

Four Lenten Studies Series C

"The Last Seven Sayings of Jesus"

by
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Leading the four Lenten Studies

THANK YOU

Thank you for being a small group leader for this Lenten series.

THE GROUP LEADER

The leader should be a facilitator. This means that he/she should make it possible for things to be organised and happen. The leader should not necessarily do everything but should delegate responsibility. It is particularly a good idea for the leader not to be personally responsible for the domestic arrangements but to give this responsibility to an assistant.

PROMOTE DISCUSSION

The leader's main job in the group discussion time is to get people talking. It is not to provide all the answers. A leader's skill is in making people feel at ease, appreciated and in gently drawing people into discussion. Leaders need to treat all questions seriously and with respect so that people will be encouraged to share because no question or opinion is considered too stupid or antagonistic to be appreciated.

The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out. (Proverbs 20:5)

PREPARING THE VENUE

A venue should be comfortable and non-threatening. Chairs should usually be placed in a circle for discussion. Avoid having chairs behind each other if possible as it encourages those sitting in them to be less involved.

Some people also take the phone off the hook or switch them off to avoid distractions.

THE FIRST MEETING

People will come to the first meeting with some apprehension, particularly if they are unfamiliar with Christianity or church. They will also bring with them all sorts of fears and preconceptions of what Christianity and church are about. The first

meeting is the ideal time to shatter people's negative preconceptions and put them at their ease. For this reason, ensure the venue is welcoming and looks good. Consider using soft indirect lighting and having background music as people arrive. Surprise people with excellence and how "normal" things are.

BREAKING THE ICE

Warm up activities at the start of a home group meeting can be anything that will help people relax, smile and get to know each other. It can be as basic as a chat over a cup of coffee.

WHAT SHOULD PEOPLE BRING?

Ask people to bring their Bibles (provide some for those who may not have one).

TIMELINESS

There is no spiritual merit in meetings being long drawn out marathons. People will tire of them if they are. Be disciplined with time and let people go home at a civilised hour.

Before people go home, the meeting should have a definite ending e.g. a concluding prayer.

PRAYER

All prayers prayed by leaders before or after a meeting should be simple, sincere, relevant to what has been discussed and short. Such prayers will not intimidate people and will encourage them to believe that they too might soon be able to pray in such a way.

DOING THE STUDIES

Encourage members of the group to take turns in reading the readings out loud to the group (checking with them first privately that they are willing and able to do so).

Be familiar with the teaching sections so that you don't necessarily have to read them verbatim but can paraphrase them easily in your own words.

God bless your ministry
Nick Hawkes

Session 1

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

(Luke 23:34a)

Welcome people

Introduce people. Break the ice.

Begin with a brief opening prayer.

Introduce by saying:

What seven last things would you say if you were dying in great pain? What would you concern yourself with when everything is stripped away and you are faced with the question of your death and the reason for your life?

In the next four sessions, we will examine the seven last things Jesus said before he died. (As there are four sessions and seven sayings, most sessions will look at two of Jesus' sayings.)

Read

Luke 23:32-38

Explain:

Jesus was betrayed, unjustly sentenced, mocked, beaten and whipped. The whipping suffered by Jesus was designed to punish, humiliate and weaken him. It would have been inflicted by a whip of four or five strands with pieces of lead or bone along their length. (Some see this prophesied in Psalm 129:3: "*Ploughmen have ploughed my back and made their furrows long.*") Many consider Isaiah 50:6 and 52:14 to be prophecies about Jesus. If so, it would suggest that Jesus was so disfigured by this abuse that it caused people to turn their heads away in revulsion. Finally, Jesus is crucified, a death that the Roman philosopher Cicero (born in 106 BC) considered to be "*the most horrible death*".

Yet Jesus embraces all of this for he will not be deviated from the path of pain that will rescue humankind back to God. Such is God's love for us. Jesus endures the evils done against him, and then prays to God the Father to forgive them. Could you do that?

Jesus forgave and, by doing so, showed that evil had no power over him.

Reflect:

Reflect silently for a few moments on this question: "Has bitterness at other people's actions got you in its power?"

Read:

Read 2 Peter 2:19

Discuss:

What is the relevance of this passage to forgiveness?

Summarise by saying;

The Apostle Peter reminds us, "*a person is a slave to whatever has mastered them*" (2 Peter 2:19), which is why the Apostle Paul is determined that he "*will not be mastered by anything*" (1 Corinthians 6:12). Jesus did not give the evil done to him the power to make him bitter. Evil was powerless because Jesus forgave.

Lack of forgiveness imprisons people in the unpleasantness and heart-ache of anger. Refusing to forgive is our human way of trying to hold on to power, to seek to be the judge over another. Forgiveness lets this judgment and bitterness go. It has to go for God will not have his people imprisoned by anything, certainly not bitterness and hatred.

The wisdom of the Old Testament Proverbs tells us not to conceal bitterness (Proverbs 10:18). It will eat away at you and will eventually break out, so deal with it.

Read:

Matthew 5:21-26

Ask and discuss:

Why is forgiveness so important?

Summarise by saying:

Forgiveness is a key characteristic of Christianity for it has eternal consequences. Jesus taught quite clearly that if we cannot forgive, we cannot receive forgiveness from God. (If we usurp God's place by judging others, we cannot receive from God.) Lack of forgiveness and the bitterness that accompanies it is destructive of the relationships God wants us to have with each other. It does not honour the other person who, like you, was created by God. Jesus calls this person your brother, someone who is loved by God, regardless of what they have done (Mt 5:21-26). Therefore, work for peace and forgive as the Lord has forgiven you (Colossians 3:12-15).

Forgiveness means giving up the right to react to an injustice done to you. Lack of forgiveness contributes to the problem rather than solving it. Forgiveness allows new beginnings.

There was a lovely story to come out of Rwanda, a country torn apart by civil war. It concerned a Hutu woman called Elizabeth. Sadly her son was killed in the civil war by another soldier. Despite this, she refused to become bitter like so many others had during the ethnic war in Rwanda. Instead, she prayed for the killer to repent. One day the killer came to Elizabeth, handed her his gun and told her to take him to the authorities to be punished, (which would very likely result in his execution). Instead, the

punishment she inflicted was to take the young soldier into her home in place of her son and care for him. She said,

"The only way to God is through the house of your enemy. If you cannot forgive, you fall into hell. The way to the cross always passes through your neighbour's house." (On Being Alive, July, 1998 p.13)

Discuss:

What instances do you know of forgiveness helping a relationship that was badly broken?

Conclude by saying:

Forgiveness begins with an act of will. Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. If you wait until you feel forgiving, you will never forgive. However, if you forgive, your feelings of forgiveness will eventually come into line with your will.

The question to ask first is therefore "Do you want to forgive?" Saying "yes" is the first step. Then you too will be able to pray. *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Close in prayer

Session 2

"Today you shall be with me in paradise"

(Luke 23:43)

Welcome people

Ask how people are. Break the ice.

Begin with a brief opening prayer.

Introduce by saying:

Jesus' second saying was concerned with bringing hope to those lost in sin. Could you speak words of hope and salvation to someone whilst you yourself were in great pain and just a few hours from your death? Jesus did.

This should teach us something about Jesus' priority. It most certainly teaches us a lot about the urgency of sharing the hope of the gospel with people who don't know Jesus. It is never too late to speak the words that will lead someone to faith in Christ and give them an eternal future with God.

Read:

Luke 23:39-43

Discuss:

- 1) What points particularly impact you from this story?
- 2) What does this passage teach about who can become a Christian and how?

Teach:

If it was Jesus' concern to bring others to faith in his last few hours, it must certainly also be ours. Evangelism is not just the job of a few specialist people like Billy Graham, it is the purpose of all of us who are the church. Whilst there will be people with a specialist ministry in bringing people to faith in Christ, all of us are to be looking for opportunities to share our faith. The Bible says, *always be prepared to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect* (1 Peter 3:15).

Discuss:

Who told you the gospel in a way that got through to you and how did they do it?

Read:

Acts 1:8

Discuss:

- 1) Whose witnesses are we ...and what does this mean?
- 2) Where are we to expect the influence of our witnessing to be felt?

Teach:

This passage teaches us:

- 1) it is never too late to become a Christian
- 2) no one is ever too evil to become a Christian.

Two thieves were crucified, one either side of Jesus. Both were sinful people. Both were imperfect like you and me. However, the reaction of these two men dying in great pain beside Jesus, differed greatly. One looked at Jesus in his pain and jeered, mocked and swore at him, thinking Jesus was useless at bringing hope. The other looked at Jesus and recognised that he spoke the truth and that what Jesus was doing was something holy.

There was nothing that the thief could give Jesus. He could not give money for mission, he could not lead a home fellowship, he could not conduct outreach rallies. He could not even be baptised. (If he came into the church, none of us would want to sit next to him.) He could only give recognition for who Jesus was. He could only place his faith in Jesus. And that is all we can do in order to accept God's salvation of us.

Two sinful men were confronted with the same Jesus. One went to be with Jesus in heaven. The other did not. Which are you most like? Allowing Jesus to rescue you into heaven requires you to turn away from doing wrong things, put your faith in Jesus and to do the work of Jesus in the world. There is no option for sitting on the fence. You must choose. And if you choose Jesus, you are entrusted with truth and purpose that is to be shared with others by word and deed.

"Dear Woman, here is your son"

(John 19:26b, 27a)

Read:

John 19:25-27

Discuss:

What does this act by Jesus teach you about him?

Teach:

If you have known grief, it will be of huge comfort to you to know of Jesus' response to events that left a mother shattered, vulnerable and in deep grief. Hear we read that even in the pain of death, Jesus made provision for the care of his mother. His' response reminds us that practical compassion and care should always characterise the life of a Christian. We cannot love God and have God's empowering spirit within us and be indifferent to the grief of others. It is simply not an option for us. The Spirit of God within us compels us to do something to help. As James says, *"I'll show you my faith"*

by what I do" (James 2:18).

In Jewish society, it was the role of the eldest son to look after the mother if their father could not. We hear nothing of Joseph after Jesus was a child, so we can only assume Joseph died when Jesus was quite young.

I'm not sure why the responsibility for looking after Mary did not go to Jesus' brother, for instance James. There must have been a reason which we are not told of why this was not possible.

As Mary looked up and saw her first born son impaled naked for public ridicule on a cross, dying in agony, she would have felt crushing, inconsolable grief and anguish. The hopes and dreams for her remarkable son would have been cruelly smashed. The dreadful part of Simeon's prophecy to Mary after the birth of Jesus that a sword would pierce her soul (Luke 2:35) had proved true. If the suffering of her son was not enough, there was also now no one left who would look after her. There was no husband to look after her, no son available to look after her and she was some distance from her homeland in Galilee. There was no government aid program, so her own life was in peril.

Each of you know of people who are in real need.

Read:

Galatians 6:2

Discuss:

What does this mean?

Teach in conclusion:

One of Jesus' final acts was to care for a helpless, desperate woman - his mother. Jesus took time off from saving all of humanity to do a practical act of caring. He organised for his disciple John to take care of Mary as if she were his own mother. He told John to consider Mary as his own mother. He told Mary to consider John as being her own son. To the very end, Jesus is still focussed outwards to others.

If we are to be disciples of Christ, your life and mine needs to be known for its compassion and practical care. By caring in this way, we not only teach the gospel but show it in action. That is why we have a slogan at Athelstone Uniting Church which says, "This place is a rescue station for the broken and lonely." Caring is not an option.

Close in prayer

Session 3

"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

(Mark 15:34)

Welcome people

Ask how people are. Break the ice.

Begin with a brief opening prayer.

Read:

Mark 15:33-36

Teach:

I hope you have all said "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" to God at some stage in your life, for, if you have, you have been honest with God.

Jesus was very honest in the midst of the greatest trial of his life. He did not deny the reality of what was happening to him. He did not pretend his agonising crucifixion was all happy and victorious. In his grief, Jesus quotes some words written 1,000 years earlier by the psalmist (Psalm 22:1) to express the anguish of his soul, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*"

It was the agony of a person God the Father had turned away from because Jesus, at that time, had taken to himself all the evil and sin of humankind (so we could be free of it and therefore be eligible to live with God). Jesus became defiled with sin because he took our sin away from us and took the consequences of them on himself. Jesus became a total outcast to God. This act showed the incredible humility of Jesus.

Read:

Philippians 2:5-11 (Explain that this is a very early Christian hymn about Jesus which Paul quotes.)

Discuss:

What do we learn about Jesus from this passage?

Teach:

In taking away our sins, Jesus has opened the way for us to God. However, we must still choose to accept this act that Jesus has done for us. We do that by turning away from the things we have done wrong from the past, placing our faith in Jesus and doing the things Jesus wants us to do. There is a sense in which we (that is to say, our ego, our personal pride, our independence from God) needs to die if we are to see God. We too need to share in the death of Christ and die to self so that we can live for Christ. The Apostle Paul said, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but*

Christ lives in me" (Galaaations 2:20).

Jesus' honesty in crying out in pain also encourages us to always be honest to God about our feelings. Remember that approximately one third of the Psalms are prayers of sorrow and lament. It's okay to be honest with God. God will not be shocked. Honesty with God when we are lonely or in pain is a value we need to take to the very doors of death. Jesus knew why God had forsaken him, but he still expressed the anguish of his soul when it happened.

"I thirst"
(John 19:28b)

Read:

John 19:28-29

Discuss:

Why do you think details about the crucifixion including this one are recorded?

Teach:

There is a deep need within all of us that mere physical things do not satisfy. Jesus recognised this when he went to Jerusalem to attend the Jewish "Feast of Tabernacles" (John 7:37b-38). This feast celebrated God's provision for his people. It celebrated the fact that God looked after them when they wandered in the desert for forty years (where they could only live in makeshift tabernacles); it celebrated the harvest. People held up fruit and branches in the procession down to the pool of Siloam where water was drawn with a golden pitcher and carried back to the temple where it was poured into a hole in the surface of the altar. This was to signify the time when God would continue to provide for his people by pouring out his spirit on all people. This was visually symbolised by a river flowing out from the temple of God (Ezekiel 47) - hence the act of pouring water into the temple altar. In doing this, the people were expressing their thirst for more of God. Then, in the midst of the ceremony, Jesus stands up and shouts out, "Is anyone thirsty? If so, let them come to me and drink from me." It was an audacious act.

Now, however, in this Easter passage, the roles have been reversed. Jesus has invited us to drink from him, now he asks us for a drink. Jesus is bleeding and dehydrating. He is thirsty. It is one more reminder of Jesus' humanity and the brutal reality of the death he faced on our behalf. This is what Christians remember with such gratitude when they celebrate Holy Communion together.

Ask people to ponder this question in silence for a while:

What are the deepest longings in your soul? What do you thirst for?

Teach:

This passage reminds us that Jesus identified with us in our pain. Ours is no distant God. God is not above us in our misery but alongside us in our darkness, sharing our pain. God is not some remote, unknowable God, a prisoner in his heaven alone in his holiness, but he is God who will not be without us.

When we cried out at the pain of existence and wondered whether there was any purpose or plan in it all, God revealed himself as a Father, a Father who has a plan, who stands in and beyond time and who therefore guarantees the final outcome.

When we cried out that God did not understand the awful reality of pain on earth, God revealed himself to us as a Son, a Son who shared our grief, anger, temptation, tiredness, humiliation and agony. God showed he understood our pain. When we cried out against having to wait until we got to heaven before we could address the issue of pain and suffering around us, God revealed himself to us as Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God who equips us and compels us to address suffering and injustice wherever we come across it now. As Christians, we do not have the option of ignoring the pain, suffering and injustice of the world.

Read:

Isaiah 53:3-5 (an ancient prophecy about Jesus)

Discuss:

What does this teach us about Jesus?

Conclude by saying:

The passage from Isaiah 53 teaches us that God shared our suffering as Jesus and suffered for us (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15). God is therefore no uninvolved God. He came to live with us. Jesus was born a suspected illegitimate child, he had no home of his own, he wept, got tired, was betrayed by friends and executed in the most humiliating and painful way devised by humankind. That's how much God identified with us. God is therefore, as Alfred North Whitehead says, "*the great companion, the fellow sufferer, who understands.*" This truth is also illustrated by a story told by Elie Weisel who, when imprisoned in a concentration camp, watched a nine year old boy being hung by the Nazis. Another prisoner said "Where is your God now?" to which Weisel replied, "He is there, hanging from that rope."

God is with us and shares our suffering.

Conclude with prayer

Session 4

"It is finished"

(John 19:30a)

Introduce by saying:

How do you think the newspapers would have reported Jesus' death if it happened today? They would probably say, "What a tragedy... a life cut short... only three years of ministry... such a waste." Yet God doesn't see what we see. We see only three years of ministry. God sees the fulfillment of his plan to rescue humankind back to himself.

When we become Christians, we become people of destiny whose lives make a difference to the events of eternity. What is important is not how long you live but whether or not you have fulfilled the purpose your heavenly Father has for you.

What will they say at your funeral? Some years ago, Michael Hutchence, lead singer of the band INXS, hung himself. He had wealth, girls, fame, status and adventure... but he hung himself. At his funeral, all they could say was that he was good musician and was liked by his friends. I suggest that that is a totally inadequate epitaph for a life. You are meant for so much more. You are meant to fulfill God's purpose. Please give ministers something to say at your funeral! Finish well.

Ask and discuss:

What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?

Teach:

Jesus' mission was to take the blame for your sins and mine on a cross. We could not earn the holiness required by God by our own actions, so God did it for us. God, as Jesus, was prepared to die on a cross for us. And when he had done so, Jesus said the words, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

Buddhism believes the main problem in life is not sin but suffering and that the root of this suffering is desire. The aim of life is therefore to rid yourself of all desire by meditation and self-control. The second last words of Buddha to his disciples were "*strive without ceasing*", then he goes on to say "*always exert the mind, seeking the way out.*" This is very different from the last words of Jesus on the cross, "It is finished". Jesus won the right for us to be with God by dying in our place on the cross where he gave us his holiness in exchange for our sinfulness.

Hinduism teaches that everyone must receive the fruit of their wrongdoing in a future life. There is no escape from the almost endless cycle of rebirths (or reincarnation). Islam teaches that all wrong acts need to be balanced by an equal value of good acts. In contrast to both Hinduism and Islam, Jesus

says, "it is finished". The Greek word used in Scripture for this is *tetelestai*, meaning "paid in full". This word is in the perfect tense, and so it means "it has been, and will for ever remain, paid in full."

Jesus finished it for you. Will you accept what Jesus finished for you?

Reflect:

(Reflect quietly for a moment).

Teach:

In his book "*Finishing Strong*" Paul Farrar quotes Dr. Paul Beck who says that only one Christian leader in ten will finish well in America. Pride, money, selfishness and sex ruin most leaders. Dear friends, if this is so, what are you doing that will ensure that you are in the ten percent that finish well?

It is very hard for leaders to finish well, let alone those who don't hold leadership positions in the church. Many of the great leaders in the Bible didn't finish well. Some had ministries that were cut off early, (Abimelech, Samson, Absalom, Ahab, Josiah, John the Baptist). Others finished poorly, (Gideon, Eli, Saul and Solomon). Some only finished in an average way, (David, Jehosaphat and Hezekiah). Fortunately, some finished well, (Abraham, Job, Joseph, Elijah, Daniel, John, Paul and Peter).

No wonder Charles Haddon Spurgeon said,
*"Beware of no man more than yourself;
we carry our worst enemies within us."*

Read:

2 Timothy 4:7-8 (Explain that the Apostle Paul wrote these words, possibly only a few days before his execution in Rome.)

Ask:

What does this teach us about:
1) Paul's attitude to life?
2) Paul's priorities?

"Into your hand I commit my spirit"

(Luke 23:46 [quoting Psalm 31:5a])

Read:

Luke 23:44-47

Teach:

In the end, it all comes back to trust. Are God's words trustworthy? Is God trustworthy?

Blondin, the famous 19th century French tightrope walker, successfully crossed the 1100 foot span of Niagara Falls a number of times. He even did it blindfolded and once walked a wheelbarrow across. Everyone cheered. Then he wheeled a wheelbarrow across. Again they cheered. Blondin then put a sack of potatoes in the wheelbarrow and wheeled it across. The crowd clapped their appreciation. He then asked the crowd if they thought he could wheel a person across Niagara Falls in his wheelbarrow. "Of course," they shouted. "Who trusts me enough to get in my wheelbarrow?" Blondin asked. Absolute silence. No one volunteered.

To what or to whom are you going to entrust your very self?

Jesus trusts his Father. He quotes Psalm 31:5 "*Into your hand I commit my spirit.*" It is a position of absolute trust and God will finally work all things out at the end of our life. This psalm goes on to say, "Redeem me Oh Lord the God of truth." Jesus is quietly trusting God the Father to redeem him at his death.

Jesus' last saying reminds us to trust God in all things. Commit your way to the Lord. The Lord's way is true, it is right, it is good and it is the best future you can invest in. Jesus committed his life to God the Father - and so can we.

Read:

1 Peter 1:3-9

Ask and discuss:

- 1) What is the hope Peter is speaking about?
- 2) What makes this hope special?
- 3) How does this hope affect you?

Conclude by saying:

When we have done all that is possible, there is nothing left but to entrust ourselves to God. By doing so, we are allowing God to have the last say, the last word.

It is my fervent prayer that you have committed yourself to the God of hope.

Close with prayer: Mention everyone by name as you pray God's blessing on them.

The next step: Invite your group members to take the next step that is available for them, e.g. being part of a continuing home fellowship group.