

# The Difficult Words of Jesus

## Chapter 1

- **Opening Prayer**

*Dear Lord, as we embark on this study of some of the harder things you say to us in scripture, we ask that you help us to bring fresh minds to your message that we might adopt it in our lives. Above all, be with us. In Your Name we pray. Amen.*

- **Read Mark 10:17-27**

- **Chapter 1 – Sell What You Own**

- Jesus frequently answers questions with questions. Does this Socratic approach bother you?
- In verse 10:21, Jesus looks at him and *loves* him – the only time Mark mentions Jesus loving an individual.
  - Why might this be significant?
    - *Levine points out that it is astonishing that this was saved for a failed disciple*
- *Jesus' questioner feels like something is missing in his life, but Jesus' response is for him to give up something more*
  - *Levine says this is to refocus on heaven and follow Jesus*
- Disciples are astounded at Jesus' answer. Mark presents the disciples as not the "sharpest knives in the drawer."
  - How wise (or not) do you think the disciples were?
  - Why did the Gospel writers include verses that seem to diminish the disciples' wisdom?
- Do young people you know worry about "inheriting eternal life"?
  - What does this say about the rich young man?
- Luke describes the young man as a "ruler" – a term he uses five other times to refer to people of economic or political influence.
  - Does this change the story for you somehow?
- Levine offers three interpretations:
  1. Born with a silver spoon, looking for his next challenge
  2. Looking for affirmation that he's doing just fine
  3. Trying to fill an emptiness in his life
  - How do *you* imagine this young man to be?
- In 10:17, the man call Jesus "Good Teacher"
  - Why does Jesus say "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."?
    - *Mark's Gospel portrays Jesus as teaching through action. Just branding him as an instructor does him a disservice.*
- "What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?"
  - Other translations use *obtain, get, and receive*
  - What might this word choice tell us about the questioner?
  - Levine points out the selfishness of the question, but says self-interest isn't necessarily a bad thing
    - Is the questioner being overly selfish?
  - If you had only one question to ask Jesus, what would it be?
- Why do you think Jesus replaced "You shall not covet" with "You shall not defraud" in his response?
- [19] "the Bible as well as noncanonical texts written by Jews... proclaim the opposite of the prosperity gospel"

- Would you agree? What is at the heart of the prosperity gospel's attraction?
  - How is "keeping" the commandments different from "living" the commandments?
  - Mark 10:25 - "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle..."
    - Levine points out that unequal income distribution is a major reason the world lacks peace
      - Do you think that economic disparity is at the heart of most unrest in the world?
    - The eye of the needle is not a real gate, and "camel" is not a mistake for Greek kamilon (thick rope)
    - Why do you think Jesus' analogy is appropriate here?
  - Jesus doesn't tell everyone to sell all they have (e.g., those who host him and his disciples)
    - What does this say to you about his message here?
  - What do you think about Levine's desire that the young man who was wearing just a linen cloth in Gethsemane was the rich young ruler?
  - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer** (have volunteers take turns)

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# Chapter 2

- **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, sometimes family relationships can get messy, especially when it comes to faith. Help us to better understand your direction for how we should relate to one another in the context of our love for you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7FalyDUk34> 0:21-7:02**

- Reflections?

- **Read Luke 14:26-27 and Matthew 10:35-39**

- In what way have these verses troubled you in the past?

- **Chapter 2 – Hate Father and Mother**

- Levine points out that her initial reaction to hearing “hate father and mother” is to reject the Gospel entirely
  - Have you ever dismissed a book after reading only a few pages?
  - Does this help explain how a non-believer might dismiss the entire Gospel, and the Christian faith with it, when they hit something they don't agree with (or don't understand)?
    - How do we help them through this? *Encourage them to stick with it, like a book, TV, show, or movie that starts poorly*
- The *Good News* translation changes the Luke verses to be like the Matthew verses (“love me more” instead of “hate”)
  - What does that say to you about the translators?
- Some point out contradictory passages (e.g., those that say honor father and mother, and that husbands should love wives)
  - Do these contradictions diminish Jesus' message in Luke?
- *Other appearances of the Greek word for hate (miseo) in Luke's Gospel:*
  - *Luke 1:71 – Zechariah praising God who saved Israel from the hand of those who hate them*
  - *Luke 6:22 – Beatitudes – blessed are you when people hate you*
  - *Luke 21:17 – Everyone will hate you because of me*
  - *These are all not the same kind of hate Jesus asks his Disciples to direct to others*
- [37] Consider Jesus' disciples telling their parents that they needed to worship Jesus in order to be faithful to their own tradition
  - How might you react to your children if they approached you in this way?
  - Could this be part of what Jesus implies by *hating* father and mother?
- Levine touches on examples of Christian persecution, including Nero's blaming them for the Roman fire that consumed 2/3 of the city
  - How do people stand up to such hatred?
- [39] “Hate maintains a relationship, no matter how painful. Indifference is the end of the relationship.”
  - Do you agree with this, and as such that hatred might be better than indifference?
- Levine points out that we can be trained to hate groups of people, but we cannot turn on hate for individuals we already love – even if directed to do so by Jesus. “Hate is like love. It is something felt in the heart, not determined by the intellect.”
  - That means we can't take Jesus' command literally
  - How do we take it figuratively? *Hyperbolic statement to emphasize loyalty and commitment*
- [43] “Religious differences in families can be painful. But, they need not and should not lead to hate.”
  - Faith is dictated by the heart in the same way hate is dictated by the heart
  - Have you seen hate manifested in your family due to religious differences?

- What do you think of the practice of receiving a new name when joining a faith?
  - Luke 14:26 says “...and does not hate...even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”
    - For what would you give up your life?
  - In what ways do you see Jesus as your “Doktorvater” or loco parentis, taking the place of your mother and father?
  - Other reflections?
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- **Closing Prayer** (have volunteers take turns)
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# Chapter 3

- **Opening Prayer**

*Lord God, help us understand what you mean by being a “slave for all.” In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7FalyDUk34> 7:00-12:48 (to the point where Levine says “...which gives us, by the way, all those Christian denominations”)

- Reflections?
- Is it surprising that it has taken our country this long to come to grips with the racial bias engendered by slavery?
- Do you view yourself as a slave to God... that He is your “master”?
  - In what ways is this a “freeing metaphor”?
  - In what ways does the metaphor not fit?

- **Read Ephesians 6:5-8**

- How do you rationalize these comments from Paul?
- Do they make the people of Paul’s culture seem barbaric to you?
- How do you think God reconciles this behavior?

- **Chapter 3 – Slave of All**

- Levine opens the chapter with a mention of the Jews escaping Egyptian slavery in the Exodus
  - When you read this Biblical story, how does it portray God’s view of slavery?
- *A 2017 estimate by Alliance 8.7, an international coalition, says there are ~40 million in modern slavery*
  - *Forced labor (20m), forced marriage (15m), sexual exploitation (5m)*
  - *Estimates vary by definition of slavery and data used*
- *A 2018 Global Slavery Index estimates for modern slavery*
  - *~403,000 in U.S. (0.1%)*
  - *2.6m in North Korea (10.5%)*
- Are there downsides to celebrating our “freedom” as a country?
  - Does Independence Day equate to Freedom?
  - In what ways might this whitewash our history of slavery and even modern slavery?
- Levine talks about the progression through the Bible on the topic of slavery
  - In the Old Testament, Jews are forced to release slaves after a certain number of years (Sabbatical)
  - Paul proclaimed “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free...”
  - Do you get a similar sense of the definition of slavery progressing when you read the Bible from OT to NT?
- Mark 10:44-45 – “and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”
  - Today, we treat Jesus’ language (be a slave to all) as a metaphor. In Jesus’ time, they were more literal.
  - In what ways does metaphorical treatment aid or detract from Jesus’ message?
- What does it mean to “wish to be first”?
  - In what ways do you share this wish?
- What do you draw from our culture’s description of political leaders as “public servants”?
- [72] Levine discusses Jesus telling his disciples that they are no longer servants, but friends.
  - In what ways do you think of God as a friend?
  - Is this, as with some of Levine’s students, too informal for you?

- Other reflections?
  - **Closing Prayer** (have volunteers take turns)
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# Chapter 4

- **Opening Prayer**

*Creator God, we thank you for allowing us at your table, and cherish the time we spend there. Enlighten us this hour that we might feed on your love. In Your Son's holy name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7FalyDUk34> 28:45-33:17 (to the point where Levine says "...I can help you with that.")

- Reflections?
- What makes God cry?
- Why do some Christians feel like they need to make Judaism look bad to make Jesus look good?

- **Read Matthew 15:21-28**

- *Levine dismisses several common explanations of this passage:*
  - *Matthew's term for dog - Greek kunarion, means "puppy"*
    - *It's still a dog, and you wouldn't want to be compared to it*
  - *Jesus was testing the woman's faith*
    - *She was a Canaanite, so she didn't share the same faith*
  - *Jesus was just kidding*
    - *"Oh, please"*
- *Levine offers several more reasonable interpretations.*
  - *Drawing a link between Canaanite woman and Rahab and Tamar mentioned in his genealogy*
  - *Recollecting ancient Israel's enemy and then opening the door for a new relationship with that enemy*
  - *Recollecting other Biblical mothers with similar difficulty*
  - *Fulfillment of Sermon on the Mount instruction (turn the other cheek)*
    - This is the one Levine leans toward
    - How does this work for you?
- Why do you think Jesus didn't immediately respond to the woman?
- What troubles you most about this passage?

- **Chapter 4 – Nowhere Among the Gentiles**

- [76] Jesus spent his ministry almost solely within classical borders of ancient Israel.
  - What does this say to you about God's purpose for Jesus?
  - Why wouldn't Jesus travel broadly, like Paul?
- *Matthew 10:5b-6 – "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."*
  - *Levine considers this "weird," not because it's antithetical to the Christian message, but because it seems unnecessary.*
  - *Gentiles wouldn't have understood his references to the Torah*
  - *The disciples wouldn't have had time to reach that far*
- Jesus tells the disciples to heal, drive out demons, and raise the dead.
  - What do you believe the disciples did on this mission?
- Levine dismisses two explanations for Jesus restricting the disciples' mission to Jews.
  1. So that the Jews would be condemned for turning away
  2. Neither Jesus nor Matthew said this – it was taken from the M source, and that this source was from a group of Jewish followers who wanted to keep the message to themselves
    - Matthew kept it, but surrounded it with faithful Gentiles and the Great Commission

- What are your reactions to these two explanations?
  - *In Acts 10:28, Peter claims it is unlawful for Jews to associate with Gentiles*
    - *Levine states that he is wrong, and provides numerous examples of sanctioned association*
  - [85] Levine discusses the “lost sheep of the House of Israel”
    - This implies either all of Israel or a subset of the Jews who have lost their way (Levine thinks the latter)
      - “the lost sheep represent the population that needs not only guidance but role models”
    - Who are the lost sheep of the House of Christianity?
  - “Both Particularism and Universalism Have Their Place”
    - Apply this to modern-day Christianity.
    - When do each have their place?
  - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer** (have volunteers take turns)

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# Chapter 5

- **Opening Prayer**

*Dear Lord, the concept of Hell is so hard for us to grasp. Give us new insight into this concept and help it to motivate us to reach out to you in love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7FalyDUk34> 14:54-24:02 (to the point where Levine says "That's not the job of the individual Christian")
  - Are there people you want to put in Hell? If so, who?
  - **Read Luke 16:19-31**
    - What do you think Lazarus would have said?
    - [121] "Schadenfreude [wishing a worse fate on others] is not gracious"
    - What do you think of Levine's suggestion that this is the post-mortem/*pre-final* judgment fate of Lazarus and the Rich Man
  - Other Reflections?

- **Chapter 5 – Outer Darkness**

- Do you agree with the 58% of Americans in 2014 who believe in a literal hell?
- How would you describe hell to someone new to the faith?
- Only 22% of Jews believe in hell where 60% of Protestants do
  - Why do you think that's the case?
  - Hebrew texts do not spend a lot of time on post-mortem for the damned or the righteous
    - Is this comforting or does it skirt the issue?
- Why do you think the Gospel writers chose to include so many quotes that suggest eternal damnation?
- Levine covers "Theodicy" [divine justice, or as her students said: "the sequel to *The Illiad*"]
  - Does a literal hell meet your expectation for divine justice?
- **Read Luke 13:24-30**
  - [115] What do you think of Levine's proposition that when Jesus describes the "outer darkness" with weeping and gnashing of teeth, it is not hell, but the back of the line?
    - [116] "*those still in the line are those who want to be there, and who repent of their indifference.*"
- [121] *The Christian beliefs in heaven and hell were influenced by Greek and Roman stories*
- [122] 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish tradition pivoted from God giving life to the dead to God giving life to all
  - Do you see a similar pivot in Christianity today?
- Do we need the fear of a punishing hell to become righteous?
- Do you have any such lingering fear?
  - [124] "*I do not want to leave my husband and children..., both for my sake and for theirs. Such thoughts keep me focused on today and tomorrow, not the afterlife.*"
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer** (have volunteers take turns)

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# Chapter 6

- **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, we freely admit that we don't understand all that you have to say to us through the Bible, including concepts like hell and the devil. Let this lack of understanding encourage us to endeavor in our study of the Word and its application in our lives today. In Your Son's name we pray. Amen.*

- **Video** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8p0UxCc-Xp0> [18:26]

- In what ways might a Jew feel appalled by Christians' claims that OT is punishment and NT is love
- Did you have a view that Paul has a negative view of the Torah?
- Did you identify the Temple in the story of Jesus' cleansing of it with a generalization of the sins of the Temple (and thus Jews)?
- *Levine seems to be generalizing Christianity in the same way she accuses Christianity of generalizing Jews*
- Other Reflections?

- **Chapter 6 – Your Father the Devil**

- Have you ever heard or felt that “Jews had horns” or that “Jews are children of the devil”?
  - There are many depictions of Moses with horns in Christian art [show examples by Googling]
  - Horns were seen as symbols of power
- [128] *“John’s Gospel makes the world so alive that a breeze can remind us of divine power, a breath can remind us of the Holy Spirit.”*
- *Crucifix showing Jesus’ knees bent signifies Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (Google the images and read Numbers 21:4-9) – anyone looking up at the serpent on the pole would be healed of a serpent bite*
- [134] Levine discusses the harm done by calling people names. “We remember the words that cut, especially when they come from someone we respect or love.”
  - Can you provide examples of words that have cut you?
- Do you think evil people are:
  - Children of the devil?
  - Possessed by the devil?
  - Something else?
- “Double predestination” – God creates some people whose purpose is to be sent to hell
  - Do you believe this to be true, and if not, why would some Christians believe it?
- Levine states that belief/faith, like love, is involuntary – it is not a choice
  - In what ways might you agree or disagree with this statement?
- The disciples on the road to Emmaus get to Jesus’ messianic identity through a Eucharistic experience, rather than Bible study
  - How much of our spiritual understanding is from experience vs. intellect?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer** (have volunteers take turns)

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