

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

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Kingsland Baptist Church 20555 Kingsland Blvd. | Katy, TX | 77450

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LESSON 1 | HARD SAYING ABOUT PARABLES

LUKE 8:9-10

Everyone has particular movies or styles of movies that they prefer. Maybe it's sports movies, war movies, period pieces, or romantic comedies. But no matter the movie genre, there is one plot line that will cause me to turn the movie off: miscommunication. I hate when the whole problem in a story revolves around someone misunderstanding someone else's statement. I don't know how often I have leaned over to my wife and said, "This movie/show/episode would have been ten minutes long if this person had simply asked that person what they meant.

The same is true of the Bible too. The Bible is not one book but a collection of books. It was written by dozens of authors over hundreds of years in multiple languages. It shouldn't shock us that some of the things it contains are hard to understand. But some people consistently jump to the wrong conclusion. They claim the Bible is outdated, hateful, or some other fashionable critique that people use to excuse themselves from listening to its message.

Perhaps, instead of dismissing the hard saying of the Bible, we need to seek to understand. Maybe we will learn something about the Biblical world that makes the saying make sense. Maybe we will learn something about ourselves that will make the saying a source of truth we weren't expecting.

Today we are starting a series looking at the Hard Sayings of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Hopefully, as we study various sayings, we will discover that it's okay to ask questions and be bewildered by things the Bible says. Maybe this study will give you the confidence to ask the questions that keep you from following with your whole heart.

We will start our study with a saying that is not just hard but also representative of why hard sayings exist in the Bible. It is the reason Jesus gives for why he teaches in parables.

"Why can't you just teach like Jesus?" This is a common suggestion that every Pastor or Bible Teacher has received at some point in their ministry, usually after a poorly written, overly long, or hard-to-understand sermon. Though it is true that many bible teachers frequently fail to connect deep theological and biblical truth to everyday life and subsequently leave

their listeners wondering what they are supposed to do with what they just heard, there is an equally troubling assumption about the nature of Jesus's teaching.

First, it should be noted that far from being simple, homely, and accessible teaching, the parables are hard to understand. Jesus has just told the famous parable of the four soils. After he finishes, the disciples come to Him and ask what it means. So much so that not even the disciples get it.

Jesus responds to their request with the hard saying of Verse 10, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that *SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND.*" This saying suggests He teaches in parables not so that He will be easy to understand but so that His meaning will be harder to grasp. People have a hard time figuring out what to do with this passage. Why is Jesus playing favorites? What makes the disciples so special that they get to know "the real meaning" of the parable? Why is Jesus making it harder for people to understand?

THE PURPOSE OF PARABLES: TO MOVE US TO SEARCH - V9-10

The key to understanding this statement is the first two words of Jesus's response: "To you." Jesus says that they have been granted access; they have been given the opportunity to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God. The question is, "Who does Jesus mean when he says "you"?" Does he mean the disciples, his inner circle of favorite people? The clue is found in the version of this story in the Gospel of Mark. Luke 8:9 says, "His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant." They come to Him for an answer, and Jesus gives it to them. Jesus is showing us that the ones who **GET** to understand what He is talking about are the ones who **WANT** to understand what He is talking about. His disciples didn't understand him either, but they wanted to understand, so they were seeking answers.

Jesus is saying that He hides his meaning so that we will be moved to seek understanding and, in the process, begin seeking Him. As He said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Seek, and you will find." Anybody can do it. You just have to ask. But not everybody does it. Many want to use Jesus to get what they want. And when He offers them something different or doesn't do what they want, they go away.

Teaching in parables is another example of the fact that God wants to reveal Himself to you but won't override your free will. He rewards seeking. He leaves enough of Himself in the world to move us to seek Him and to reward those who do. He hides himself enough to allow sinful, selfish, stubborn people to go on with their lives uninterrupted. There are

only two kinds of people in the world: those who seek God and those who seek to avoid God. Both will be successful in the end.

Why does Jesus teach in parables? Not him putting the cookies on the bottom shelf or hanging the fruit on the lowest branch. To hide his meaning. Not to be mean, but to get us to seek. It's an act of love. He isn't going to override our will. The powerful presence of God is so overwhelming that it would have compulsive force, and we would have no choice. Like a parent in a room. The clearest indicator of the heart of a child is what it does when no one is watching them. Why does God hide? So that we will look for him.

He isn't saying I am hiding it, so it's hard, and you have to be smart to get it. The disciples don't get it. I'm hiding it so that you have to be looking for it. You have to want it. You have to ask for it. And he promises that those who ask receive and those who seek find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.

THE PROBLEM OF PARABLES: HARD-HEARTEDNESS — MATTHEW 13:15a

The answer Jesus gives in Like is a quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10. Mathew's version of this encounter includes a more extended quote from this prophet. In it, Jesus reveals the problem that the parables claim to solve. Matthew 13:15 says,

"FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM."

The first part of the prophecy reveals a problem with the human heart. The more we hide from God, the more sin dulls our senses to the wonders and presence of God.

God hasn't gone anywhere. Psalm 139 articulates this point beautifully. The psalmist suddenly becomes aware that there is no place he could go where God is not. Psalm 137:7-8 say, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or Where can I flee from your presence?" The whole Psalm is full of the psalmist realizing how close God is and how deeply God considers every aspect of our lives.

It is our benumbed hearts that are no longer able to perceive His presence in our lives. Like a callous that forms on our skin when it gets rubbed uncomfortably, our souls become

insensitive to the uncomfortable conviction that comes from the awareness of God's presence and holiness.

The parables are a way of getting us to seek something beyond ourselves, to entice us with the fact that maybe we do not have all the answers, and to get us to wonder about things. They are stones in our shoes. Things you walk on for a little while and think, "oh ouch, this kind hurts," until you realize that it's there and you need to deal with it.

THE PROMISE OF PARABLES: HARD-HEARTEDNESS - MATTHEW 13:15B

The problem that parables confront is our hardness of heart. But if you look closely at the end of the prophecy from Isaiah, you see the result Jesus is trying to produce in us by telling parables.

Verse 15 ends with the statement that if people didn't have such dull hearts, "they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return, and I would heal them." If the parables can awaken in us seeking, Jesus is showing us the promise that will result: understanding. Seeking produces understanding. Understanding leads to returning to God. Returning to God results in healing.

Like the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, after years spent wasting his money and life, the son experiences great calamity and suffering. When he is just about as far from home, and as low as he can get, Luke 15:17 says that "he came to his senses." He finally becomes aware of what he had previously been numb to. The result of this understanding is to make him want to go home. In Luke 15:18, he says, "I will get up and go to my father." He is so humbled and ashamed by his sin that he is willing to be his father's slave. When he gets home, he discovers that his father is waiting for him to come home, wants him back, and is ready to restore him. When the older brother isn't happy about there not being enough "consequence" for his younger sibling's bad behavior, in Luke 15:32, the father responds, "this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found."

That is where you and I are. We are lost and overwhelmed by our sin. God desires that we come to our senses, return to him, and discover that we never ceased to be his children and that he longs to make us whole. He wants us to "begin to live again."

The parables, instead of being an obstacle to that, or the chosen instrument of Jesus to help us come to our senses, to awaken in us a realization that we don't have all the answers, and to seek something beyond ourselves...but only if you want it.

CONCLUSION

Jesus's explanation about why he teaches in parables is an excellent hard saying to begin our series. Many people don't investigate hard sayings for the same reason they don't investigate a hard-to-understand parable. But the hard sayings are there for the same reason as parables: to move us to seek answers and ultimately to seek God. They force us to confront our stubborn hard-heartedness and encourage us to accept that what will heal us might be the thing we are resisting so hard.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. What is a hard saying of Jesus? What makes them hard? How do you handle when you encounter a hard saying of Jesus?
- 2. Why did Jesus hide his meaning from people? Who gets to know the meaning of the parables?
- 3. Why do we hide from God?
- 4. What does it mean to have a dull heart? What are the symptoms of a dull heart? What is the treatment?
- 5. What is the connection between seeking, understanding, returning, and healing? What does each mean? How does one lead to the other?

LESOON 2 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

LUKE 9:57-62

I hate buying cars. I mean, I really hate it. I hate bargaining. I hate the constant back and forth. It always seems like the car salesman tries to waste as much time as possible so that you spend your whole day trying to buy a car and are more likely to pay more because you have so much time invested. It's frustrating how they say things like, "Lemme go talk to my manager," when you know full well that they are just getting another cup of coffee. I am always worried that I will pay too much or buy a car with some hidden problems. Car dealers seem more determined to mask problems and mislead than to tell you the truth and risk you walking away.

The opposite is true of Jesus. Instead of trying to make it as easy as possible for people to follow him, he keeps making it more challenging. He does the equivalent of a car salesman saying, "are you sure you want to buy this car...! don't know if you are ready for this." He isn't doing it as a form of reverse psychology, though.

Today we will look at a series of hard saying that Jesus speaks in the context of recruiting new followers. He doesn't mince any words but instead says some hard thinking about what it really means to follow him. Perhaps as we look at these sayings, we will gain a new perspective on what following Jesus actually involves.

DISCIPLESHIP REQUIRES: CHANGING GOALS - V57-58

The first saying occurs as a response to a declaration. Luke 9:57 says, "As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." As Jesus is walking down the road, a person spontaneously says he will follow Jesus wherever He goes.

Jesus doesn't respond, "great, let go." Instead, he responds with a cryptic statement about birds and foxes. In verse 58, Jesus says, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

This statement reminds us that following Jesus is not necessarily a path to worldly success. The God who reveals himself through Jesus is a god who requires that we come to Him

for "daily bread." He promises to provide, but that provision is found in the context of relationship. It requires the willingness to trust.

It involves dependence, not just on God, but on others. Jesus says that He doesn't have a place to lay his head. This means He has to trust God to provide. He also has to rely on other people whom God uses to provide for him. This is a dimension of following Jesus that we are frequently uncomfortable with. God calls us not just to himself but into community. We are called to rely on others as well.

There is an extra dimension to this saying as well. The fox that Jesus mentions might not just be an example derived from nature. It maybe have had social and political significance as well. Later, in Luke 13:32, Jesus refers to King Herod as the fox: "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My goal." If that is the case, then the birds Jesus mentions might reference the Roman rulers whose symbol was the eagle. If this is true, it deepens the meaning of what Jesus is saying. He is telling us that following him requires us to rethink our definition of success. We won't have the abundance, security, or success those rulers enjoy.

Discipleship requires that we change our goals from the ones our society gives us and be willing to see ourselves as failures in the world's eyes as we run the race that God has set before us.

DISCIPLESHIP REQUIRES: CHANGING PRIORITIES - V59-60

The next hard saying about discipleship happens when Jesus invites a man to follow Him, and the man expresses willingness but also mentions an obstacle. Verse 59 says, "And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father."

It seems like a reasonable request. According to Jewish tradition, the duty to bury someone superseded almost all other activities, including studying Torah, serving in the Temple, and even offering sacrifices. That is why it is shocking when Jesus responds in verse 60, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."

The key to understanding this statement is to realize that the man's father is still alive. If his father were already dead, he would be focused on conducting the burial, not listening to Jesus. When he asks Jesus for time to bury his father, he is actually saying that he has other concerns, obligations, and priorities right now. He is telling Jesus that now isn't a good time. But one day, when he has more free time, he will definitely follow Jesus.

But what are we to make of the phrase "Allow the dead to bury their own dead." Some think it means to allow the spiritually dead to bury the physically dead. But surely, if the man's father were spiritually dead, he would be a worthy audience to proclaim the kingdom of God to. Some interpret the phrase as a translation of an Aramaic proverb that means something more like "Leave the dead to the burier of the dead."

Either way, what Jesus is telling the man is, "That's not your job. Following me is the job I've assigned you. Do it now. Don't wait until the time is right. There will never be a good time. Do it now."

Many of us do the same thing as this man. We hear the call of God and respond favorably to it. But we also see the complications involved in extricating ourselves from our current circumstances. We tell ourselves and God that we plan on obeying when we have more time and money, when things aren't so hectic or busy, when the kids are out of school, or when we retire.

We forget that the one who calls knows our obligations. He knows where we are and what we are doing. He knows what He is asking when He calls us to a new life that we weren't expecting. We need to accept that discipleship involves changing our priorities to conform to what God is calling us to do. We also need to realize that delayed obedience is disobedience.

DISCIPLESHIP REQUIRES: CHANGING FOCUS - V61-62

The final statement comes in reply to another volunteer who asks to be allowed to bid farewell to his family. Verse 61 says, "Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say goodbye to those at home."

Again the response that Jesus gives is hard and apparently callous. Verse 62 says, "But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Why won't Jesus let this man go back and say goodbye? The truth is Jesus doesn't tell him not to go say goodbye. He says not to be distracted by what he is leaving behind. Jesus wants him to realize that when he goes back to say goodbye and to tell them where he is going, they will ask him to stay for a farewell meal, they may even try to convince him to stay.

This statement is a warning that discipleship requires a change in focus. In the same way that a plowman can't dig a straight furrow if he isn't looking where he is going, so

too constantly looking back to the life he could have had will render a follower of Jesus ineffective at what he is being called to do.

Paul demonstrates this in Philippians 3:13b-14, which says, "13 forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Hebrews 12:1-2 tell us to "run with endurance the race that is set before us...fixing our eyes on Jesus."

CONCLUSION

Most people don't hate God. Most people don't hate things God calls them to do. Most people just have something better to do. This causes many to present Christianity as something that requires minimal effort, which can be done alongside other pursuits. Jesus, however, always presented following him as a radical reordering of our lives. Following him requires we change our view of what constitutes a successful life and learn to trust him and others. Following him requires us to change our priorities. We must be willing to let go of work that isn't ours to do and embrace the mission that God has called us to. Following Him requires us to change our focus, off of ourselves and our past or even our expectation for the future, and to place our focus on Him and the race He has placed in front of us to run.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What are some misunderstandings that people have about the Christian life? Where do these misunderstandings come from?
- 2. What does it mean that discipleship requires changing our goals? How does Christianity change our view of success? How do we still cling to old views of success?
- 3. What does it mean that discipleship requires changing our priorities? What keeps us from changing our priorities? What should our primary priority be?
- 4. What does it mean that discipleship requires changing our focus? What distracts your focus away from following Jesus? Your past? Other People? Your expectations?
- 5. Which of these is most challenging for you? Why? What excuses do you give for not following Jesus better?

LESSON 3 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT NEW LIFE

LUKE 5:39

Have you ever had an article of clothing or pair of shoes perfectly broken in? When it began to wear about, you just couldn't bring yourself to retire and place it.

I have done it with shoes. The soles were worn out and warped so badly that it made my ankles and knees sore to wear them for long periods. My wife bought me an identical pair of shoes, except they were new and unbroken in, and even despite the pain I experienced, it took me a while to officially switch over to the new shoes.

I have also done it with jeans. A perfectly broken-in pair of blue jeans is a thing of beauty and one of life's simple pleasures. I think the more faded and worn a pair of jeans is, the greater they have been loved. This one particular pair must have been exceedingly worn. The pockets didn't hold change because of holes. There was even a place in one of the legs where my keys were poking a hole not just in the pocket by through the denim as well. My wife forbids me to wear them anymore. Yet, I still found myself pulling them out of the closet instead of the other replacement pants she had bought me.

But my favorite example of this phenomenon is my orange backpack. This backpack is perfect. It's the perfect shape. It's the perfect color. It has the perfect number of compartments and pockets. The straps fit perfectly. It was hard to describe how perfect this backpack is. I took it everywhere. I used it for everything. It was my sidekick and security blanket when I went on vacations, mission trips, the office, and retreats. But then things started to break on it. The more I fixed it, the more fragile it became. I was cleaning it out one time and turned it upside down to dump random crumbs out. As I held the bag up and upside down, I saw light shining through the threadbare bottom when I did so. It could no longer do the job I was asking it to do. It was time to retire it. It now only carries my bible and notebook to church, but that's about it.

We try to do something similar to the new life Jesus offers us. We have our old life broken in, so even though it's causing us pain or no longer works for us, we stick with it rather than embrace the radical change Jesus came to give us. Jesus isn't helping us turn over a new leaf or try harder at being us. He is raising us from the dead. He is making a new creation. Colossians 2:13 says, "When you were dead [k]in your transgressions and the

uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him." 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

Today we are going to look at some hard sayings Jesus spoke concerning this new life he came to bring us. In Luke 5:27-35, the Pharisees complain about how Jesus and his disciples do things. They aren't acting like other Jews. They aren't even behaving like followers of the crazy and eccentric cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist. They definitely aren't acting like Pharisees. In response, Jesus says three parables addressing the danger and difficulty of trying to fit him into your boxes and preconceived notions of what He will do.

JESUS WON'T FIX YOUR OLD LIFE V36

The first parable Jesus tells is about trying to patch an old garment. In verse 36, He says, "No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old."

I remember the first time I wore holes in the knees of my pants. My mom said not to worry; she could patch them. I was ecstatic until I saw the patches. I was expecting the jeans to look like they had never been torn. Instead, they looked neat, tidy, but obviously patched. Jesus makes that comparison with his teaching. He tells them the life he came to bring doesn't fit neatly into your previous life. It will stand out as not belonging.

He also says that the worst possible patch would be to take a piece from a new garment to make a patch for an old one. In Matthew's version of this parable, the new garment isn't just new. It is unshrunk. Matthew 9:16 says, "no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results." Jesus is telling us you can't take a piece of his teaching and try to fit it into a place in your life. Doing that might work for a little while, but it will not be a permanent solution.

What I find interesting is that Jesus says doing this destroys the new garment too. He means that by trying to cut out the parts of his teaching into pieces you like and don't like, you end up ruining the parts you think you can use.

Have you ever known someone who took a piece of Jesus's message but failed to take the whole thing? Our society has done this with Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged," and John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." If those are the only

Bible verses you know, you end up not even understanding them if you rip them out of the new garment of Jesus's teaching.

You can't use Jesus to fix your old life, so stop trying and put on the new garment.

JESUS WON'T FIT IN YOUR OLD LIFE V37-38

The next comparison Jesus makes involves wine and wineskins. Verses 37-38 say, "37 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. 38 But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins."

This one requires a little bit of an explanation. Most of the ancient world drank wine. This was done for health reasons as well as culinary. The water in the ancient world was not very clean. The alcohol in wine made the water safer to drink. Wine in the ancient world wasn't made in barrels but in wineskins.

Wineskins were made by taking whole skins of goats and sewing them completely shut except for the opening around the neck, which functioned like a spout and was closed by a stopper. The juice from freshly crushed grapes was placed in the wineskins. Over time, the juice would ferment through a process the ancients didn't understand and turn into wine. They didn't understand fermentation because they didn't know about yeast, which wasn't discovered until modern times. The yeast that turns grape juice into wine naturally occurs on the grape's skin.

As grape juice ferments, the yeast eats the sugar in the juice and produces carbon dioxide and alcohol. The carbon dioxide causes the wineskin to expand. A wineskin can be used multiple times, but the wineskin will become brittle and dried out over time. Once this happens, the wineskin can be used to hold water, but it can't be used to hold wine anymore because the expansion and contraction of the skin will eventually lead to the skin rupturing.

The parable's point is that you can't fit Jesus into your old life. Your old life isn't a basically good garment with a small hole that can be fixed. It's an old wineskin that is beyond repair. If you try to put the new wine in the old wineskin, you will destroy both.

Jesus came to do more than fit into your old life. He didn't come to make your old wineskin useable again. He came to invite you to reject former ways of thinking and embrace a new way of looking at the world and living life. As Paul writes in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Jesus doesn't fit in the old wineskins of the world's categories.

JESUS WON'T FORCE YOU OUT OF YOUR OLD LIFE V39

The last parable is a little tricky. In verse 39, Jesus says, "And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good enough." This saying confuses people because it makes them wonder what Jesus is saying. Is He saying we shouldn't try the new wine? Is he saying we should stick with what we have? Is his teaching the old wine or the new wine?

This saying is more about human nature than His teaching. Most people would rather stay in their old ways than embrace this new way. They stay in their old way of lie not because they prefer it but because it is "good enough." To embrace the teaching of Jesus would require too much change, too much hassle, and too much difficulty. They don't see the benefit. It doesn't seem like it's worth the trouble. Jesus is saying that most people would rather stay in their old life than embrace the new. He is telling them that He isn't going to force them to embrace this new way of life.

CONCLUSION

Which one of these hard sayings hits you the hardest? Do you try to use bits and pieces of Jesus to fix holes in your old way of looking at the world? Do you try to fit Jesus into your old life? Are you too comfortable in an old way of seeing things? Does embracing the new life of Jesus sound like too much of a hassle? We need to remember what Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3, "Unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What bits of Jesus's teachings do people try to fit into their old lives? Have you ever seen people distort Jesus's teachings to fit them into their lives?
- 2. What are the worldly categories that people try to fit Jesus into?
- 3. What does it mean that people won't embrace the new life because the old is "good enough?"
- 4. What does it mean to be conformed to this world? How do Christians sometimes still conform to the pattern of this world?
- 5. What does Jesus describe following Him as being born again?

LESSON 4 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT MONEY

LUKE 18:18-30

Most of us are good at being Pharisees. We are experts at exploiting ambiguities and loopholes for our benefit. We pretend to follow the rules because we want others to. But we look for ways to justify our desire to avoid obligations. One sign that we are trying to do this is our use of the word "technically." "Technically" is a terrible word. We use it to excuse behavior we know is questionable. We say things like, "that was technically not against the rules," or "technically, I didn't do anything wrong." Proof that this is a terrible way to live can be found simply by putting the shoe on the other foot. Imagine if your business partner told you he had technically been fair and honest with you. Imagine if your spouse returned from a business trip and told you that they have technically been faithful to you.

All of this shows that we are experts in trying to find ways to do the bare minimum to avoid getting into trouble. The same is the case with our Christian faith. Instead of trying to become like Jesus, some people seem content with pursuing the basic minimum requirements for missing Hell. We want to figure out how much sin we can allow in our lives without incurring God's wrath. When confronted with inconsistencies in our walk, we respond, "Well, it's technically not sin." We feel justified in allowing some shady thing to remain in our lives because no one can prove that it is evil.

We need to change our approach to such things. Instead of asking whether something is "technically sin," we should seek whether something is helping us follow Christ or hindering us. Because if it is hindering us, perhaps, even though it might not be sin, it might be an obstacle for us that we need to get rid of. Hebrews 12:1 says it this way, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Two things can keep us from running our ace well: sin and encumbrances. Sin is easy to identify, though hard to resist. Sin is simply things that are wrong for all people everywhere to engage in. Encumbrances are a little trickier. An encumbrance is a hindrance, a burden, or something that restricts your motion. In life, an encumbrance is anything that isn't "technically" sin but which keeps you from running your race well. Someone else might be able to engage in the activity without a problem, but it has become a hindrance for you.

Another word for encumbrance is obstacle, something that is getting in your way. This category is challenging because it calls us to change our mindset from "will I get in trouble for this" to "is this going to help me run well." Everything in life is either wing or a weight. Everything is either helping you to be the person God is calling you to be or it is holding you back. What is hard is that something that might be an encumbrance for you might not be for someone else. Discovering and laying aside encumbrances takes discernment, honesty, and sacrifice. But we must do it if we want to run the race God has for us.

That is what today's lesson is about. As we continue our study on the hard sayings of Jesus, we are going to look at a hard-saying Jesus speaks to a man who comes to Him wanting eternal life but not wanting it enough to leave behind something very dear to him. He is wealthy, and when Jesus asks him to part with his money to follow him, he refuses.

JESUS AND THE RICH YOUNG RULER - V18-24

A man, whom we will later discover has a lot of money, comes to Jesus asking the right question. In Matthew's version of the story, he is described as "young" (Matthew 19:20). In Luke's version, he is called a "ruler" (Luke 18:18). Hence, he is known as "the rich young ruler." He is asking the right question from the right person. He wants to know what he needs to do to inherit eternal life.

Some people think that he isn't so much asking Jesus as much as looking for His approval. Jews of Jesus's day saw the land of Israel as central to the promise of God. Anybody who owned a lot of the Promised Land was thought to be blessed by God. So, some people think he was trying to show Jesus and others how blessed He was and simply wanted Jesus to single him out as the kind of person we all should aspire to be.

Jesus draws his attention to keeping the commandments. He tells him that he first needs to keep the law. It's interesting to note that the only commandments that Jesus tells him to obey are what are sometimes referred to as the moral commandments. The Ten Commandments are sometimes divided into two categories: the theological commandments, relating to how we treat God; and the moral commandments, relating to how we treat others. By focusing on the latter category, Jesus shows us that the greatest measure of a man's love for God is how he demonstrates manifests for other men.

The man says honestly that He has kept the whole law since he became a man. Again, some people think that he is being sinful and arrogant by suggesting that he is morally blameless. I think it is more likely that He is saying he is good at keeping rules but still feels empty inside. He is asking if there is more to finding fulfillment than works-based righteousness.

That's when Jesus upends this man's life. Before you read the bombshell, read what Mark 10:21 says, "Jesus felt love for him." What Jesus is about to do is not motivated by a desire to be cruel. He is about to say a difficult thing, but he is doing it completely out of love for him.

That's when Jesus tells him that his wealth is an obstacle. He needs to give it away and follow Jesus. Jesus isn't saying all wealth at all times is evil. He is saying that for this man it has become an obstacle. It is keeping him from finding life, and he needs to let it go.

The rich man could not understand his identity apart from his wealth, so he walks away from Jesus.

JESUS AND THE PEOPLE - V24-27

Jesus then turns to the people watching and listening and speaks the hard saying. Verses 24-25 say, "24 And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! 25 For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

People have wondered what Jesus actually means by camel and eye of the needle. Some think he means a literal camel and a literal needle. Others think that the word that gets translated as camel is actually the Greek word "camilos," which refers to a thick rope used on ships, which would obviously be hard to pass through a needle. Still others think that the eye of the needle refers to a small gate in the large city gates through which only men could pass. No matter the details, the point is still the same: wealth makes it harder to come to God.

He has made this point in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24): "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." We often choose to serve wealth because wealth likes to pretend we are in charge. We think we are in control. But Jesus makes it clear. Hoping in money is in competition with hoping in Him.

This statement startles those listening because they also think wealth is a sign of God's blessing. They cry out in v26, "then who can be saved."

Jesus responds that everyone has obstacles that make it hard to believe. But all things are possible with God. The trick is to trust in God and not in anything you might think you bring to the table.

JESUS AND PETER – V28-30

Then, just when you think the story is over, Peter starts talking. Poor Peter. He was born with his foot in his mouth. He wants confirmation that they will be rewarded for their sacrifices. Peter is thinking that since the rich man isn't blessed, maybe he and the disciples are the ones who are to be envied. This seems to be the path all their minds are going down because Mark's gospel follows this story with the story of James and John asking to sit on the left and right of Jesus (Mark 10:37). Jesus answers that the gospel doesn't simply replace the reasons people exalt themselves with new ones. It tears down all reasons people exalt themselves and calls us to a life of obedience and service. Mark's gospel makes this point more explicit. Verse 31 says, "Many who are first will be last, and the last, first." If you are wondering if you are in first place, like the Rich Young Ruler and Peter did, you are asking the wrong question. Following Jesus means following His example. As Philippians 2 says, Jesus was in first place but didn't consider it something to be used for his advantage (Philippians 2:6). He chose instead to serve others with his life. That is the standard He wants us to follow.

APPLICATION

With that in mind, what are the lessons we are supposed to derive from the interactions Jesus had with the young man, the people, and Peter?

Jesus calls us to righteousness – Jesus doesn't tell the young man that righteousness isn't the answer. He tells him that the road to eternal life starts there, but it doesn't end there. Because none of us is perfect, we assume we aren't supposed to try. Jesus told us in Matthew 5:48, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." He told us this not to be cruel but to tell us that righteousness is the life God came to give us. But the way the Pharisees pursue righteousness isn't enough. Righteousness isn't gained by rule following but by relationship, by learning to live in fellowship with and dependence upon God.

Jesus calls us to sacrifice – The call to follow Jesus involves sacrifice. Often the sacrifice is of a good thing that we love too much and which is getting in the way of us following God completely. In Matthew 16:24, Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Jesus isn't trying to deprive us of good things. He is trying to get us to lay down the good things that we have turned into idols and have become obstacles to finding the only life that will bring us true fulfillment. It is a hard life, which can often feel like a central part of us is dying. Some, like the rich young ruler, are to do it. But such sacrifice is central to following Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in The Cost of Discipleship, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."

Jesus calls us to life — It is easy to focus on sacrifice and to feel burdened and convicted by how hard and cruel it seems to have to give good things up. It is important to realize that Jesus isn't doing this to crush our dreams or ruin our lives. Jesus is motivated by love. Jesus is not taking good things away so that our life is miserable. He is trying to show us that real life is found not in seeking those things but in seeking the kingdom. The life he calls us to is more, not less, than the life we want for ourselves. As CS Lewis wrote in "The Weight of Glory, "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. What is the difference between sin and encumbrances? How do we spot encumbrances? Why do we not like people to point out our encumbrances?
- 2. In addition to wealth, what are other things that can be obstacles to following Jesus completely?
- 3. How can we view the sacrifices Jesus calls us to make not as crushing but as liberating?
- 4. What do you think it means that Jesus "felt love for him" when He asked him to do what He did?
- 5. Read Philippians 2:7-8. What things do you consider positive but which might be an obstacle? What would Jesus ask you to give up? What would it be impossible for you to imagine your life without?

LESSON 5 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT HELL

LUKE 12:4-12

My father was in the military, so I grew up on military bases all over the world. It was a great life that allowed me to see many different places. One negative, though, was watching people live out a military-style approach to life all the time. Some people wanted to turn everything into a battle, fight about everything, control people, give orders, and tell people what to do. It became so frustrating that I was determined that I wouldn't be like that. When I became a parent, I wouldn't say things like, "because I am the dad, that's why." When I became a professor, I wouldn't tell my students "sit down and shut up." When I became the department chair, I wouldn't tell my colleagues, "do your job or else." I was determined to inspire and convince. I wanted people to follow me and obey because they saw the benefit and value in doing what I said.

This approach works great most of the time. But sometimes, I have had to tell my kids I don't have time to explain. They just need to obey because I am the father. When I was a professor, about once a semester, I would have to let a student know that they had misinterpreted my humor and easygoing demeanor as a lack of concern and that if they needed me to be a jerk to them to get them to start taking the class seriously, I would be happy to do so. I even had a colleague once whom I could never get to do his job unless I told him he was at risk of losing it. I realized that though negative motivation isn't the best kind of motivation, it is sometimes necessary to awaken in us an accurate understanding of what is at stake.

That is the central idea behind the hard saying we are looking at today about Hell. Hell is one of those topics that many people don't want to talk about. One reason, perhaps, that people don't want to talk about it is because some people want to talk about it too much. Hell is real. Jesus talked about it. But Hell is not an evangelism strategy. To people whose lives were broken by their own sin, Jesus never said, "you know that a holy God has the right to damn you to hell for all eternity for what you have done." Jesus offered life and hope to such people. He invited them out of bondage to sin. He encourages them to come home and see they are sons and daughters of God.

So today, we are going to look at a couple of hard sayings that Jesus says that deal with Hell. Hopefully, we will be able to get a handle on how we can reconcile the existence of Hell with the idea of God's love. The two verses in question occur in Luke 12. Verse 5 says,

"But I will [d]warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into [e]hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" and Verse 10 which says, "And everyone who [g]speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him."

When you first read these verses, it is easy to see the problem. They talk about being afraid of God because he likes throwing people into Hell, especially for an unspecified sin that He refuses to forgive.

The goal of this study is not just to answer questions about hard sayings, but also show how to deal with hard sayings in general. These two sayings teach an important principle: consider the context. Or if you need a pithy way of saying it: Never read a Bible verse. Bible verses aren't individual pearls strung on a necklace. They are links in a chain. The starting point for understanding any passage, not just the hard ones, is to look at the verses immediately surrounding them.

When you look at the context, you realize that the main thrust of this passage is not about making you afraid of God, but rather just the opposite. The recurring phrase is do not be afraid (v4), do not fear (v7), do not worry (v11). This passage is about realizing we can surrender our fear because we have a God that loves us and is in control.

DON'T FEAR BEING UNPROTECTED - V4-5

The first thing we are encouraged not to fear is being left to the mercy of powerful people. Verse 4 says, "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do." In times of persecution, it is easy to feel alone. People wonder where God is and what they are supposed to do.

Jesus responds by telling them first to remember that they are more than their bodies. No one has access to our spirit unless we give it to them. All the world can do is threaten to damage our bodies in the hopes that we will damage our spirit to avoid it.

Jesus continues in verse 5, "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" It sounds like Jesus is telling people they are caught between a rock and a hard place. They shouldn't fear persecutors because God is able to do worse to them. This is reinforced by the word "warn" and the repetition of the word "fear."

It will be helpful to remember two things. First, the word "warn" is better translated as simply "show." Second, the word fear has a couple of different but overlapping meanings.

Fear can mean "to cower in terror at." This definition is often synonymous with "to be afraid of." But another definition of fear is "to wonder and be amazed at." This definition is synonymous with "to be awed by." The difference is discerned in its effect on us. To be afraid of something makes you run away from it. To be awed by something makes you want to draw closer to it. Why is the word fear used? Most things we are awe-struck and amazed by are powerful, like a fire or a waterfall. We desire to be close, but we must be careful because it's bigger, stronger, and more powerful than us. Fearing God is to be amazed by who God is and to desire to draw closer to Him.

God isn't trying to intimidate us into following Him. He is trying to show us that He has real power. God created you. God has power over you. And here's the good news, God loves you. This means He is our refuge and strength. This also means that there is real justice in the world and those who commit evil will be held accountable.

Further proof that this is the correct interpretation can be found simply by looking at how Jesus refers to his audience. In verse 4, He addresses them as "my friends." He isn't trying to scare us. He is trying to encourage us that He has the power and he won't leave us unprotected.

DON'T FEAR BEING UNIMPORTANT - V6-7

This invitation not to fear continues in verses 6-7: "6 Are not five sparrows sold for two [f] cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. 7 Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.:

One reason people give in to sin or fear is that they think they are on their own and have no other choice. Again, Jesus says don't fear. Not even the most insignificant creature escapes the notice of God. Not even the most insignificant detail about our lives escapes the notice of God.

This fact is summed up beautifully in Psalm 139:17, "How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" The word "to" is better translated as "towards." How precious are Your thoughts TOWARDS me...how vast is the sum of them." You matter

Don't be afraid. God hasn't forgotten us. Each one of us matters a great deal to God.

DON'T FEAR BEING UNPREPARED - V8-12

The final encouragement not to fear comes in the context of expressing commitment to Jesus to others. Verses 8-9 say, "8 Everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of

Man will confess him also before the angels of God; 9 but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God."

We are called to take a stand. What happens when we fail? What happens when I really believe but chicken out or am intimidated? That is why Jesus speaks verse 10, "And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him." Momentary failures of nerve only reveal that we are still in the process of being sanctified. It is still sin but forgivable. The sin against the Holy Spirit is to resist the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, to not want what he promises to do, to harden your heart. Mistakes, ignorance, and error can all be forgiven. But to know fully what is being offered by God and to wholly refuse is to put a person beyond the reach of God. It's unforgivable because the person doesn't want forgiveness.

Jesus goes on to offer hope to people who are worried about letting God down. One reason many don't take a stand for Jesus is not knowing what to say. One way in which the enemy silences believers is by convincing them they will say the wrong thing. Verses 11-12 say, "11 When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." These verses don't excuse lazy preachers for not studying and preparing. They also don't excuse people from growing in their understanding of their faith. This passage offers encouragement that when we stand with Jesus, Jesus stands with us. When we speak on behalf of Jesus, Jesus speaks through us.

CONCLUSION

With all that said, what are we supposed to do with these two hard sayings? I think they teach us two primary and important truths.

God Gives Choice – This is the meaning behind both the talk of Hell and the unforgivable sin. It is possible to reject God. It is possible to tell God no. God will not force you to do something you don't want. For our yes to God to matter, we have to have the power to say no. Hell is proof that God gives us real choice. The Unforgivable sin means it's possible to resist God forever.

God's in Charge – We don't have to fear anything because we have God on our side. That God calls us to fear him, but not in the sense of being afraid or in terror of him. Rather by resting in His power and authority, we are invited not to fear anything or anyone else.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why is talk about Hell unpopular? How do people misuse the doctrine of Hell?
- 2. Why is talk about fearing God unpopular? How is it misunderstood? What does it really mean?
- 3. How does correctly fearing God free us from fearing the things in the world?
- 4. How do we act when we fear we are unimportant to God? How does correctly fearing God free us from fearing that we will be unnoticed?
- 5. How do we act when we fear we are unprepared to speak for God? How does correctly fearing God free us from fearing that we will be unprepared?

NOTES:

