



PART 13 – JESUS' MESSAGE

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. Many people if asked what Jesus taught would answer with one word: “Love”. Based on your knowledge of Jesus’ teaching would you agree with this or not?

Read Matthew 5:43-6:34

2. Matthew 5:43 combines a command from Leviticus 19:18 to love one’s neighbour with a command to hate one’s enemies that is not found in the Old Testament. How did the Law become distorted in this way?
3. How does love of our enemies (those who think ill of us and do wrong to us) reflect the likeness of God?
4. What kind of relationship with God does Jesus encourage His followers to have and why is He so opposed to religious hypocrisy?
5. What priorities for Christians does the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ (Matthew 6:9-13) teach us?
6. What does Jesus teach us in 6:19-34 about priorities for His followers? What would it mean to seek God’s kingdom first, to build up treasures in Heaven and to serve God, not money?
7. What, according to Jesus, is the key to a worry-free life?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Do you recognise in your own attitudes the three limitations religious teachers had put on God’s standard of right and wrong: neglecting the heart; separating religion from normal life; and judging others?
- Do you think Jesus’ standard in His Golden Rule – do to others as you would have them do to you – is desirable and possible? Do you think you could live consistently this way?
- Jesus set a very high standard for behaviour and warned that the consequences for sin are serious. Do you believe you deserve God’s judgement and that you need His forgiveness?
- Why is it so important to realise that the kind of behaviour Jesus commanded for His followers can only be possible when we live in a relationship with God as King and Father?
- Which kind of soil in Jesus’ parable of the soils (Matthew 13:1-23) do you think you are? Has God’s truth found a place in your life and is it growing there to bear lasting fruit?

What are parables and why did Jesus use them?

Jesus often taught using parables (stories about everyday life that teach spiritual truths – see *Module 2 Study Aids* for a table of Jesus' parables). Some parables are easier to understand than others. In fact, some parables were designed to make it difficult for people to understand. In **Matthew 13:10**, Jesus' disciples asked Him why He always used parables. Jesus explained that some people were open to His teaching – they would keep thinking and seeking understanding from God until they got the message of the parable. Other people were not really listening, and they would never get the message. Jesus only wanted to reveal the truth about His Kingdom to people who were really serious about seeking God. The parables acted like a filter, separating out those who were seeking God from those who were not. Parables are a great way to subvert expectations – they often have a twist in the tale – and to challenge people to respond as they imagine themselves in the story and identify with one of the characters. They can also serve as illustrations of spiritual truths drawing on familiar imagery. Parables are an extension of wisdom teaching found in Old Testament books like Proverbs.

Not all of Jesus' teaching to the crowds was in the form of parables. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), for example, is mostly direct and clear only occasionally using imagery. Importantly, when He was alone with His disciples He spoke plainly to them and often explained the meaning of His parables (Mark 4:34). In doing so, He was preparing them to be teachers in the Church after His departure. A lengthy example of such private teaching is found in John 14-16. One example of Jesus' explanation of a parable is recorded in Mark 4:13-20, where He explains the meaning of the different soil types in His parable of the sower.

Was Jesus' teaching really unique?

It has sometimes been pointed out that the 'Golden Rule' associated with Jesus is also found in the teachings of various other philosophers and religious leaders who lived before Jesus. Along with this, it is claimed that all religions are basically the same, teaching people to love others. Such claims are wrong for several reasons.

Firstly, the similarities between Christian ethics and other teachings should not surprise Christians, since we believe that God's standard of right and wrong is written on human hearts (Romans 2:15), so that people have some knowledge of right and wrong. The similarity of basic ethical standards across the world's cultures is, Christians argue, evidence for God's existence.

Secondly, it is simply not true that all religions teach love and they certainly do not universally teach love for enemies, even if they do expect love for co-religionists. The version of the Golden Rule found in earlier teachings is negative – 'do not do to others what you would not have them do to you' – forbidden harmful actions towards others. Jesus, however, goes much further in commanding good actions towards all. His call for His followers to love their enemies is radical and reflects the character of God, who loves all people (Matthew 5:43-48). There is no known record of anyone teaching this before Jesus and it is this radical call that really sets Jesus (and Christian ethics) apart from alternatives. It exposes our corrupt hearts and calls us to a standard that we only see lived out in Jesus Himself.

Thirdly, such claims assume that the heart of religion is ethics, but the central claims of Christianity are not about how people should live, but how they can be made right with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus did not teach people that they could live good enough lives to satisfy God or earn acceptance with Him, but that they needed to depend on His mercy and receive His forgiveness. Unlike other founders of major religions, who appeared with new teachings and rejected what went before (Buddha rejected Hinduism; Muhammad rejected both Arab polytheism and Jewish and Christian claims about God's revelation), Jesus claimed to continue the story of the Old Testament. His teaching makes sense within a specific context and must be understood against the backdrop of the Old Testament. Only God could cure the problem of sin and Jesus was God's Saviour for sinful people. Other religions may place the emphasis on ethics, but Christianity is about a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The correct behaviour, meeting Jesus' exceptional ethical standard, flows from this relationship as a response to God's grace. Jesus' core message was not that we need to become better people by trying harder, but that we need to come to Him for forgiveness and guidance.