



Hard Sayings of Jesus

Lesson 1 Translations! Traditions! and Troubles!

Opening Prayer

Introduction

Jesus was a teacher. The crowds realized that as they hung on his every word and drank in his parables. His enemies realized that, even if they sneered when they called him *teacher*. Speaking in beautiful sermons, using simple parables and illustrations, Jesus taught people the truths of heaven that he came to fulfill on earth. He spoke his truths to be understood. As the psalmist wrote, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (119:130).

List at least one or two of your favorite sayings of Jesus and be prepared to explain why they are dear to you.

Now take a minute to list some of the words of Christ you struggle with most. What about them makes them difficult for you?

So why, then, did so many in Jesus’ day misunderstand him? Why do so many still misunderstand him?

Translation Problems

The great majority of Jesus’ words are clear, simple, and immediately understandable. They were spoken mainly to Aramaic-speaking Jewish people living in Palestine two thousand years ago.

We have the pure Word of God preserved for us, but we read it in translations—and often with two thousand years of interpretation shaping how we think. Those translations and interpretations are usually wonderful blessings and tools for us. Usually!

Matthew 5:32 “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”

1. What does it sound like Jesus is saying in these words?

2. Explain why this passage might be considered a difficult saying.
3. This actually is a difficult passage to translate. Jesus uses a rare passive form of the verb “to commit adultery.” It would seem a more accurate way of rendering the translation would be that if a man wrongly divorces his wife, he “causes her to be seen as an adulteress.” What’s the point of what Jesus is saying then?
4. Let’s compare and evaluate some different translations.

ESV – “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

EHV – “But I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to be regarded as an adulteress. And whoever marries the divorced woman is regarded as an adulterer.”

5. Identify the potential damage that could come from the NIV or ESV translation of this verse.
6. As we care for one another, wanting no one’s reputation to be damaged, what’s to be one of our main concerns? Use **Ephesians 5:3** to help answer that question.

Ephesians 5:3 Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people.

Tradition Problems

Incorrect interpretations can become so associated with Jesus’ words that they’re often accepted as fact and passed from one to another—changing or obscuring Jesus’ intended meaning. The following is a good example of this:

Matthew 19:24-26 “Again I tell you, 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.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

7. There’s an often-repeated tradition about the “eye of a needle” that Jesus is referring to. If you’ve heard it, share it.
8. That traditional interpretation isn’t based on fact at all! But in some ways, it leads to a tradition that, while incorrect, seems *easier* to understand. What would seem to be Jesus’ point if the “eye of a needle” were a small gate in a city wall?

9. Take away that traditional interpretation, and it gets a lot harder! What does Jesus seem to be saying now?

10. It is always good for us to double check our interpretations of difficult words or phrases by comparing our understanding to more clear passages (i.e. Letting Scripture interpret Scripture). Use the larger context of the Bible to help inform you understand Christ's words about the rich entering heaven:
 - a. Name rich people in Scripture who were faithful believers.

 - b. What do the following passages add to your understanding of what Jesus means?

Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

1 Timothy 6:9-10 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

11. Consider Jesus' exchange with the rich man that took place immediately before he spoke these words (**Matthew 19:16-22**). Analyze why Jesus would say what he did this strongly.

More Practice...

Genesis 4:15 "But the LORD said to [Cain], 'Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.' *Then the LORD put a mark on Cain* so that no one who found him would kill him."

1. By that translation, what does it sound like God is doing to Cain?

2. A tradition has imposed another layer of meaning upon that interpretation. What (sadly!) has been a common traditional interpretation of this verse?

3. A more accurate translation of those words is, "The Lord gave a sign to Cain..." When you are working with that translation, what happens to the traditional understandings?

4. Do any questions or difficulties remain?

Prayer