

ENCOUNTER JESUS

Finding Our Way
Back to Him

21st Century Christian • Chad Ezelle

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START

Note: this might be tough for you to agree with at first, and I completely understand why. But Jesus made demands on the lives of everyone who followed Him throughout His short stay in this world. He makes those same demands on us, too—even though we are attempting to follow His path nearly two thousand years later. It might be tempting to gloss over the teachings of Jesus in this section because they don't seem relevant to our lives or they seem too hard to be true. But take a closer look at them and you might be surprised at what you see.

We Hold These Truths...

America was built on dreams—dreams of freedom, dreams of liberty, dreams of better lives, dreams of providing better things for families, dreams of dreams. The result of all that is what I call “American Christianity.” I call it that, but I don't think it's real Christianity at all.

Every student learns at some point that there are three inalienable rights in America:

1. Life
2. Liberty
3. The pursuit of happiness

Those three things, we've all been taught, are the foundation of the America that we know. These dreams of a richer, better, and fuller life of meaning have been the foundation of what we do in this great country. And since those things have been ingrained into our thoughts, I think we tend to pursue those liberties more than other freedoms or responsibilities.

It goes without saying that we value the ideals of life and liberty, and there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, I love life, and I love liberty. But the last one—the pursuit of happiness—could cause a problem for anyone striving to follow Jesus—especially when that right is contrasted with the words Jesus spoke.

It's dangerous to read the words in the Bible as if they were written yesterday and interpret them like we do any other piece of modern literature. The last word of the Bible was written a couple thousand years ago to people living in a completely different society than ours. And as a result of that, they would have read the words a little (a lot) differently than we might. In our culture, we take some of Jesus' teachings with a grain of salt because they seem so distant and radical. And we cruise over them because we think Jesus couldn't have meant it the way it sounds to us.

Misinterpreting Jesus?

In reality, we interpret His words using our culture as the standard. And that's a dangerous thing.

Here are just a few examples. This group of passages is not exhaustive, but just enough to give a better idea of what I'm talking about here.

"He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

Remember inalienable right #1? The founders of this country had in mind that everyone should be able to protect their own lives, providing for themselves and their families. And they even went as far as saying that it was the Creator who endowed all men with that right. But in reality, it was the Creator who said that a true follower of Jesus would be willing to lose his life to find a new, better one. Immediately, we get the idea that some of the teachings of Jesus might contrast with our present beliefs.

If we are only concerned about the life that ends at our grave, then I can understand the desire to provide a better, richer life today. But if we're people who are much more interested in the eternal kind of life, this world shouldn't

influence our decisions much. In a perfect world, this side of eternity wouldn't matter at all. Unfortunately, though, perfection isn't a word we normally use to talk about our planet.

Another passage from Jesus:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

In this world, we are what we have. If we live in a big, nice house, then we are at one certain status level. But if we are struggling to make a rent payment on our one-bedroom apartment, we are at a much lower level. If we are driving around in a new Mercedes Benz, we are viewed to be at a certain level. And if we are driving around in a 1995 Civic with 276,000 miles and a cracked windshield, we are thought to be at a much, much lower level. In the eyes of most people, we are what we have.

What makes it so dangerous is that we generally want to be viewed highly by our peers. We've been conditioned to the point that we don't want to have anyone looking down at us. We want to be at their level (or even above it). And by that philosophy, we must have nice things if we want to be on the level of our peers. We are what we have, right?

The problem is that it is in complete disagreement with what Jesus taught. His purpose as He spoke the words of Matthew 6:19-21 was to show the foolishness of accumulating things in this life. At some point, none of it will matter, and Jesus wanted His people to realize what is most important in this life. It's not the cars, the houses, the retirement accounts, or the emergency fund. What's most important is following Jesus, no matter what it means for our social or economic status. No matter what it means for our comfort, blessings, or effort, Jesus wants His followers to realize that we are not what we have.

More words from Jesus:

"Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:18-19).

We have probably heard the story of the man who went out to sow seed since we were young. It's always been a favorite parable, probably because it's such a simple lesson. Simple, but difficult.

It's easy, even for people who have no experience in farming or gardening, to understand the value of rich soil. It's simple for people to understand that there are different soil types, with each type presenting difficulties for growing plants. And the conclusion of the parable is ingrained in our thoughts: we must be the good soil to receive the seed (God's Word) and let it produce (fruit in our lives).

But the parable doesn't do us any good if we take for granted that we are the good soil. We've heard the Word, put our faith in it, and maybe even taken some kind of action to be obedient to the Word. And so we think, because of what we've done, we are inevitably the good soil. Should we be so quick to think our lives are exactly what God wants? Probably not.

When describing the thorny soil, Jesus compared the thorns to the cares and riches of this world—the big houses, the new cars, the retirement accounts, and all the other treasures of this earth. If we were to take a closer look at our lives, we might find that the cares and riches of this world are constantly choking out the fruit from our lives. Not that those houses, cars, and accounts are evil and bad and sinful, but they can surely drain the spiritual fruit from our lives, can't they?

How much more good could you do for Jesus' cause if you weren't so bound by a desire to keep up with the cares and treasures of this life? How many people could you serve? How many children could you help out of poverty? How much good could you do?

More of Jesus' teaching:

So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich. And when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, He said, "How hard is it for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:22-25).

Those verses show us why one man was kept from following Jesus. But before we dig into them, I need to tell you what it does not mean for us.

Jesus doesn't expect His followers to take pictures of all their stuff and

sell it all on Ebay. That's not the point of what He told the guy that we now know as the rich, young ruler. However, this encounter does have some valid principles for us.

The ruler was obviously a religious person—he had kept the commandments of the Old Testament since his childhood days. He most likely grew up in a religious home, and he probably knew all about God. But he obviously didn't know much about the Son. Most likely, if we knew this guy, we'd probably think very highly of him. We'd probably think of him as a great person with a good heart. We'd surely think well of him due to his successes—he would be, after all, rich, young, and powerful.

He went to Jesus to find out what he should do to make it into heaven, probably thinking that he'd already done enough. When Jesus told him he lacked one thing, I'm sure he had to pick his jaw up off the ground. Surprised that he hadn't done enough just yet, the young man learned what it was that he still needed to do. Jesus told him to get rid of his things, give away all the proceeds to the poor, and then he could follow Him.

Sadly, his riches were too much for him to part with, and he went away full of sorrow. But why all the sorrow? He was presented with a choice to make, and he made it. So why was he so upset?

Here's why: I really believe the man wanted to serve God—he had kept the commandments. He even wanted to do whatever he could to have eternal life, that is, until he found out what was needed. He wanted to go to heaven, to be happy in the next life, but he wanted to be happy in this life more. And therein is the reason for his sorrow. He knew what was right, and he knew exactly how he should have responded to Jesus' teaching. But he was torn by his love for his money.

It's painful, but I don't see how the average American Christian is much different from that. The teachings of Jesus are simple, but hardly ever easy.

We want to serve God. We want to do whatever He wants us to do. We want to be pleasing to Him. And we do it because we want to spend an eternity with Him in heaven. But do we want it more than we want anything else? Do we love Him more than anybody or anything?

Jesus wasn't trying to teach that one of the requirements for spiritual life is to sell everything we have. He was teaching that the requirement is to get rid of everything that we prioritize before God. It was a lesson on priority, not finance.

The rich, young ruler loved God and his own money. When he was

presented with a decision to make, he chose what came first in His life. Sorrow ensued.

Again, the teaching for us is not that we should run out and auction off everything we own. But we have to take a look at our priorities. If it causes us sorrow to use our material blessings to finance an evangelistic trip, contribute to a building project, buy food or clothing for the poor, or anything else for the good of Jesus' cause, are we any better than that ruler? In fact, if the previous statement causes you anger or frustration, does it say anything about your priorities?

When it comes to the riches and material blessings of this world, it's all about the priority we give them. Jesus never taught us to become poor before we follow Him. Instead, He taught us that attempting to follow Him would be ineffective if we were not completely willing to become poor for His sake.

One more lesson from Jesus:

Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:14-15).

Let's face it; it's human nature for us to want people to like us. We want to be esteemed. We want to be respected. And we want people to genuinely gravitate toward us. And the truth is that there isn't a thing wrong with that—until we want the praise of men more than the praise of God.

The Pharisees were the religious people. That much you already know. They were the ones who supposedly were adept at following the Old Testament commands, and they were never shy about letting people know how good they were at heeding God's Word. In addition to their supposed righteousness, the Pharisees were evidently pretty skillful when it came to their finances.

Luke tells us that they were lovers of money. In my mind, I see them as the ritzy, extravagant people who commanded the attention of the people around them. They wanted to be seen, and they were willing to do whatever it took to accomplish that goal. They were probably the epitome of what most people wanted to be in that day. As a result of their money and supposed piety, they were highly esteemed by their peers.

Except for Jesus. He wasn't impressed. In fact, He told them that their superficial religion and justification before the people was an abomination

to God. They were the kind of people who did the right things externally while having their hearts in another zip code. Outwardly, they were religious, but inwardly, they were seeking riches.

And those Pharisees are a perfect picture of the Christ-followers today who do the right actions, but only because that kind of behavior is expected. They were very religious people, but it was a fake kind of religion. And Jesus called their façade an abomination in God's eyes.

Would He say the same about us? Obviously, that's a question that we can only answer for ourselves, but I believe it's a valid issue. Are you only serving God on the outside? Although you are going through the right motions, is your heart still far from God and centered on your stuff?

If so, you know very well the sorrow the rich, young ruler experienced by being torn between the two. You know what it's like to want to do the right thing, but also to have that desire choked out by the thorns of "American Christianity." You know about the struggle between wanting to store your treasure in this life and wanting to be prepared for the next. And you know what it's like to want to do everything you can do to make this life as comfortable as possible, while knowing that you have to forget about this one if you want to find the next one.

All of those struggles come from the pursuit of "American Christianity." It's the desire to have God and Jesus as a part of your life, but not the center of it. It's the desire to want God along with a bunch of things. It's the desire to focus all your effort on providing a better life for you and your family, even though Jesus taught to provide an everlasting life.

I call it "American Christianity," but I don't think it's real Christianity at all. In fact, "American Christianity" has taken us away from Jesus. It's made us foreigners to His kingdom, and we must relocate our hearts. We must encounter Jesus again. This book is about finding our way back to Him.

Chapter 1 - START

1. Explain how the "American Dream," although not necessarily sinful, can be conflicting with Jesus' message of Christianity.
2. In this chapter, we discussed a few examples of how we interpret Jesus' teachings using our culture as a standard. Give a few examples of other passages with which we do the same thing.

3. If you're honest with yourself, what is it in your life that you prioritize above God? What would tangible repentance look like in this area?
4. Does one need to become poor before following Jesus? If not, what did He mean to teach to the Rich Young Ruler?
5. Compare and contrast "American Christianity" with the kind of Christianity Jesus taught in the passages we discussed in this chapter. Why do they seem to be so different?
6. What are some specific areas in your life where you need to find your way back to Jesus? What would it look like if you were to make an effort to get back to Him?