

Get Off the Fence

Leader's Guide

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Jesus won't accept neutrality.

Of all the people admired in the world today, Jesus of Nazareth continually ranks at the top of the list. Even those who don't call themselves Christians regard Jesus as one of the wisest teachers and most loving leaders the world has ever known. He is still making the covers of magazines and being talked about in coffee shops with a popularity like no other person who has walked this earth.

So why did his contemporaries kill him?

Scripture: [Matthew 12:22–32](#)

Based On: "No Wonder They Crucified Him," sermon series by Daniel Meyer, [PreachingToday.com](#).



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Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: *At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.*

Of all the people admired in the world today, Jesus of Nazareth continually ranks at the top of the list. Even those who don't call themselves Christians regard Jesus as one of the wisest teachers and most loving leaders the world has ever known. He is still making the covers of magazines and being talked about in coffee shops with a popularity like no other person who has walked this earth.

So why did his contemporaries kill him? What was it about what he said or did that was so provoking and upsetting that religious and secular leaders alike wanted to see him dead? What was it about Jesus that could make the crowds that once followed him finally turn upon him—demanding his blood and cheering his pain? If Jesus was simply the gentle genius some portray him to be, how could this have happened?

There's only one explanation: Jesus was much more than meek and mild. He was more than a poetic philosopher. Jesus was the Light of Heaven hitting a darkened earth like a meteor blast. He made claims and demands that left people undone. He named realities that others sought to bury. He broke barriers and battered bastions no one else had the nerve to assault. He called for the utter dismantling of the way things were and the new creation of something so much better. Jesus was not politically correct. He was not religiously pious. He was not socially tame. Jesus was a dangerous man because he was, and is, the God who is dangerously good.

Do you and I know this Jesus, and does it show? Or has our concept of Jesus become so domesticated that he no longer really disturbs us, no longer really disrupts us, no longer really disciples us into the new life of the Kingdom of God?

For example, what do we do with the Jesus who says: "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24) or "Every kingdom ... and every city or household divided against itself will not stand." What do we do with the Jesus who declares: "He who is not [actively] with me is [actually] against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." In short, what do you do with the Jesus who says: Get off the fence!

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Daniel Meyer says, "Jesus was not politically correct. He was not religiously pious. He was not socially tame." What do you think he means by this?



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[Q] Do you see Jesus as a radical who wants to dismantle things in your life and recreate you? Why or why not?

[Q] What are some ways he has undone you?

[Q] In what ways do you think Jesus may want you to get off the fence concerning him?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We have to buck life in a fence-walking world.

Read Matthew 12:22–32.

It is hard to face a Jesus like that. We live in a “fence-walking world.” Ours is a world that has grown comfortable with partial commitments, hedged bets, and associate memberships. We want to feel part of the game, but we also like the safety of the stands. We like to crow about the heroism and victories of war and politics when it’s going well for our side, but distance ourselves from taking responsibility for the bad plays and losses. We want good friendships and marriages, but we avoid facing the problems and sin that keep them from being great relationships. We want our kids to be spiritually vital but also on the traveling sports team on Sundays. We want a sane, healthy life, but also one packed with all the possessions and pace of “success.”

A man named Homer finally worked up the courage to propose marriage to the girl of his dreams. Dropping to one knee, he looked his beloved in the eye and said: “Sue, I know I’m not wealthy like Tom. I recognize that I’m not handsome like Tom. I may not be as well educated as Tom. But I love you, Sue.” The woman, obviously moved, responded sincerely: “Why, I love you too, Homer. But tell me a little more about Tom!”

We do this fence-walking with God, too. It isn’t that we’re not interested in God. We’re just wary of full investment. In the words of Wilbur Rees: “I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please—not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don’t want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant worker. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of a womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I’d like to buy just \$3 worth of God, please.”¹

¹ *\$3 Worth of God*, Judson press (1971)



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But God is not interested in these partial investments and divided loyalties that produce such poor fruit. A religious leader can build quite a following by pretending otherwise. He can suggest that God is mainly interested in some fine-tuning of our personalities—that he's content so long as we're spending time and money on him on Sundays, even if we're dallying with Tom the rest of the week. Gordon MacDonald explains why:

When the crowd got too large, [Jesus] would inevitably sharpen the blade of his teaching. He would make it clearer that there was a dramatic cost to discipleship. It was almost as if he were saying the size of this crowd suggests that you haven't heard me plainly enough or some of you wouldn't be here; so let me give it to you another way. And when he finished restating his message, many would then leave because they finally understood that no one can remain in the presence of Christ and be merely a very nice person.

[Q] What does Jesus mean when he says that those who are not with him are against him (Matthew 12:30)? What does it mean to be with him?

[Q] What do you think is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31–32)?

Leader's Note: *Feel free to look up the many commentaries on this at www.christianitytoday.com/bible/features/commentaries.html.*

[Q] How does Matthew 12:22–32 demonstrate that Jesus is repelled by fence walkers?

[Q] In what ways have you just wanted “\$3 worth of God”?

[Q] Explain how Jesus might want you off the fence in each of the following areas of your life:

- Relationships
- Job
- Finances
- Habits

Teaching Point Two: Ground yourself on God's side of the fence through spiritual disciplines.

Jesus said such crazy-sounding things at times. Read what he said to the Christians at Laodicea in Revelation 3:15.

Jesus described life with God in terms of leaving parents, getting out of safe boats, dropping nets, selling possessions, and denying self. In these statements, he is not saying there's something intrinsically wrong with those things. Jesus isn't against family or safety or possessions or self. He is simply questioning whether we're going to define and pursue these values in the world's way or the kingdom's way. He asks: Where are you putting your feet



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down? Who and what do you really love? What's the ground you're planting in? What sort of fruit is it producing? Are you still trying to walk the fence?

Lent is the season when followers, or would-be followers, of Jesus have traditionally screwed up the courage to look down at their feet and examine the line they've been walking, the investments they've been making, and the loyalties they've been dividing in order to start walking in a different way. Will you do that with me? Historically, Christians have taken hold of a spiritual discipline or two to aid them in this process. The spiritual disciplines are simply means of grounding ourselves on God's side of the fence.

Adele Calhoun suggests in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* that we practice Examen, a simple exercise to help us better discern God's hand and voice. You might try that practice, or one of nearly 60 others described there. And if you do, you will find at least three blessings proceeding from that side of the fence.

For one thing, the spiritual disciplines lead us into a greater integrity—a greater integration between what we say we believe and want and what we actually feel and do. To use Jesus' metaphor, they help you to see where the house of your life has gotten divided against itself, or where it's gotten shifted off of rock-solid foundations. Through the disciplines, God will start to improve the alignment.

Second, as God uses the disciplines to further transform our character and conduct, we will develop a greater influence on our society. To be ruthlessly blunt, the world has plenty of people just like us today. It has millions of fragmented people running under their own power, driven by their anxiety, fear, or anger. If the church is going to truly be the kind of influential salt and light that Jesus calls it to be, then it will do so because there are disciples who have taken deliberate steps to get off the fence and ground their lives more deeply in God.

Finally, you'll find that the ultimate fruit of the spiritual disciplines is greater joy. Discipline is not usually a word we associate with joy. But ask an Olympian standing on the medal platform how she spells "The Path to Joy" and she will say "D-I-S-C-I-P-L-I-N-E." Ask Jesus, says the writer to the Hebrews, why he disciplined himself in the face of temptation or endured the pain of the cross, and he will answer: It was for the joy of living with integrity to my mission. It was for the joy of exerting an eternal influence on people.

Read Hebrews 12:1–2.

[Q] What kind of sin tangles you up in your race?

[Q] In what practical ways can we "fix our eyes on Jesus"?

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[Q] What was the joy set before Jesus that motivated him to endure the cross?

[Q] Which of the following spiritual disciplines would you most like to implement? Try to pick just one.

- Regular prayer
- Regular reading, study, or memorization of Scripture
- Fasting
- Tithing
- Other

How could you begin to make that practice part of your life?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To help us think about spiritual disciplines.*

Activity: *Using a whiteboard or poster board, brainstorm all the spiritual disciplines you know of. After you have written these down, ask the group if they have successfully practiced any of these disciplines, and if so, how they helped their spiritual life. Then ask if they have tried any of these disciplines and failed at them. If so, why do they think they failed? What might they do differently to make these disciplines work for them?*

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

To paraphrase Jesus: I have taught and modeled for you everything I have, that your life might have complete integrity in your relationship to yourself, to others, and to God (Matthew 7:24–27). I have come and called and given my life for you, that through you I might have complete influence here, there, and to the ends of the earth. I have said and done all that I have so that my joy might be in you, and your joy might be complete (John 15:11). But if you want all this, you cannot remain as you are. You cannot keep walking divided as you do. You must get off the fence and ground yourself in God.

It is easy to be like the Pharisees. I am so used to walking high and mighty on my familiar fence, and so sure that change is mostly what others need, that it is far too easy to do the one unforgivable thing—regard the Spirit of God, still trying to reach me, as evil. Call the Light darkness. And—so jaded by preaching, so smug in my niceness, so stuck in my religion—I think, *How do we get rid of this man?*

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How about you? Would you get down off your fence? Or would you think: No wonder they crucified him?

Edward Sandford Martin—American editor, critic, essayist, and poet (1856-1939)—wrote:

*Within my earthly temple there's a crowd.
There's one of us that's humble; one that's proud.
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,
And one who, unrepentant, sits and grins.
There's one who loves his neighbor as himself,
And one who cares for naught but fame and self.
From much corroding care would I be free
If once I could determine which is me.*

Action Point: Practice Examen² this week:

1. Recall that you are in the presence of God. As you quiet yourself, become aware that God is present within you, in the creation that surrounds you, in your body, in those around you. The Spirit of God, sent by Christ, will remind you that you are gifted to help bring creation to its fullness. Ask the Holy Spirit to let you look on all you see with love.

2. Spend a moment looking over your day with gratitude for this day's gifts. Be concrete and let special moments or pleasures spring to mind. Recall the smell of your morning coffee, the taste of something good that you ate, the laugh of a child, the fragrance of a flower, the smile brought forth by a kind word, a lesson that you learned. Take stock of what you received and what you gave. Give thanks to God for favors received. Also look at your permanent gifts that allow your participation in this day. Recall your particular strengths in times of difficulty, your ability to hope in times of weakness, your sense of humor and your life of faith, your intelligence and health, your family and friends. God the Father gives you these to draw you into the fullness of life. As you move through the details of your day, give thanks to God for his presence in the big and the small things of your life.

3. Ask God to send you his Holy Spirit to help you look at your actions and attitudes and motives with honesty and patience. "When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit inspires you to see with growing freedom the development of your life story. The Spirit gives a freedom to look upon yourself without condemnation and without complacency and thus be open to growth. Ask that you will learn and grow as you reflect, thus deepening your knowledge of self and your relationship with God.

¹ Adapted from <http://norprov.org/spirituality/ignatianprayer.htm>

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4. Review your day. This is the longest of the steps. Recall the events of your day; explore the context of your actions. Search for the internal movements of your heart and your interaction with what was before you. Ask what you were involved in and who you were with, and review your hopes and hesitations. Many situations will show that your heart was divided—wavering between helping and disregarding, scoffing and encouraging, listening and ignoring, rebuking and forgiving, speaking and silence, neglecting and thanking. Remember, this is not a time to dwell on your shortcomings; rather, it is a gentle look with the Lord at how you have responded to God's gifts. It is an opportunity for growth of self and deepening your relationship with God.

Notice where you acted freely—picking a particular course of action from the possibilities you saw. See where you were swept along without freedom. What reactions helped or hindered you? See where Christ entered your decisions and where you might have paused to receive his influence. "Test yourselves," St. Paul urges, "to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. Perhaps you yourselves do not realize that Christ Jesus is in you" (2 Corinthians 13:5). His influence comes through his people, the Body of Christ. His influence comes through Scripture, the Word of God.

Now, as you pray, Christ's spirit will help you know his presence and concern. As you daily and prayerfully explore the mystery of yourself in the midst of your actions, you will grow more familiar with your own spirit and become more aware of the promptings of God's Spirit within you. Allow God to speak, challenge, encourage, and teach you. Thus you will come to know that Christ is with you. Christ will continually invite you to love your neighbor as yourself and strengthen you to do this.

5. The final step is a heart-to-heart talk with Jesus. Here you speak with Jesus about your day. You share your thoughts on your actions, attitudes, feelings, and interactions. Perhaps during this time you may feel led to seek forgiveness, ask for direction, share a concern, express gratitude. Having reviewed this day of your life, look upon yourself with compassion and see your need for God. Try to realize God's manifestations of concern for you. Express sorrow for sin, the obscuring darkness that surrounds us all, and especially ask forgiveness for the times you resisted God's light today. Give thanks for grace, the enlightening presence of God, and especially praise God for the times you responded in ways that allowed you to better see God's life. Resolve with Jesus to move forward in action where appropriate. You might like to finish your time with the Lord's Prayer.

—Study by Daniel Meyer, with JoHannah Reardon

