

Jesus and Culture: A Four-Part Bible Study

Leader's Overview

This study will:

- Establish the identity of Jesus, His role as the Word made flesh, and show how the Law always condemns and the Gospel of Jesus always saves (Lesson 1).
- Identify how our culture has made the grave error of exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and encourage your students not to make the same bad exchange (Lesson 2).
- Show your students the benefits of drinking the living water of Christ instead of drinking the toilet water of godless culture (Lesson 3).
- Give your students the image of Jesus in His state of exaltation to match the familiar image of Him in His state of humiliation (Lesson 4).

Introduction

When was the last time you heard about Jesus outside of church? People speak, write, sing, email, text and swear in the name of Jesus all the time, often without even thinking about it.

Jesus has a rather prominent place in culture in America. Wherever you look, you can see places where His name, His image, and some form of His teaching have a footprint. Whether Jesus is being used or misused, there is little doubt that He is having an impact on culture. Can a man who claims to be the only true God make headway in an America that is increasingly plural, secular, and humanistic?

Unfortunately, many Christians have distorted views of who Jesus is. For many, Jesus has become not just a Savior, but a friend, a therapist, an entertainer, a good moral teacher, a motivator, and yes, a homeboy.

This can be a touchy subject. Anytime you are talking about Jesus, you are talking about something that is very personal to people. There are strong feelings, strong commitments, and deep inner faith involved in the hearts and minds of Christians.

What has the cultural embrace of a distorted Jesus done to our view of our Savior? Does the insertion of a distorted Jesus into secular culture make the culture more Christian, or Christianity more secular? Should Jesus simply be my Savior, or must He also be all those things that a therapeutic culture demands?

Lesson 1: Jesus and the Cross

Read Matthew 16:13-18.

1. Jesus asked His disciples what other people were saying about Him (13-14). What do people outside of the church say about Jesus today?
2. Jesus focuses His inquiry by directing it towards His disciples (15). Peter then makes clear confession of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah (16). How important is it that all Christians confess as Peter did?
3. How was Peter able to make such a bold confession (17)?
4. Jesus' response to Peter points forward to the work of the apostles in the New Testament and indeed to God's people today. Jesus tells Peter "on this rock I will build my church." Notice how each of these five words has great significance:

I	-Jesus founds the church, is in charge of the church, and loves the church.
will	-The work of the church begins after Jesus ascends into heaven (Acts 2).
build	-Though the church is founded by the apostles and the prophets, Jesus is the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).
my	-The church is Jesus' radiant bride, holy and blameless before Him.
church	-The church is Jesus' called-out community of people who believe in Him.

The Bottom Line

In Jesus' time, just as in our time, there are differing opinions about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Rather than give in to the opinions of the day, Peter and the disciples proclaim Jesus to be the Son of God and their Savior. All Christians confess with the disciples that only Jesus can save us from our sins.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8a.

The church in Corinth was a messed up church overrun with doctrinal errors. So mistaken were these people that even the death and resurrection of Jesus had been called into question.

Paul and others had proclaimed the gospel to the church in Corinth, but they still didn't understand. What is the gospel (3-5)?

These few verses of Scripture summarize the most important truths for those early Christians and for us today.

Jesus died in our place for our sins.

Jesus was buried.

Jesus rose from the dead.

After rising from the dead Jesus appeared to many witnesses.

In order to properly understand this and all other teachings of holy scripture, Law and Gospel must be properly distinguished.

Law	Gospel
I must love and obey God.	I love and obey because God first loved me.
I am a bad, vile, evil, wicked person.	Jesus gives grace to me because I believe in him.
I have sinned and deserve punishment for those sins.	Jesus lived a perfect life and died in my place for my sins as my substitute.
I deserve an eternity in hell because of what I have done.	I receive eternal life in heaven because of Jesus.
Because I have sinned, I have no way of obtaining my own righteousness.	I believe, and Jesus gives me his own righteousness.

The Bottom Line

The Old Testament and many eyewitnesses testify to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel of Christ saves us from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for the cross. Thank you for Jesus. Help us faithfully to confess Jesus as the Son of God. Help us to love the church and to proclaim Jesus Christ crucified. In Jesus' good name. Amen.

Lesson 2: The Divine Exchange

Read Romans 1:16-17.

1. What is God's power to save (16)?
2. Why is it God's power to save (17)?
3. The last few words of verse 17 have been called the "title" of Romans. How do people obtain righteousness?

Read Romans 1:18-20.

1. Against what things is the wrath of God revealed (18)?
2. What two invisible qualities of God are revealed in nature (20)?

The Bottom Line

The only way to obtain righteousness before God is through faith in Jesus Christ. God reveals himself to people not only through his Word, but also through creation. Since all people bear witness to creation, they are responsible to God for their sins.

Read Romans 1:21-23.

1. Have you ever had something good happen in your life and you failed to thank and give credit to God?
2. The passage says that people exchanged God for images of themselves (23). Think of it this way: Look at a cross, then put a mirror in front of your face. Can you see the cross with the mirror in the way?

The Bottom Line

People are at their worst when they turn from God and turn to themselves. It's as if God has blessed us with His goodness and mercy, and we trade it for a self-portrait. What a horrible trade! When we exchange God's glory for a mirror, we become confused about what is good and our lives become governed by what we want the most, without any regard for God's will.

Read Romans 1:24-25.

1. Have you ever really wanted something, and when you finally got it, it wasn't all you hoped for?
2. Verse 25 describes the worst possible exchange a person can make: Trading God's truth for something you know is a lie.

The Bottom Line

If we keep rejecting God, He will eventually give us what we want and turn us over to our own wickedness. When that happens, the things we love are thrown into disarray and the gifts God has given us become degraded and dishonored. When we worship the picture of ourselves in the mirror, we reject our status as image-bearers of God and instead we act like animals.

Read Philippians 2:5-11.

1. We've seen the terrible exchange we are tempted to make. What exchange did Jesus make (6-8)?
2. Since Jesus made this divine exchange, who will bow before Him and acknowledge Him as God (10-11)?

The Bottom Line

Will we be content to gaze into the mirror, or will we lay the mirror at the foot of the cross? Jesus sacrificed Himself, gave us His love, and emptied Himself for us. How different Jesus' love looks than the love of the mirror!

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, we are often tempted to reject your goodness and embrace our own opinions and ideas. Give us wisdom to see your mercy and empower us with your grace to do your will for your glory and for our good. In Jesus' good name. Amen.

Lesson 3: Living Water or Toilet Water?

John 17 is Jesus' longest prayer. In it, He prays for His disciples and for all believers. Think about that for a minute: Just hours before His death, Jesus prays for us.

Read John 17:6-8.

Jesus thanks the Father for giving us to Him as a blessing. How often do you thank God for the many blessings He gives to you?

Read John 17:9-10.

When Jesus refers to "the world," He is talking about everything that stands in opposition to God. What are some examples of things in your world that are opposed to God?

Read 1 John 2:15-17.

What happens to people who love the world (15)?

The Bottom Line

Our culture has been thoroughly corrupted by the world. Everywhere we look, God is mocked and profaned. In fact, our world is so lost and so beyond the pale that Jesus doesn't even pray that it be saved. Instead, He prays for the people in the world.

Read John 17:11-14.

1. Jesus prays that His disciples would be protected (11). In fact, Jesus says that all of his disciples have been protected except Judas (12). How assuring is it to know that God is protecting us?
2. There is tremendous tension in the life of a Christian. Jesus promises that we'll be hated (14), but that we will also have joy (13). How is it possible to have joy while being hated?

The Bottom Line

They're going to hate you, you're going to have trouble, but that's okay, because Jesus prays that you'll be protected and you'll have joy in the midst of that hatred.

Read John 17:15-19.

Verse 15 is the heart of what God calls each Christian to do and to be. Jesus prays that we would be (1) in the world, but (2) protected from the evil one.

Jesus wants us to care about the people in the world enough to connect, understand, and relate to the world. What are some things we can observe to gain a better understanding of it?

Music

Music is a language that people identify with because it articulates what they are thinking and feeling. Can you think of songs that talk about anger, sadness, loss, violence, love, etc.? How can understanding popular music help us understand people in the world?

Film

It has been said that the movie theater is the greatest pulpit in America. People go there to get their story, and their worldview is shaped by that story. What are ways that some movies have shaped opinions and morals in our culture?

Values

What do people care about? What do people spend their money on? What do people spend their time doing? Is it watching sports, driving big cars, loving their kids, sending 5000 text messages a month? Why do they do these things?

Read Jeremiah 2:13.

A cistern was a hole dug in the ground to store water. Jeremiah says that God's people rejected clean water from God and instead were content to drink their own dirty water.

The Bottom Line

We need to understand what's going on in the world and the lives of people. People are thirsty and we have streams of living water, but if we don't give it to them they'll drink out of the toilet just because they're parched. Jesus will protect us with the Word of God. There are lost and confused people out there, and they need the truth.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, you prayed that we would be in the world and protected from the evil one. Please send us into the world that we may speak your name into the lives of people, and please protect us with your word and truth. In Jesus' good name. Amen.

Lesson 4: Jesus in Eternity

Usually when we think of Jesus, we have an image of Him in His state of humiliation; that is, His time on this earth as a carpenter and teacher. In fact, most of our depictions of Jesus are similar: He wears nice robes, has long hair and a neatly trimmed beard, holds lambs and children, and always smiles.

There is more to Jesus than this, though. Throughout His ministry there are times when this traditional portrayal of Jesus is challenged. All of this leads to the picture of Jesus on the Last Day, which is very different than any that we are used to.

Read Mark 11:15-18.

Why did Jesus react with anger against the merchants and money changers in the temple?

Read Matthew 16:21-23.

Here Jesus rebuked Peter, a disciple and close friend. Why did Jesus talk to Peter this way?

Read Matthew 26:36-40.

1. The Bible says Jesus was sorrowful to the point of death. Why did He feel so burdened?
2. Jesus' disciples fell asleep while their Lord agonized. How would you feel if your most trusted friends weren't there when you needed them the most?

Read Matthew 27:32-44.

Jesus endured the most painful death imaginable. He was beaten and flogged. He was mocked. He was spat upon. He was humiliated. He was treated like a criminal. How does it feel to know that He endured all of this and more for you?

The Bottom Line

Life for Jesus was not always the calm, pastoral scene that is so familiar to us. Jesus was angry in the face of sin and injustice, quick to refute false doctrine, and anguished as He bore the sin of the world.

Read Revelation 19:11-16.

This depiction of Jesus may be unfamiliar to you. This is Jesus in his state of exaltation. Jesus rules and reigns in heaven, and on the Last Day we will see Him as He is depicted in this passage.

Try to visualize the picture that is painted by St. John. Jesus rides a white horse out of heaven to make war with Satan, the great dragon. He leads the greatest army ever assembled. His eyes are blazing, His robe is dipped in blood, He rightly wields a great sword, and He has a tattoo down his leg that reads "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." He thoroughly destroys and defeats the armies of darkness. When the battle is completed, He sits upon the throne and reigns in eternity.

The Bottom Line

When Jesus was on this earth, He swung a hammer, fed the hungry, healed the sick, raised the dead, taught the multitudes, fought injustice, and endured the cross. In eternity, Jesus will be high and exalted. We do well to view Jesus in both His state of humiliation and His state of exaltation.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for your humble life with us. Thank you for humbling yourself to death on the cross for our sake. Help us to look to eternity, when you will return and claim your own. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.