

# bible<sup>+</sup>study: july 2019

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*Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series*

## July 7, 2019 Text: Matthew 5:13-20 “Jesus Teaches about Fulfilling the Law”

Look at Matthew 5:13. Jesus could have said, “You are a giant freezer.” (That’s what salt did: it preserved food.) Jesus could have said, “You are a big bottle of Clorox.” (That’s what salt did; it cleaned things.) Jesus could have said, “You are a jug of Tabasco sauce.” (That’s what salt did; it stirred up flavor.) Jesus could have said, “You are an ER surgeon.” (That’s what salt did; it provided healing.)

No wonder that “back in the day” some people got paid not in money, but in salt. To say a worker was “worth his salt” was to say that he earned what he got paid. But Jesus said that salts could go bad. Surely He isn’t talking about us.

Eugene Boring has noted that salt does not lose its saltiness because of some chemical change. It loses its power when it is mixed with impure elements. Jesus alerts us to the reality that our mission as disciples is corrupted if we mix Kingdom values with the standards of the world. Such salt is worthless.

The word “you” in verse 13 is a strong plural word. As John Wesley has written in his Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament: “Ye—not the apostles, not ministers only; but all ye who are thus holy.” All followers of the Lord are salt.

Here is a pop quiz for your Sunday School class. What evidence is

there that this congregation maintains the heritage of our faith standards (preserving)? What evidence is there that this congregation has addressed some place of dirt and injustice in this community (cleaning)? What evidence is there that this congregation has helped persons find meaning to their lives (flavoring)? What evidence is there that this congregation has touched others with a restoring presence (healing)?

How is our time spent? How is our money spent? How is witness made? How salty are we?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Jack A. Keller, Jr. in *Doctrines and Discipline* (edited by Dennis M. Campbell, William B. Lawrence, and Russell E. Richey, Abingdon Press) wrote: “United Methodists claim a heritage that holds together as complementary goals personal assurance and social witness, personal holiness and social holiness, holiness of heart and holiness of life. We have a clear Wesleyan mandate to ‘reform the nation’ and to ‘spread scriptural holiness.’”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, during these days of remembering our national independence, move among us that we might use that freedom as our circumstance for our faithful Christian witness...”

## July 14, 2019 Text: Matthew 5:21-32 “Jesus Teaches Us to Love One Another”

Sex.

Okay, now that I have your attention, let’s look at some of the teachings of Jesus. In this week’s study text, our Lord talks about murder, adultery, and divorce.

Murder is in the heart so anger is the very same demon (Matthew 5:21-22). Insulting others is part of that same package. God does not want our altar gifts if we demean those gifts with our anger and divisions. Make peace before bringing those gifts! (In our United Methodist order of service, the passing of the peace comes before the offering. This is more than “Hey, how are you?” It is distributing the peace of Christ.)

Adultery is more than some specific sexual activity. It is lust. (Matthew 5:28) Jesus is obviously just giving one example of how that lust (adultery) might express itself. In that male-dominated culture, it would make sense to illustrate from the dominant perspective, but the caution our Lord gives surely also applies to a woman who has a sexual hankering for some hunk and also applies to those whose lust is toward the same sex. Lust creates the “other” into a thing to be used rather than a relationship to be nourished.

Divorce breaks up what had been put together. Jesus lived in a culture in which men could divorce a woman simply by saying “I’m tired of you.”

## July 21, 2019 Text: Matthew 5:38-48 “Jesus Teaches About Transforming Love”

I don’t know about you, but I’ll be glad when this series of lessons is over. Every time Jesus opens His mouth, He nails me.

“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” makes sense to me. After all, look at Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:25, and Deuteronomy 19:21. These verses speak of evening up things. Isn’t that fair? Those Old Testament writers were arguing for even-handed fairness because their cultures insisted on unequal retaliation. (If you cut my hand, I should hurt both of your hands and perhaps a foot also.) ou do more than get even! The Old Testament law tries to bring some grace to that, proclaiming that we should do no more than has been done to us. Then, Jesus comes along and ups the ante.

Kick it up a notch,” Jesus says, so you will have even greater righteousness than the Law (Matthew 5:20). Instead of just making things even,

Our Lord tries to bring some balance to this male-dominated culture by saying that women also have rights. Only if the wife is sexually unfaithful is the man to consider divorce (Matthew 5:32). Even then, it is not just a matter of pushing her out the door; the man must file a written explanation. Jesus was ahead of His time in seeking a fair and balanced place for women!

I have included here a list of all those of us who have never violated any of these teachings. Their names appear within the parentheses: ( ). Jesus intends for this all to be taken seriously (Matthew 5:22, Matthew 5:29, for example). He has gotten my attention. What about you?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Love Letters from Cell 92* (eds., Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz), Abingdon Press) there is a quotation from a letter Maria von Wedemeyer wrote the imprisoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “...there’s very little difference between sinning in thought and in deed. The sinful thought is the really dangerous thing, because actions are over in an instant, whereas thoughts are hard to let go of.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Me? Lord, are you talking to me?...”

go the extra step (Matthew 5:39-41). This goes as far as loving enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). Gasp! Am I to be kind to those with whom I disagree politically? The New Testament word for enemies (*ēchthrōs*) comes from a root word that means “hate.” Jesus turns that 180 degrees and calls for us to love (*agapaō*).

Verse 48 opens the door to a teaching that is maintained distinctively in the Wesleyan tradition: Christian Perfection. Some translate the word in this verse as “perfect.” Other say “complete” or “mature.” The word “perfect” scares us off a bit, but John Wesley teaches us that it does not mean “without sin.” Christian Perfection is not exemption from “ignorance, mistake, infirmity, or temptation.” It means a heart that is intentional in full love of God and full love of neighbor, made possible (Or why else would Jesus command it?) by daily growth by the grace of God.

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It is sometimes called “entire sanctification.” Praise God for this blessing from the Holy Spirit! It’s the way God loves and we are called to imitate that love for all.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *Wesley, Aquinas, and Christian Perfection* (Baylor University Press), Duke professor Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric has written: “Perfect love is attained through conformity to Christ. Wesley insists that to be perfect means ‘to have the mind of Christ’ and ‘to walk as he walked.’...this (imitation of Christ) is not based primarily on emulation of Christ’s life

style but in obedience to Christ’s great commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself....The perfection that is possible in this life is the perfection of the will, the perfection of love. It is not the perfection of the intellect, the perfection of knowing, nor is it the perfection of the body. Hence, perfection in this life is always perfectible and never indefectible. The perfect can fail and even fall, but they can also grow.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Help me love, O Lord...”

**July 28 2019 Text: Matthew 7:1-6, 15-23 “Jesus Teaches About Spiritual Discernment**

I remember a challenging moment at a General Conference of The United Methodist Church. There was a large block of time given to confessing the sin of racism that had existed in United Methodism and its predecessors. One speaker eagerly proclaimed, “I trust that this is a turning moment, one that will indeed bear fruit for Christ and the Church.” Quietly, a bishop of the predominantly Black AME Church said, “I plan to be a fruit inspector.”

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Good fruit comes from good trees (Matthew 7:17). Let’s check the fruit of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (mission statement of The United Methodist Church). I pulled the 2017 Journal for our North Carolina Conference; it gives statistics through the end of 2016. How about using as one sign of “making disciples” the number of people who made professions of faith in our churches in 2016? We had 226,323 members and received 2,053 persons on profession of faith. That means it took about 100 of us to lead one person to make a profession of faith. Are we bearing fruit?

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When Jesus speaks of “false prophets” (Matthew 7:15), he is not talking about those who make no pretense at being a follower of the

Christ. There is even an integrity in those who make honest confession of some other faith. What has upset Jesus are those who make like they are His followers (sheep: for example, Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34:10, Matthew 2:6, Matthew 9:36), when in fact their teachings and their lives are far from His truth and His example. What about those who claim that Jesus gives financial blessing to those who are faithful? That ain’t in my Bible! Even if doing is in the name of Jesus, a false prophet is giving thistles instead of figs (Matthew 7:16).

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It is easy to fool ourselves that we are okay because we have said all the right words. No, it’s not right words; it is right deeds that make us recognizable to God (Matthew 7:21-23).

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In his study *The Gospel of Matthew* (Upper Room Books), Bishop William Cannon writes: “Jesus does not want only verbal assent from his followers but a life of obedience where his disciples actually perform in deeds the will of God.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open me to Your will...”.



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