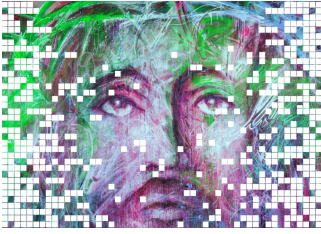


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Session 1: What is God Like?

Matthew 13:1-23

DAY 1

Answer these questions before reading this week's text.

How would you answer the question "What is God like?"

What evidence or experience do you have to support your answer?

Jesus told parables - extraordinary stories about ordinary people who experience a plot twist that shifts the audience's perspective - to communicate his most important ideas. Assuming Jesus is who he said he was (God in the flesh), what do you think it says about God that He came and taught people with *stories* - instead of lectures, seminars, or three-point sermons?

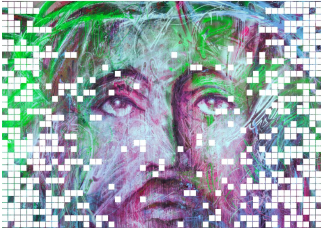
DAY 2

Introduction: Parables are simple stories Jesus told to convey complex, transcendent Truth. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) contain at least 37 unique parables (scholars disagree about the exact number), and with each one, Jesus employed common, everyday imagery from farming, fishing, and family that everyday people could relate to.

In almost every parable Jesus tells, the main character is meant to reflect the character of God; this week's parable is no different. In the "Parable of the Sower," the farmer sowing (or planting) seed represents God sharing His word (or the Gospel message) with the world.

Relevance: One of the most common questions people ask about Christianity is whether or not God loves and/or wants ALL people to know Him. Is God's saving grace available to everyone,

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or just to a few lucky souls? With this parable, Jesus teaches that God shares his message with the kind of carefree, reckless abandon that a farmer has when he scatters seed everywhere - with no regard for where it lands. If God really is like this farmer in Jesus' story, we have every reason to believe that He wants everyone, everywhere to know Him. God makes His message known to everyone, even though not everyone will be receptive.

Questions: How does this idea of God differ from how you've thought of God in the past?

Do you think your non-religious friends think the Christian God loves all, invites all, and makes Himself known to all? Why or why not?

DAY 3

Read Matthew 13:1-9

Before reading ahead to Jesus' explanation of the parable, how do you interpret this parable? Who is the sower? What is the seed? Who or what is the soil?

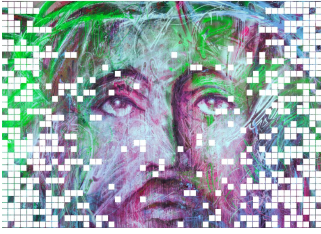
What do you notice about the role of the sower? What implication does this have for you and your role in God's kingdom?

What caused the seed to grow and produce fruit?

DAY 4

Read Matthew 13:18-23

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How does Jesus' explanation of the parable line up with your initial understanding?

How can you increase your understanding so the evil one does not "snatch away what has been sown on your heart"?

What happens to those who understand and receive His word with joy but don't have a firm root? (similar to foundation, see 1 Corinthians 3:10-11) What is your response to God when you are suffering affliction and/or persecution?

Even when one understands and begins bearing fruit, we can still "become unfruitful". What does Jesus say can cause us to become unfruitful?

What does Jesus say is the result of seed sown on good soil?

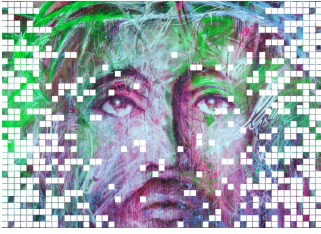
How are you bearing fruit?

DAY 5

Read Matthew 13:10-17

Read Matthew 11:16-24. Did most of people on the crowds following Jesus understand and accept Jesus' message? What do you think would hold someone back from accepting Jesus' message?

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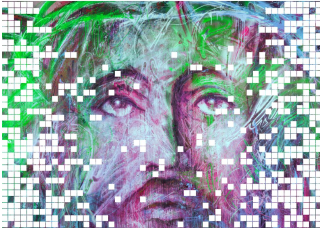
Read Matthew 12:14. This was a turning point in Jesus' ministry. From this point forward, He preached almost exclusively outside of Jerusalem and increased His use of parables when speaking to the crowds.

What reason did Jesus give for speaking in parables?

DAY 6

Read Matthew 13:1-23 once more all the way through. If possible, read it out loud. Write down your lasting insights, inspirations, questions and doubts.

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Session 2: Who Does God Love?

Luke 15

DAY 1

Recap what stood out to you about God from Session 1 "What is God Like?"

The Parable gives examples of four kinds of "soil", what kind of "soil" are you?

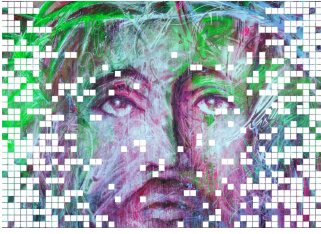
DAY 2

Introduction: People get lost all the time, but for different reasons. Some get lost because they didn't know where they were going in the first place. Others get lost because no one looks out for them. And still others get lost after making some bad choices. With three brilliant parables found in Luke 15, Jesus taught his disciples about how God responds to the various ways people go astray.

In each of these stories, something is lost – a sheep, a coin, and a son – and the main character in each story – the shepherd with a hundred sheep, a woman with ten coins, and a father with two sons – represents God. Each story tells of a different kind of "lost-ness" – the sheep didn't know any better, the coin was simply *dropped*, and the son was openly rebellious against his dad. Yet "the God character" responds the same way in every situation: with a desperate search (or in the case of the "father," keeping watch and hoping for his son's return) and, once what was lost has been found, a celebration.

Relevance: Whether by our own ignorance, by someone else's mistake, or by our own hard-headedness, we've all been lost at some point in our lives. Many people seem to think that God is wrathful or angry toward people who stray from church, or from belief in Him. But Jesus clearly wanted to illustrate a totally different image of God – one who *loves* lost people so much that He'll abandon those who are "found" in order to seek out the lost!

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Questions: How do you think it felt for Jesus' audience – many of whom may have been "lost" – to hear Jesus' stories about the lost sheep, coin, and son?

Why do you think it was important for Jesus to spread the word about God's true, gracious posture toward those who are "lost" and who, in terms of religious righteousness, are on the outside, looking in?

DAY 3

Read Luke 15:1-7

From verse 1, who was in the audience for these parables?

From verse 2, why do you think this would upset the Pharisees?

What does this parable say about God, that He would leave ninety-nine sheep to go after the one lost sheep?

In verse 7, Jesus describes "joy in heaven". What distinguishes the sinner from the righteous?

Jesus first word when He began his public ministry was "repent". See Matthew 4:17. What is repentance and why is that important?

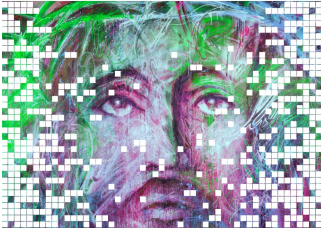
Who do you believe would be more receptive to message of repentance, the "sinners" or the "Pharisees"? Why?

DAY 4

Read Luke 15:8-10

What does the woman do when she loses the coin?

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What does this tell you about God?

What is the source of joy in verse 10?

DAY 5

Read Luke 15:11-32

This parable builds on the prior two parables, the younger son is the “lost sheep” or the “lost coin”. What did the younger son say to the Father when they met? Verses 18-21.

To repent is to turn away from sin, to turn away from what separates you from God. How did the actions of the younger son show his repentance?

Read verses 20-24. How did the Father respond to the younger son? What does this tell you about God?

Read verses 25-28. How did the older brother respond to this celebration?

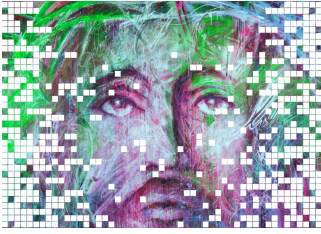
What similarities do you find between the Pharisees and the older brother?

Read verse 28. Who rejected whom?

DAY 6

Read Luke 15 once more all the way through. If possible, read it out loud. Write down your lasting insights, inspirations, questions and doubts.

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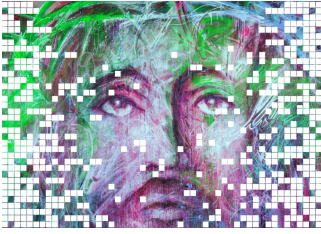


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Do you find yourself more like a sinner who recognizes the need for repentance or a self-righteous Pharisee who knows enough and is good enough before God?

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Session 3: What's in It for Me?

Matthew 20:1-16

DAY 1

Recap what stood out to you about God from Session 2, "Who Does God Love?"

Did the parables from Luke 15 change the way you understand God?

DAY 2

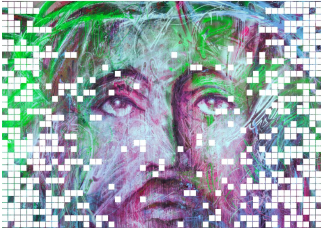
Introduction: In Matthew 19:30, Jesus offers up this earth-shattering idea: "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." According to Jesus, those who are "first" in this life – in prestige, pride, and self-righteousness, for example – will be *last* in the Kingdom of God. Radical to say the least, Jesus aggravated religious people to no end.

To further illustrate his point, Jesus told a story about a vineyard owner who hired four groups of workers to work his fields at four different times throughout the day. One group started at 6am, the next at 9am, noon, and 5pm. At the end of the workday – 6pm – the vineyard owner asked his foreman to pay the workers their wages, and what follows is completely unexpected: he pays all the workers the same, no matter how many hours they spent working in the vineyard!

Relevance: Jesus' parable strikes at the heart of a common Christian sin today: the assumption that good behavior entitles a person to preferential treatment from God. If you listen close to stuff Christians say, you'll hear it: the pernicious theology of prosperity, the belief that if we're good to God, then God should be good to us.

Jesus rejected that idea. In his worldview, devotion to God isn't about paying your dues now so you can reap some reward later; it's about the joy of being in relationship with God. Working in God's vineyard isn't a chore you endure to earn your way to heaven; working in God's vineyard is a privilege, a joy akin to heaven itself.

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Questions: What do you think is wrong with prosperity theology (the idea that God's rich blessings are conditional upon our generosity toward Him)?

Why do you think the idea that God loves and treats everyone the same – and that when we come to Him, He rewards us the same, no matter how many “years of service” we have – is so hard for some people to accept?

DAY 3

Read Matthew 20:1-7

What times of day did the landowner go out to hire laborers?

What does this tell you about God?

God rewards those who believe in Him, those who trust Him, Hebrews 11:6. When the landowner went to hire the laborers, the process was similar during the day but not the same. Compare verse 2 to verse 4.

Does this tell you anything about the laborers?

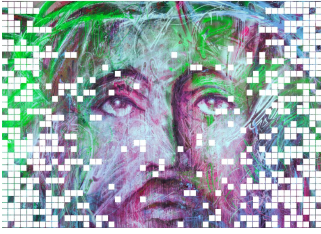
DAY 4

Read Matthew 20:8-12

How did the landowner instruct his foreman to pay the laborers? What does this tell you about God?

In verse 10, the laborers who worked all day thought they would receive more. Why do you think the laborers thought this? Remember verse 2.

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What was their reaction to the payment? How would you have reacted in their situation?

What does this tell you about the kingdom of heaven?

DAY 5

Read Matthew 20:13-16

What is the definition of grace?

The laborers who worked only part of the day did not earn the total compensation that they were paid. They received an entire day's wage while only working part of the day. How is the landowner showing grace in these verses?

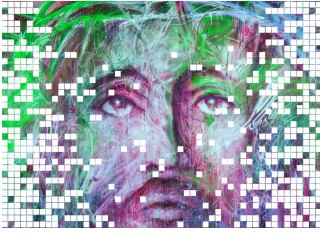
Does the landowner distribute grace "fairly", according to worldly norms?

Read Luke 23:39-43. How would you answer the question, is God fair? Is God just?

DAY 6

Read the verses once more all the way through. If possible, read it out loud. Write down your lasting insights, inspirations, questions and doubts.

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Session 4: Why are Christians Obsessed with Sin?

Luke 7:36-50, 18:9-14

DAY 1

Recap what stood out to you about God from Session 3, "What's in It for Me?"

DAY 2

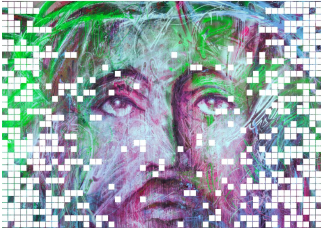
Introduction: Most people in our culture who identify as *agnostic, atheist, non-religious, or spiritual but not religious* know ****just enough**** about Christianity to know they want nothing to do with it. Many of them were raised in (or at least *around*) the Church, and they willingly chose to walk away from it. Researchers have been hard at work trying to determine the reasons why so many people walk away from the Christian religion, and it basically comes down to one word: *Sin*.

According to the Barna Group's research, 87% of non-religious young adults said Christians are hypocritical about our own sin, while 89% said we are judgmental when it comes to other people's sin, and a whopping 91% said we are hateful when it comes to sexual sin, and particularly hateful toward homosexual people. Those who were surveyed cited these issues as their primary motives to leave the Church.

These issues may seem unique to our place and time, but they are not new. Jesus tackled issues of sin, hypocrisy, judgmentalism, and sexual sins in a handful of his parables. This week, we'll take a look at two of his most profound stories on these subjects.

Relevance: In one of the stories, a "sinful woman" breaks all the rules of decorum by interrupting a formal dinner and touching a man (Jesus) who was not her husband. The strict, religious response was swift: *this woman is a sinner, and Jesus should deal with her properly by punishing her bad behavior*. But to everyone's surprise, Jesus handles the situation a little differently.

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In the second parable, two men say two very different prayers. One man is a good, faithful religious leader, and the other is a sinner – a known thief. Jesus' audience was used to hearing sermons and stories about God rewarding faithful piety, like that of the first man, so of course they're surprised when Jesus flips the script.

Questions: What do you think are the key differences between the way many Christians and Churches deal with sin, and the way Jesus dealt with it?

DAY 3

Read Luke 7:36-39

Why do you think the Pharisee invited Jesus to dine with him? What does this show about His heart?

How did the woman react to Jesus? What does this show about her heart?

What are your motives for coming to know Jesus? Do you find yourself more like the Pharisee looking for a reason to discredit Jesus or the woman who brings perfume and kisses His feet?

DAY 4

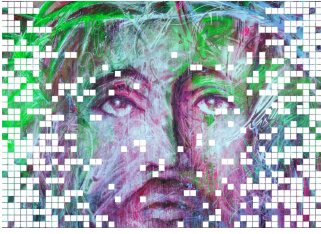
Read Luke 7:40-50

What do you find most interesting about this parable?

How does Jesus compare the Pharisee to the woman in verses 44-47?

In verses 48-50, who does Jesus forgive? What is the reaction of the Pharisee?

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The woman was very kind to Jesus, performed good works of humility and kindness. What does Jesus say “saved” the woman? Why is this important?

In this parable He is forgiving those with large debts just like those with little debts. What is your reaction to the apparent “unfairness” of God?

DAY 5

Read Luke 18:9-14

Who was the audience for this parable? See verse 1. Where did they place their trust and how did they view other people?

Where do you place your trust? How do you view other people who don't live up to your definition of righteous?

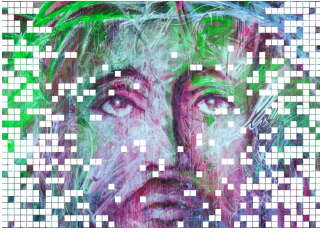
What difference do you notice between the two prayers? What did it show about their hearts?

Both owed something in the parable, but it wasn't the relative size of debt that resulted in justification before God. Why do you think it is so important to humble yourself before God? See also, Isaiah 57:15

DAY 6

Read the verses once more all the way through. If possible, read it out loud. Write down your lasting insights, inspirations, questions and doubts.

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Session 5: Why Would a “Loving God” Send People to Hell?

Luke 16:19-31

DAY 1

Recap what stood out to you about God from Session 4, “Why are Christians Obsessed with Sin?”

DAY 2

Introduction:

Relevance:

Questions:

DAY 3

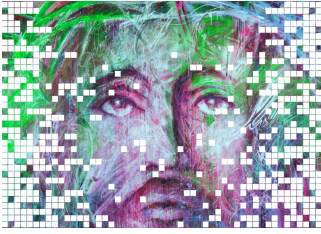
Read Luke 16:19-23

Describe the “rich man” and his living condition.

Describe Lazarus and his living condition.

What happened to the two men upon death? What does this tell you about how God sees us and values us?

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How would you value the men in this story?

The "rich man" was not given a name in this story while the poor man was given a proper name, Lazarus. Do you think this is significant? Why?

See also, Genesis 17:1-5, Genesis 32:24-30, Matthew 16:17-18, Revelation 21:27

DAY 4

Read Luke 16:24-26

From verse 24, describe the rich man's request and the condition that he was in.

The rich man requested that Lazarus be sent to where he was even though he was in agony. What does this say about this man's concern for others?

When you are going through difficult times, how do you treat others?

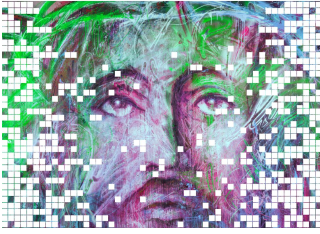
Read verse 26 very carefully. This verse describes a chasm and states "that those who wish to come over from here (Heaven) to you (Hades) will not be able, and that none may cross over from there (Hades) to us (Heaven)". What do you find in this verse most interesting to you?

What do these verses suggest about those in hell? How does this change the way you think about hell?

DAY 5

Read Luke 16: 27-31

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What was the rich man begging Abraham to do?

Abraham responded saying "they have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them". How are you listening to Moses and the Prophets?

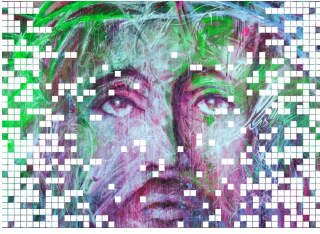
The rich man still wants more from Abraham, saying that someone needs to come from the dead to warn his family. Why do you think the rich man thought that his family would need something as dramatic as this before finally listening?

Abraham said that even someone rising from the dead would not convince them. See also, Matthew 28:11-15. Are you waiting for one more piece of evidence before you believe? What will it take for you to listen to Moses, the Prophets and Jesus?

DAY 6

Read the verses once more all the way through. If possible, read it out loud. Write down your lasting insights, inspirations, questions and doubts.

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Session 6: Is Jesus Really Coming Back?

Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 12:16-21

DAY 1

Recap what stood out to you about God from Session 5, "Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?"

DAY 2

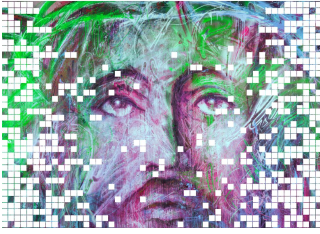
Introduction: This week's parables center on Judgment Day, the Apocalypse, or the "End Times." Over the past few generations, especially within American Christianity, we've really given people the wrong idea about what Christians are supposed to be waiting for. Misguided, fear-driven ideas like those expressed in popular Christian books and movies do not adequately describe what Jesus taught about what lies ahead.

Relevance: In the world of Christian theology, the study of the Last Things is called *Eschatology*, and no matter what you believe about God, you have an eschatology. Your core beliefs about the future are evident by the way you choose to live today. If you believe God will sit on his throne and judge your every action, you'll be more likely to live by the straight-and-narrow. If you believe God is a big softy in the sky who will freely welcome everyone into heaven, regardless of how we live, then you might be a big softy yourself. Even atheists can have an eschatology: if, for example, you believe it's possible for the Earth to go up in flames because of carbon emissions and greenhouse gases, you might long for the day that Subaru finally comes out with a hybrid. And that's your eschatology.

No matter who you are, or what you believe, your eschatology is always showing.

Questions: Before hearing this week's sermon or studying these parables, how would you define your eschatology? What do you believe about the future of this planet and the people who live here?

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DAY 3

Read Matthew 22:1-6

In verses 1-3, how does the king invite people to his feast? Why is this important?

In verse 3 and verse 5, how do the people react to God's invitation? Why do you think they would react this way?

Who do think the slaves are in these verses? Who are the people that did not listen to the invitation?

How did the people react after they ignored God's invitation? How do you see a similar reaction to God's message today?

How is God calling you to come to Him? What do you need to do to pay closer attention to His voice?

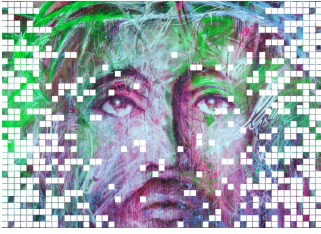
DAY 4

Read Matthew 22:7-14

The king is enraged at those who murdered his slaves and sets the city on fire. This is possibly a foreshadowing of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but the king is not done with his invitations. The king now says "the wedding is ready" in verse 8. How then, does the king change the invitation? What was the result?

What does this tell you about God?

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In verse 11, what does it mean that there was a man not dressed in wedding clothes? See Isaiah 61:10, Zechariah 3:3-4 and Revelation 7:10

How do we become dressed properly before God? Galatians 3:27 and Revelation 19:7-9

DAY 5

Read Luke 12:16-21

In this parable the rich man "reasons to himself" in verse 17. How do "reason" with yourself in order to justify doing the things you want to do anyway?

The man in this parable decides to "eat, drink and be merry". What does this say about his priorities in life?

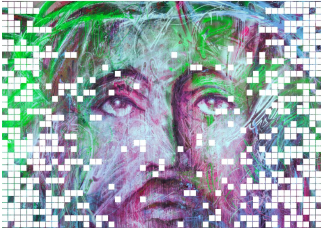
If this man really believed Jesus' words, and that He may be coming at any moment, how might his actions be different?

How about you...are you storing up treasures for yourself in this life? Or are you eagerly awaiting the marriage feast, Christ's return?

How do your actions reflect your answer?

DAY 6

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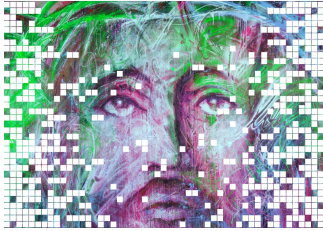


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Read the verses once more all the way through. If possible, read it out loud. Write down your lasting insights, inspirations, questions and doubts.

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Session 7: What Does God Want from Us?

Luke 10:25-37

DAY 1

Recap what stood out to you about God from Session 6, "Is Jesus Really Coming Back?"

DAY 2

Introduction: Are Jesus' parables *true stories*? A while back I made the mistake of watching a movie called *The Wolf of Wall Street*. My soul is still in recovery from all the things I saw and heard in that movie. It was like they tried wrap every known human sin into a single screenplay. Greed. Lust. Language. Rage. Gratuitous sex. Adultery. Violence. Drugs. Idolatry. It's a story about this guy, Jordan Belfort, who did horrible things that affected a lot of innocent people, and he basically got away with it. When it was over, I felt like there was no way God would ever forgive me for seeing what I just saw, and that's saying a lot. I watch *Game of Thrones*. But then, at the end, before the credits rolled, it said, "Based on a True Story."

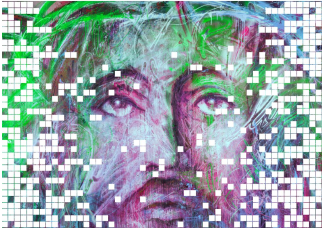
And the more I thought about it, the more indignant I became. That movie might have been based entirely on historical events, but there was nothing *true* about it. There's nothing *true* about the story that a man can live for money, and lie to his investors, and cheat on his wives, and do a bunch of drugs, and steal a bunch of money, all without facing any real consequences. It might be historical, but it isn't *true*.

What about Jesus' stories? Are they true?

Relevance: Compare that with the story Jesus told in Luke 10 about a man who was walking down the road when he was attacked by some thugs. They beat him up, stripped him naked, and left him lying unconscious on the side of the road. A while later, a preacher, on his way to church, walked down the same road, saw the man lying there, half-dead, and instead of stopping to help, the preacher crossed to the other side of the road and kept walking. Maybe he said, "I'm praying for you" as he passed by.

After that, a politician walked down the same road, saw the man's beaten, bloody body lying there, looked around to see if anyone was watching, because if someone was watching, or if the press was there, he would have stopped to help. It's a good photo opp. But no one was watching, and he crossed to the other side of the road and kept walking because dead guys don't vote.

JESUS UNFILTERED



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But then, the worst kind of person you can think of - for Jesus' audience, it was a Samaritan. Samaritans were the enemy. They represented everything the Jewish people believed was wrong with the world. Think about what a *Samaritan* might be for people today. When you read "Samaritan" in this story, you should read your own bias into the narrative. Instead of a "Samaritan" you should think about the kind of person you'd least expect to do something good.

An Aggie. A person who prefers cats over dogs. A guy driving a Hummer. A felon. A thief. A sex offender. A radical Muslim. A young black man with sagging pants and an angry scowl. We're all biased and racist. We've all secretly decided who the "bad guys" are.

Questions: What kinds of people do you struggle to love?

DAY 2

Read Luke 10:25-29

Why do you think the lawyer wanted to "put Jesus to the test"?

How did Jesus respond? What can you learn from this?

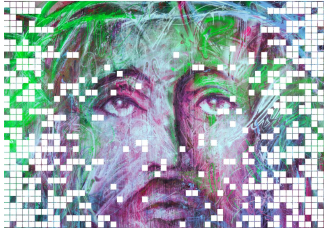
What does Jesus say we need to do to inherit eternal life? How does this differ from what you think we need to do to inherit eternal life?

DAY 4

Read Luke 10:30-32

What happened to the man in verse 30? What similarities do you find with him and with yourself?

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How did the priest and the Levite react to this man?

The priest was a religious authority and Levites were the tribe of Israel where the priests came from. Would you expect something different from them compared to how they acted?

Do you hold religious authorities to higher standard than yourself? Why?

Are you looking for a religious leader to pick you up from your position? If so, you will likely be disappointed. Jesus is here for us and promises to be our savior. How can you change your habits so that you can rely upon Jesus instead of upon a religious leader?

DAY 5

Read Luke 10:33-37

What do you think caused the Samaritan to stop and help the wounded man?

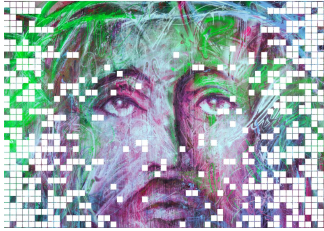
How did the Samaritan actually help the wounded man?

Recall an instance when you acted like the priest and Levite? What drove you to behave this way?

Recall an instance when you acted like the Samaritan? What drove you to behave this way?

DAY 6

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Read the verses once more all the way through. If possible, read it out loud. Write down your lasting insights, inspirations, questions and doubts.