

SESSION 5

SERVING LEFTOVERS TO A HOLY GOD

For more information on the material in this session, read chapter 5 of the book *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God*.

You can tell a lot about what type of person you are by looking at the way you respond to God. Examining your church attendance record, the amount you give to charitable organizations, or the number of Christian books you've read will tell you some things. But these (and a number of other superficial qualifications for being a "good Christian") are merely externals. If you were to strip away all of your activities and associations, what would be left? At the core of your being, what do you think about God? How do you respond to Him?

Jesus told the parable of the sower to illustrate the point that different types of people respond to God in different ways. In session 3 we examined God's overwhelming, relentless love for us. The only possible response to this type of love is to give ourselves wholly to God in loving surrender. Right? Sadly, we all know that this isn't the case. In the parable of the sower, some do respond to the seed of God's Word in loving obedience. But some hear and reject

God's truth. Others seem to be growing and following for a while, but as soon as things get difficult they give up. Still others follow joyfully at first, then get caught up in the cares of the world and the pull of possessions and choose a different course.

The parable of the sower provides a perfect opportunity for us to pause and answer the question: How do I respond to God? Which type of soil am I? Take a minute to read this parable in Luke 8:4–15. Try to appreciate the force of Jesus' words. Read it honestly, trying to see where you fit in the parable. Then answer the question below.

1. **After reading the parable of the soils and Jesus' explanation of it, which type of soil do you think best describes you? Why?**

I think that most people would like to believe that God doesn't expect too much from us. I'd say that most Christians live as though God wants a minimal commitment from us but is absolutely thrilled when we surprise Him by going above and beyond. As comforting as that may be, I simply don't find any hint of this in Scripture.

What I see instead is God warning us again and again about the dangers of being lukewarm. He warns us against thinking we're committed when we're really not. He calls us to let go of everything we have and follow Him. The harshest words in the Bible are reserved for those who maintain a minimal external commitment to the Lord but don't pursue Him passionately (the best known examples of this are Jesus' harsh rebukes of the Pharisees).

One of the most terrifying passages in Scripture is found in the opening chapter of Malachi. At the time when Malachi was prophesying, the people of Israel were going through the religious motions. They were frequenting the temple, offering sacrifices, and saying prayers. I can't imagine that their level of religious commitment was any lower than what you would find in most American churches. But in the book of Malachi, God

takes the notion that half-hearted worship is better than no worship at all and blows it completely out of the water.

Take a few minutes to read Malachi 1:6–14. As you read it, try to picture the religious scene. What were God's people doing in this passage? How might their actions look in a typical American church? And make sure you pay attention to the way God responds.

2. **According to Malachi 1, what were the Israelites doing wrong in their approach to God? Why was this such a big deal?**

3. **In this passage, how does God respond to their half-hearted sacrifices?**

4. **We no longer offer animal sacrifices, but we would be foolish to disregard this warning. In what ways do you think we may be in danger of making the same mistakes that the Israelites made in Malachi 1?**

The book of Malachi stands as a shocking wake-up call to those of us who believe that something is better than nothing when it comes to following Jesus. Think about it for a minute: Do we really expect God to be thrilled when we look at His incredible gift of love and casually reply, “I guess that’s worth minimal commitment on my part”? There’s no way!

It should be enough for us that God is the holy creator of the entire universe. But when we add the fact that this God also loves us unconditionally and laid down His life so that His rebellious creation could enjoy eternal fellowship with Him, our mediocre response to God not only looks ridiculous, it looks like pure evil. And that’s exactly what God calls the Israelite’s half-hearted worship in Malachi: It’s not too bad, non-ideal, or better than nothing—it’s evil!

I’m going to ask you to pause again and think about your response to God. Would you say that you’re absolutely committed to Him? Or would you say that you spend your best time and energy on yourself, then give Him whatever is left at the end of the day? The way you answer this question is essential for deciding where you go from here. After hearing a warning like Malachi 1, there’s no more pretending that everything is just fine. It’s time to honestly evaluate yourself and decide what it’s going to take to pursue God as though nothing else matters.

5. Would you say that you are guilty of serving “leftovers” to God? How so, or why not?

Jesus is not at all ambiguous about what He calls us to—we just have a difficult time accepting it. He says very simply, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:24–25).

For a significant portion of my life, my tendency would be to read a passage like this and then think through the reasons why Jesus couldn’t be saying what He seemed to be saying.

I’m learning to fight that tendency and let Jesus speak for Himself. If you were to let go of everything you’d like Jesus to say to you and take His words at face value, how should these words affect your life? The answer may be fairly simple, but allow yourself to think through the implications of Jesus’ statement and the impact it should have on your life.

6. What does it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus? What do you think Matthew thought those words meant when he wrote them down?

7. Being as practical as possible, describe some of the ways that taking up your cross and following Jesus might play out in your unique setting.

It’s impossible to talk about some of Jesus’ more difficult commands without someone accusing you of preaching perfectionism. I flatly reject the notion that God only accepts perfect people. This is the opposite of the gospel! But this accusation is something of a red herring that could lead us away from taking Jesus’ words seriously. The fact of the matter is that Jesus calls us to let go of everything and follow Him.

The incredible reality of God’s love should cause us to respond with an intense and all-consuming love for God. If we were perfect, we would need no salvation. But precisely because we are imperfect, sinful, weak human beings, God intervenes in His infinite grace and grants us the unbelievable privilege of pursuing Him with every ounce of our being. It’s not about

us being perfect in ourselves; it's about adopting a posture of obedience where we let go of everything we have and joyfully cling to God. Though we will fail, our passion, love, and commitment to God are never in question.

8. How would you explain the difference between living a perfect life and developing a posture of obedience to God? Why is the distinction important?



If you have the *Crazy Love DVD Study Resource*, watch the video for session 5 now, particularly if you are meeting with a group. After the video, work through the rest of this session.

I know the material in this session is hard-hitting. Believe it or not, I don't like to be harsh just for the sake of being harsh. All I'm trying to do is point out that there is an all-powerful, holy God who rules this universe, that He loves us more than we could possibly imagine, and that He calls us to pursue Him in a loving and obedient relationship.

I know it's uncomfortable to question your motives and commitment. But I'm simply pointing out that God isn't calling us to a lukewarm Christian life. In fact, God hates the lukewarm Christian life. Because of this frightening reality, I'm going to ask you to be honest about your doubts. I don't want you to question God or His love for you, but I do want you to question some of the assumptions you've held. I want you to ask which type of soil you are, what kind of worshipper you are, and whether you really love God more than anything in the world. This time of self-examination could be the most important of your life.

9. As you think back over the material you've covered for this session, do you have any doubts about your salvation or your relationship with God? Be very honest here. Where did this session leave you?

10. Whether or not you've decided that you're living the "lukewarm life" at this point in your life, write down some thoughts about the solution to lukewarmness (if you don't need this right now, you will at some point). How do you overcome apathy and increase your love for God?

11. End this session by spending some time with God. As you do, meditate on the following questions. Don't answer quickly; just consider these things in God's presence, and do whatever business with God is necessary. Am I willing to say to God that He can have whatever He wants? Do I believe that wholehearted commitment to Him is more important than any other thing or person in my life? Do I believe that nothing I do in this life will ever matter unless it is about loving God and loving the people He has made?