

back to the center

For Honest Heretics

Volume 1 · twelve lessons in what Jesus said and did

by Carlos C.



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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're where I was, you're not alone, and you're not imagining it. What you see is real. You may find, as I did, that the teachings at the center are worth more than everything built on top of them.

Carlos C.

Before you begin

You have probably noticed something. When people talk to you about Christianity, they often describe a version of it with surprisingly little to do with the man it is named after: certainty without humility, judgment without mercy, wealth treated as a blessing, power treated as a calling. Maybe you grew up in church and left. Maybe you just grew up around it. Either way, **you are not imagining the gap.**

This book shows where it came from. Every lesson prints what Jesus actually said, tells the real history of how something else took its place, and then measures the teaching against him. Many will not survive the comparison.

It will not try to convert you. You don't need to believe anything about who Jesus was to hold Christians to the center they already claim. You only need to know his words better than the people quoting something else, and to say so calmly. Each lesson ends with a way to do exactly that.

THREE GROUND RULES

- **Respect the person.** Most people hold these beliefs sincerely, because a pastor or a parent taught them. The belief may be wrong; the person usually isn't acting in bad faith.
- **Let history make the point.** Ask "Where did this idea come from?" and let the dates answer. Keep "whose purpose does this serve?" for your own thinking.
- **Don't shy away from the verdict.** Give ground where a teaching really does come from Jesus. Where it contradicts him, say so, kindly and clearly.

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
Bring it back · 1 min	How to raise it with someone, respectfully
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.

The C.H.R.I.S.T. method

Six steps for any conversation, one for each letter of the name at the center. You start on shared ground and finish with a question, never a verdict.

C COMMON GROUND

Start with what you agree on: he is the center. *"You follow Christ. Let's start with him."*

H HEAR THEM OUT

Let them explain what they believe and why, all the way through. *"Where did you first learn that?"*

R RED LETTERS

Ask for his own words; many Bibles print them in red. *"Can you show me where Jesus said that?"*

I IDENTIFY THE SOURCE

Name where the idea actually comes from: Moses, Paul, a council, a preacher or a party. *"That started in the 1830s."*

S SHOW WHAT HE SAID AND DID

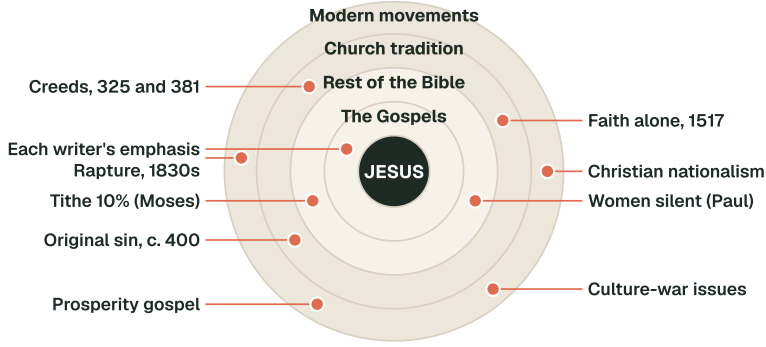
Open to the verse and let them read it themselves. *"Here's what he said about it."*

T TURN IT INTO A QUESTION

Leave them a question to carry home, not a ruling. *"If he put this first, should we?"*

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 establish the ground Christians cannot dispute: what their own Bible says about putting Jesus first, and what he himself put first. Every one of them still exposes a drift. Lessons 10 and 11 take two teachings you have almost certainly heard, wealth as a sign of God's favor and judgment of outsiders, and show plainly that they contradict him. Lesson 12 lays out the verdict so far.

You don't need to believe anything to do this volume. You only need to read what he said, and compare.

THE TWELVE LESSONS

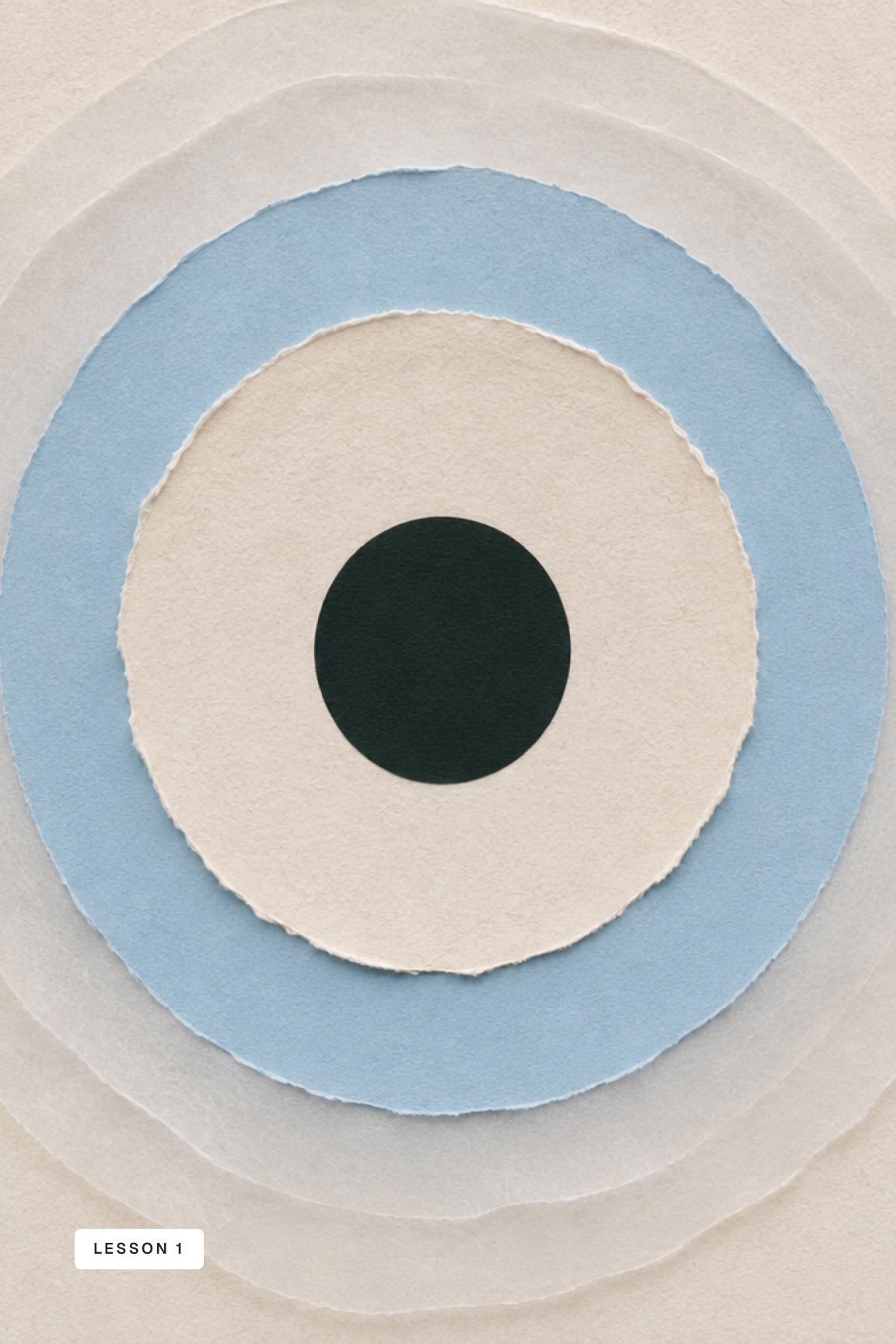
1–4 · The center	Who is at the center · The clearest picture of God · Hearing and doing · How Jesus read the Bible
5–9 · What he put first	The two greatest commandments · Blessed · Love your enemies · In secret · The least of these
10–11 · Measured against him	Wealth as blessing · Judging others
12 · 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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

Here is the problem in one sentence: much of what is preached in Jesus' name today has little to do with what Jesus said. You have seen it. Certainty without humility. Judgment without mercy. Wealth sold as a blessing and power pursued as a calling. And if you have tried to talk about it with people you love who are sure they're right, you know how maddening it is, and how alone it can make you feel.

You are not the only one who sees it. This book calls people like you **honest heretics**. It's meant with a smile: the religious leaders of his own day accused Jesus himself of blasphemy.

It doesn't ask you to believe anything about who he was. It shows, lesson by lesson and with the Bible open, where Christianity broke from its own founder, and it gives you the words to say so clearly and calmly. It also makes a claim you may not expect: the teachings themselves are good. You don't have to be a Christian to let them shape your life.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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.

WHO'S WHO:

Moses led Israel out of slavery in Egypt and, in Jewish tradition, received God's Law, so he stands for the Law. Elijah was the most famous of Israel's prophets, the people believed to speak for God, so he stands for the prophets. Peter, James and John were three of Jesus' closest followers, his disciples.

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.

THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the four Gospels, tell the story of Jesus' life. Most of what follows them is letters written to early churches, many by Paul, a leader who joined the movement after Jesus' death. Christians treat these letters as Scripture, so they carry weight in any conversation with a believer.

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.**

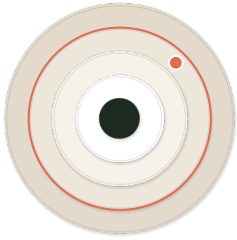
The early followers carried that conviction everywhere. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, called Jesus the only foundation anyone can lay. The letter to the Colossians said he should have "the preeminence," first place, "in all things." The letter to the Hebrews said God spoke in many ways through 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.

POINT TO THIS:

Every passage in this lesson comes from the Christian Bible itself. When you raise it with a believer, they cannot wave it away as an outsider's opinion. Their own book puts Jesus first.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

A religion built on correct beliefs is easier to run than one built on following Jesus. Beliefs can be tested at the door, signed in a membership statement and enforced from the pulpit. Loving your enemies and giving to the poor cannot be checked off a list. Over the centuries, that convenience shaped what churches emphasized. Plenty of people recite the creeds sincerely, but the system they inherited rewards agreement over obedience.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Both objections sound devout, and both avoid the point. The first makes every verse equal so that no saying of Jesus ever has to come first. The second uses the cross as a reason to skip the sermon. Answer briefly and calmly, and keep returning to his words. You don't need to win the argument. You need the conversation to end at Jesus.

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 is a real failure, and a large one, because it sits at the very center of the religion. If you were raised on those statements, you are free to set them down and go straight to what he said, and you will often find you understand him better than the people who kept reciting.

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."

You can take these teachings without taking anything else. Letting them lead your life doesn't require joining a church or reciting a creed, and many people live them more faithfully than the people who claim them loudest. If you choose to follow them, you need no one's permission.

Reflect

2 min

When Christians have talked to you about their faith, did they talk more about beliefs about Jesus, or about things he said to do?

What did you absorb about Christianity growing up, and where did it come from?

Based on the teachings in this lesson, what would you expect Christians to be known for? How does that compare with what they are known for?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, listen to how the Christians around you describe their faith: at work, online, in your family. Notice whether they talk about beliefs about Jesus or about things he said to do. Write down one example of each.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND

"We both agree Jesus is the center. Everything else should start with him, right?"

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION

"If you had to name three things Jesus himself said to do, what would they be?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

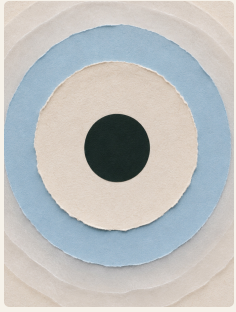
Most people name beliefs, not commands. Show them Matthew 28:20, "teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you," and ask: "If that's what he said to pass on, how much of what we pass on is his?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"Being a Christian means believing in Jesus."	"It does, and he also said, 'Why do you call me Lord and not do what I say?' (Luke 6:46). Believing in him includes listening to him."
"You can't separate Jesus from the rest of the Bible."	"I'm not trying to. The Bible itself says to start with him: 'This is my beloved Son. Listen to him' (Mark 9:7)."

PASS IT ON:

Some of the believers you love are quietly tired of the add-ons too. If one of them is searching, don't argue. Hand them the believer edition of this book, or *Follow Me*, the book of Jesus' own words that goes with this series.

Remember it



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

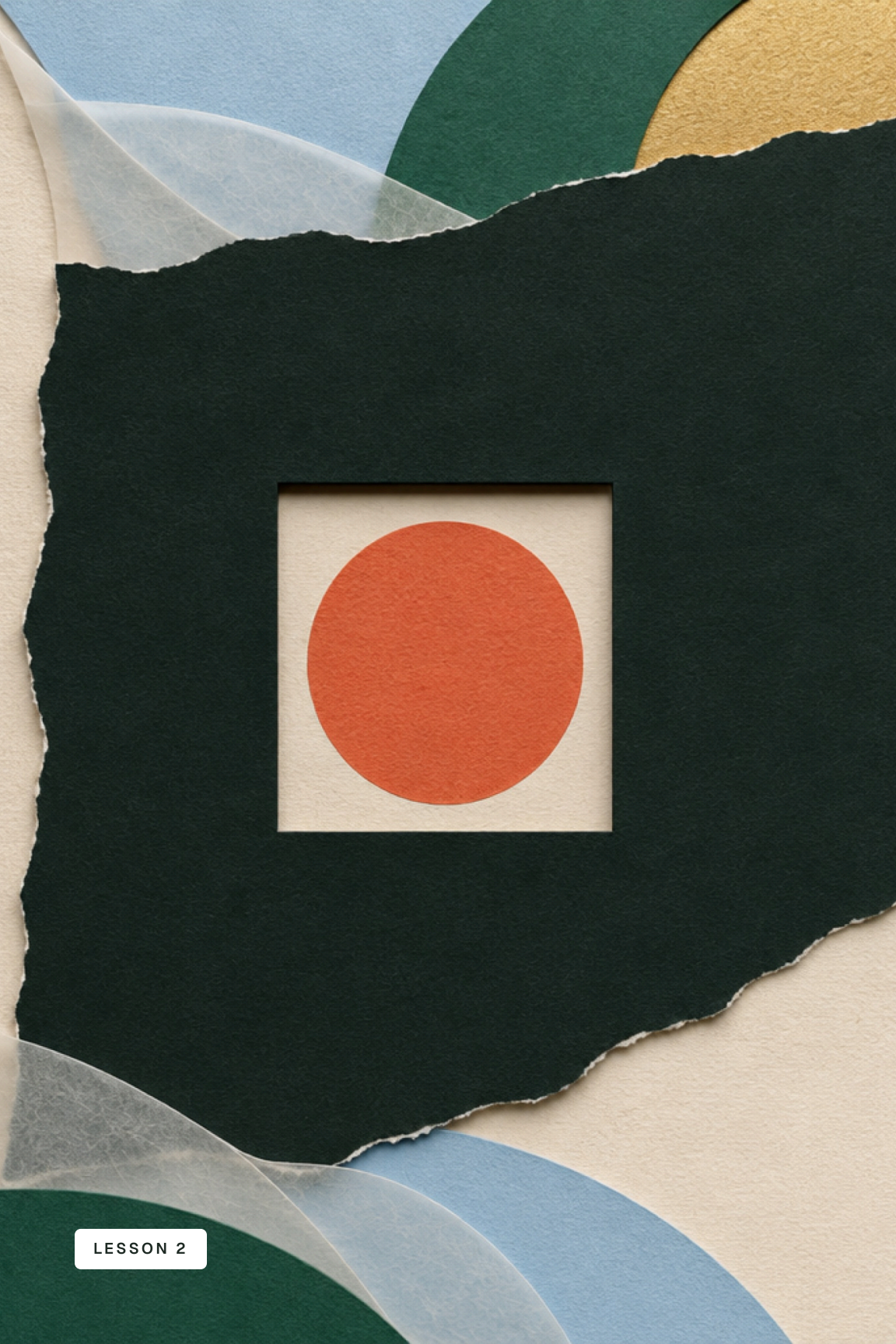
Two rings, one point: pale paper rings fade outward, and one small dark point holds the center. Listen to him.

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

Ask many Christians what God is like and you will hear about anger: a God who keeps score and is ready to punish. Many people carry that fear long after they stop believing. Here is the problem: Christians themselves say the clearest picture of God is Jesus, and Jesus looks nothing like that. If you've tried telling someone you love that, you know how lonely it can feel.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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.

WHO'S WHO:

Philip was one of the twelve disciples, Jesus' inner circle of followers. "The Father" was Jesus' usual name for God. Hebrews and Colossians, quoted below, are two of the early Christian letters that follow the Gospels in the New Testament.

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 soldiers 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.

WHO'S WHO:

Samaritans were a neighboring people whom many Jews regarded as religious outsiders and rivals. Elijah, the prophet from Lesson 1, had once called fire down on enemies; the disciples wanted to do the same.

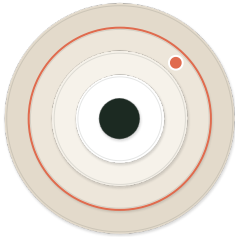
The disciples reached for a picture of God from an older story. Jesus corrected it with his own.

POINT TO THIS:

Jesus described himself in a few words: "I am gentle and humble in heart" **Matthew 11:29**. When a Christian describes an angry God, you can point to the one person their own faith says shows God most clearly.

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."

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

A frightening God is useful to anyone who wants control. Fear fills pews, keeps questions quiet, keeps children in line and opens wallets. Revival preaching built whole careers on it. Many who used fear sincerely believed it would save souls, but Jesus never led with it, and the picture they preached is not the one he gave.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Expect "God is also a judge." Agree, then ask what kind of judge Jesus was: the one who refused the fire and prayed for his executioners. You don't need to argue about the Old Testament. Keep the conversation on the face Christians themselves say shows God.

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 is one of the most damaging failures in the religion. Generations of people were taught to fear a God who looks nothing like the man Christians call his clearest picture, and many still carry that fear. If you were one of them, you were not imagining the harm, and the fault was not yours. The God you were warned about is not the one Jesus described.

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.

You don't need a theology to practice this. Mercy toward people who reject you is one of the hardest and best things a person can learn, and it is the opposite of what fear-based religion teaches.

Reflect

2 min

What picture of God were you given growing up, and who gave it to you?

Has someone used God's anger to control or shame you, or someone close to you?

If God looked like the Jesus in this lesson, what about the religion you've seen would have to change?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, notice how God is described around you: on church signs, in sermons on the radio, online, in family conversations. Is it the God who calls down fire, or the father who runs? Write down one example of each.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND

"We both believe Jesus shows us what God is like, right? He said, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father.'"

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION

"When you picture God, does he look more like Jesus at the dinner table, or like something else?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

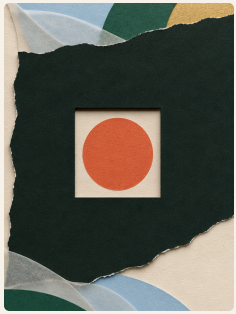
Show them Luke 9:54-56, where Jesus refuses to call down fire on a village that turned him away. Ask: "If that's what God is like, how should that change the way we talk about God to people who reject him?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"God is angry at sin, and people need to hear that."	"Jesus took sin seriously too. But when his disciples wanted fire from heaven, he rebuked them (Luke 9:55). Which picture should come first?"
"The Old Testament shows God destroying his enemies."	"Christians read those stories through Jesus. He said seeing him is seeing the Father (John 14:9)."

PASS IT ON:

If someone you love lives in fear of an angry God, don't argue them out of it. Point them to one scene: the father in Luke 15 who sees his son far off, and runs.

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

You have met Christians who are certain about what they believe and unchanged in how they live: loud about faith, quiet about the poor, quick to forgive themselves and slow to forgive anyone else. Jesus had a story about exactly that kind of religion, and he did not go easy on it.

Almost every Christian knows the story, which makes it the clearest common ground you will ever have. It can be maddening to watch people who are sure they're right live as if his words were optional, and to feel like the only one who notices. You're not. Jesus noticed first.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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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 answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind, and went. 30 He came to the second, and said the same thing. He answered, '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.

WHO'S WHO:

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' longest recorded teaching, in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. In the second story, the people listening were the chief priests and elders, the religious authorities of Jerusalem. Tax collectors worked for the Roman occupation and were despised as traitors and cheats.

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.

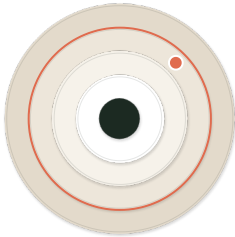
The story of the two sons pushes the point further. One son says "no" to his father and then goes to work. The other says "Yes, sir" and stays home. Jesus asked which one did his father's will, and the religious leaders listening had to admit it was the first. Then he told them something that must have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

POINT TO THIS:

Jesus praised the people whose lives changed, and said so to the religious leaders' faces. That is his answer to measuring faith by belief alone.

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.

> WHO'S WHO:
> Martin Luther was the German monk whose 1517 protest began the Protestant Reformation. James is a short New Testament letter.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

A faith that asks only for agreement is easy to sell. It fills seats without asking anyone to change how they spend money, treat enemies or vote. Churches can grow for decades on a single decision rather than a changed life. Bonhoeffer watched where that leads: churches full of believers who did nothing while their neighbors were taken away.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Expect "we're saved by faith, not works." You don't need to argue theology. Point out that Jesus himself said the test of a house is hearing and doing, and that he praised the son who said no and then went.

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 one of the clearest failures in modern Christianity, and you have probably seen it up close: people sure of their beliefs and unchanged by them. You are right to judge a faith by what it does.

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.

This works with or without faith: measure yourself by what you do this week, not by what you agree with.

Reflect

2 min

Think of a Christian whose life matched their words. What did they actually do?

Where have you seen "Lord, Lord" without the doing: in a church, a family, a public figure?

What is one good thing you agree with, but don't do?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, watch for the gap between saying and doing in public Christianity: a politician quoting Scripture, a church sign, a post. Write down one example. Then pick one teaching you already agree with, such as settling a quarrel, and do it yourself, no belief required.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND

"We both know the story of the wise and foolish builders. It's one of the most famous things Jesus ever said."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION

"In that story, what was the only difference between the two builders?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

Both heard; only one did. Read Luke 6:46 together (*Follow Me* §39), then ask: "Which of his words do Christians today hear without doing?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"We're saved by faith, not works."	"I'm not arguing about that. I'm only pointing to what Jesus said the test of a house is: hearing and doing (Matthew 7:24)."
"Nobody can live up to the Sermon on the Mount."	"Agreed. But one son in his story said no and then went (Matthew 21:29). He's the one Jesus praised."

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.

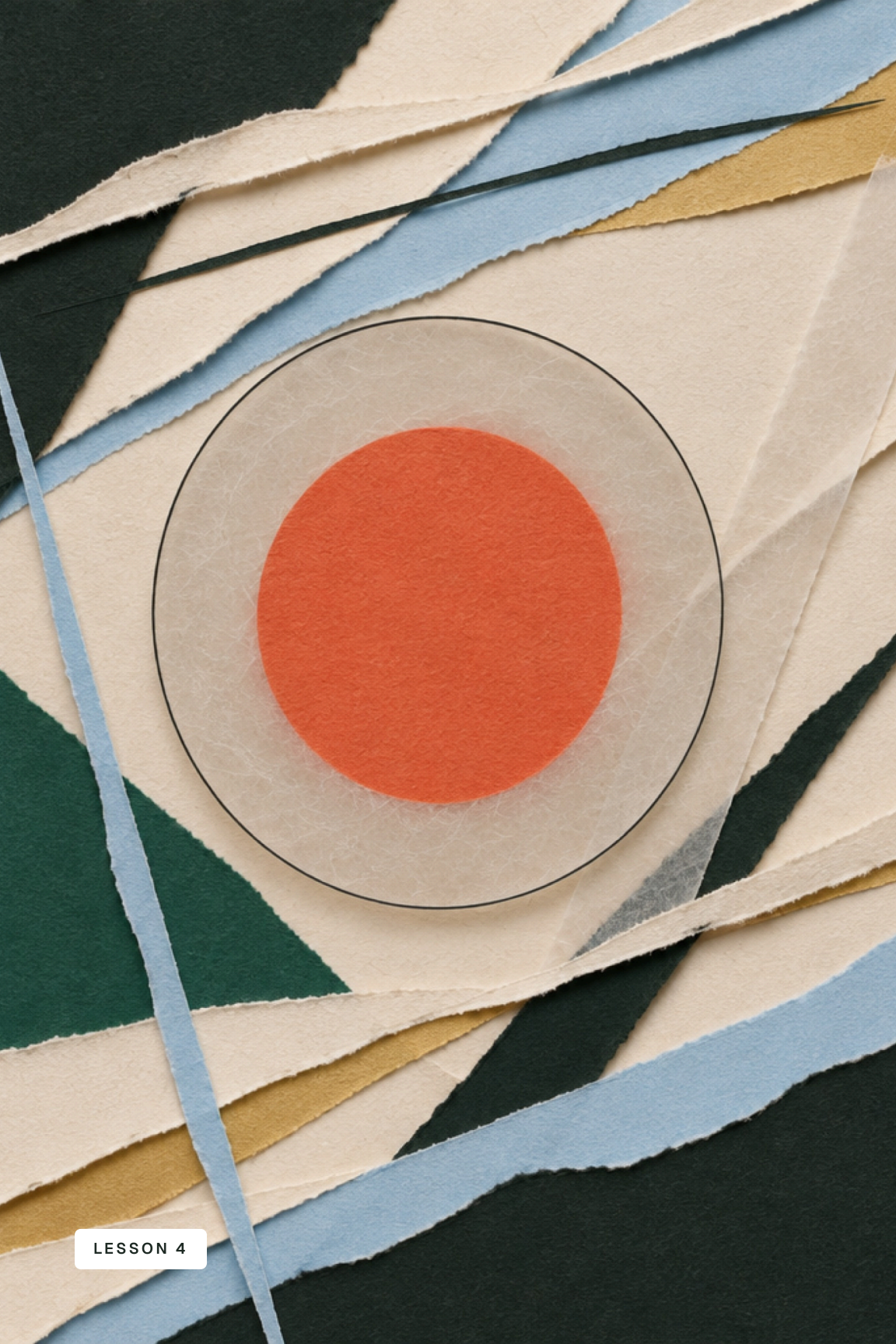
Solid and sliding: one dark shape stands firm while pale strips slide away beside it. The only difference was doing.

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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?

If you have ever had a Bible verse thrown at you, this lesson is for you. Many Christians treat every line of the Bible as equally binding, so anyone can find a verse for almost anything, and people have: to defend slavery, to silence women, to bless wealth and war. Jesus read differently. When someone quotes an ancient law to settle a question, ask: how did Jesus read that part of the Bible? Being the one person at the table

who isn't moved by a verse thrown out of context is a lonely spot. Call it what it is: you're an honest heretic, and this lesson shows you how Jesus himself read Scripture, which is the strongest ground you could stand on.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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Read it

3 min

WHO'S WHO:

Jesus' Bible was what Christians now call the Old Testament: the Law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms. Isaiah and Hosea were two of Israel's great prophets. A synagogue was the local meeting place for prayer and Scripture reading; Nazareth was Jesus' hometown. The Pharisees were a devout group of Jewish teachers who studied the Law closely.

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 who-
ever 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.

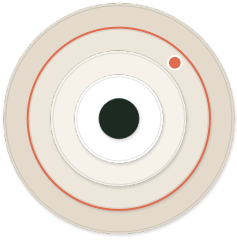
Look again at what he read in Nazareth. Isaiah's sentence ends: "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God" **Isaiah 61:2.** Jesus stopped reading in the middle of that sentence. He proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor, closed the scroll and sat down. He left the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

POINT TO THIS:

Jesus didn't throw out the Bible of his day. He read it through a center, love of God and neighbor, and he said everything else "depends on" those two. A Christian who treats every verse as equal is not reading the way their own founder read.

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.

WHO'S WHO:

The Talmud is the great collection of Jewish teaching and debate, compiled over the centuries after Jesus. Origen was a third-century Christian scholar in Egypt. Augustine of Hippo, a North African bishop, is the most influential theologian in Western Christianity. Luther, from Lesson 3, began the Protestant Reformation.

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 banquet: "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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

A Bible where every verse weighs the same is a powerful tool, because someone can always find a verse for what they already want. Defenders of American slavery quoted Scripture; so did defenders of segregation; preachers of wealth and of holy war have done the same. A center takes that weapon away. Most people who read this way learned it from sincere teachers, but the method itself serves whoever is holding the verse.

What they'll say back

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 ap-

plying 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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Expect "you're just picking the verses you like." The calm answer is that you are trying to pick the verses Jesus picked, and to read the rest the way he did: through love of God and neighbor, and "I desire mercy."

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 is a real failure with real victims. Verses read without a center have been used to defend slavery, silence women and shame people who never heard a word against them from Jesus. If a verse was ever used against you, you are entitled to ask who said it, and whether Jesus read it that way. Often he did not.

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.

You don't need to believe anything to use this. It is one of the wisest principles anyone has offered about rules, and it comes from the person many rule-keepers claim to follow.

Reflect

2 min

Has a Bible verse ever been used against you or someone you know? Who actually said it: Jesus, or someone else?

What rules in the religion you grew up around seemed to exist for the rule's sake rather than for people?

If "I desire mercy" were the test, which church teachings you know would fail it?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, whenever you hear a Bible verse used to win an argument, online, in the news or in your family, ask two questions: **"Who said this, Jesus or someone else?"** and **"Does it hang on love of God and**

neighbor?" Write down one example that fails the test.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND

"We both agree the whole Bible matters. What I want to know is how Jesus read it, since he's the center."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION

"When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, what did he say the rest of the law hangs on?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

Read Matthew 22:40 together (*Follow Me* §16): "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." Then ask: "If a verse is being used in a way that isn't loving God or loving people, is that how Jesus would read it?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"The Bible says it, and that settles it."	"Jesus read the Bible too, and he weighed it. He said everything hangs on love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22:40). Can we read this verse the way he would?"
"That's just picking the verses you like."	"I'm trying to pick the verses he picked. He told people to 'go and learn' what 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' means (Matthew 9:13)."

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

Ask a Christian what their faith requires and you may hear a list: what to believe, what not to do, which side to vote for. If you've been handed a list like that and told it was God's, you know the frustration. Jesus was asked the same question and answered in two sentences, with no list attached.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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.

WHO'S WHO:

A scribe was an expert in the Jewish Law, the commands God gave through Moses. The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish worship. "Hear, Israel" begins the Shema, the prayer devout Jews said every morning and evening, then and now.

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 compassion, 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."

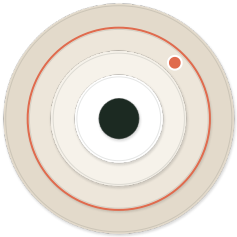
WHO'S WHO:
Priests and Levites served in the Temple; they were the religious professionals of the day. Samaritans lived between Galilee and Judea and worshiped differently. Jews and Samaritans had despised each other for centuries, so a Samaritan hero would have shocked Jesus' audience.

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.

POINT TO THIS:
This is the one teaching nearly every Christian already accepts. When a conversation drifts to rules and positions, Matthew 22:40 is the simplest way back.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

Rules give an institution something to enforce. A list lets a church decide who is in and who is out, and it lets members feel righteous for what they avoid instead of for how they love. A rule against dancing can be checked. A command to love your neighbor as yourself puts every member on the hook every day, which is far less convenient.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

The first objection treats any criticism of rules as lawlessness, and the second treats love as too soft to count. Neither engages Matthew 22:40. Quote it, and ask which rules they have in mind that hang on something else.

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.

What you noticed is real: many Christians can tell you exactly what their church forbids and very little about how it loves. If you were raised on those lists, you can set them down. Jesus gave you two sentences instead, and a story that makes them hard to escape.

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.”

You don't need to believe anything to live this way. Many people with no faith at all stop for the stranger on the road more readily than the people who walk past on their way to worship. Jesus' story was told precisely to make that point.

Reflect

2 min

When Christians have explained what their faith requires, did they mention love of neighbor, or a list?

Who is the "Samaritan" for the Christians you know, the person they were taught to look down on?

Have you seen a church rule work against love? What was it?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, notice how the Christians around you describe their faith: by what they avoid, or by whom they help. Write down one example of each. If someone mentions a rule, ask yourself which of the two commandments it hangs on.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND
"We both know Jesus named the two greatest commandments. Love God, love your neighbor."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION
"If those two are the greatest, which of your church's rules would you put third? And does it hang on the first two?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS
Show them Matthew 22:40, "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments," and ask: "Is there anything we treat as essential that doesn't hang on these?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"Without rules, people do whatever they want."	"Jesus didn't remove rules. He ranked them. Everything hangs on these two (Matthew 22:40), so a rule that works against love loses."
"My neighbor means fellow believers."	"That's the exact question Jesus was asked. His answer was a Samaritan, the person his listeners were taught to despise (Luke 10:29-37)."

PASS IT ON:

When a believer hands you a list of rules, you don't have to argue with the list. Ask which items on it hang on love of God and love of neighbor. Many believers have quietly wondered the same thing.

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

Today, "blessed" often means comfortable: a new house, a good job, a safe family, posted with a caption. The people Jesus called blessed were the poor, the grieving and the persecuted. This lesson shows how the word got turned around, and how Christianity found ways to keep his blessings on the wall and out of daily life. When you hear "blessed" used for a new truck or a vacation, it can feel like you're the only one who remembers who Jesus actually called blessed. You're not imagining it.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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.

WHO'S WHO:

Galilee was the rural northern region where Jesus grew up and did most of his teaching. Most of his listeners were farmers, fishermen and laborers, many in debt and under Roman rule. "The Kingdom of Heaven" and "God's Kingdom" are Jesus' phrases for the world as God means it to be, a world he said was already breaking in.

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.

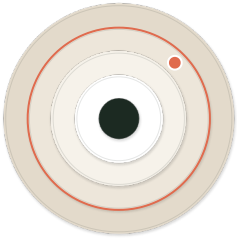
Then notice the qualities in Matthew's list. The gentle. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. None of these is a belief. Every one is a way of being with other people. This is Jesus describing the kind of person his Kingdom belongs to.

POINT TO THIS:

The Beatitudes open Jesus' longest teaching, and most Christians know them. When someone calls wealth or comfort a "blessing," you can point to the first words of the Sermon on the Mount.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

Every one of these readings lets comfortable people keep the Beatitudes as decoration. Monks can be poor for the rest of us. Rulers can set mercy aside in office. The whole Sermon can wait for another age. The result is a faith that hangs "Blessed are the peacemakers" on the wall and blesses the war, and calls a raise a blessing while the poor are told to try harder.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Both objections move the Beatitudes away from ordinary life, one by spiritualizing "poor," the other by calling the Sermon impossible. Point to Luke 6:20-24 and Matthew 7:24. He meant ordinary people, and he meant them to do it.

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.

What you noticed is real. A culture that calls comfort "blessed" has reversed the opening words of Jesus' most famous teaching. If you grew up hearing that God rewards the comfortable, you can set that down; he said the opposite, in public, on the first page of the Sermon.

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.

None of these requires belief. Mercy, gentleness and peacemaking are good on their own terms, and many people live them without ever calling it religion. You can let these sentences shape you as much as anyone.

Reflect

2 min

When you hear Christians say they are "blessed," what are they usually talking about?

Which Beatitude do you see least among the Christians you know? Which do you see most?

Which of these qualities, the merciful, the gentle, the peacemakers, would you most like to see more of around you?

Practice this week

1 min

For a week, notice every time you hear someone say "blessed," in person or online. Write down what it referred to. At the end of the week, compare your list with the people Jesus called blessed.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND
"We both know the Beatitudes. They open the Sermon on the Mount."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION
"Who did Jesus actually call blessed? Can you name a few?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS
Show them Luke 6:20-24, "Blessed are you who are poor... But woe to you who are rich!" and ask: "If that's who he called blessed, what do we mean when we say we're blessed?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"God does bless his people with good things."	"Maybe. But when Jesus said 'blessed,' he named the poor, the grieving and the persecuted (Matthew 5:3-10). That's the list he started with."
"The Sermon on the Mount is an ideal, not a rulebook."	"He ended it with the builder who hears these words and does them (Matthew 7:24). He expected people to build on it."

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

You have likely seen Christians who are quickest to call for retaliation, treat political opponents as enemies of God, and cheer for force. If you've pointed that out to people you love, you know how alone it can feel. This lesson shows what Jesus actually said, how plainly the first Christians obeyed it, and when the church changed its mind.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

Read it

3 min

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

WHO'S WHO:

"An eye for an eye" comes from the Law of Moses. It was a limit, meant to keep revenge in proportion. Tax collectors worked for Rome and were despised as traitors; Jesus uses them as an example of people who love only their own.

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."

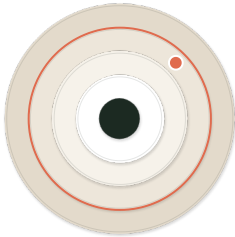
He lived it to the end. When Peter drew a sword to defend him at his arrest, Jesus stopped him: "Put your sword back into its place, for all those who take the sword will die by the sword" **Matthew 26:52**. And on the cross, Luke records him praying for the men executing him: "Father, forgive them,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

POINT TO THIS:

Few Christians will deny that Jesus said "love your enemies." The disagreement is only ever about whether it applies now. The history below shows that the earliest Christians thought it did.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

Empires need soldiers, and movements need enemies. Once Christianity became the religion of those in power, the command to love enemies was a problem for anyone with an army. It has been a problem for every politician since who needs his followers angry. Sincere Christians have wrestled with real threats, but the drift always ran in the same direction: toward permission.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Both objections are real, and you don't need to settle questions of war to make the point. Ask instead about attitude: does Jesus' teaching allow Christians to hate their political opponents, mock them or celebrate their pain? It does not, and most believers will admit it.

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.

What you noticed is real. When Christians call for revenge or treat the other side as subhuman, they are doing the opposite of what their founder said, and the earliest Christians would have recognized it at once. You can say so calmly; Matthew 5:44 is on your side.

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."

You don't need faith to see the wisdom in it. Refusing to hate the person who wronged you frees you, and kindness to an opponent disarms them more often than force does. Plenty of people outside any church have lived this better than the Christians around them.

Reflect

2 min

Where have you seen Christians treat their opponents as enemies of God?

Did the history of early Christian nonviolence surprise you? Why or why not?

Is there someone you would find it hard to wish well? What would change if you did?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, notice how the Christians around you talk about their opponents, in person, in the news and online. Write down one example of contempt and, if you find one, one example of genuine kindness toward an enemy.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND
"We both know Jesus said to love your enemies. It's one of the clearest things he ever said."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION
"Who do you think he'd count as our enemies today?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

Read Luke 6:27-28 together (*Follow Me* §18), "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you," and ask: "Is there any version of hating the other side that fits inside that?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"Some people deserve what's coming to them."	"Jesus prayed for the men crucifying him: 'Father, forgive them' (Luke 23:34). If they didn't fall outside his mercy, who does?"
"You have to fight evil."	"Fight evil, yes. But he said overcome it by loving your enemies (Matthew 5:44). The early church took that literally for three hundred years."

PASS IT ON:

Some of the believers you love are uneasy with the anger too. You don't have to argue. If one of them starts asking questions, hand them the believer edition of this book.

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

You have probably noticed how loudly some Christians practice their faith: public prayers, announced donations, prayer as a political badge. If you've felt like the only one in the room who saw the irony, you weren't wrong. Their founder told them to do all three behind a closed door. This lesson shows exactly what he said.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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.

WHO'S WHO:

"Hypocrites" comes from a Greek word for a stage actor, someone performing behind a mask. Synagogues were the local meeting houses where Jews gathered to pray and hear Scripture. "Gentiles" means non-Jews. Fasting is going without food for a time as a religious practice.

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 synagogues 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 secret, 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.’

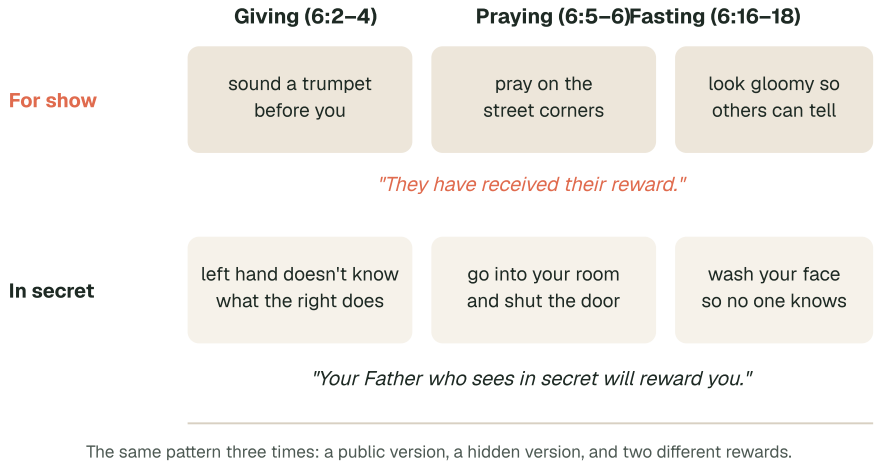
MATTHEW 6:16-18

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 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 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.**

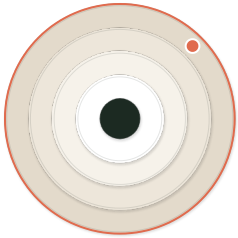
His own habit matched his teaching. Mark records that "early in the morning, while it was still dark, he rose up and went out, and departed into a deserted place, and prayed there" **Mark 1:35.** And the prayer he taught is remarkably short. Luke's version is shorter still **Luke 11:1-4.** The closing 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.

POINT TO THIS:

Matthew 6 sits in the Sermon on the Mount, the best-known teaching Jesus gave, and it contains the Lord's Prayer, which most Christians know by heart. The instructions wrapped around that prayer are about secrecy.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

Public faith is useful. It wins votes, raises money and marks who belongs. A politician who prays on camera gets something he could never get from praying in a closet. Many people who want prayer in public places sincerely miss a time when faith felt shared, but the strongest push has always come from those who gain from being seen.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Both are common, and both prove less than they seem. Matthew 5:16 is about pointing to God, and Jesus' occasional public prayers were never performances. Calmly bring it back to Matthew 6:6: "pray to your Father who is in secret."

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.

What you noticed is real. When prayer becomes a political prop or a public performance, it is doing the exact thing Jesus told his followers not to do, in the most famous sermon he gave. You can point that out without contempt; the passage is short and very clear.

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.

You can live this without believing anything. Quiet generosity protects the dignity of the person you help, and it frees you from needing anyone's applause. Many people who never set foot in a church practice it better than the people who pray loudest.

Reflect

2 min

Where have you seen faith performed for an audience: at events, in politics, online?

Did the Cold War history of "under God" and the Prayer Breakfast surprise you?

Who is the most generous person you know? Do you know about their generosity because they told you?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, keep count of the public displays of faith you see: prayers at events, posts, signs, announced donations. Then, separately, do one good thing for someone that you never tell anyone about. Notice how different the two feel.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND
"We both know the Lord's Prayer. Do you remember what Jesus said right before it?"

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION
"Where did he say to pray: in public, or in private?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

Show them Matthew 6:6, "when you pray, enter into your inner room, and having shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret," and ask: "If that's what he said, what should we make of prayer used on stage or in politics?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"We need prayer back in schools and government."	"Students can still pray on their own; Jesus' own instruction was to pray behind a closed door (Matthew 6:6). Who is official public prayer really for?"
"Christians shouldn't hide their faith."	"He didn't say hide it. He said don't perform it. 'They have received their reward' (Matthew 6:5) is about people who prayed to be seen."

PASS IT ON:

If a believer you love is tired of faith as a show, Matthew 6 is the gentlest place to start. You don't have to argue; hand them the believer edition of this book.

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

You have probably heard Christians say the poor brought it on themselves, or that "God helps those who help themselves." Hearing it from someone you love, said with total confidence, is maddening. This lesson shows what Jesus actually said, how the first Christians lived it, and where the other idea came from.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

Read it

3 min

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

WHO'S WHO:

"The Son of Man" is the title Jesus most often used for himself. Here he pictures himself as a king judging all the nations, separating them the way a shepherd in his day separated sheep from goats at the end of the day.

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 angels; 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.

WHO'S WHO:

Abraham was the ancestor of the Jewish people; "Abraham's bosom" was a way of picturing paradise. "Moses and the prophets" means the Jewish Scriptures, which already commanded care for the poor.

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 surprised 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:

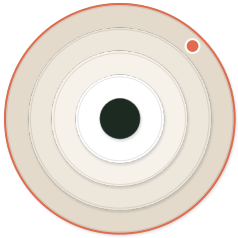
The dinner advice in Luke 14 has a reason attached: invite those who "don't have the resources to repay you." Jesus did not tell his followers to help the poor who deserved it. He told them to help the ones who could never pay them back.

POINT TO THIS:

The sheep and the goats is one of the few places where Jesus describes the final judgment in detail, and the test is how people treated the poor. Most Christians know the story. Few have noticed that belief never comes up.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

Sorting the poor into deserving and undeserving is convenient for anyone who would rather not give. It turns a command into a judgment call, and the judgment usually lands on keeping what you have. Many Christians give generously and work hard for the poor. But the idea that the poor brought it on themselves lets comfortable people feel righteous while walking past the gate, exactly like the rich man in the story.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

You will hear both, often together. Answer calmly: the first is Paul, speaking to church members who refused to work; the second is Jesus quoting a command to give. Then come back to Matthew 25:40. In his own description of the judgment, there is no "deserving" test.

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.

What you noticed is real. When Christians blame the poor for their poverty, or repeat "God helps those who help themselves" as if it were Scripture, they are not quoting Jesus. They are quoting Benjamin Franklin, and contradicting the one story in which Jesus describes how everyone will be judged.

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.

You don't need faith to live this. You only need to stop sorting people by what they can do for you. Many people outside any church live this better than the Christians around them, and the people they help know the difference.

Reflect

2 min

Have you heard Christians say the poor brought it on themselves? How did it sit with you?

Before this lesson, did you think "God helps those who help themselves" was in the Bible?

Who do you know, religious or not, who treats people who can't repay them well?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, listen for how people around you, Christian or not, talk about the poor. Notice who gets called "deserving" and who doesn't. If you choose, do one quiet kindness for someone who can't repay you, and notice how it changes the way you see them.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND
"We both know Jesus said, 'Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.' It's one of the best-known things he said."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION
"In that story, what does the king ask people about at the judgment?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS
Read Matthew 25:35-36 together (*Follow Me* §134). The questions are about food, water, welcome, clothes, the sick and the prisoner. Then ask: "Where in that story is the test for whether they deserved it?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"God helps those who help themselves."	"That's Benjamin Franklin, not the Bible. Jesus said, 'I was hungry and you gave me food' (Matthew 25:35)."
"If we help people, they'll just stay dependent."	"Jesus told us to invite people who can't repay us (Luke 14:13-14). He didn't tell us to check first."

PASS IT ON:

Many believers already feel the pull of Matthew 25 and wonder why their church talks about it so little. If one of them asks, you don't need to argue. Hand them the believer edition of this book.

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."
5. Washington Post / Kaiser Family Foundation survey on poverty, reported by Julie Zauzmer, "Christians are more than twice as likely to blame a person's poverty on lack of effort," *The Washington Post*, August 3, 2017.

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 24 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/honest-heretics/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.

This may be the easiest gap of all to see. The man who told a rich man to sell everything is now preached by ministers who fly private jets and promise that donations will come back multiplied. Saying so to someone who feels blessed for their giving rarely lands, but the text alone makes the case, and his teaching on money is good advice for anyone.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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 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.

"Blessed are you..."		"Woe to you..."
who are **poor**	→	who are **rich**
who **hunger** now	→	who are **full** now
who **weep** now	→	who **laugh** now
when men **hate** you	→	when men **speak well** of you

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 re-
quired 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.”

WHO'S WHO:

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are the books that tell Jesus' life; the verses above are his own words in them. Deuteronomy, Proverbs and Job, mentioned below, belong to the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish Scriptures Jesus grew up with. A tax collector, like Zacchaeus, collected taxes for Rome and was despised as a collaborator.

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?

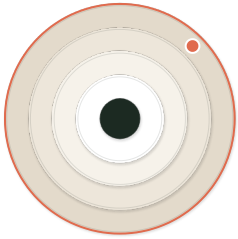
> **A MYTH TO SET ASIDE:**
> You may hear that the "eye of the needle" was a small gate in Jerusalem that a camel could squeeze through on its knees. No such gate is known from the time of Jesus; the explanation appears many centuries later. The disciples' reaction shows they heard an impossibility, 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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

First, the ministries that collect the "seed" money; a message that promises a return on donations pays the messenger before anyone else. Second, everyone already comfortable, because it turns privilege into a reward from God. And it quietly blames the poor: if faith brings wealth, poverty starts to look like a lack of faith. Many believers in it are sincere, often looking for hope in hard times. The system they trust profits from that hope.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

The Old Testament objection is the most common, so expect it first. It is also the weakest with a believer, because it concedes that Jesus said something different. Ask calmly: "Did Jesus ever repeat that promise?" Then let the silence do the work.

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.

What you noticed is real, and it is one of the plainest failures in modern Christianity. Ministers who preach wealth as a blessing are preaching against the man they name. If you grew up hearing that faith would make you prosperous, or that hard times meant you didn't believe enough, you can set that down. He never said 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.

You don't need any faith to take this one. It is simply true that people who hold money loosely and give freely tend to live freer, happier lives, and Jesus said so two thousand years before the studies did.

Reflect

2 min

When have you heard someone's success described as God's blessing? What did that imply about people who struggle?

Have you, or someone you know, been told that giving to a ministry would bring money back? What happened?

Who is the most generous person you know? Do they have much?

Practice this week

1 min

This week, notice how money and God are talked about around you: on television, online, on church signs, in your family. Write down one example of wealth described as a blessing, and one example of someone giving quietly. Then, if you like, try the teaching for yourself: give something that costs you, and tell no one.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND

"I love that you want God involved in every part of your life, money included. Let's see what Jesus said about it."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION

"Can you think of a time Jesus pointed to someone's money as proof God was pleased with them?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

He did the opposite: "Woe to you who are rich" (Luke 6:24). Ask gently: "If he said that, where did we get the other idea?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"God blessed me with all this."	"Maybe so. But Jesus never once pointed to someone's money as proof of God's favor. He praised the people who gave it away."
"The Bible promises blessing if you tithe."	"That's Malachi, in the Old Testament. When Jesus mentioned tithing, he said justice and mercy matter more (Matthew 23:23)."

PASS IT ON:

Some believers are quietly uneasy with prosperity preaching but have never seen what Jesus said about money laid out in one place. If one of them asks, hand them the believer edition of this book instead of an argument.

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.
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LESSON 11

11

Judging Others

LOG About 24 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/honest-heretics/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."

If you have been on the receiving end, you know this subject: the sermon about your sins, the relative who reminds you where you are headed, the stranger with a sign. Ask honest questions and you may be called a heretic; consider yourself an honest one. Jesus taught almost the opposite, in some of his most direct words, and his answer to the urge to judge works for anyone.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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.”

WHO'S WHO:

The Pharisees were respected, devout teachers who kept God's Law carefully. Tax collectors collected money for the Roman occupiers, often with a cut for themselves, and were despised as traitors. In Jesus' story, the respectable man is the one who gets it wrong.

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.

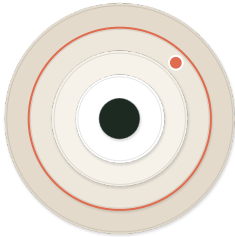
Jesus did judge some people harshly. Read Matthew 23 (*Follow Me* §135) and you will find him calling religious leaders "hypocrites" and "whitened tombs" **Matthew 23:27-28.** But look at who he judged: the powerful, the religious and the self-righteous. He never once spoke that way to the outsiders,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

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

Judging outsiders makes insiders feel safe and righteous, the exact feeling Jesus aimed at in the Pharisee's prayer. It draws a line between the saved and everyone else, and a group with an enemy holds together. In politics, a campaign against other people's sins mobilizes voters far better than a sermon about your own. Many who "call out sin" sincerely believe they are helping. But the habit serves the people doing the judging.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

Expect "love tells the truth" most of all. Agree that truth matters, then ask one question: "Did Jesus say to start with other people's sins, or with our own?" Matthew 7:5 answers it in his own words.

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.

What you noticed is real. If you have been condemned, shamed or warned by Christians, you were on the receiving end of something Jesus told them not to do. You owe them no agreement on that. You can also notice that his answer, deal with your own faults first, is good advice for everyone, including people who have been judged.

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 underrate 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.

You can take this teaching without taking anything else. Looking at your own faults first makes you fairer and calmer, and it disarms people who come at you with judgment, because you are no longer playing their game.

Reflect

2 min

When have you been judged by a Christian? Did it bring you closer to their faith or push you away?

Where do you see the beam-and-speck pattern outside religion, in politics, at work, in your family, or in yourself?

What would Christians be known for if they followed Matthew 7:1–5?

Practice this week

1 min

For one week, notice judgment around you: in sermons or posts that reach you, in politics, at work, and in your own thoughts. Each time, ask who is doing the judging and who is being judged. Write down one example where the judge had an obvious beam of their own.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND

"Jesus said a lot about how we treat people who get things wrong. Can we look at what he said?"

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION

"In the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, who went home right with God?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

The tax collector, the one who judged no one but himself. Read Matthew 7:5 together (*Follow Me* §34): "First remove the beam out of your own eye." Then ask: "If that's his order, what would change in how Christians talk about other people?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"We're called to speak the truth in love."	"We are. Jesus said to start with our own beam, and to go privately if we go at all (Matthew 18:15). Public condemnation isn't on his list."
"Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites."	"He did. He said it to religious leaders, not to sinners. If we follow that example, we start with the religious, and with ourselves."

PASS IT ON:

The believers who judge you are often harder on themselves than you know. If one of them ever wonders whether there is another way, hand them the believer edition of this book. You don't have to win; his words will do it.

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"?

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 Gandhi gave it a modern form.

Sources

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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 24 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/honest-heretics/12

LUKE 6:46

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

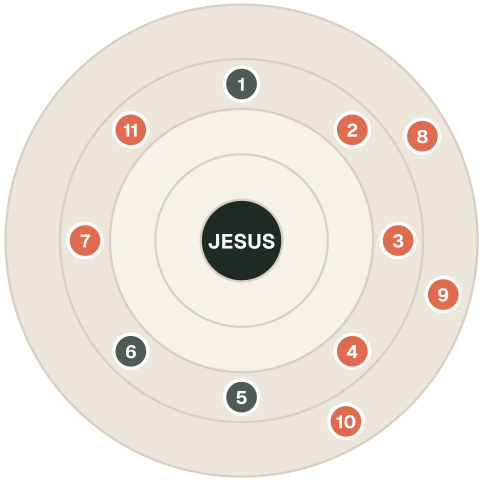
Eleven lessons ago, this volume started with one sentence nearly every Christian would sign: Jesus is the center. Since then, each lesson has taken one teaching and set it beside what he actually said and did. The figure that follows gathers all eleven verdicts in one place.

There it is: eight contradictions and three add-ons, none from the center. You suspected that what you heard in Jesus' name did not match the man. Now you have the evidence, from the Christians' own book and history. You are not the only one who sees it. This book calls people like you **honest heretics**, and this lesson pulls it together.

In this lesson: Read it · The world behind the words · How it drifted · What they'll say back · Measured against the center · A keeper · Reflect · Practice this week · Bring it back

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.”

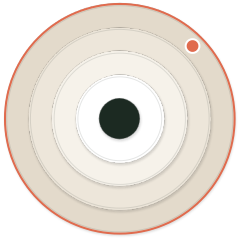
WHO'S WHO:

The apostles were the followers Jesus sent out to carry his message, Peter, James and John among them. Antioch was a large city in Syria, north of Galilee, where one of the first communities outside Jewish Palestine formed.

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.

WHOSE PURPOSE IT SERVES:

Every drift in this list solved a problem for someone other than Jesus. Creeds made beliefs easy to police. Fear filled pews. Blessed wars served rulers. Public prayer won votes. Prosperity preaching paid the preachers. Judging outsiders kept insiders loyal. The people inside the system were mostly sincere. The system itself kept rewarding whatever pulled attention away from his words.

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.

What they'll say back

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.

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE:

The first is the most common answer you will get, and the best response is calm: "Check any one of them." The second is true, and conceding it makes you more believable. Then point out that the good came from people who followed what he actually said.

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.

What you noticed is real. It was never your imagination, and it was never a misunderstanding on your part. The religion that formed around Jesus has, in large part, wandered from what he taught. And the prob-

lem was never Jesus. The further you look into what he actually said, the clearer it becomes that much of what turned you away from Christianity would have turned him away too.

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.

You can live every line of this without believing anything else. Many people outside the church already do. If you choose to let his teachings lead you, this list is the whole of it, and no one stands between you and it.

Reflect

2 min

Which of the eleven verdicts best explains something you saw growing up or in Christians around you?

Which teaching from the list above do you already live by, without ever connecting it to Jesus?

How has knowing what he actually said changed the way you hear Christians talk about him?

Practice this week

1 min

Choose one teaching from the list and live it every day this week, simply because it is good. Then, the next time someone tells you what Christians believe, ask yourself which of the eleven verdicts their claim falls under. You'll be surprised how often you can tell.

Bring it back

1 min

1 COMMON GROUND

"We both agree Jesus should come first. I've been looking at what he actually said, and I'd love to hear what you think of it."

2 THE BRIDGE QUESTION

"If you had to pick the three things Jesus himself said mattered most, which would they be?"

3 BACK TO HIS WORDS

Most people name something close to the list in this lesson. Show them Matthew 22:37-40, where he says everything depends on loving God and loving your neighbor. Then ask: "How much of what Christians are known for today hangs on those two?"

THEY SAY	YOU CAN SAY
"You're just attacking Christianity."	"I'm doing what Jesus asked: measuring things by what he said. If his words are the center, they can handle being checked against."
"Every church has flaws."	"Agreed. That's why the question is simple: does this teaching come from him, or from somewhere else?"

PASS IT ON:

You don't have to argue anyone out of anything. When a believer you love starts asking questions, and many quietly are, hand them the believer edition of this book, or *Follow Me*, the book of Jesus' own words. Let him make the case.

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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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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