

Did Jesus Really Mean It?

Jesus sometimes used hyperbole; that is, He exaggerated for effect.

“First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye,” He said (Matt. 7:5), perhaps with a slight chuckle.

“You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” He accused the Pharisees (Matt. 23:24), dripping with sarcasm.

“If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you,” He insisted (Matt. 5:30).

For each of these, I have no problem pushing past the intentionally-preposterous illustration to discover the real meaning Jesus was driving at, in less poetic, more practical terms.

That leaves us to wonder about some of His statements that hit close to home. I sometimes comfort myself by saying, “Well, Jesus didn’t really mean that. He was just trying to get a point across.”

But I don’t think Jesus uses hyperbole as much as we might hope. I would suggest that we spend less time trying to figure out why Jesus’ words don’t really apply to us the way they sound, and more time submitting to His demands.

For example, in **John 12:25**,

Jesus declares, He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. All attempts to evade this passage stumble and fall. There is no way to safely hide behind the Apostles, suggesting that Jesus directed these words only at those in the room at the time (in fact, this teaching was repeated on other occasions to different audiences). There is no hint of exaggeration. There is no humorous accompanying illustration. In fact, Jesus spoke on the eve of His own crucifixion, putting a deadly serious edge on the whole statement.

Did He mean it? I have to lose my life to be with Him in heaven?

Yes! I must lose my life. I must despise my life in this world. I must grow to realize that the flesh is at odds with the spirit, and to think of the eternity of heaven. I must learn that this world is holding me back (2 Cor. 5:1-5). I must learn to say with the Apostle Paul, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). I must subordinate my will to the will of God as revealed in His word. I must stop living for myself. I must stop thinking of the worries of the world—the cost of living, of the thrill of vacationing, the comforts of material things. I must start thinking like a real servant of Christ—putting off the old man, contributing to the health of His church, speaking up in His name.

Sure, there are reasonable limits to this. Clearly, suicide is not what He means. And the

monastic life of John the Baptist is probably not our calling. Scripture itself tells us that it is the will of God for us to work hard to support ourselves and our families (2 Thess. 3:12), to enjoy our time with our wives and raise our children well (Col. 3:19-21), to take needful breaks (Mark 2:27). At least, this holds true for those who choose to have families—though compare 1 Cor. 7:32-35, 2 Tim. 2:4.

But, don't breathe a sigh of relief, thinking that we have escaped the challenge of this passage and can go about a "normal" life, if slightly more upright than our neighbors. Christianity is a revolution of the will! For most of us, thoughts of this life and this world utterly consume our energies. It's not that we give eternity 50% and this world 50%. (Even a 10%-90% split would be an improvement for most of us.) When is the last time your "to do today" list included, "teach my neighbor the gospel"? When is the last time you thought of your long term goals, and "go to heaven" was item number one? We still want to keep salvation a manageable matter of "going to church" at the appropriate times, while we keep the rest of our time to ourselves. We welcome the arrival of the kingdom of God as long as it consists of baking cookies or addressing pleasant cards, but push it back off our shores as soon as it requires confrontation, persecution, or suffering. We still want to think of repentance as pruning a couple of wayward limbs rather than cutting down the whole tree. We declare the largest and most personally fulfilling portion of life as off-limits to God's claim. Abraham didn't downsize; he left everything and set out to find a heavenly country, living in tents until he found it. A disciple of Jesus will give up that freedom and take up the yoke of Christ without delay. A Christian will break all natural ties and affections for things of this life, and surrender them all to the privilege of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:7-8). Following Christ will never be less than completely dying to self.

Then there is **Luke 14:33**,

So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

Did He mean it?

Yes He did! Now, Jesus did not eliminate all personal property. We read how Christians retained homes and possessions (Rom. 16:5, Phil. 4:12-18). But don't breathe a sigh of relief, thinking that we have escaped the challenge of this passage, and can continue in our comforts as long as we do not attain to the one-percent. These disciples' desire to hoard and keep and expand shriveled into nothing, and their overriding concern became others and the gospel (Acts 4:37, 16:15). The new relationship with the world (1 John 2:17) creates the new skill of contentment (Matt. 6:31-34, 1 Tim. 6:6-8). Requests to give and share become joyful opportunities (Matt. 5:42, 1 Tim. 6:17-19) rather than annoying impositions. Practically every time Jesus mentions money, it is in a negative light. He often pointed out the dangers of too much (Matt. 6:19-20, 19:23-24, 1 Tim. 6:9-10), but I cannot recall Him pointing out the dangers of too little. Everyone needs a hobby and furniture, but if anything prevents or slows or even delays what God calls me to accomplish, than I need to obey now. Remember the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:21).

Then there is **Matt. 5:27**,

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery"; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with

her in his heart.

Did He mean it?

Yes he did! While there remains a bright dividing line between temptation and action (Heb. 2:18), I must take more seriously His words. Lusting is tantamount to acting immorally. Dwelling on sin leads me inexorably toward it. So what if Fifty Shades won awards—Jesus tells me to guard my heart and my mind by shielding my eyes. I must stop justifying my toying with sin.

I can think of others. There's Matthew 7:21-23. Pretty much all the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12). And Matt. 5:44. And Matt. 6:14. Okay, pretty much the whole sermon on the mount. But I think I have challenged myself enough for the time being!