

HOW JESUS TAUGHT

1. In the preceding talks, we sketched the overall biblical story of the Kingdom of God in human history. In doing so, we saw that this story is the framework in light of which Jesus's teachings are to be properly understood. And now that the stage has been correctly set, we can begin to study the teachings of Jesus as a part of that overall framework. It is very exciting to begin the high point of our curriculum, our Lord's teachings.
2. It is an unspeakably awesome and life-changing thing to come under His words.
 - a. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Matthew 24:35.* The words of Jesus are more enduring and substantial than physical reality itself. The stuff that gave birth to the universe is in them. Life, His life, is in them.
 - b. *John 7:37-38: In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, if any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.* If you put the effort in to understand and then put into practice Jesus's words, you will be so filled up with life, that it will just start pouring out of you. Out of your deepest and innermost parts, rivers of life-giving water will flow into those around you.
3. But the first thing we must do, before we look at what Jesus taught, is to look at how Jesus taught. And so, that is what this talk is about. Jesus's method of teaching. The reason to explore this topic first, is that because we misunderstand Jesus's teaching style, we often gravely misunderstand what He was trying to teach us.
 - a. Let's start by looking at what Jesus Himself had to say about His teaching method.
 - b. The first thing to note is that, mostly, Jesus taught in parables. **Parables** were stories, riddles, puzzles, slogans and sayings. Jesus didn't just say things straight. This is indirect language we are dealing with here.
 - i. *Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. Matthew 13:34-35*
 - ii. Now, a lot of times people assume that the reason Jesus taught like this was because His audience were these simple country folk types, and so He was bringing things down to their level with nice simple parable stories to make these complicated spiritual things easy for them. But that is not the case. Jesus spoke in parables for an entirely different reason.
 - iii. Let's read a little more from *Matthew 13 (verses 10-17)* now, where Jesus spells all of this out.

¹⁰ *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"*

¹¹ *He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables:*

*“Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.
14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:*

*“‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.
15 For this people’s heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.’ [Isaiah 6:9-10]*

- c. What this passage shows us is that Jesus was a deeply skilled and thoughtful teacher. In order to be a good teacher, you need to know your audience. You can have the best material in the world, but if it is not presented in a way that your audience will understand it, it will be of no use to them. So, a good teacher carefully tailors the material to their audience. Jesus points out here that He was very vigilant to do just that.

- i. And here is how Jesus described most of His audience:

*For this people’s heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.*

- ii. Mostly, they were flat out opposed to the truth.

- iii. And Jesus noted that it was all such a shame because the truth they were closed to was the very thing they needed most.

*Otherwise, they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.*

- d. Now, just imagine if you were trying to teach someone something that can be difficult and confusing, like grammar. But imagine now something much worse...that the people you are trying to teach grammar find the content of the subject itself extremely offensive and threatening. They are highly resistant to what they actually need to know, and deeply opposed to acknowledging it. How in the world could you teach these people grammar?
- e. Jesus had the daunting task of teaching a complex and nuanced subject matter to a largely uneducated, as well as largely unwilling, audience. And worse yet, the kinds of things that He was trying to convince them of were not mere intellectual ideas. He needed them not only to come to understand a radically different way of living, but to come to love it so much that they would faithfully live it themselves, even to die for it, when necessary. How in the world did He attempt to tackle this seemingly impossible mission? Through an ingenious and utterly brilliant teaching method.

- f. He used His parables. And how did the parables help in this situation?
 - i. To see this, the first thing we need to appreciate is that, not every single person that Jesus was teaching was opposed to His message.
 - ii. Jesus was a shrewd observer. He saw that. He knew He was dealing with a mixed audience. And parables are the perfect thing in that situation. Why? Because, when being taught in this indirect way:
 - iii. *Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.*
- g. That is the wonder of what Jesus's parables are. Those who have, His teachings give them more. Those who do not have, His teachings take what little they have away from them.
 - i. Those who have *what*, are given more of it by the parables? Those who had a knowledge of and desire for the truth, for love, for healing, for God.
 - 1. *"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.*
 - a. The knowledge of those secrets of the Kingdom was given to the disciples because why? Because they wanted it. *Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.* They wanted to see, and so when they looked at the parables, they saw. After all, God is always overjoyed to dole out the good stuff to whoever will take it.
 - ii. And those people who were not seekers, who were too tied in with evil to accept the challenge of goodness, who did not want to see? When they looked at the parables, they only found confusion. *Even what little they had, was taken from them*
- h. Here is how Professor William Barclay put it. "The parable conceals truth from those who are either too lazy to think or too blinded by prejudice to see. It puts the responsibility fairly and squarely on the individual. It reveals truth to him who desires truth; it conceals truth from him who does not wish to see the truth."
- i. But things are not really so simple as I have made them out so far. In fact, people rarely fit neatly into little yes or no categories. In reality, each human heart, even the best of them, is a complex mixture of openness and of hardness to the truth of God.
 - i. Even the folks who were opposed to Jesus's message, were often not wholly given over to evil. Some good, and some receptiveness to goodness, remained deep within them.
 - ii. Now, given this reality, even though you might not guess it at first glance, Jesus's method of cloaking of the truth in mystery, His speaking in a hidden way, in riddles, was actually His best bet at getting through to people.
 - 1. You see, if Jesus was completely clear with telling people how things really were, with confronting people's sinful hearts, if He came out and flatly contradicted or corrected them, their guards would immediately go up. They would all at once become reactive, defensive, angry.

- a. In fact, every time in the gospels where Jesus did speak frankly about the way things were, things quickly got explosive. For example, in His hometown, when He said *today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing Luke 4:21* They immediately decided to throw him off a cliff!
 - b. That is why Jesus was very careful with the truth. Jesus didn't try and shove facts of the matter down the throats of resistant people. And He cautioned His disciples against doing so. "*Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. He continues... If you do... They may trample the pearls under their feet. They will do away with the truth. And He continues...and they will turn and tear you to pieces. Matthew 7:6.* They will try and do away with you as well.
 - i. So, if they really just don't want the truth, leave them be. *If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. Matthew 10:14.* Wise words for us today as well.
- 2. What we are saying is that given Jesus's mixed audience of highly resistant and somewhat resistant people, the direct approach simply couldn't work.
 - a. He needed to find a way past people's defenses. So, rather than a frontal assault, Jesus devised the clever teaching method of sneaking a live grenade past the line of scrimmage.
 - i. When He crafted His parables, Jesus was very careful to put the perfect balance of just enough clarity and just enough obscurity in them. There was enough obscurity on the surface of these teachings, so that people would not be immediately offended and turn away. But enough clarity, so that if you would really sit with these teachings, gazing past the misty surface of them, deep within them, you would find the crystal-clear truth hidden there.
 - ii. Here is a very helpful way of thinking about it. If you have a room full of cockroaches and flip the light on full blast, they will scramble out of it so fast, there is no chance of catching any of them. But if you increase the light, just ever so slowly, little by little, some will stick around. And that is what Jesus did. Just dialed into the amount of truth that people could handle. Jesus always entices us along with degrees of truth, depending how much we can stand.

1. As an example of this, He frankly told his disciples at the end of his ministry: *I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. John 16:12*
- iii. This all means that the teachings of Jesus are things that must be carefully puzzled over, worked through. Like a jigsaw puzzle or a Rubik's Cube. They should not be simply taken at face value, and then applied to our lives thoughtlessly as a sort of automatic process. Many have taken this approach, and come to all sorts of odd conclusions, as we will see shortly.
 1. Instead, as you seek, in your journey to understanding the teachings of Jesus, don't be bothered by the fact that comprehending the spiritual truth behind His words is a difficult and long process. It is supposed to be that way.
 2. It must be that way. Because when you struggle with the words of Jesus you are actually struggling through a revolution of your consciousness. Not just with what you think, but how you think. With your identity, and with how you relate to others. With your deepest hopes and fears. With what you value, what matters.
- iv. And by the way, this was not some new move on Jesus's part. This is how God is too. *Truly, You are a God who hides Himself*, says the prophet *Isaiah (45:15)*.
 1. "The presence of mysteries in the divine text is hardly accidental . . . The struggle to understand them is one of the divinely appointed means for bringing believers to maturity." - said Origen
 2. A hidden God. After all, it would be quite easy for God to more clearly reveal Himself. He could write John 3:16 in fire across the sky every night, for instance. But He doesn't. For all the reasons we just went through. As Blaise Pascal put it, "perfect clarity would help the mind, but harm the will." Remember our discussion of miracles? More evidence was not always helpful.
 - a. "Yes," you ask "but couldn't He go further and reveal Himself definitely and

indisputably to these resistant people?
Cause them to have a direct perception
of Himself, or some such thing?"

- b. Possibly He could. But if He were to do so, to remove any possibility of doubt or of obstinance...well, that would be a kind of tyrannical cosmic bullying. God is not into prying people's eyelids open that are shut tight, or cramming ideas into their brains against fierce and willful resistance. If they want to live life on their own terms, He will respect that.
3. And so, to paraphrase Blaise Pascal again, "God has arranged things such that there is enough revealed so that those who want to see can see, and enough concealed so that those who do not want to see, are not forced to see."
- a. Our search for God is always like that. When you look, if you want to see, you will see. If you do not want to, you will not.
 - b. God has given people sufficient evidence to make a rational and reasonable decision. To make a start at following Jesus. And they will get more evidence and more clarity as they continue to turn more and more fully toward the truth. But simply sitting back with your arms crossed and demanding to see more evidence before you make any kind of commitment will be met with a firm "no." We must respond to the light we do have, before more light will be given us.
4. That is why Jesus, after saying something profound, often said *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*
- a. That is a challenge. Can you hear me? Do you have the ears to? Do you want to?
 - b. Here is another great one He would say. *Be careful how you hear.* How are you

hearing? Are you striving and struggling after the truth? If you hear it, will you accept it? Will you live in accordance with it once you find it?

- c. *He who has ears to hear, let him hear*, means that if you cannot understand what I am telling you, the problem is not with what I am saying, it is with you. So, if what I am saying does not make sense to you, then introspect. And you will find that you are out of sorts. You need to put your other ears on! Open your heart. Diligently study and wrestle with what I am telling you, until you are able to understand and accept it.

- 3. This all very much relates to a second aspect of the genius of Jesus's teaching method. He intentionally said things in very bizarre and shocking ways. Paradoxically. Why did He do this? Well, as Dallas Willard pointed out, people did not have pencil and paper or audio recording devices in those days. So He had to say things in a way that would stick.
 - a. He packed the truth into neutron-star-density bite sized nuggets that were a sentence or two, and were also so shocking and strange that you really couldn't possibly forget them once you heard them.
 - b. "*Gouge my eye out!* What was that about?" You couldn't help but wonder about these teachings, think about them. And as you worked on them, all the while they were working on you.
 - c. Unbeknownst to them, the more people were willing to wrestle with these bizarre sayings, the more they were being transformed by the wrestling. Slowly coming into a position where they were able to understand, accept, and obey the truth.
 - d. For instance, *John 6's "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*
 - i. Yikes! Can you imagine how the crowds felt after hearing that? The text says that this saying *offended them*. And we read that His disciples said, "*This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?*"
 - 1. In fact, *John 6:66* has to be one of the saddest verses in the entire Bible. *From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.* A mass, on the spot, departure.

2. But there were some that stuck around. And why?
3. *“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”*
4. You see, the twelve also didn’t understand what He was talking about at this point. The difference was, as a result of seeing His miracles, His wisdom, and His love, they had come to believe something. That He was it. That He had it. So, despite the difficulties involved, they kept struggling through His mysterious teachings. You can bet they spent some serious time mulling over that one, praying about it. Debating with each other about it. You can almost hear their gears turning. “Eat His flesh? Eat it? That is so odd. Clearly, He was not talking about cannibalism. What was He getting at? Didn’t He say, *for my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink?* If not physical food, then what kind of food is He? And how do we eat Him? Is that kind of thing somewhere in our Torah? Or is this something new and different entirely? I wonder...” That is what Jesus wanted, that is what they needed, the gears turning.
 - a. They needed to learn that a human being can ingest not only physical food, but Christ Himself. That He is made of a kind of substance, which is more real, more substantial than food.
 - b. To date in history, no one had done that before. This was something new and different, difficult, deep. A whole new way of being. Humanity 2.0.
5. Other teachers were profound, they were deep. They were an ocean of truth that you could dive down and get lost in, and come up for air when you had enough. But Jesus was not an ocean. He was a hurricane. The ingenious part though is that the force and the power of the hurricane

is disguised in a strange costume. On the surface, His teachings often initially seem bizarre, obscure, impossible, even irrelevant. And so, the hurricane in them does not come upon you by force. You can keep your distance if you choose. Stay perfectly safe that way. But these sayings of His are always daring us to come nearer. If we dare to try to come to understand them and to live them as a comprehensive way of life, the hurricane force of His teachings will destroy us. Make no mistake, they will utterly destroy everything, absolutely everything, in you that is false and wicked. And in doing so it will remake you into something else entirely.

a. Into what exactly?

i. Into the wise, loving, creative, joyful rulers over God's creation that humanity were intended to be. Remember, that is what the whole story of the Bible is about.

4. Always keep your new set of spectacles in mind. Recall that God made the daring and complicated choice of delegating the care of His World to humanity. There was risk inherent in that choice, in giving up the reigns. Things would at times, with humanity running the show, go profoundly off course. But God delegated because He knew He could get things back on track. And He delegated because without this delegation, humanity would have lost the wonder and the dignity and the significance of being the rulers of creation.
 - a. And He delegated because without this delegation, God would have lost the joy and the pleasure of having us rule over His creation.
 - b. God makes an amazing world. He has something of unfathomable value, beauty and wonder, and what does He do. Hold onto it for dear life? No. He just gives it away. He tells humanity, "You have it, you take care of it, you enjoy it." And He takes profound joy in humanity running His show, more joy than He would have had just holding onto control. That's God. Joy in others succeeding, in their well-being, in exalting others. God has His deepest joy in giving good gifts and blessing others. God is always a giver. Never a taker.
 - c. After all, before He made us, God wasn't lonely or bored. He was in a state of perfect bliss, not in any way lacking. God did not make you for His benefit. He made you for your benefit. He made you so that you could experience the wonder and goodness of existence. He created you so that He could gift you with an unending life of unimaginable pleasure and happiness.
 - d. You see, as Dallas Willard pointed out, at the heart of the universe is not some quantum mechanical paradox. It is Love. *God is love* says *1 John (4:8)*.
 - e. An endless ocean of pure, self-giving Love, ceaseless in its activity, in its reaching out, in its working to bring about what is best for everyone and everything,

everywhere, all the time. That is the origin of our universe, and the force behind everything. The deepest reality is a Being who is three unspeakably magnificent and beautiful People of boundless goodness, knowledge and power.

- i. We do need to stop and say a word about love though. Because there is such deep confusion on love today, both within and without the church.
- ii. The first point of confusion is that many people think that love is a feeling.
 1. Now, if you love someone, it is true that it will manifest in the way that you feel about them. Just as it will manifest in the way you think about them. And in the way that you act toward them.
 2. But love itself is deeper than a feeling, thought or action.
 3. *1 Corinthians 13. "If I speak in the tongues of men or angles but do not have love, and so on."*
 - a. Love is something thing that you have, or do not have.
 - b. This means that love is part of the essence of who you are...if you are a loving person, that is.
 - c. Love is a quality. A disposition. A character.
 - d. Which means that, as Dallas Willard pointed out, love is not something that you are able to turn on and off, like opening and closing a sink tap.
 - i. Being filled up with love, or not filled up with it, is more like being a battery that is either empty, or is charged up. If you put that love battery in the human flashlight, and it is not charged, darkness. But if it is charged, the light is going to shine. All the brighter, and all the longer, depending on how much charge it has.
 - ii. If you are filled up with true love, with God's kind of love, can you, will you, just love some people and not others? Turn that water tap on and off here and there?
 1. Of course not. Turning the tap on and off will only stunt your progression into a person of true love. If you want to become what you were meant to, if you want to be happy and free, you will need to make a fundamental commitment to keeping that tap in the on position, regardless of who you are dealing with.
 4. But because many people have no understanding of these things, and these days mostly equate love with feelings, often times, people will say of their spouse, when they are thinking of splitting, "I just don't love him anymore."
 - a. When they say this, they are expressing the fact that they no longer have feelings of warmth, affection, and enjoyment toward their spouse. Which I am sure is the case.
 - b. What they fail to realize is that the reason they are not experiencing the correct feelings toward their spouse spontaneously rising up in them is because, deep down, they

are not actually a loving person. And as a consequence, of that, they do not have love for their spouse. In other words, the defect is in their character.

- i. Now, on the flip side, unfortunately, the reality is that, being the imperfect lovers that we are, we are not always going to have great feelings toward our spouses. But the solution to this is not to split. And it is not to attempt to manage or chase a feeling. Instead, chase love. As you begin to actually love your spouse, from the heart, more and more the hard feelings will leave you, and the proper feelings will come. From the inside, out.
- ii. Likewise, don't try and manage your unhelpful thoughts getting in the way of your relationships by brute force alone. Instead, chase love. Meditation, mindfulness, self-help books, talk therapy and the rest of it, entirely on their own, are all of very limited usefulness. Because until your mind has been fundamentally renewed by the love of God, you just will never be able to think straight.
- iii. Same goes with actions. You could do the right thing by your spouse day after day, all the while hating their guts, couldn't you? Don't try and simply manage your behavior. Chase love. When you find it, you will find yourself very much wanting to do the right thing by them. Deeply wanting what is good for them. In which case, it will be quite natural and typical for you that you do the right thing by them. Even when it is tough. Here was Dallas Willard's definition of love...**Love** is willing good. Goodwill. More specifically, love is a state of being, which expresses itself in goodwill toward the other.
- iv. What is the problem with the world, with humanity? People don't have love. Dead batteries. Flashlights running on empty.
 1. Now, I do want to be very clear on something. In the interim, because the inside of our cup is not yet all the way washed, we will need to directly manage our thoughts, behavior, and feelings, as a temporary stop gap. After all, we can't have them destructively bursting out of us. For instance, when you are upset with your spouse, or have difficult feelings toward them, you need to do right by them as an act of

- unpleasant obedience on your part, even though you don't feel like it.
2. But that approach, in the long-term, is not sufficient to the needs of the human condition, and to the complexity of human relationships. Direct effort in suppressing evil tendencies is not the way to success. Wash the inside of the cup. This is always followed by a bubbling up of all the wonderful things that you are inside. That is the way to success.
- c. How do you chase love? Where do you get love? We already talked about that, earlier in this curriculum. The triangle of transformation.
 - i. And by the way, the triangle of transformation is not some sort of magic in and of itself. It has nothing to do with itself. The triangle is all about directly connecting us to love itself, to God Himself. After all, there is only one place in the universe that ultimate love is to be found, where it is ours for the taking. *Love comes from God. 1 John 4:7*
 - f. God is not only a being of pure love, but also is Himself the source of all love that exists in the universe. Which means that even the wicked have tiny flickers of the Divine at work within them still. But God invites them, invites all of us, into the wholeness and completeness of the Divine love. Into a willing good toward others that is simply what and who we are.
 - g. To be like that...always overflowing with untainted love from the inside out, is what it means to be truly human. And believe it or not...one day you will be truly human. And all these old-fashioned biblical words that are awkward and confusing are about that. Holiness, righteousness, sanctification. These words just mean that you can, you should, and by God's grace you will, become, in your character, what God Himself is.
 - i. *Leviticus (11:45) and 1 Peter (1:16) read, Be Holy for I am Holy.*
 - ii. Absolute love. It doesn't matter how people treat Him. It doesn't matter what it costs Him. *God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked Luke 6:35.*
 1. In fact, *[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*
 - iii. That is how God is, says Jesus. So, you become like that. *Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*
 - iv. *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48).*
 - h. That is the reality which we, who are *partakers of the Divine nature*, are growing into. *Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, **which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator** Colossians 3:9-10*
 - i. Imagine that. Conformed to *His likeness. His image.*
 - ii. *God is love.* And one day, each of us will also be able to say "I am love."

- i. Why did God make humanity at all, given the mess He knew that we would make of things? And why permit all this ongoing suffering? Why not put an end to it all right now? Why instead, orchestrate this long, painful, complex road to redemption? Because a universe with other people in it who have the same loving nature as Him is so much richer and fuller and more beautiful and exciting than one without such people in it. God is committed to that project. That is the meaning of human history. That is what everything is moving toward.
5. Who was Jesus? Love incarnate. What did He come to do? Jesus did not come simply to get a new set of ideas inside of us. He came in order to get the divine substance, His very self, Love, into us. Along these lines, early Jewish Christians referred to what they had taken on, simply as “The Way.” It was a new way of being human. And every teaching of Jesus must be understood in that overall context. Love above all.
 - a. If you were to ask Buddha what is most important in life, he would say desire causes suffering, get rid of desire. If you were to ask Muhammad, he would say submission to the will of God. When they asked Jesus, He said, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.* The second is this, *‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:20-31.*
 - b. With Jesus, there was only one law. The law of Love. Jesus forbade His followers from putting other laws higher than it. From putting rules and procedures ahead of genuine human need and relationships.
 - c. What good are burnt offerings and sacrifices, Bible studies and soup kitchens? It depends on the circumstance in which they are occurring. If they are a means of loving God or neighbor, then they are great. If not, be rid of them.
 - d. Paul taught the same path. Love as the fulfillment of the law. As the fulfillment of all moral requirements and demands.
 - i. *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13: 8-10.*
 - e. Not rules, but relationships. Love is what the Old Testament was about. Love is what the New Testament is about. Christianity’s whole goal is to get us healthy and to bring us into healthy, wonderful, life-enhancing relationships, with God and with others. And to get rid of everything and anything in the way of that. Even rules when they do. After all, rules can fail, but *love never fails*.
 - i. For instance, when they asked Jesus, “Are we allowed to we divorce our wives whenever we feel like it?” “Nope” replied Jesus, “not if you are a Kingdom liver.” They didn’t like that at all! So, they came back with, “Well, doesn’t the Scripture say we can? Then why are you saying otherwise?” Here

was His answer: *Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. (Matthew 19:8)*

- ii. God allowed divorce in the law He gave to His Jewish children as a provision for human hard heartedness. If you are insistent on being a toxic, destructive jerk to your spouse, go ahead and do everyone involved a favor and just divorce them, allowed God.
 - 1. In such a circumstance, divorce was permitted as it was the lesser of two evils.
 - 2. But what's the best way? Don't divorce them. And don't stay married while being a jerk to them. Instead, stay married and learn to love them.
- iii. Unfortunately, what this example shows is that, given the reality of what humans actually are, as opposed to what we ought to be, we do need rules. In churches, in homes, in workplaces, and in governments. We need rules and laws and punishments in order to mitigate external expressions of evil. To force people, to some extent, into at least the basics of behavior that are necessary for there to be a safe and reasonable living environment for everyone. We need rules, but we have to understand that by themselves, they are woefully inadequate to human flourishing. They do nothing to address the human heart.
 - 1. "Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure." - James Madison
 - 2. Likewise, T.S. Eliot said "They constantly try to escape from the darkness outside and within by dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."
 - 3. But there is no such system, is there? The evil will always come out in other ways, find its way out around the rules.
- f. Rules are for the hardhearted. Lovers don't need rules. Lovers don't need to be forced into doing the right thing. And even when they run into situations for which there is no explicitly stated rule, they do the right thing.
- g. All the rules and rituals and spiritual practices everything else in the Christian life are simply a means to the end of nurturing and growing love for others. Which is why, when you read through the gospels, you will notice that Jesus wasn't big on rules. In fact, He was quite a rule breaker. That got Him in trouble, didn't it? To understand Jesus's teaching, understand that other than the Law of Love, the things Jesus taught were not laws.

(END OF AUDIO SEGMENT ONE)

(START OF AUDIO SEGMENT TWO)

- 6. The philosopher Peter Kreeft told a funny story. He had two dogs. If he would point to something in a room, one of the dogs would look where he was pointing. But the other dog would just sit there looking at his finger. Now, the issue that the second dog had is precisely the same issue that people often have when considering the teachings of Jesus. We so often

miss what they are pointing to. His teachings are often reduced to yet another set of useless rules, of commands. And worse yet, so many of His teachings actually make no sense at all, when analyzed in this way. Which is why, by and large, we find them impossible. We do not understand how someone could possibly live by them.

- a. The reason that we have this constant tendency to reduce His teachings to legalisms is because we would prefer if His teachings were simplistic commands. We want tidy little checkboxes, because that is easy and comfortable and definite. We want a minimum moral requirement to meet. But Jesus is not into moral minimums. He is into moral maximums.
- b. Which is why Jesus did not give us literalistic principals that can be applied, without thought, to every situation. Instead, Jesus gave illustrations of how someone lives who is full of perfect, Kingdom love. That is a key point. Illustrations, not commands. He gave illustrations of what kingdom living typically looks like.
- c. Let's take two examples.
 - i. *Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* Luke 14:12-14
 1. As Dallas Willard pointed out, I am sure we all have some relatives that we would love to show this passage to! But was Jesus issuing a command that you can never have a party where you invite your friends or relatives? Of course not.
 2. Instead, Jesus is illustrating Kingdom living. Kingdom lovers invite the difficult people, the awkward people, the boring people to their parties. Kingdom lovers don't just pat people on the back who can pat them back. Instead, they lavish love on people who never will have an opportunity to return a favor to them.
 - ii. Or consider *Matthew 6*. Jesus tells His followers that when they give to the needy, pray, fast, or do other good deeds, they should do them secretly.
 1. But we could notice that Paul, at times, in his letters, talked about the good things he did.
 2. Was that a violation of Jesus's teaching?
 3. No. Because, again, Jesus was not issuing a universal command, but illustrating Kingdom living.
 4. He was illustrating that Kingdom lovers keep their good deeds a secret because they are doing what is right out of love for others, and not simply in order to get recognition or show off.
 5. However, there will be situations where it is better that a kingdom lover does a good deed and doesn't keep it secret. It will always depend on what the Law of Love dictates.

6. In our example, Paul was trying to encourage and inspire people to follow His example in the way of Christ. He was not trying to show off.
7. Just always keep in mind that **love** is willing good toward someone. So, when you are wondering what to do as a kingdom liver in a given situation, the Christian framework to consider the question from is “What would be good and helpful for that person?” Disciples of Christ use their discernment to reflect on the decision in front of them through the lens of the Law of Love and then determine what would be best. And then they do it.
 - a. Now, this process of using our judgement in order to apply the Law of Love, instead of just following a simple rule book does raise a major difficulty for us. If Jesus is not going to just straightforwardly tell us what to do in every and any situation, how will we always know for sure what to do?
 - b. We won’t. Kingdom living always requires discernment, wisdom.
 - i. You can have love for someone without having wisdom...actually, that is not an uncommon scenario. But the issue with this is that you will often make an enormous mess of things. Intending good for someone is not enough. We need to know how to safely and effectively implement what is good for them in a given situation. You cannot helpfully rule and reign over your bit of God’s creation, without wisdom. Wisdom is the only reality sufficient to navigate the tremendous complexity and the confusing situations that we all confront in our Christian lives.
 1. Examples are everywhere to be found. Say your child is an alcoholic, how, in practical terms, do you love them? Requires a lot of wisdom to maintain that affirmative, positive connection, and yet to avoid enabling bad behavior. To see the spots where you can help, and to see the spots that are beyond your help. Where you intervening will make things worse.
 - c. There are going to be all sorts of tough calls. Won’t we get those tough calls wrong sometimes? Yep. But doesn’t it matter when we get it wrong, aren’t there negative consequences to that? Yep. Well, then should we just shrug our shoulders and resign ourselves to poor decision making? No. Because there are some practical steps that we can take to help us grow in wisdom.
 - i. First of all, we saw earlier in the curriculum that knowledge is the basis of faith. But we also need to appreciate that that knowledge is the basis of wisdom. So, the spiritual practice of study is a key starting point in gaining wisdom.
 1. *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17*
 2. We see here that the goal of our gaining spiritual knowledge is not just to so that we have a bunch of the correct ideas floating around up in our heads, but so that these ideas are available to us to equip us for every good work in our day to day lives.

3. However, there is a twist. Wisdom starts with knowledge, but it doesn't end there. After all, you can be spiritually knowledgeable, but not wise.
 4. **Wisdom** is the consistent ability to practically apply spiritual knowledge, in a given situation.
 - a. *This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best. Philippians 1:9*
 5. So, how do we move beyond theoretical knowledge, and into to applied wisdom?
- ii. Well, it's tricky. Because wisdom can come from experience. But, again, this is not always the case.
1. *As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly. Proverbs 26:11*
 2. Experience alone is insufficient. Experience plus humility though, that's the ticket!
 - a. We have to be open to correction, to admitting mistakes, to acknowledging our deficiencies and blindspots.
 3. Most of all, humility always starts with listening.
 - a. *Do not be wise in your own eyes. Proverbs 3:7*
 - b. We must seek out advice from people who have wisdom in the area that we need advice.
 - i. Look for someone godly, mature, stable, surrounded by healthy relationships, and thoughtful.
 - c. And then, have the humility to carefully consider their perspective, allowing it to correct your own. And then again, sometimes not. Maybe, after careful consideration, you come to see that this specific piece of advice is actually off base. Maybe they were not the person you should have asked in the first place. Determining whether the advice is good or not is an art and a learned skill.
 - i. But the general idea is that we do need good advice in order to live well. Given our limited perceptions and experiences, we simply can't get by without other people's wisdom and insights into our own situations.
 - d. And, by the way, you know who I heard has really a lot of wisdom, about most situations? The Guy upstairs! He wants to give input in your life. Believe it or not, He might have some pretty good ideas about things for you to consider as you calculate your next move!
 - e. *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. James 1:5*

- f. Prayerfully ask Him about specific situations that are tricky for you.
- g. *The Spirit of truth will come and guide you in all truth John 16:13.*
 - i. If you ask, and then are quiet, and you wait, and listen, certain things will come to mind.
 - ii. But be careful with this. Because any inkling that we get has to be taken on balance, and tested against everything else as well.
- iii. Which brings us to our third and final point on the topic of how to grow in wisdom. And that is this: we can't just pray and read the Bible and assume that all of the complexities of our life will be adequately addressed in that manner.
 - 1. Instead, Jesus's teachings must be carefully considered and lived out in the overall context of lived experience, a consideration of trends and patterns, an understanding of human history, the rest of the Bible, and common sense. It takes some real critical thinking to be a Kingdom liver.
 - 2. If we are going to love in a creative, thoughtful, risk-taking way, it is critical that everything Jesus said and everything we read in the Bible, and just generally everything that we come across in life, always, must be taken in balance. Looked at holistically. Thoughtfully. As part of the bigger picture.
 - 3. This is difficult for us because one of the terribly unfortunate aspects of the human condition is that we are prone to extreme thinking. *Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes. Ecclesiastes 7:18.* But how much subtlety do you hear out of the mouths of politicians or in news reporting? How about in internet discussions and debates? Those signs people like to put out on their yards, the bumper stickers you see as you drive around, are those nuanced and careful in their messages?
 - a. This tendency toward unbalanced thinking is one of the big problems we bring with us to the Bible, as we read it. Our numerous biases and our difficult in seeing the bigger picture are always present. This is one of the reasons that, at times, reading the Bible is simply not profitable for people. That is why people are very good at finding justification in the Bible for whatever views they are bringing to it. And when we do this, the Bible just adds fuel to the fire. "It's not just me saying it, it's God saying it!" For instance, slave owners justified slavery from their distorted reading of the Bible.
 - b. But what is the corrective to this? How can we save the Bible from becoming fuel to our toxic fires, and instead allow it to challenge and transform us? For starters, by always, always

keeping the bigger picture in mind. The Law of Love. You wouldn't have too many slaves, if you were following the Law of Love, would you?

4. Now, sometimes issues are clear and obvious, as with slavery. But, often the application in our own lives of the things that we find in the Bible is not so straightforward.
5. We do wish instead that things were black and white. Because black and white are reassuring, easy. But, as philosopher Peter Kreeft says, a human being is not a simple thing, and nothing that presents itself to us is simple. Life is shades of gray. Which is why the Bible shades of grey too. After all, the Bible is the most helpful and accurate way of seeing life that there is. In life, in the Bible, and in the teachings of Jesus, there is always more than meets the eye.
 - a. Now, there are big principals that are always true. Love, forgiveness, Jesus is God, the Apostle's Creed and that kind of thing. But the application of these big principals is where the difficulty lies. And the thoughtful and wise work of the application of these principals is our sacred responsibility.
 - b. There is just no way around it, a renewed mind, and wisdom as well, are both challenging and nuanced things. They require much diligent cultivation, over many years, much maturity. And spiritual wisdom only can be had in the context of the renovation of the entire human person that we have been discussing all throughout this curriculum. As Dallas Willard put it, "sanctification will make you smarter."
6. Making difficult judgment calls and taking responsibility for important decisions is a weighty matter. And a lot of people would rather not have that responsibility. Instead, they would rather be off the hook. Leave things in their life up to Jesus. But Jesus didn't come to get us off the hook. Instead, He came to help to get you to the point where you can effectively order and manage your life. Where you can rule and reign over your little bit of God's creation well.
 - a. It's a subtle thing. As Socrates noted, there is "an art to living well." And the very start of wisdom in living and in thinking is to realize that.
 - b. It is the work of a lifetime to come to where we look carefully and holistically at things. Where we have learned to listen well. To observe, to cut through the noise and distraction and see the essence of something. Looking below the surface. Where we can discern the question behind the question that someone is asking us.
- d. The wise application of the law of love, in the power of the Spirit, is what is truly, and sorely needed in our churches, in this world. It is exceedingly rare. And so poorly

valued. We like flashy and exciting preachers and ministries. We often disregard the old, the quiet, the slow, the listeners. The humble, mature Christians in our congregations who have learned so many valuable lessons throughout the lumps and bumps of years of living. But their voices are critically important. So many people desperately need someone like that to peer through the superficialities and complexities of their circumstance, and into the heart of the issue and delicately speak that powerful word of wisdom, discernment, insight to them, in language that they can understand and accept. That light in the darkness in the confusion. That manifestation of the power of the Kingdom in the form of the spoken word. Do you remember, from our last talk, that praying and saying are two major forms of Kingdom power that we are to exercise? What we are talking about here is one form of what Dallas Willard calls **saying**.

- e. To conclude this talk, I want to walk you through an example of what saying, actually looks like in practice.
 - i. You might read *1 Corinthians 7* and think, “well, Paul here is pretty clear to the unmarried folks, that it would be better if they just stayed that way. He says that, barring a few exceptions, his opinion is that they shouldn’t get married. So that must be the best way for Christian people to be, unmarried.” And people have taken that text that way.
 - ii. But what do we read in *1 Timothy 5*? Paul is counseling Timothy there that he should tell the single gals to get married.
 - iii. Why the difference? Because Paul was writing to two different groups of people, in two different situations. You can read about what those situations were for yourselves at a later time. But the point is that he thoughtfully and logically used the mind that God gave him and gave different pieces of advice, based on the Law of Love, to these two different groups.
 - iv. What we can see here is that we should not take a passage of Scripture on an issue and apply it our lives uncritically. That is foolish and will often be harmful to you. Instead, we want to fit every teaching of the Bible into the overall message of the Bible, and into a larger Christian view of the world.
 - v. In this example, before giving advice, we would first need to step back and reflect on what marriage is, what the Bible has to say about it generally. Then we would think about the person we are giving advice to, what kind of person they are. And to reflect on what type of situation they find themselves in. We would also think about our own experience of marriage. And so on. All of it, before we go giving advice. That is what Paul did to these two different groups of early Christians. That is what Jesus is after. What His teachings are about. Not rule followers. Not robots. Wise stewards and rulers of His good creation, who He can empower to run things for Him.
8. To summarize this talk:
 - a. First, Jesus taught in parables because a direct and confrontational approach was ineffective in reaching His difficult audience. Therefore, His teachings should not be thoughtless applied to our lives as a neat little set of rules to live by. Instead, they are

thought provoking, challenging puzzles for us to work through, as wrestle with the radical goodness that He calls us to. He often used bizarre and difficult language in order to get His sayings to stick in people's heads, and to force people to grapple with deep spiritual truths.

- b. Second, Jesus was Love incarnate. And His goal was not just to get a new set of ideas, but to get His own Divine Nature, Love Itself, into us. Love is willing good. It is a state of being that we must come into, by working the triangle of transformation. Love is a state of being which will helpfully express itself in the way we think, act and feel. Jesus taught the Law of Love as the highest and only true law, to which every other law and ethical consideration must be subject. This is the interpretive key to understanding Jesus's teaching.
- c. Applying the Law of Love in the situations we find ourselves requires considerable discernment. There is no simple rule book. And wisdom starts with knowledge. But it goes beyond knowledge. Experience is required, which must always be coupled with humility to be useful. And we must find wise people and ask them for advice in order to navigate our life well. Also, God will help us along with wisdom as well, if we ask Him to. Additionally, wisdom is the fruit of a consistently thoughtful, wholistic, balanced, and introspective approach to life. The wise application of the law of love, in the power of the Spirit, is what the world sorely needs. And manifesting the power of the Kingdom by offering such insight in the lives of others, is one form that a spiritual power that we referred to as saying, can take.

- Father, we invite your sacred Love into our hearts.

Amen