

You might be surprised by the title to the new series of studies that we have for our autumn series. The **Hard Sayings of Jesus** will take us into the gospels and the teaching of Jesus. Many people who listened to Jesus found that some of the things Jesus said were 'hard' to understand.

John 6:60 *'On hearing it (the teaching of Jesus), many of his disciples said "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it.'*

The word hard can be used in two particular ways. Some sayings of Jesus were hard to understand. The disciples would sometimes ask Jesus for an explanation to a particular statement or parable.

The other use of 'hard' is that, although you may understand what Jesus is saying, putting it into practice is tough and difficult.

It was Mark Twain who once said 'It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.'

The issue of obedience is the 'hard' aspect of Jesus' teaching.

We simply cannot ignore Jesus' teaching or to try dumb down his teaching for today's generation.

This is where spending time in a small group is so beneficial - for not only is there a wonderful sense of identity that grows as you relate to a room full of folk whom you get to know but there is the rich reward of being able to pray and share together. This is why it is important to get out of the rows of a Sunday into the circle of a small group during the week. It is within such a group that we can find studying the scriptures and finding appropriate application so helpful....so make sure you get stuck into a group.

There are only going to be five studies for the groups in this series as many get involved in the Shoe Box appeal by November.

I will supplement the series on each Sunday morning where we will unpack another five or more hard sayings of Jesus.

Let's pray that we might know the Spirit's illumination as we look at the teaching of Jesus in this series.

Alan ~ September 2010

1: SALTLESS SALT

Passage: Mark 9:49-50

Take a few minutes at the beginning of this new series to just think about the title 'The Hard Sayings of Jesus'. How do you understand this title?

Maybe share together what you believe is a 'hard saying' of Jesus. It could be either one you do not understand or one that you have real difficulties in accepting or putting into practice.

Watch the DVD

Let's kick off the study with main verses from Mark 9:45-50 ***Everyone will be salted with fire. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."***

- Think in your group how essential salt is in life. Maybe take time to list some of its uses - even some unusual uses! You might even remember life before deep freezers and the essential use of salt!
- How does salt lose its saltiness?

Look at one or two of the other areas that Alan refers to with regard to salt being salty.

1. THERE NEEDS TO BE SALT IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

There is an intriguing battle account that is recorded in 2 Chron. 13 - where David's kingdom was soon to be divided with Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Abijah (David's grandson) was King of Judah. The situation arose that he was being attacked by Jeroboam who was King of Israel. Abijah challenges Jeroboam about the rebellion that he is leading against David's Kingdom and refers to being disloyal to the covenant of salt. 2 Chron. 13:5 ***Don't you know that the Lord, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt.'***

I will leave you to see what resulted as Abijah cried out to God.

- When we speak of salt in our relationships - how is fidelity and friendship, loyalty and commitment to be worked out in practice?

2. THERE NEEDS TO BE SALT IN OUR OFFERINGS

No, don't be tempted to put a sachet of salt in the offering bag on Sunday - too much salt is definitely not good for our treasurer!

Leviticus 2:13 calls the Israelites to ***season all your grain offerings with salt....add salt to your offerings.***

- In what way does salt speak about our relationship with God when it is added to our offering?
What does this mean that we are to do?

Romans 12:1 (Msg) 'So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.'

3. THERE NEEDS TO BE SALT IN OUR WITNESS

There is the well known beatitude in Matthew 5:13 ***You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.***

- Take time to reflect on what you sense Jesus was referring to when he indicates how we are to be the '*salt of the earth*'.
What are the responsibilities that we have?
This in turn will indicate the importance of salt not losing its saltiness.

There was a book written on evangelism that had the challenging title '*Out of the Saltshaker*'. The writer was facing the challenge that our witness cannot be contained within the saltshaker of the church - it needs to be shaken and spread to have influence upon society. We are not to withdraw from the world but get involved in the world and

be effective in our witness.

- How can we make sure that the true flavour of Christ likeness is tasted by others?

4. THERE NEEDS TO BE SALT IN OUR COMMUNICATION.

Colossians 4:6 *'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.'*

This is Paul's strong encouragement that - our everyday conversations need to be seasoned with salt.

- How do we make sure that there remains lots of salt in our communication to one another?
- For instance, what are the challenges in speaking well of one another especially when we are not in the presence of the one we are speaking about?

Jesus' hard saying - is it really hard? Yes, I believe it is hard in the sense that there is a daily challenge not to put too much salt on our dinner plate but plenty of salt in all these areas that we have been thinking about.

Yes, let's be a salty church!

2: FORGIVENESS

Passage : Matthew 18:21-35

So also My Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

From an article by the Rev. A. M. Shepherd.

At the end of the Second World War, the allied troops went into Ravensbruck concentration camp. And amongst the scenes of terrible suffering and misery, they found the broken body of a dead child. Beside it lay a scrap of paper with some moving words written on it. No one knows who wrote them, but it was probably the mother of the dead child. And what she wrote was a prayer:

“O Lord, remember not only the men of good will, but those of ill will also. But do not only remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us: remember the fruits we bore thanks to the suffering; our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage and the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this; and when they come to judgement, let all the fruits we have borne be their forgiveness.”

That quote from an article by the Rev. A. M. Shepherd has always touched my heart and made me think. How many of us would be able to forgive as that mother forgave in Ravensbruck concentration camp? You and I will never know just how much she suffered during her time there, and no-one knows exactly how she met her death. Did she starve to death, or was she killed in the gas chambers? Whatever her death, or the death of her child, her heart was one of absolute forgiveness. And we see from the last few sentences that although her forgiveness may not have touched the hearts of those who had perpetrated all those atrocities, it enabled so much of Jesus to embellish her, even though—if she was a Jew—she would not have truly known Him. I can imagine that God really rejoiced over that woman, and I am convinced that she heard His “Well done!” as she entered into His glorious Presence.

As an ice-breaker, tell one another of any other act of forgiveness that has impressed you. Or even speak of some attitude of un-forgiveness that has soured someone’s heart.

NOW READ Matthew chapter 18 v 21—35.

NOW WATCH THE DVD.

I do apologise for that awful joke at the beginning of my talk, but after that touching story of the woman in Ravensbruck I wanted to lift the tone of things a bit.

But this is not really a subject that can be treated in a frivolous way. When Jesus told His disciples that His Heavenly Father will deal with us in a manner similar to that of the angry king in the parable if we are unable to freely forgive from our hearts, then we need to take this saying very seriously.

1. In my talk I said that the numbers 7 and 70 would have special meaning to a Jew in Jesus time. That 70 times 7 would imply that we need to “forgive to the point of spiritual perfection”. What does this expression mean to you, and what do you think Jesus is demanding from us?
2. It has been said that “Unforgiveness is like taking poison yourself while waiting for the other person to die!” Discuss this sentence.
3. When you have prayed the “Lord’s Prayer”, how often have you really listened and understood the line; “forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those that trespass against us”? Do you really think Jesus meant those words, or are we being too pedantic when we stress them?
4. The Bible says “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Eph. 4:32) Here is the counter-point to question No.3. This verse doesn’t warn us that God will not forgive us unless we forgive, but it does command us to forgive “as God in Christ forgave you”. Does this make things easier to understand or not? Does the fear of God punishing you concern you more than the command to love and forgive as He does?
5. *“It is the Grace of God that offers us this kind of absolute forgiveness, and living in that state of forgiveness means that we are in a place of Grace.”* What does “living in a state of Grace” mean to you? How would you put this concept into your own words? And how important is this “state of Grace” to you in your life?

READ Luke 7 v 36—50

6. Have you ever sought the forgiveness of God with tears as this woman did? You certainly don’t have to speak about this in your group, simply recognise that we have probably all had to do so at some point in our lives. When she wept at Jesus’ feet she must have been at her wits end. What words would you say could express most what she felt when she rose up again?

7. Love and forgiveness set up a chain reaction: the more forgiveness, the more love; the more love, the more forgiveness. How can we begin to bring this chain reaction into our own lives.
8. Jesus commanded that we “love our enemies, do good to those who hate us and pray for those who spitefully use us.” The woman in Ravensbruck certainly had very obvious enemies, but who do you think we Christians in the 21st Century ought to be praying for in this way?

PRAYER.

Lord, take our lives and fill them with Your praises.
Let us speak the words of peace that Jesus brings to birth in us.
Take our lives and fill them, Lord; fill them with Yourself.
Lord, take this house and fill it with Your blessing.
Let it be a haven where the poor in spirit may come and find forgiveness.
Take this place and fill it, Lord, fill it with Yourself.
Amen

GOING FURTHER.

Spend some time with God asking Him to allow His Holy Spirit to search your heart and spirit. Then wait on Him until He begins to let you know who and what you still need to forgive. Remember you may not like what He tells you, but when we obey His call to forgive then we begin to live in the freedom of His Grace, and our relationship with Him deepens considerably.

Once you have heard all that God wants you to hear, seek the help of the Holy Spirit to utterly and totally forgive and to learn how to enter that place of Grace and to get closer to the point of spiritual perfection.

3. PREDESTINATION

Passage: Matthew 22:10-16; Mark 4:10-12

Introduction

Perhaps before starting the study it may be useful to establish the group's current understanding of the term "predestination". Some may have never come across it before; others may be fully familiar; most will probably be somewhere in between.

Take some time to share your awareness – but put a limit on it, otherwise, trust me, there will be no study!

Then read Matthew 22: 10-16 and Mark 4: 10-12 before watching the DVD introduction.

Predestination & Election

Firstly we're going to establish these concepts of predestination and election as recurring themes within God's word. Today's study is not based on the interpretation of an isolated statement of Jesus – there is a range of scripture references that support the principle of God determining in advance the eternal destiny of individuals. These are perhaps not as widely spoken about as the principle of God offering full and free salvation to all – but they are there nevertheless. We will start by looking at some examples:

Ephesians 1:3-5

He chose us in him before the creation of the world ...

He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ ...

Romans 8:29-30

Those he foreknew he also predestined ...

Those he predestined he also called ...

Romans 9: 15-18

I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy ...

Acts 13:48

All who were appointed for eternal life believed ...

Free Will

Of course there are many scriptures that convey the free will of the individual to accept God's offer of salvation, which is open to all:

John 3:16

Whoever believes in him will not perish ...

Ezekiel 18:32

I take no pleasure in the death of anyone ... repent and live.

Romans 10:9

If you confess and believe ... you will be saved
John 1:12
To all who received and believed ... he gave the right to become children
of God

Which way does God work?

Given that there is Biblical support for both approaches, which of the two is the actual basis on which people receive eternal life in heaven?

List and discuss some of the characteristics of God that might support or contradict either of these approaches. For example:

Predestination:

+ God is sovereign, creator, all knowing, all powerful

Free Will

+ God is fair, just, loving, merciful

In summary, the two hotly-debated schools of theological thought mentioned on the DVD are:

Arminianism: Salvation is provided by God for everyone, but only becomes effective for those who accept his provision.

Calvinism: Salvation is by the almighty power of God alone, who causes only his chosen ones to willingly accept the gospel.

Take some time to discuss in the group the implications of each view. In particular, what effect would each view have on the need to preach the gospel? If the eternal destiny of individuals is already predetermined, why would Jesus command us to preach the gospel? (Mark 16: 15-16) Would God's divine will not come to fruition regardless of our preaching efforts?

Or is this the means God has decided to use to bring his chosen ones to faith, hence it must be preached to achieve this? (1 Corinthians 1: 21-24)

If the unspiritual man is dead towards spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14) how can he respond to the gospel without the intervention of God anyway?

How are you feeling about all this right now?

It might be good to share with the group how considering these things is making you feel:

- Confused? Uncertain? Perturbed by the quandary?
- Affirmed? Strengthened? Resolute in your beliefs?
- Resigned? Trusting? At peace in God?

There are no absolute right or wrong feelings – we may all be at different stages in our thinking about these things, with varying degrees of concern about needing to know “the answer”.

There is value though in exploring the basis of our faith, and being willing to tackle and resolve in our own minds the way we believe God to be at work – even if this is different to the way others see things. One thing is certain: no-one will categorically and definitively know “the answer” this side of heaven.

One view that may help

I am no theologian – just an ordinary believer who reads the Bible and tries with the help of God’s Spirit to understand what he is saying. I am however a thinking person and my rational mind often doesn’t allow me to just “accept” things – I need to reconcile what I see and read with what I know and believe of God, especially where there are multiple possible views.

I tackled the issue of predestination a long time ago, and having resolved it for myself I have had the benefit of no quandary or qualms in this area for the vast majority of my Christian life. I can recommend sorting it out in your own mind. Below is a short simplified summary of the conclusion I reached – it works for me, it may be helpful to you.

As you may have noticed, there is not really a practical application from this study – which makes it different to most of the others. This is spiritual character building – it may be painful to go through, but ultimately it builds us up in our faith.

1. Any apparent contradiction must be resolvable

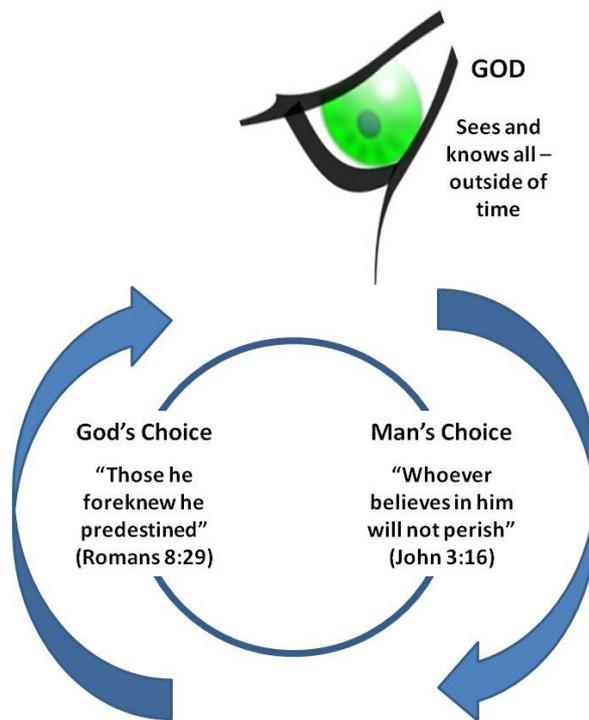
Believing what we do about the accuracy of God’s word (in the original), there must be an explanation for any seeming inconsistency. Faced with the dilemma of whether our eternal destiny is chosen by God or ourselves, if the scriptures convey both principles then both must be possible. This leads us to see it as not exclusively one or the other, but rather a combination of the two.

2. The issue needs to be looked at from God’s perspective

With our human perspective, we presume that things happen sequentially – because that’s the way time elapses. Since God operates outside of time he doesn’t have the same limitation. In sequential time, either God chooses us and we then accept – or God gives us the option and we then choose. Outside of time, God knows the ones who when given a free choice would choose to accept, so he can elect those same people as his chosen ones. That way it is both “chosen in him before the creation of the world” and also “whoever believes in him will not

perish”.

Simplistically we can picture this as a continuous circle of events, with God looking on from the outside. Both election and free will are components that contribute to the overall outcome.



4. ENVY BECAUSE OF GOD'S GENEROSITY

Passage: Matthew 20:1-15

A great deal of Jesus' teaching was through parables. It was a memorable way of teaching where truth would be woven through the story that would have a significant twist right at the end. They were 'tales of the unexpected!'

Envy can be a very powerful emotion. Take a few minutes within your group to talk about the power of envy.

Read the parable - in Matthew 20:1-15

Watch the DVD

It was probably over 40 years ago that Lord Soper preached on this parable at the Labour Party Conference and socialist politicians would easily identify with the parable. They would be great advocates of how people have the right to work and to have a wage for the work that they complete for their employer.

Conservative politicians would equally use the parable to commend Jesus for his sense of priorities to function effectively in the market place - let the employer make his own decisions without hindrance!

Jesus is not talking about working practices but about the Kingdom of God.

What do you understand by *the Kingdom of God*? Why do you think Jesus referred to this phrase so frequently in his teaching.

As we think about the parable - as Alan indicated in the DVD, it is about the need a landowner had to expand the team of harvesters for the grape harvest. The scene is clearly set for the landowner to go to the market place where workers who were available for hire congregated.

Financial remuneration was agreed with the first workers and all subsequent ones knew that the landowner would pay what is right. The landowner made several visits to the market place to hire more workers throughout the day with the last worker being hired at 5pm.

It was only what happened next in the parable that must have got people on the edge of their seat prepared to respond - 'it's not fair!' How often do you hear those words? They are not always spoken by children!

Think about some of the issues that Alan raised in this part of the parable.

The workers were hired in a strange way.

Why was it that the landowner hired people throughout the day and not simply hired sufficient at the beginning of the day?

The workers were paid in the wrong order.

As they queued up, the last were paid first.

How do you think the people would have reacted when it should be 'first come, first paid?'

The workers were paid the wrong wages.

We find that each of them was paid the same - one denarius. Some had worked twelve hours and the day's rate was a denarius, but there were those who worked only one hour and should have received a 1/12th of a denarius.

- Imagine for a moment how the worker for one hour felt when he got paid.
- Imagine what the all day workers felt waiting to be paid when they saw the one hour worker receiving a denarius.

What would your place of work be like if something similar happened there?

We have to remember though, that Jesus is telling a parable!

Ponder - 'Little seems more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals.'

Why do you think that Jesus was wanting to make his hearers uncomfortable?

It has been sometimes said that Jesus' ministry was to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted.

Think about the context of the parable - which is 10:13-15. This is where children are being prevented from having access to Jesus by

the disciples who regarded the children as being insignificant. And then the following section is about the rich young ruler [10:16-30] and Jesus' words about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter is found responding - what will we get out of it! How are we going to be rewarded?

Jesus has to deal with the whole issue of God's generosity which is what the parable is about. We need to hold onto this interaction that Jesus has with Peter for it forms the basis for this parable.

What lies right at the heart of the Kingdom of God is **the grace of God**. The Kingdom is all about the extravagant grace of God. The workers for one hour experienced great generosity.

In what way is Jesus' saying here '**ARE YOU ENVIOUS BECAUSE I AM GENEROUS**' a hard saying?

What about the illustrations Alan used.

- You have a friend who is very gifted and you are envious of God's grace in their lives.
- You hear of a church that is really growing but their 'theology' is pretty dubious.
- Someone rejoices in an significant answer to prayer and you are left with the same issue unresolved.

Think through other areas. Why is it that we pretend that we are not envious when the honest reality is that we are?

How do we celebrate the generosity of God in the lives of others in a way that is sincere?

Alan indicated a couple of further illustrations:

The older son with the prodigal brother who was miffed that his brother was receiving the generosity of the father when he returned.

The thief on the cross with Jesus who was welcomed into the eternal presence of God yet did nothing in his life to deserve such grace in Jesus' words 'tonight you will be with me in paradise.' Yet this is our testimony - that through the most unfair action, namely the cross, Jesus died in order that we might not be given what we deserve but we have received what we needed...and that is grace...nothing less than amazing grace.

5. FAITH THAT MOVES MOUNTAINS

Passage - Matthew 17:20

“If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed you could say to this mountain “Move hence to yonder place”, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.” (Matt. 17:20)

From “Perfect Everything” by J Rufus Moseley.

“Until we know that Jesus is God-with-us in perfect availability and in perfect triumph with perfect power to answer, we are to pray to the Father in His name; and ...in His name means in His love, in His spirit, in other words as disciples of His. A good and true wife can get, in her husband’s name, everything he has and everything he can get. She does not get it as a formula, but she gets it because of her relationship. So, we do not get our prayers answered because we attach to them the empty phrase “in the name of Jesus” but because we are His and are seeking to live and pray and do everything in His spirit and in His Love and under His leadership.....Jesus said to His own disciples that they could not only get, in His name, anything that the Father had, but that the Father loved them and would give them everything He had as fast as they were made ready and as fast as [they made themselves] ready to receive [from Him].”

TO BEGIN.

Moishe Rosen, founder of “Jews for Jesus” once said of himself as a follower of Jesus the Messiah; *“The man who knows he’s going to live for ever can afford to be patient”!*

How patient are you?

Or do you feel that your life seems to be speeding past, and you don’t have any real time to think; and therefore you tend to become

impatient?

Do you feel like Moishe Rosen, that you have forever in front of you, or does it feel like you are slowly slipping over a cliff?

READ Mark 11 v 20—25 and Matthew 17 v 14—20.

NOW WATCH PART ONE OF THE DVD.

READ John chapter 15.

NOW WATCH PART TWO OF THE DVD

1. Throughout the Gospels Jesus didn't seem to expect the disciples to have immense amounts of faith. Why do you think that was? And does this give you encouragement?
2. Having read all these Scriptures, what would you say FAITH is, and what is real FAITH based on?
3. Why do you think Jesus gave us the proviso that Mustard seed faith comes only if we have a truly forgiving heart? Do you see any connection with this proviso and the fact that Jesus performed amazing miracles?
4. In Matthew's Gospel the proviso for Mustard seed Faith is time spent in prayer and fasting. How does this tally with your life, and do you see any kind of link between these two provisos?
5. In my talk I said that "*We, here in the West, in the flippant, easy going, culture of the 21st Century find it very hard to really work at something for a long period of time: particularly if that "something" is as ephemeral as faith*". I didn't mean that people don't work hard nowadays, of course they do; in fact I think that life is harder and more complicated in many respects now than it has ever been. But, because we have so many aids—computers, washing machines, cars etc. etc.—life moves at a very fast pace and putting on the brakes and actually being still does not come naturally to us. Do you agree? Have you ever managed to just sit still for—let's say—10 minutes, or even half an hour without feeling guilty? Do you think you ought to feel guilty? If not, then why is it that you feel guilty, is it other people's

pressure or are you simply hitting yourself with a big stick?

TAKING THINGS SERIOUSLY!

If we really want the kind of faith that moves mountains, then we need to take Jesus seriously. In order to meet those two provisos (absolute forgiveness, and prayer and fasting) that Jesus gave us to help us attain Mustard Seed Faith, we need to take time alone with Him, quietly and unrushed. Searching our heart and asking Jesus to scour out any unforgiveness takes time, lots of time; and spending time in prayer and fasting is also something that doesn't fit easily with today's lifestyle. Maybe we need to set out a "Framework for Mustard Seed Faith"; something simple and "do-able" like the suggestion below. Do you think you could manage this in your life, if not, why not? What could you manage? Discuss.

Creating a Framework for the cultivation of
MUSTARD SEED FAITH.

<p><u>Each Day</u></p> <p>Ten Minutes Bible Study Ten Minutes Prayer</p>	<p><u>Each Week</u></p> <p>Half to One Hour alone with Jesus; not including time at church.</p>
<p><u>Each Month</u></p> <p>Attendance at "Source". Including "Time for God" and "1st Wednesday".</p>	<p><u>Each Year</u></p> <p>One day spent totally alone with Jesus.</p>

Hard Sayings of Jesus

The DVD introduction to the study series together with these study notes is brought to you by Mike Haywood, Mavis Gibbs, and Alan Dinnie.

Study 1	Saltless Salt	Alan
Study 2	Forgiveness	Mavis
Study 3	Predestination	Mike
Study 4	Envy because of God's generosity	Alan
Study 5	Faith that moves mountains	Mavis

The series is complemented by the Sunday Sermons that Alan will be preaching on further Hard Sayings of Jesus

Remember that if you missed a particular Sunday you can always listen to the message or download the message from the Church website.

www.wbc-ashford.org.uk