

The Demands of Loyalty

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a five-part series

Aug 13 & 14, 2016

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Isaiah 5:1–7 (CEB)

Let me sing for my loved one
a love song for his vineyard.
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
²He dug it,
cleared away its stones,
planted it with excellent vines,
built a tower inside it,
and dug out a wine vat in it.
He expected it to grow good grapes—
but it grew rotten grapes.
³So now, you who live in Jerusalem,
you people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard:
⁴What more was there to do
for my vineyard
that I haven't done for it?
When I expected it
to grow good grapes,
why did it grow rotten grapes?
⁵Now let me tell you

what I'm doing to my vineyard.
I'm removing its hedge,
so it will be destroyed.
I'm breaking down its walls,
so it will be trampled.
⁶I'll turn it into a ruin;
it won't be pruned or hoed,
and thorns and thistles will grow up.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.
⁷The vineyard of
the LORD of heavenly forces
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the plantings
in which God delighted.
God expected justice,
but there was bloodshed;
righteousness,
but there was bloodshed;

Psalms 80:14–19 (CEB)

¹⁴Please come back, God of heavenly forces!
Look down from heaven and perceive it!
Attend to this vine,
¹⁵this root that you planted
with your strong hand,
this son whom you secured
as your very own.
¹⁶It is burned with fire.
It is chopped down.
They die at the rebuke coming from you.
¹⁷Let your hand be

with the one on your right side—
with the one whom you secured
as your own—
¹⁸then we will not turn away from you!
Revive us
so that we can call on your name.
¹⁹Restore us,
LORD God of heavenly forces!
Make your face shine
so that we can be saved!

Luke 12:49–56 (CEB)

⁴⁹“I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze! ⁵⁰I have a baptism I must experience. How I am distressed until it's completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division. ⁵²From now on, a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three. ⁵³Father will square off against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother; and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴Jesus also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, ‘It's going to rain.’ And indeed it does. ⁵⁵And when a south wind blows, you say, ‘A heat wave is coming.’ And it does. ⁵⁶Hypocrites! You know how to interpret conditions on earth and in the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret the present time?”

How well do we really understand what Jesus expects of us?

When God set about to save humanity from itself, he chose a people through whom he would accomplish the rescue. But his people proved unwilling to do their part, to stay loyal to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead they chased after other gods and amusements of all sorts. This is the point of the passage from Isaiah above. God is the vinegrower and his people are the vines. God dug the vineyard, planted the vines, and expected good grapes. But he got rotten. Harsh? Yes. True? Yes.

In the passage from Psalm 80, the people call upon God to return. It is a prayer for restoration and salvation. And God did return to save them and, indeed, the whole world. He became incarnate, born to a young woman in Galilee. When Jesus began his public ministry, he knew it would set hearts ablaze. Fire can warm a cold heart, but fire also refines and consumes, burning away impurities.

Jesus' challenge to all those who turn to him is straightforward: Will you be loyal? Will you be true to me? Will you be faithful? These questions had been put to the Israelites and they had been found wanting. Now the same questions are put to you and me. Will Jesus come first in our hearts and lives?

Hard sayings of Jesus

Spend just a little time in the gospels and you are soon confronted by difficult and surprising sayings of Jesus. In one, a man wanted time to bury his father before following Jesus, but Jesus wouldn't have it, saying to the man, "Let the dead bury the dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:59-60). Really?

In today's passage from Luke, Jesus is instructing the twelve disciples as they prepare to go out on their own to proclaim the Good News. Among other things, Jesus tells them that he has come not "to bring peace but a sword" and "to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother." Frankly, none of this sounds much like the Jesus I heard about in Sunday school, as a child or as an adult. What are we to really make of such teachings?

On my bookshelf, I have a copy of *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by a father and son team. The father, James Carroll, is a life-long Presbyterian pastor. His son and co-author, John, is an associate professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary. In the book, they look at a number of gospel passages that rock us back on our feet, or at least should. For each passage, the scholarly son wrote an interpretation of the passage and the pastoral father then took the son's work forward to a sermon. They seek to knock us out of our "easy chairs of faith."

So what gives? Nearly all these hard sayings are in the context of Jesus teaching his disciples, reshaping their understanding of God and God's kingdom, and of their own place and responsibilities in it. Jesus knew that he had a lot of work to do and pulled no punches in helping them to understand the gospel in all its glory. As John Carroll wrote, "Jesus dares to replace our vision of things with a new one. . . . And so Jesus, in challenging our familiar and comfortable world, can only succeed by making exaggerated claims, by painting extreme images. He must, in a word, *attack* the world that we have allowed to define us, the life we love so much, in order to give us a new life."

Perhaps we could think of Jesus' hard sayings as the fire-hardened steel chisels that it takes to break through all our defenses so that we can emerge from our shell and see the light of God's love in all its fullness. We must not shy away from the hard sayings; rather, we must embrace them and pray for understanding.

The demands of loyalty

The Good News¹ is our proclamation that Jesus is Lord² – no one else, nothing else. And if Jesus is Lord, then, well, Jesus is Lord. Merriam-Webster's defines lord as "a ruler by

¹I've noted this many times but it simply cannot be overemphasized. In your NT, "Good News" and "gospel" both translate an underlying Greek word, *evangelion*. In the Roman empire, the *evangelion* was a proclamation carried out to the provinces with the news that a son had been born to Caesar or that a new Emperor had taken the throne. The NT writers used it in exactly the same way, but with one change. For them, the proclamation, the *evangelion*, is that Jesus is Lord – not Caesar. It is still a proclamation about kingship, but about the true king.

²I can't resist making another point here. Christians will often say something like, "Jesus is Lord of my life." Well, alright, but I think it misses the mark. The point of the *evangelion* is that Jesus is Lord of everyone, whether they know it or not. It is not my agreement that makes Jesus Lord, it is God who has made Jesus Lord. Jesus is Lord even of those who deny him. Read the great Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 on this. To put it another way, the *evangelion*, the Good News, is not a private proclamation; it is a very public proclamation that encompasses all of God's creatures and creation.

hereditary right or preeminence to whom service and obedience are due.” That works for me. There may be many powers in this world that demand service and obedience, but there can be only one LORD, one King of kings, one Lord of lords. For the many millions living within the Roman Empire, the Lord of lords was Caesar. But the Christians proclaimed that the Lord of lords is Jesus, to whom even Caesar would one day bow.

And as the Lord of lords, Jesus demanded undivided loyalty to himself. If that meant a son would be divided from his father, then so be it, Jesus comes first. If it meant that a daughter would be shunned by her mother, then so be it. Jesus comes first. You and I don’t live in a world where our loyalties are likely to be tested in so direct a way. But in the lives of the early Christians such tests came far too often.

In those first centuries, the Christians were seen by many in the pagan world as a strange sect who met at night, spoke of a Lord other than Caesar (never a safe thing to do), and engaged in unusual practices, including something about eating the body and drinking the blood of this Lord. Scary stuff, I imagine, to many parents. Rather than being seen as upholders of family values in the empire, Christians were seen by many as destroyers of families, for the Christians insisted upon loyalty to Jesus and to the people of God even if it meant being shunned by your family.

You and I are not likely to be shunned by our families for being Christian, for proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. But our loyalty is tested in other ways; ways that we might even have trouble seeing. And in these tests, in the choices we make, there can be no higher priority than Jesus. Not our families, not our jobs, not our aspirations. Our creator must come first. As Jesus said, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

Finding my life

We all want to find ourselves, to find our place in life, our purpose. Vast portions of television are devoted to the search. But here is the great truth that Jesus teaches. We cannot find ourselves by looking inward. No amount of navel-gazing or other me-oriented searching is going to bear fruit. You can look yourself over from top to bottom but you’ll never find your true *self*.

To find ourselves, we must look outward, toward God and toward one another. To find your *self*, you must stop looking for it and, instead, look for Jesus, in whom you will discover your *self*. As Jesus said, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39).

Jesus never spoke truer words. We are created by God in God’s image. How could we ever hope to find our *selves* unless we begin with God? And what direction does God send us in realizing the full potential of our *selves*? Outward . . . loving God and loving neighbor. Only by staying loyal to Jesus and losing our life will we ever find the life we seek.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Loyalty can be pretty perplexing. We want others to be loyal to us. We want to be loyal ourselves. How far should loyalty go? When does our loyalty threaten to drag us across the line into unwise choices?
2. You might share some stories about times in your own life that loyalty posed a problem. Have you ever felt betrayed by a person you thought was loyal to you? Should you have felt betrayed? Has “disloyalty” ever been the right path for yourself or for someone you know?
3. People in our lives can be mistaken or worse. Our loyalty to anyone might be misplaced under the right circumstances. But how about Jesus? What does it mean to be loyal to Jesus? Can our loyalty to Jesus ever be misplaced? How do we know what it means to be loyal to Jesus?

Daily Bible Readings

(more hard sayings of Jesus)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Mark 9:42-48 Self-abuse? Does anything matter more than the kingdom?	Tuesday, Matthew 20:1-15 When grace is not fair. Good news indeed.
Wednesday, Luke 16:1-8 Praise for a dishonest manager?	Thursday, Luke 14:16-24 Left out at the final banquet
Friday, Luke 10:30-35 How could our enemies be better neighbors than we are?	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul's letter, Philemon

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

NOTE: These two classes will be on a four-week hiatus beginning the week of August 14. They will resume the week of September 11.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
