

The Character of Jesus

A Four-Part Bible Discussion Series by Robert Jackson

This document contains detailed notes for leading four independent Gospel-based studies which explore different aspects of Jesus' character.

Discussion 1: Jesus' Authority – Two Healings

This study looks at the healing of the Centurion's servant in Matthew 8 and the healing of the paralytic in Matthew 9. The point of the discussion is that Jesus has authority over everything. I got the idea for this study from "For the Love of God" by D. A. Carson. The Gospels go to great lengths to establish the authority of Christ – it is key aspect of who He is.

Introduction

Opening question: When was a time that you were given a big responsibility; and what happened? [This might generate some interesting stories.]

Read Matthew 7:28-29: After the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were amazed by the power of Jesus words. Matthew goes on in the next few chapters to emphasise the power of his actions as well. Today we're going to read about two of the healings which Jesus performed, and we'll ask what kind of authority He claimed to have.

Part One

Have Matthew 8:5-13 read out. Jesus' public ministry is in full swing here, and this event takes place in Capernaum, which was Jesus' centre of missionary effort.

v5: What was a Centurion? [A military commander! He commanded a squadron of 80 soldiers – a standing army big enough to take care of a small city or a group of villages. He would be accountable to a senior officer, the Tribune, who is like an Admiral today. The Tribune would be under the direct orders of Caesar himself, who at this time was Tiberius. Rome was a Military dictatorship, and its military hierarchy was the tightest and most effective that the world had ever seen.]

v6: Why would this guy have sought out Jesus? [Jesus had become popular as a healer.]

Do we notice anything unexpected about this Centurion, even with just these words? [He is sympathetic to his servant. The stereotypical military commander would have no such compassion!]

v7: Jesus' response is to go and give help immediately.

Read v8-9 carefully. What is the Centurion saying here? [Get people's opinions. If someone gets it right, great, but usually people get this one all wrong. The Centurion here has a humble faith in Jesus because Jesus, like him, *is a man under authority*. Imagine that Caesar decides he's going to invade a new territory. The order goes

through the Tribune, who will then order the Centurions to gather each of their squadrons...

Ask: So, when a Centurion gives a command to his soldier, is he commanding under his own authority? Answer: No! He is speaking with the authority of his superiors. In fact, it is as if Caesar himself is giving the order. If a soldier disobeyed, the punishment was death. This is not because the Centurion is so powerful, but because he is a *man under authority*, and if *he* is disobeyed, *Caesar* is disobeyed. The chain of command means that when a Centurion speaks to a soldier, Rome speaks.]

Say: With this in mind, let's reread v8-9. What is the Centurion *really* saying? [The answer should now be obvious. The Centurion is to be respected and obeyed *because he is a man under authority, with people under him*. In the same way, the Centurion understood that *Jesus was a man under authority*. When He spoke, it was as if God Himself was speaking. Jesus spoke with God's authority. Because of this, the Centurion knew that Jesus could do anything at a word, regardless of distance, just like God (and Caesar, so to speak).]

Say: When Jesus speaks, God speaks. With the eyes of faith, the Centurion was able to draw an analogy with his own situation in order to profoundly understand Jesus' authority.

v10: What is Jesus' response? [Astonishment at the Centurion's amazing spiritual insight.]

v11-12: Who are the subjects of the kingdom? [The Jews.] What contrast is Jesus drawing here? [He is saying the many Gentiles (those “from east and west”) will join the Jews in the Kingdom of God.]

v13: Was the Centurion's faith vindicated? [An easy one to end on!]

Part Two

Say: We'll now look another healing of Jesus, to see what more we can learn about His authority. Who would like to **read Matthew 9:1-8**?

v1: Jesus has returned home to Nazareth. Most of his public ministry was confined to the area around the Sea of Galilee.

v2: How could Jesus have seen their faith? [No correct answer. My opinion: They had travelled so far with a paraplegic, which would have been a lot of work, for no reason other than the hope that Jesus could heal him. That takes faith!]

What is Jesus' response to the paralytic? [To forgive his sins.]

But he wanted healing, not forgiveness. Why would Jesus do that? [Get people's opinions. This is a very difficult question, because Jesus seems to be saying that people get sick because they're in sin, which is not always true. The most likely answer is that Jews *always believed* that if you were sick, it was because of sin. (This explains the Rabbi's confusion in John 9:1: He reasoned, “We only get sick because we sin, so how can someone be born sick?” You may even like to read John 9:1 to show that this was the prevailing attitude of the day). So, Jesus knew that if anyone got sick, they *would be convinced* that they needed mercy. That's why so many sick people in the Gospels cry

out for mercy instead of healing (see, for instance Matthew 9:27 - they are convinced that if they were just forgiven, then they would get well immediately!, because they thought their suffering was due to their sin). It may be helpful to just reaffirm the fact that suffering is not due to our sin - it could be a multitude of other reasons, as the book of Job makes abundantly clear.]

Given these facts, how can we understand Jesus' words in v2? Is he saying that people only get sick due to sin? [The answer should be obvious now, but get people's opinions. Most likely, Jesus gives the man forgiveness because that is what he so desperately desired.]

v3: How do the religious leaders react? [Outrage. Blasphemy (such as claiming to be God) is an offence worthy of death.]

Why were they so outraged? [Because only God gives forgiveness for sins. Jesus is claiming God's authority again!]

v4-5: Jesus here asks a rhetorical question. What is the answer? [It's surprising how few people actually think about this answer to this rather straightforward question! The answer is "It is easier to say *Your sins are forgiven.*" Why? Because forgiveness is unseen, anyone can say it, and who knows if they're telling the truth! But to say "Get up and walk" requires immediate miraculous intervention.]

What is the point of Jesus' rhetorical question? [He is pointing out how ridiculous it is for the Rabbi's to be so outraged simply because He forgave someone their sins!]

v6-7: Jesus now makes the more difficult claim (Get up and walk), and is successful. What has Jesus tried to prove here? [By demonstrably doing the more difficult task, He proves His authority to do the "easier" task: To forgive.]

Say: The Jews were correct in their belief that only God can grant eternal forgiveness. No mortal can restore his relationship with the divine by his own efforts – forgiveness comes from God alone. In this passage, Jesus sought to prove His authority to grant the forgiveness of sins. And that is a bold claim indeed!

v8: What was the response of the crowd? [They were amazed, and confounded by the authority that Jesus had. "How could a man have such authority?," they wondered.]

Conclusion

In the two passages we've looked at today, we have sought to uncover different aspects of Jesus' authority. We have seen that in His day, people saw Jesus' life, heard His words and witnessed His miracles, and concluded that He had the authority of God. The Centurion saw that when Jesus spoke, God Himself was speaking. The crowd around the paralytic was struck by Jesus' evidence that He, like God, had the authority to forgive sins. Jesus made many other powerful and unique claims of authority. In what ways are we discovering the power of Jesus in our lives today?

Life Applications

- ✚ We need to respect Jesus' lordship in our lives – He has ultimate authority.
- ✚ We need to put all our faith and trust in Jesus' power to forgive our sin.

Discussion 2: Jesus' Body – The Temple

Based on John 2, this discussion looks at Jesus' body as the temple of God, as well as how Jesus sanctifies our bodies as His holy temple.

Opening question: What's the first thing you think of when you hear the word "temple"? ... Today we will look at what Jesus thought was the true temple.

Read John 2:13-22: Jesus clears the temple. There are scoffers in v18 who are offended by his actions.

v11-12: How many miracles had Jesus done at this time? [Only one.]

And where was that miracle done? [Galilee - North Israel. Jerusalem is far away, in the South.]

So how well-known would Jesus have been in Jerusalem at this time? [He would have been completely unknown.]

v14: What infuriated Jesus? [They were turning God's house into a market of greed and corruption.] During the Passover, it was required to sacrifice an animal (Deuteronomy 16:2-6) and also to pay the annual head tax (associated with the temple tax). The Sadducees decided that only animals bought *from them* could be sacrificed, and only money in *their currency* could be offered. What does this tell us about v14? [They had taken God's holy regulations and turned them into massive money-spinners. Those money changers were skimming profits off everyone's contributions to God!, and those animal sellers were ripping people off who simply wanted to give an offering to God!]

v18: What did these guys want from Jesus? Why? [They wanted some proof of his authority to do what he was doing. He was acting like a big leader, but he was a nobody in their eyes.]

How are these guys *just like* many sceptics today? [Many sceptics of Jesus ask for the same thing: "Anyone can make those claims. Where's the proof?" "If God just appeared to me right now..."]

Jesus had one answer for the sceptics of his day. It's exactly the same answer we should have today. What was it? [v19 – Jesus rose from the dead.]

Why is it such a powerful answer? [Because Jesus had the power to rise from the dead – this backed up his claims that he was the way to salvation. Not only that, the evidence for the Resurrection is very compelling! Has anyone read "More than a Carpenter" or "True and Reasonable"?)]

So, Jesus gave an incredible answer – the most powerful answer possible. Did they get it? [v20 - They totally missed the point!] Why did they completely miss what Jesus said? [They thought that a temple was a building.]

How many people think this way today? Why? [Almost everyone thinks the same way. The religions of men sanctify places – their holy places are buildings.]

What is a Temple, really? So what makes Jesus' teaching different? [Our bodies are designed to be God's true temple. This is one of the most unique things about Jesus' teachings. The religion of God sanctifies *people* – 1 Corinthians 6:19.]

Religions of men have elaborate purification rituals before entering temples. *We* are unclean. We need to be cleansed in order to enter the holy place. What kind of thinking can this lead to? [That our bodies are evil. That we are worthless. That we'll never "measure up." That places are more important than people...]

"[You may] remember the assassination of India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi. The murder was prompted by revenge because she had sent the military into the Sikh temple, where weapons were being stored. She was murdered in order to preserve a temple. Jesus would have told them that they had actually destroyed what was intended to be His temple in order to preserve a place."

– Ravi Zacharias, "Jesus among other gods", page 72.

This is what makes Christianity unique: God wants to sanctify *us* so that we can come directly to Him (Hebrews 2:11, 4:16). Our bodies are the sacred temple of our God.

An interesting question is how is the body viewed in society today? How do people, especially in the *non-religious* world, treat their bodies? [Some overeat, some starve themselves; some are slothful, some work themselves to the bone. People get drunk, take drugs, sleep around, dress lewdly, indulge in lust – people have no respect either of their own bodies or those of other people, and they abuse their bodies in the name of pleasure, freedom and independence. The world places no value on God's holy temple – we are encouraged to profane it daily; it is a tool to be used and abused.]

Our bodies are sacred – one of the greatest gifts that God gives us. In God's eyes, no place is any more special than any other. He doesn't live in temples! Instead, God sanctifies us, his people, so that he can dwell in us, His holy temple. And that is an amazing truth! No other founder of a major religion has ever made this claim.

Conclusion

Each December, the Jews celebrate the re-dedication and restoration of their temple in a feast called the "Feast of Dedication" (Hanukah). Jesus thought it was important enough to travel to Jerusalem for! (John 10:22) But today, their temple is no more. Our "Feast of Dedication" is the communion, where we commemorate the destruction of Jesus' temple, and its restoration 3 days later.

As Christians, we also celebrate the restoration of a temple. But our temple is not a building, it is Jesus Himself! Even today, God's temple stands in living, breathing glory – in you, in me, in all His sons and daughters. As it was in Christ's body, so it is in our body. The church rises as a holy temple to the Lord, shining the light of God to all nations. We worship a living God in His living temple. And that is something to rejoice about!

Life Applications

- ✚ We need to respect the sanctity of our bodies and those of other people.
- ✚ We need to worship God in confidence and awe that we are His holy temple.

Discussion 3: Jesus' Divinity – Our Incarnate Lord

This study traces a fascinating conversation in John 8 where Jesus repeatedly asserts the truth and integrity of his claims. The conversation culminates in what is probably Jesus' most direct assertion of divinity in the entire Gospels (John 8:58). Jesus' divinity is, of course, central to his character and his message.

Opening discussion point: What is the Incarnation? [God taking on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.]

Part 1

Read John 8:31-41: The conversation between Jesus and the believing Jews begins.

v31-32: What is Jesus saying to these “believing” Jews? [Belief is not enough! We need to make Jesus our Lord and hold to his teachings. These Jews had started to believe his words, but they had not given their lives to Jesus – they were not yet free.]

v33: Why are they so offended? [By saying they can be set free, Jesus is implying that they are not free.] Is their claim true? [Absolutely not! The Jews had spent most of their history in subjection: first Egypt, then Assyria, then Babylon, then the Seleucids, and, currently, Rome.] Can people respond the same way today? [Very much so. “What do I need to be saved from?” “Who are you to say that I’m lost?”]

v34-36: Jesus draws a clever illustration here. Who can explain it? [Slaves are not a part of a family – but the ruling family has the authority to grant a slave freedom. We were all slaves to sin, but Jesus has the power to set us free.]

v37-38: Jesus knows their hearts and their intentions. The gospels are full of instances of Jesus knowing people's thoughts and revealing their hearts... What is Jesus implying by referring to “your father”? [He is saying that their plot to have him killed comes from their father – Satan.]

v39a: The Jews realise immediately what Jesus is implying. What is their first evasion? [Their first attempt to justify themselves is to say that they are Abraham's children. Since they are the chosen people, how could they be serving Satan?]

v39b-41a: What is Jesus' response? [Abraham's true children are those who share in his covenant of salvation and walk in the light (Romans 4). These Jews are illegitimate children, since they have rejected God's purpose for their lives.]

v41b: Now the Jews try a second evasion: They make a direct claim to be the children of God.

Part 2: Read v41-48

v43: Why are they unable to hear Jesus' words? [They are blinded by their sin and cannot accept the truth – they are so sure of their own goodness and chosen status that they refuse to even listen to any accusation.]

v44 is one of the most compelling and direct descriptions of Satan in the Bible.

Over the course of this conversation, Jesus has put forward many incontrovertible reasons to trust his words:

1. He is guilty of no sin – his life has been one of perfect righteousness (v46).
2. He has only told the truth – no one can fault a word he says (v45).
3. He is a prophet and the son of God (v36, 38).

Now read **v48**: What is the Jews' response to Jesus' incredibly powerful testimony? [He is a Samaritan and demon-possessed. A petty, racist and ridiculous accusation.]

Part 3: Read v48-59

With such an outlandish outburst, Jesus has every right to shake the dust from his feet. Instead, he continues to reason with them. Why? [He is giving them every possible chance to see the truth.]

v49: What is Jesus' first response? [Since his life honours God, he could not be demon-possessed.] By pointing out that he has been dishonoured, Jesus shows that he has taken offence at their words.

v50-51: What else does Jesus say in response? [He is not drawing attention to himself, but pointing people to God – further evidence that he is not demon-possessed. And lastly, his words are the path to salvation, so he must be from God.]

v52-53: What are the Jews claiming here? [They have misunderstood Jesus' words. They think that Jesus has promised physical immortality. In truth, this is further evidence of their lack of spiritual discernment.]

v54-56: Jesus gives an evasive answer, simply making further claims to be the Messiah. What does Jesus mean in v56? [This relates to Luke 10:24, and is more directly explained in Hebrews 11:10-16. Abraham looked forward to the coming Messiah!]

v57: Once again, they miss the point totally. We can now see how right Jesus was in v43 – the more he explains the truth, the more blind they become.

v58: This is probably the most direct claim that Jesus ever made to be God. What passage from the Old Testament does it refer back to? [Exodus 3:14 – Jesus is Yahweh, the I AM, in the flesh.]

v59: How does the conversation end? Why did the Jews go straight for the kill? [Blasphemy was punishable by death (Leviticus 24:16). This is the exact fate Stephen was to suffer – a sudden stoning in a fit of anger... But Jesus' time had not yet come.]

Conclusion

Jesus was God in the flesh, and his life was filled with compelling claims and irrefutable evidence of this single fact. We worship an Incarnate Lord.

Life Applications

- ✚ We need to worship Jesus as the great I AM – He is God in the flesh, now and forever.
- ✚ We need to recognise that to follow sin's deceitfulness is to follow Satan.

Discussion 4: Jesus' Wisdom – Two Parables

This study will look at two familiar parables from the Gospel of Luke in order to show the incredible wisdom with which Jesus conveyed his message. Throughout the Gospels, we are constantly shown the amazing wisdom of Christ in the way he interacts with people, answers their questions and presents his message.

Opening discussion point: What is wisdom? [Wisdom is putting our knowledge into action – it's when we live our lives in accordance with sound principles.] In today's discussion, we will witness the incredible wisdom of Jesus in the way he taught people through parables.

Part 1

Read **Luke 10:25-37**: The Parable of the caring Samaritan (only God is good!)

What is a parable? [A fictional story with certain direct parallels to the real world which makes a moral or theological point.]

v25: What are we told about this lawyer? [He is trying to test Jesus – his motives are not pure.]

v27: He answers exactly how Jesus would have answered. He knows all the answers – he's an "expert" in these matters, hence Jesus' rather dismissive answer in v28.

v29: What kind of answer could he be looking for? [Who knows? Probably a very technical, exacting list of requirements.] In response, however, Jesus just tells a story.

v30-35: Let's think about the man travelling to Jericho. How did the robbers view him? [As someone to use and exploit.] How did religious men view him? [He was a problem to avoid.] How about the innkeeper? [A customer to serve for a fee.] What about the lawyer Jesus is talking to – how would he view the man? [A subject to discuss.]

How did the Samaritan view the man? [A fellow human being worth being cared for. This is a simple example of the Golden Rule being followed (do unto others...)]

v37: The lawyer answers the question correctly, and then says no more. He has been silenced. What is it about this story that would have made the lawyer uncomfortable? [This story illustrates the heart of New Testament morality: It's not about lists of rights and wrongs; it's not about legalistic requirements – it's simply about having a heart for people; living a life of love. The lawyer recognises that Jesus' teaching is about mercy and love, not rules and regulations. He is silenced; the error of ways has been revealed.]

Part 2

Read **Luke 20:9-19**: The Parable of the Vineyard.

Refer to Luke 20:1: Jesus is teaching in the temple, speaking to chief priests, scribes and elders.

v9: Who is the man planting the vines? [God.] What is the vineyard? [The Kingdom of God – the great Gospel theme!] Who are the farmers? [The people of Israel.]

Do the farmers own the land? [No – it is only being rented to them.] What does this imply for our lives today? Can we claim ownership over our lives? [We are stewards (caretakers) of all that God has given us. All of our money and possessions belong to God, but he has entrusted them to us to see if we will be faithful with what we have been given.]

v10-12: Why are the farmers acting this way? [The master has been gone a long time. They have started thinking that *they own the place* and that these servants have no right to take the fruit of their harvest.]

Why does the master keep sending servants? [He is eager to reap the fruits of his own vineyard, and is giving the farmers every opportunity to act justly.]

Who do the servants represent? [The prophets] What is the fruit that Jesus is talking about? [This could open a kettle of fish, but it is very clear that the fruit of the kingdom in this parable is focused on *is righteousness*; the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). All the prophets came to call people to repentance and righteousness – a transformed life that shines God’s love is the fruit of God’s grace. Because they lacked the fruit of righteousness, the nation of Israel persecuted the prophets.]

v13: The master here risks his own son, instead of simply punishing the farmers, which he has every right to do. Obviously, this would never happen in real life – and that’s the point – God is not like us; his compassion reaches to the highest heavens.

v14: Is there anything flawed about their reasoning here? [What they’re saying makes absolutely no sense! If they kill the son, the master will severely punish them – there’s no way they will receive the master’s inheritance, it’s more likely they’ll receive their own death sentence. Their thinking here is truly pathological.]

In what way does v14 relate to the thinking of the Pharisees in the arrest and crucifixion of Christ? [By killing God’s prophet and high priest, they thought they were ensuring that they (the Pharisees) would remain in control of the religious order, and continue enjoying their reign over God’s chosen people.]

v16: This story has had beatings, insubordination, irrationality and murder. Yet, at what point do the priests gasp? [When Jesus says that the master will give the vineyard to others.] Who are these “others”? [The Gentiles. Jesus is talking about the transformation of Kingdom from a nation into a world-wide family. This is the one thing that the Pharisees cannot accept – that they will no longer be the sole “chosen people.”]

v17: What relevance does this Psalm have here? [The Psalm says that the Messiah will be rejected by his people. Since the nation of Israel will forsake their own Saviour, Jesus is saying that he will turn to the people who trust in Him.]

v18: Many of us are probably familiar with this powerful verse. What is its meaning? [If we fall in humility on Christ, we will be broken and contrite, but not crushed – instead, God will restore us to a relationship with Him.]

v19: This is amazing! All that Jesus has done is tell a story – no challenges, no commands, no prophecies, no condemnations – just a story, that’s all. And yet, they want to arrest him and probably put him to death! This shows the incredible power of parables to convict our heart, even though they are just stories. Jesus had done nothing but expose their hypocrisy, and his subtle yet powerful methods show his incredible wisdom.

Conclusion

In both these Scriptures, Jesus tells a story which cuts to the heart of his audience. Even though he often spoke in parables, he always conveyed his message powerfully and clearly. Jesus presented his message with incredible wisdom, and there is much to learn from the way he interacted with people.

Life Applications

- ✚ We always should remember the Golden Rule in our daily interactions.
- ✚ We should seek out God's wisdom and imitate Christ in the wise ways that he spoke to people and answered their questions.