and care for the sick and the poor, one of the early forerunners of the hospital.

Over the following centuries a different idea grew. Helping the poor became tied to a question: did they deserve it? England's Poor Laws turned the question into law. The 1601 Act for the Relief of the Poor distinguished the "impotent poor," who could not work, from the able-bodied, who were to be set to work. In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act made relief available mainly inside workhouses, harsh places meant to make asking for help a last resort.

By then a popular saying had taken hold: "God helps those who help themselves." It sounds like Scripture, and many people assume it is. It is not in the Bible. The English political writer Algernon Sidney used the line in his *Discourses Concerning Government*, written in the early 1680s and published in 1698, and Benjamin Franklin made it famous in *Poor Richard's Almanack* in 1736. The idea behind it has deep roots in Greek fables, not in the Gospels.

The sorting continues. In a 2017 Washington Post and Kaiser Family Foundation survey, Christians were more likely than non-Christians to say that a person's poverty is generally the result of a lack of effort rather than of difficult circumstances.

c. 30	Jesus: "I was hungry and you gave me food to eat."
c. 362	The emperor Julian complains that Christians feed pagan poor as well as their own.
c. 370	Basil of Caesarea builds care for the sick, the poor and travelers.
1601	England's Poor Law sorts the poor into those unable to work and the able-bodied.
1736	Franklin's almanac popularizes "God helps those who help themselves."
1834	England's New Poor Law sends the poor to workhouses.
2017	A survey finds Christians more likely to blame poverty on lack of effort.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

The question "Do they deserve it?" usually starts as a reasonable worry about being responsible with limited resources. Communities wanted to help those truly in need and not be taken advantage of. But over time the worry hardened into suspicion, and suspicion made it easy to walk past. Jesus never told his followers to check first.

Honest objections

3 min

"Paul said, 'If anyone is not willing to work, don't let him eat.'" He did, in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, writing to a church where some members had stopped working, apparently expecting the world to end soon. It was a word to church members who could work and refused. It was never a

test to apply to the hungry stranger, the sick or the prisoner before helping them. And it is Paul's instruction to one congregation, not a saying of Jesus, who set no conditions.

"Jesus himself said, 'You always have the poor with you.'" In Matthew 26:11 he said it to defend a woman who had poured expensive perfume on him. He was quoting Deuteronomy 15:11, and the verse he quoted goes on: "Therefore I command you to surely open your hand to your brother, to your needy, and to your poor." Using his words as a reason to stop helping turns them upside down.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Both objections are real verses, and both, read in context, end where Jesus did: open your hand. If a rule about the poor would have let the rich man walk past Lazarus, it is not his rule.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Treating the poor as having brought it on themselves, and helping only those who deserve it, contradicts the test Jesus himself said all people will face.

Measured against the center, this is not close, and it is a contradiction, not an add-on. Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner, and said that what is done to them is done to him. He told his followers to invite people who cannot repay them. He named the beggar and left the rich man nameless. A faith that sorts the poor by merit before it helps them has replaced his command with a test he never set.

This may be hard to hear, especially if you have worked hard for everything you have. Hard work is good. But Jesus did not ask whether the hungry person had worked hard. He said, "I was hungry." Following him here means helping first and leaving the judging to God.

A keeper

1 min

Treat the person who can't repay you as if they were the most important person you will meet today. That is the whole teaching of this lesson in one line, and it works whatever you believe.

MATTHEW 25:40

40 “The King will answer them, ‘Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

It changes small things first: who you invite, whom you notice, whom you sit beside. The person in your life who can do nothing for you is the clearest test of who you are.

For you as a believer, this is not a side ministry. In his own words, it is where you meet him.

LIVING IT NOW:

Learn the name of one person in your week who can do nothing for you: the cashier, the man at the intersection, the new neighbor. Then do one thing for them they can't repay. Being Centered is that ordinary.

Reflect

2 min

Who in your life could never pay you back? When did you last give them your time?

Have you ever decided someone did not deserve help? What did you base that on?

If the king in Matthew 25 asked you about this past month, what would you say?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, do one thing for someone who cannot repay you, and tell no one. Buy a meal, visit someone who is alone, or give to someone who asks. Before you do it, notice whether you want to decide first if they deserve it. Write down what you noticed.

Talk it over

1 min

- Why is it so easy to decide who deserves help? Where does that instinct come from?
- Julian complained that Christians fed even pagan poor. What would an outsider say about how the Christians you know treat the poor today?
- What is one thing you and a friend could do this month for someone who can never repay you?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, you said you are the hungry, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner. Open my eyes to you in people I would rather not see. Take away my need to decide who deserves my help, and make me generous the way you are. Amen.

Remember it



Done to me. Matthew 25:40: "Because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." The one test at the judgment is how you treated people who had nothing.

The small one, given the color: one small coral dot low on the page, the only warm color on it. Done to me.

1. In Matthew 25, what six needs does the king name?
2. Who coined "God helps those who help themselves," and is it in the Bible?
3. Besides Abraham, which character in Jesus' parables is the only one given a name?

1. Hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison. 2. Algernon Sidney used it and Benjamin Franklin popularized it; it is not in the Bible. 3. Lazarus, the beggar at the rich man's gate (Luke 16:20).

Sources

1. Julian, Letter to Arsacius, high priest of Galatia (c. 362), in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, vol. 3, trans. W. C. Wright, Loeb Classical Library (1923), Letter 22.
2. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 43.63, on Basil's foundation outside Caesarea.
3. Act for the Relief of the Poor, 43 Elizabeth I c. 2 (1601); Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 (4 & 5 Will. IV c. 76).
4. Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government* (written c. 1681–1683, published 1698), ch. 2, sec. 23; Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1736), "God helps them that help themselves."
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PART 3

Measured Against Him

Two teachings heard in churches every week, set beside what he actually said.


LESSON 10

10

Wealth as Blessing

CAMEL About 25 minutes

Is money a sign that God is pleased with you, or a weight you are carrying?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/10

LUKE 6:24

"But woe to you who are rich! For you have received your consolation.

You have probably heard some version of it. God wants you to prosper. Give faithfully and he will give back more. It is preached on television and said sincerely in churches every Sunday. Jesus talked about money as often as almost anything, so it is easy to measure against the center.

Did Jesus ever treat wealth as a sign of God's approval? You may have heard that he did from a pulpit you trust. Read what he actually said. You don't need any institution's approval to read it plainly, or to live it. The answer is plain.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A

quiet moment

Read it

3 min

Start with the man who walked away sad. He had kept every commandment since he was young. Mark adds a detail the other Gospels leave out: Jesus looked at him and loved him.

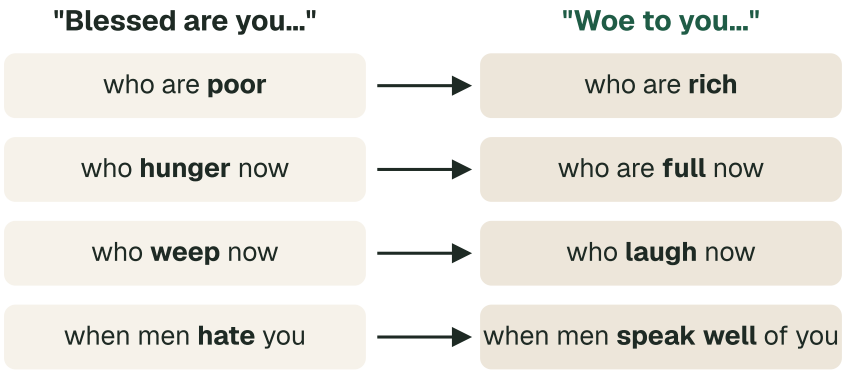
MARK 10:17-27

17 As he was going out into the way, one ran to him, knelt before
him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may in-
herit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me
good? No one is good except one—God. 19 You know the com-
mandments: ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not
steal,’ ‘Do not give false testimony,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honor your
father and mother.’” 20 He said to him, “‘Teacher, I have observed
all these things from my youth.” 21 Jesus looking at him loved
him, and said to him, “One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you
have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven;
and come, follow me, taking up the cross.” 22 But his face fell at
that saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one who had
great possessions. 23 Jesus looked around and said to his disci-
ples, “How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into
God’s Kingdom!” 24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But
Jesus answered again, “Children, how hard it is for those who
trust in riches to enter into God’s Kingdom! 25 It is easier for a
camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter
into God’s Kingdom.” 26 They were exceedingly astonished, say-
ing to him, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus, looking at them,
said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God, for all things
are possible with God.”

Luke records a sermon in which Jesus pairs every blessing with a woe. Read the two halves side by side.

LUKE 6:20-26

20 He lifted up his eyes to his disciples, and said: “Blessed are you
who are poor, for God’s Kingdom is yours. 21 Blessed are you who
hunger now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep
now, for you will laugh. 22 Blessed are you when men hate you,
and when they exclude and mock you, and throw out your name
as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake. 23 Rejoice in that day and leap
for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven, for their fa-
thers did the same thing to the prophets. 24 “But woe to you who
are rich! For you have received your consolation. 25 Woe to you,
you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who
laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 Woe, when men
speak well of you, for their fathers did the same thing to the false
prophets.



Luke 6:20–26. Each blessing has a matching woe. The people the world envies stand on the woe side.

He said plainly that money is a rival master.

MATTHEW 6:24

24 “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You can’t serve both God and Mammon.

And he told a story about a farmer whose fields did so well that he ran out of room.

LUKE 12:16-21

16 He spoke a parable to them, saying, “The ground of a certain rich man produced abundantly. 17 He reasoned within himself, saying, ‘What will I do, because I don’t have room to store my crops?’ 18 He said, ‘This is what I will do. I will pull down my barns, build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 I will tell my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years. Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.”’ 20 “But God said to him, ‘You foolish one, tonight your soul is required of you. The things which you have prepared—whose will they be?’ 21 So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The world behind the words

4 min

Most of the people listening to Jesus in Galilee were farmers, fishermen and day laborers. Many worked land they didn't own and carried debts they couldn't pay. And they had grown up with a common idea: if you were rich, God must be pleased with you.

Their own Scriptures seemed to say so. Deuteronomy promised that if Israel obeyed, "all these blessings will come upon you, and overtake you" **Deuteronomy 28:1-2**, and the blessings listed include full barns and fertile herds. Proverbs says, "The LORD's blessing brings wealth"

Proverbs 10:22. At the end of the book of Job, God gives Job "twice as much as he had before" **Job 42:10.** It was natural to read the rich as the blessed.

That is why the disciples were so shaken by the man who walked away. Jesus didn't condemn him; Mark says he loved him. He simply asked the man to let go of the thing holding him, and the man couldn't. When Jesus said a camel would sooner go through a needle's eye, the disciples were "exceedingly astonished" and asked, "Then who can be saved?" **Mark 10:26** If even a rich, obedient man was in danger, who was safe?

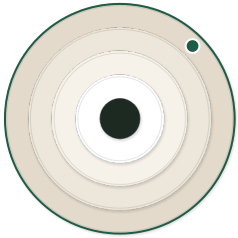
> **A MYTH TO SET ASIDE:**
> You may hear that the "eye of the needle" was a small gate in Jerusalem that a camel could squeeze through on its knees. No such gate is known from the time of Jesus; the explanation appears many centuries later. The disciples' reaction shows they heard an impossibility, not a tight squeeze.

The pattern runs through the Gospels. Jesus praised a poor widow's two small coins over the gifts of the rich **Mark 12:41-44.** In his story of the rich man and Lazarus, a man "clothed in purple and fine linen" ignores a beggar at his gate, and after death the two trade places **Luke 16:19-25.** And when the rich tax collector Zacchaeus gave half his goods to the poor, Jesus said, "Today, salvation has come to this house" **Luke 19:8-9.**

In every one of these stories, Jesus treats wealth the same way: as a danger to the person holding it, and generosity as the way out. Not once does he point to someone's money as proof that God approves of them.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 4: MODERN MOVEMENTS

The prosperity gospel, 1950s to today

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

The first Christians took these words at face value. Luke writes that the believers in Jerusalem "had all things in common" and sold property to give "according as anyone had need" **Acts 2:44-45**, so that "neither was there among them any who lacked" **Acts 4:34**.

The Didache, a short handbook of Christian teaching written around 100 AD, told believers: "Do not turn away from someone in need; share everything with your brother, and do not say it is your own." Around 388, the preacher John Chrysostom, later archbishop of Constantinople, gave a series of sermons on the rich man and Lazarus in Antioch. He didn't soften the story.

"Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life. We do not possess our own wealth but theirs."

John Chrysostom, Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man, c. 388

As the church grew rich in the Middle Ages, some believers chose poverty instead. Around 1206, Francis of Assisi, a wealthy cloth merchant's son, gave up his inheritance in public and lived among the poor. His order made poverty a way of following Jesus.

In 1905 the sociologist Max Weber proposed that some Protestant groups came to treat hard work and success as signs that God had chosen them. Historians still argue about his theory, but the idea it describes, that success may show God's favor, took deep root in America.

The modern prosperity gospel took that idea much further. Its roots are usually traced to E. W. Kenyon, an evangelist of the early 1900s who taught that believers could claim God's promises by speaking them in faith. From the 1950s, the healing evangelist Oral Roberts preached "seed faith": give to God as a seed, and expect a harvest in return. Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland spread the "Word of Faith" teaching through Bible schools and television from the 1960s and 70s, and Christian television carried it worldwide.

c. 30	Jesus: "Woe to you who are rich."
c. 100	The Didache: share everything; do not call it your own.
c. 388	John Chrysostom: not sharing with the poor is theft.
1206	Francis of Assisi gives up his inheritance.
1905	Max Weber's theory of a "Protestant ethic."
1950s	Oral Roberts preaches "seed faith."
1960s–80s	Word of Faith teaching spreads on Christian TV.
2018	A LifeWay survey finds most Protestant churchgoers believe God wants them to prosper financially.

The verses used to support it mostly come from outside the Gospels: Malachi's promise to "open you the windows of heaven" for those who bring the tithe **Malachi 3:10**, or a letter's friendly greeting, "I pray that you may prosper in all things and be healthy" **3 John 1:2**. The one saying of Jesus often quoted is "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly" **John 10:10**. Read the next verse: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" **John 10:11**. The chapter is about a shepherd giving everything up, not gaining.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

The Bible does contain promises of blessing for faithfulness, mostly in the Law and the Proverbs. Over centuries, especially in America, those promises were read as guarantees of money, and the warnings of Jesus moved to the edges. The people who taught it often began with real faith in God's generosity. The question is whether Jesus would recognize the result.

Honest objections

3 min

"The Old Testament promises blessing to the faithful." It does, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. But the same Scriptures also include Job, a righteous man who loses everything, and prophets who condemn the rich for oppressing the poor. And Jesus, who knew those Scriptures better than anyone, never repeated the promise of wealth. He reversed it. If he is the center, his reading comes first.

"It's about your attitude toward money, not the money itself." There is truth here: Jesus warned against "covetousness" **Luke 12:15**, which is about the heart. But look at what happens in his stories. He told the rich man to actually sell. Zacchaeus actually gave half away. The widow actually gave everything. In each one, the money moves.

"Jesus had wealthy friends." He did. Women of means "served them from their possessions" **Luke 8:1-3**, and Zacchaeus kept half of what he had. Jesus didn't ask every follower to give up everything. That makes the point sharper: he let people keep wealth, but he never praised anyone for having it, only for giving it.

BE FAIR:

Paul wrote that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" **1 Timothy 6:10**, not money itself, and many generous Christians are well off. Having money isn't the drift. Treating it as proof of God's favor is.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Every one of these objections has some truth, and every one runs into the same wall: Jesus never once praised anyone for having money. If a belief about wealth needs the Old Testament or a single greeting from a letter to stand up, and Jesus' own words point the other way, it is not the center.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Jesus treated wealth as a danger and generosity as the way out; teaching that wealth proves God's favor says the opposite of what he said.

Measured against the center, this is not a small difference of emphasis. It is a contradiction, not an add-on. Jesus said "woe to you who are rich," called money a rival master, told a rich man to sell what he had, and praised a widow for giving her last coins. The prosperity gospel tells people that God rewards faith with money and that giving is an investment that pays back. Those two messages cannot both be his.

This may be hard if you have been taught, even gently, that your comfort shows God's approval, or that your giving will come back to you. It doesn't mean God doesn't care about your needs; Jesus said he does **Matthew 6:31-33**. It means he never promised wealth, and warned that it can own you. Following him here looks like holding money loosely, giving where it costs you, and no longer reading anyone's bank account as a sign of God's favor, including your own.

CHECK IT IN YOUR OWN BIBLE:

Read Luke 6:20–26 (*Follow Me* §20) and count how many of the blessings and woes mention money or comfort. Then search the Gospels for one place where Jesus praises someone for being rich. You will not find it.

A keeper

1 min

Whatever you believe about who Jesus was, his teaching on money holds up on its own. Your life is not the sum of what you own. Hold possessions loosely. Give where it costs you something, and give quietly.

LUKE 12:15

15 He said to them, “Beware! Keep yourselves from covetousness,
for a man’s life doesn’t consist of the abundance of the things
which he possesses.”

MATTHEW 6:21

21 for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Modern research agrees with him. In a set of studies published in the journal *Science* in 2008, psychologists found that people who spent money on others reported more happiness than people who spent the same amount on themselves.

For you as a believer, generosity is not an extra for the especially devout. It is how Jesus said you would know where your heart is.

LIVING IT NOW:

Look at last month's spending. Pick one thing you bought only to feel secure or admired, and give that amount away this month, quietly, to someone who needs it. Then notice how little it actually cost you.

Reflect

2 min

When something good happens to you financially, what is your first explanation for it?

Who in your life has been more generous than you, with less? What did you notice about them?

If Jesus looked at your bank statement, which line would he ask you about first?

Practice this week

1 min

Choose one generous act this week that costs you something you will notice, an amount or an hour you would rather keep. Give it quietly, to a person or cause you will not hear back from. Then write two sentences:

what it cost, and how it felt a day later.

Talk it over

1 min

- Have you heard prosperity teaching in a church you've attended, even in a quieter form? How did it sound?
- Why do you think the disciples were so shocked by the camel saying?
- What would it look like for you and the people closest to you to handle money the way the believers in Acts 4 did?

A quiet moment

1 min

Lord Jesus, you had nowhere to lay your head, and you gave everything. Loosen my grip on what I own. Make me generous, and keep me from mistaking comfort for your blessing. Amen.

Remember it



One master. Luke 6:24: "Woe to you who are rich." Matthew 6:24: "You can't serve both God and Mammon." The two verses share a number, so they are easy to find together.

Too wide for the slit: a gold disc far wider than the thin slit beside it. The camel and the needle's eye.

1. Which two verses share the number 6:24?
2. What did the rich man do when Jesus told him to sell what he had?
3. What is John 10:10 really about, if you read the next verse?

1. Luke 6:24 and Matthew 6:24. 2. He went away sorrowful (Mark 10:22). 3. A good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Sources

1. U.S. Senate Finance Committee inquiry opened by Senator Charles Grassley, ranking member, in letters dated November 5, 2007, to six television ministries (Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Creflo and Taffi Dollar, Benny Hinn, Eddie Long, Joyce Meyer, Paula and Randy White), asking about compensation, housing and private aircraft.
2. Didache 4.8 (late first or early second century), paraphrased from the standard translations.
3. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, tr. Catharine P. Roth (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), Sermon 2, the second of his sermons on Lazarus and the rich man (Antioch, c. 388–389).
4. Francis of Assisi: Thomas of Celano, *First Life of St. Francis* (c. 1229); the *Regula bullata* approved by Pope Honorius III in 1223.
5. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905).
6. Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford University Press, 2013), on Kenyon, Roberts, Hagin and Copeland.
7. LifeWay Research, survey of Protestant churchgoers on prosperity teaching (2018).
8. Elizabeth W. Dunn, Lara B. Aknin and Michael I. Norton, "Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness," *Science* 319 (2008): 1687–1688.


LESSON 11

11

Judging Others

LOG About 25 minutes

Is calling out other people's sins part of following Jesus?



RATHER LISTEN?

Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.

backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/11

MATTHEW 7:1

“Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged.

Ask people outside the church to describe Christians in one word, and many will give the same answer. In 2007, researchers at the Barna Group surveyed Americans aged 16 to 29 who were not Christians. Eighty-seven percent said Christians are "judgmental." Eighty-five percent said "hypocritical." Those are the words people reach for first, about the followers of a man who said, "Don't judge."

It is painful to read, and it may not describe you or the people you worship with. But it describes how many people experience Christians, and that is worth taking seriously. If you are Centered, the reputation is a question to ask yourself first. This lesson asks what Jesus actually taught about judging, and whether the reputation came from following him or from something else.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, his longest recorded teaching, Jesus spoke about judging, and he used a joke.

MATTHEW 7:1-5

1 "Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. 2 For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. 3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye? 4 Or how will you tell your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye,' and behold, the beam is in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite! First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye.

Luke records the same teaching, and adds two more commands.

LUKE 6:37

37 Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Set free, and you will be set free.

Then Jesus told a story aimed at a particular kind of listener: people "convinced of their own righteousness, and who despised all others."

LUKE 18:9-14

9 He also spoke this parable to certain people who were convinced of their own righteousness, and who despised all others:
10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee,
and the other was a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and
prayed by himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like
the rest of men: extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even
like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that
I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far away, wouldn’t even lift
up his eyes to heaven, but beat his chest, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house
justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself
will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The world behind the words

4 min

A speck and a beam. The Greek word for the speck, *karphos*, means a bit of straw or a splinter. The word for the beam, *dokos*, means a roof beam, the timber that holds up a house. Jesus' neighbors called him "the carpenter" **Mark 6:3**, and the picture is a carpenter's joke: a man with a beam sticking out of his eye, squinting at a splinter in someone else's. People would have laughed. Then they would have stopped laughing.

Notice the order Jesus gives. Judge yourself first. Only after the beam is out can you "see clearly" to help someone else. Jesus does not pretend that no one ever does wrong. He says that the person most eager to point it out is usually the one least able to see.

The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector makes the same point from the other side. The Pharisee was not a fraud. He fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of everything, more than the Law required. His mistake was the comparison: "I am not like the rest of men... or even

like this tax collector." The tax collector made no comparison at all. He only said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus said that he, not the Pharisee, went home right with God.

Jesus' own life fits his words. Respectable people complained that he ate with "tax collectors and sinners," and he answered, "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do" **Matthew 9:10-12.** When a woman known for her sins anointed his feet at a dinner, his host thought, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have perceived who and what kind of woman this is" **Luke 7:39.** Jesus defended her.

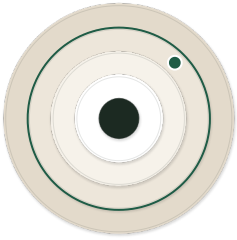
Jesus did judge some people harshly. Read Matthew 23 (*Follow Me* §135) and you will find him calling religious leaders "hypocrites" and "whitened tombs" **Matthew 23:27-28.** But look at who he judged: the powerful, the religious and the self-righteous. He never once spoke that way to the outsiders, the sinners or the people others looked down on.

A FAMOUS STORY TO HANDLE CAREFULLY:

"He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone" **John 8:7** comes from the story of a woman caught in adultery. It is beloved and fits Jesus well, but it does not appear in the oldest surviving manuscripts of John's Gospel. Many Bibles mark it in brackets. The teaching in this lesson does not depend on it; Matthew 7 and Luke 6 say the same thing on their own.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 3: CHURCH TRADITION

Correction turned outward, from private and humble to public and permanent

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

Jesus did give a way to deal with wrongdoing among his followers, and it was small and quiet: if someone wrongs you, go to them "between you and him alone" **Matthew 18:15**, with the goal of winning them back. Even Paul, who wrote firmly about discipline inside the church, drew a line around everyone else.

1 CORINTHIANS 5:12-13

12 For what do I have to do with also judging those who are outside? Don't you judge those who are within? 13 But those who are outside, God judges. "Put away the wicked man from among yourselves."

Over the centuries, the church kept the discipline and lost the quiet. By the Middle Ages, excommunication could cut a person off from worship, from business and even from burial in consecrated ground. Church courts tried people for moral offenses, and from the 1230s the papacy established inquisitions to root out heresy, with punishments carried out by secular rulers.

In colonial New England, moral judgment became civil law. In 1658 Plymouth Colony ordered that a person convicted of adultery wear the capital letters "AD" sewn on their clothing, and anyone found without them could be publicly whipped. Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) was built on laws like this one.

You may know the saying "Love the sinner, hate the sin." Jesus never said it. Its roots are in a letter by Augustine around 423 that urged "love for persons and hatred of sins," and Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu, gave it a modern form in his autobiography: "Hate the sin and not the sinner." It is often used today to justify exactly what Jesus warned against: focusing on other people's sins first.

c. 30	Jesus: "Don't judge… first remove the beam out of your own eye."
50s	Paul: "What do I have to do with also judging those who are outside?"
c. 423	Augustine urges "love for persons and hatred of sins."
1230s	The papacy establishes inquisitions against heresy.
1658	Plymouth Colony orders convicted adulterers to wear the letters "AD."
1927–1929	Gandhi's autobiography includes "hate the sin and not the sinner."
2007	Most young non-Christians surveyed call Christians "judgmental."

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

Most Christians who speak about other people's sins believe they are being faithful, warning people out of love. The church has always needed some way to deal with wrongdoing, and Jesus gave one. But over time, correction moved out of private conversations into public ones, turned toward outsiders, and grew certain where it had once been humble. The beam-first order Jesus set got lost along the way.

Honest objections

3 min

"Jesus judged people. He called the Pharisees hypocrites." He did. But look at whom he judged: religious leaders, the powerful and the self-righteous. He never spoke that way to sinners and outsiders. If you want to follow his example in judging, judge the religious and the powerful, starting with yourself.

"We're supposed to call out sin. Love tells the truth." Jesus did give a way to correct someone: privately, one to one, after dealing with your own beam, with the goal of winning them back **Matthew 18:15.** That is almost the opposite of a public rebuke of strangers. And even Paul said judging outsiders was not his business. "Those who are outside, God judges."

"If we don't speak up, people won't know they're sinning." People usually know. The tax collector in Jesus' story already knew. What he needed was mercy, and Jesus gave it.

BE FAIR:

Jesus did not ask his followers to stop telling right from wrong. He warned about false prophets and said "by their fruits you will know them" **Matthew 7:20.** Discernment is not condemnation. The real questions are who you look at first, and whether your aim is to win someone back or just to win.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Every one of these objections has to step around the beam. If a way of speaking about sin starts with other people and not with yourself, it starts in the wrong place, no matter how true the words are.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Jesus told his followers to judge themselves first and leave outsiders to God; a faith known for condemning other people's sins has reversed his order.

Measured against the center, this is not close, and it is a contradiction, not an add-on. Jesus said "Don't judge," "Don't condemn," and "first remove the beam out of your own eye." He saved his hardest words for the self-righteous and ate with the people they condemned. When Christians become known for pointing at others, they are doing what the Pharisee in his story did, not what he did.

This may be hard to hear, especially if you have spoken up about someone's sin believing it was right. Jesus does not ask you to pretend wrong is right. He asks you to start with the beam, to speak privately and humbly if you speak at all, and to leave outsiders to God. If your church is better known for what it is against than for whom it loves, that is worth bringing back to him.

CHECK IT IN YOUR OWN BIBLE:

Read Matthew 7:1–5 and Luke 18:9–14 slowly (*Follow Me* §34 and §114). Then ask which character in each passage you most resemble when you talk about other people's sins.

A keeper

1 min

Whatever you believe about who Jesus was, this teaching works for anyone. Before you criticize someone, look at yourself first. Assume you have a beam too. If you must correct someone, do it privately, humbly and with the aim of helping.

LUKE 6:37

37 Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Don’t condemn, and you won’t be condemned. Set free, and you will be set free.

Psychologists have a name for the blind spot Jesus described. In 1977 the social psychologist Lee Ross called it the "fundamental attribution error": we tend to blame other people's faults on their character and un-

derrate the circumstances behind them. Related research finds we see the circumstances behind our own faults far more easily. The beam in our own eye really is harder to see.

For you as a believer, this is the harder road: it means facing yourself before you ever speak about anyone else.

LIVING IT NOW:

The next time you start to criticize someone, in a group chat, at dinner or online, stop and name one fault of your own first, silently. If you still need to say something, say it to them directly, privately, and only to help.

Reflect

2 min

When you talk about other people's sins, whose do you talk about most, and whose do you talk about least?

Which character in Luke 18 sounds more like your prayers: the Pharisee or the tax collector?

Is there someone you have judged who needed mercy instead? What would winning them back look like?

Practice this week

1 min

For one week, every time you notice yourself judging someone, out loud or in your head, stop and name one fault of your own instead. Keep a tally. At the end of the week, look at the number and ask what it tells you.

Talk it over

1 min

- What are the Christians you know known for in your town? What would Jesus want them to be known for?
- Why is it easier to see other people's specks than our own beams?
- How could you and a friend practice Matthew 18:15 instead of talking about people behind their backs?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, you ate with the people others condemned, and you saved your hard words for the proud. Show me the beam in my own eye. Make me slow to judge, quick to show mercy, and humble enough to pray the tax collector's prayer. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen.

Remember it



Judge yourself first. Matthew 7:1, "Don't judge," opens the chapter. Picture a carpenter's beam: the bigger the beam, the louder the pointing.

The beam and the speck: a heavy dark strip right in front of you, and a tiny speck far off. Take the beam out first.

1. What were the speck and the beam, in the original Greek?
2. In Luke 18, who went home right with God?
3. Who said "Love the sinner, hate the sin"?

Gandhi gave it a modern form.
1. A bit of straw (*karphos*) and a roof beam (*dokos*). 2. The tax collector. 3. Not Jesus. Its roots are in Augustine (c. 423), and

Sources

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4. Excommunication and medieval church courts: R. H. Helmholz, *The Spirit of Classical Canon Law* (University of Georgia Press, 1996).
5. Papal inquisitions from the 1230s under Pope Gregory IX: Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (Free Press, 1988; University of California Press, 1989).
6. Plymouth Colony law of 1658 on adultery (two whippings and the letters "AD" "cut out in cloth and sowed on their uppermost garment"): *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England*, ed. N. B. Shurtleff and D. Pulsifer (Boston, 1855–61), vol. 11, Laws.
7. Augustine, Letter 211.11 (c. 423), *cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum*; M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (2 vols., 1927–1929), Part IV, ch. 9, "A Tussle with Power."
8. Lee Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 10 (1977).

PART 4

What We Found

Twelve weeks on the road. Where the drift is, and where the road goes next.


LESSON 12

12

What We Found

RETURN About 25 minutes

After eleven weeks of measuring, what is left standing at the center?

RATHER LISTEN?
Scan to hear this lesson read aloud, like a podcast. It's free.
backtothecenter.org/v1/centered/12

LUKE 6:46

"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do the things which I say?

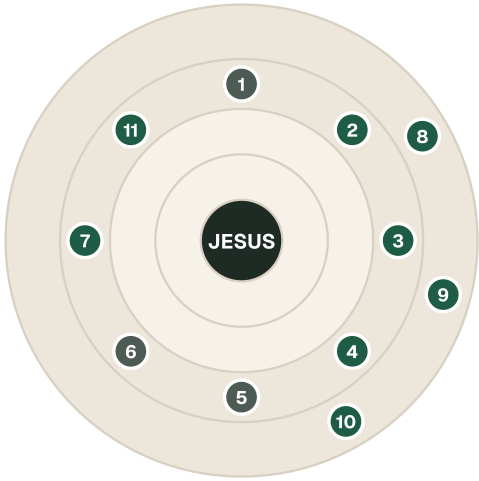
Eleven lessons ago, this volume started with one sentence nearly every Christian would sign: Jesus is the center. Since then, each lesson has taken one teaching and set it beside what he actually said and did. The figure that follows gathers all eleven verdicts in one place.

Look at it honestly. Eight of the eleven are contradictions. Three are add-ons. None came from the center. This is not a story about other people's churches; it is about the faith most of us were handed. This last lesson asks what to do with it. If you keep Jesus and set down the rest, this book calls you **Centered**.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · Honest objections · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Talk it over · A quiet moment

Read it

3 min



1	Creeds that skip his life	Ring 3	ADDED
2	God pictured as an angry judge	Ring 3	CONTRADICTS
3	Following him made optional	Ring 3	CONTRADICTS
4	Every verse weighed the same	Ring 3	CONTRADICTS
5	Rule lists over the two commandments	Ring 3	ADDED
6	His blessings set aside	Ring 3	ADDED
7	War and hatred of opponents blessed	Ring 3	CONTRADICTS
8	Faith performed for an audience	Ring 4	CONTRADICTS
9	The poor sorted into deserving and not	Ring 4	CONTRADICTS
10	Wealth as a sign of God's favor	Ring 4	CONTRADICTS
11	Correction turned on outsiders	Ring 3	CONTRADICTS

Eleven lessons, eleven verdicts. Eight contradict Jesus; three were added to him. None sits at the center.

Five sentences carried this volume. Read them once more, together.

MARK 9:7

7 A cloud came, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of
the cloud, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

JOHN 14:9

9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you such a long time, and
do you not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the
Father. How do you say, 'Show us the Father'?

MATTHEW 7:24

24 "Everyone therefore who hears these words of mine and does
them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the
rock.

MATTHEW 22:37-40

37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all
your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is
the first and great commandment. 39 A second likewise is this,
'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 The whole law and
the prophets depend on these two commandments."

LUKE 6:46

46 "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do the things
which I say?

The first says whose voice comes first. The second says what God is like. The third says what counts: doing, not only hearing. The fourth names the center of everything. The fifth is the question Jesus asked of people

who honored him without following him, and it is the question this whole volume has been asking.

The world behind the words

4 min

The first followers of Jesus had very little of what Christianity later became. They had no creeds, no denominations, no church buildings of their own, no New Testament, no statements of faith and no political movements. They met in homes and shared meals. Luke describes them as devoting themselves "in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and prayer" **Acts 2:42**. The name "Christians" was not even used until a community in Antioch, years later **Acts 11:26**.

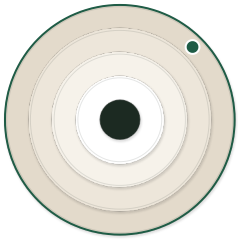
What they had was what he had given them: his words and his example. Jesus told them how people would recognize them.

> JOHN 13:34-35
>
> 34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.
> Just as I have loved you, you also love one another. 35 By this
> everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love
> for one another.”

Not their creeds, not their politics, not their success. Their love for one another. That was the only identifying mark he ever gave.

How it drifted

5 min



RING 4: MODERN MOVEMENTS

Eleven teachings, all measured, none at the center

The further an idea sits from the center, the more it needs a reason to outrank his words.

Every drift in this volume followed a similar path. It began early, usually with a good intention, and then it served a purpose of its own.

- **The creeds** (Lesson 1) answered real questions about who Jesus was, and became a summary that skipped everything he taught.
- **The angry judge** (Lesson 2) was meant to make people take sin seriously, and became a picture of God that looks nothing like Jesus at the table.
- **Optional obedience** (Lesson 3) grew from a defense of grace, and Bonhoeffer named the result "cheap grace."
- **The flat Bible** (Lesson 4) came from honoring every verse, and lost the center Jesus read it by.
- **Rule lists** (Lesson 5) tried to make holiness concrete, and pushed aside the two commandments everything hangs on.
- **The set-aside Beatitudes** (Lesson 6) were moved to monks, to private life or to a future age, so his blessings stopped reaching ordinary days.
- **Blessed violence** (Lesson 7) began when the church gained an empire's protection, and ran through crusades to the modern habit of treating opponents as enemies of God.
- **Performed faith** (Lesson 8) began as public witness, and became a badge for votes and status.
- **The deserving poor** (Lesson 9) began as a way to manage charity, and became a way to withhold it.
- **The prosperity gospel** (Lesson 10) sold wealth as a sign of God's favor, the reverse of what he said.
- **Judgment turned outward** (Lesson 11) took correction he meant for ourselves, privately and humbly, and aimed it at outsiders, publicly and permanently.

Notice the pattern. In nearly every case, the drift made Christianity easier to manage, to measure, to defend or to sell, and harder to recognize as his.

HOW THIS HAPPENED:

Almost no one in this history set out to replace Jesus. They were defending the faith, organizing a growing church, protecting it from error, or reaching more people. Each step made sense at the time. But each one was measured against something other than him: tradition, safety, influence, success. That is how a faith can drift a long way while everyone in it believes they are standing still.

NEXT, VOLUME 2:

How We Got Here traces the history behind these drifts, step by step: who actually wrote the Gospels and when, what Paul added, how the books of the Bible were chosen, Constantine and the empire's church, the creeds and councils, Augustine, indulgences, the Reformation, the American revivals, the Rapture, the prosperity gospel and the religious right. Twelve lessons, each one standing on its own, and like every lesson in this series, each has a free audio version.

Honest objections

3 min

"You found what you were looking for." It is a fair challenge. But every verdict in this volume rests on two things anyone can check: the words of Jesus printed in full, and history with dates and names anyone can look up. Where a teaching was faithful to him, the lessons said so; three were judged "added," not "contradicts," because that is what the evidence showed. Test any verdict yourself. The question is not whether this book is biased. It is whether his words say what they say.

"Christianity has done enormous good." It has. Hospitals, schools, care for the poor, the end of the slave trade in Britain: Christians who took Jesus at his word did all of these. That is exactly the point. The good came from the center. The harm came from the drift.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU:

Both objections, followed honestly, lead to the same place: his own words, and a call to measure everything by them.

Measured against the center

2 min

A CONTRADICTION

Measured against the center, much of what is now called Christianity has drifted from its founder, and in most of what this volume examined, the drift contradicts him.

Eleven teachings, eleven verdicts: eight contradictions, three add-ons, none that came from the center. These are not obscure teachings. They are things preached in many churches every week. When Jesus asked, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do the things which I say?", he was not talking to unbelievers. He was talking to people who honored him.

This is hard news, and it is meant with love. It does not mean your faith is fake or your church is worthless. It means the center has been crowded out, often by things you were taught in good faith, and he is still standing there. Coming back to him is not complicated. It starts with doing one thing he said, this week, and then the next.

A keeper

1 min

Here are the eleven keepers this volume gathered, one from each lesson. None of them requires a creed, a church or a particular belief about who Jesus was. Together they describe a life anyone can choose.

- Treat people the way you want to be treated.
- Be merciful.
- Judge people, starting with yourself, by what they do more than by what they say.
- When a rule and a person collide, choose the person.
- Help whoever needs it in front of you, even someone your side taught you to dislike.
- Make peace, stay gentle, and stand with people who are grieving or forgotten.
- Refuse to return hatred, and do good even to people who oppose you.
- Do good quietly, without needing credit.
- Treat the person who can't repay you as if they were the most important person you'll meet today.
- Hold possessions loosely, and give where it costs you something.
- Look at your own faults before anyone else's.

MATTHEW 7:12

12 Therefore, whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets.

This is what he told you to pass on, and what the world was supposed to recognize his followers by. If you want to know whether you are following him, this list is a better test than any statement of faith.

LIVING IT NOW:

Take one keeper a week for the next eleven weeks. Write it where you'll see it each morning, and at night name one moment you lived it and one you didn't.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE:

If you are Centered, the next step is simple: read his words in the order a follower needs them. *Follow Me*, the companion to this series, gathers the words and life of Jesus alone, without the add-ons, and numbers every passage so you can always find your place.

Reflect

2 min

Which of the eleven verdicts surprised you most? Which one did you resist?

Which teaching from the list above is hardest for you to live right now?

If your church were measured against the center the way these lessons measured teachings, what would it find?

Practice this week

1 min

Choose one teaching from the list and do it every day this week. Keep it specific: one act of quiet giving a day, one person forgiven, one conversation where you speak well of someone you usually criticize. At the

end of the week, write down what changed in you.

Talk it over

1 min

- Look at the figure of eleven verdicts together. Which one did you most need to face?
- Why do you think the drift so often made faith easier to manage or sell?
- What would it look like for you and a friend to spend the next eleven weeks living the list of keepers?

A quiet moment

1 min

Jesus, I have called you Lord. Forgive me for the places where I did not do what you said. Clear away what was added to you, and bring me back to the center: to love God, to love my neighbor, and to listen to you first. Amen.

Remember it



Return. The whole volume in one move: back to the center. Luke 6:46 asks the question; Matthew 22:40 gives the answer everything hangs on.

Pulled back to the center: torn layers peeled back on every side, and the clean center showing through. Return.

1. How many of the eleven teachings contradicted Jesus, and how many were added to him?
2. What mark did Jesus say would identify his followers?
3. What does Volume 2 trace?

1. Eight contradicted him; three were added. 2. Their love for one another (John 13:35). 3. The history of how the drift happened, from who wrote the Gospels to the religious right.

Sources

1. For the history behind each verdict, see the Sources list at the end of Lessons 1–11 of this volume.

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Deuteronomy 28:1-2 · lesson 10
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3 John 1:2 · lesson 10

Words used in this book

The center	What Jesus himself said and did, as the Gospels record it.
The drift	Everything that moved Christianity away from the center over two thousand years.
An add-on	A teaching added to Jesus. Not always false, but not his, and it crowds out what is.
A contradiction	A teaching that goes against what Jesus said or did.
A silent room	A subject Jesus never addressed. No one, on any side, can claim him for it.
Measured against the center	The test every lesson applies.
A keeper	A teaching of Jesus worth living by, whether you believe or not.
Centered	A believer who keeps Jesus and sets down what was built on top of him.
Honest heretic	Someone who sees plainly where Christianity left its founder, and says so with care. The religious leaders of his own day accused Jesus of blasphemy.

How this book was made

I used AI along the way, to research and to work through my questions. These lessons grew out of that process. Every Bible verse is quoted word for word from the World English Bible, and the sources for each lesson are listed at its end.

If you find a mistake, please report it. Corrections are published openly and fixed in the next printing.

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Dear reader,

I started this for myself. I had questions about Jesus that I couldn't ask anyone around me, so I went looking for the answers on my own. This book is what I found. I'm sharing it because I doubt I'm the only one who has been where I was.

I was born Catholic the way most of my family was: because we were Mexican, and in Mexico nearly everyone is. I made my First Communion. I may have been confirmed; honestly, I don't remember. We went to Mass for weddings, quinceañeras and the occasional Sunday. I learned some of the rules as a kid, but I never understood them, and I never really believed them.

Then, in high school, I fell in love with a girl whose whole life revolved around her church. It was a strict church that took its beliefs seriously. Services and Bible study filled much of the week, and it held itself apart from holidays other Christians celebrate. I started going because it was the only way to spend whole days with her. They welcomed me. We married young and raised a family, and for more than twenty years that church, and others like it, sat at the center of our life.

I learned the routines. I made real friends, and most of the people I met were kind. But I never fully believed, and I never stopped noticing the distance between what was preached and what Jesus actually said.

When the pandemic closed the churches, I found I didn't miss going. Then I watched many Christians take up a politics of power and grievance and call it faith. Christian nationalism, and the alliance of churches with a political party, sounded nothing like the man they named. That was when I finally let myself say, at least to myself, that I didn't believe.

Saying it out loud was harder. The person I love most asked me for one thing: don't try to change me. I tried to respect that, though not always well. I thought that if I explained what I'd found, she would at least see what I saw. Instead we argued, and neither of us moved.

So I stopped arguing and started studying. Almost everything I found about Jesus was written by someone trying to win, either to bring you into a church or to talk you out of one. I wanted something else: what he actually said, and where everything else came from. I used AI to research and to ask the questions I couldn't ask anyone else. Lesson by lesson, I wrote myself a course.

It helped me. Somewhere along the way I thought of the people who are where I was: sitting in a pew they no longer believe in, or out of church and still drawn to the man at the center of it, or simply tired of being told what to think about him. I couldn't find a book for us, so I'm sharing the one I made for myself.

I'm not a pastor, and I don't hate Christianity. I sat in the pews for twenty-five years, came out the other side, and I still think what Jesus taught is good.

If you believe, I'm not trying to take your faith from you. I'm only asking what you would ask of anything: does this start with Jesus? Measure this book against him, not against me.

Carlos C.