

Jesus was a great teacher, but is He God? Even many people in the church say no.

What do you say?

Introduction: The Landscape

Every two years, LifeWay Research partners with Ligonier Ministries to capture a snapshot of people's religious and theological beliefs. In 2020, their "State of Theology" study found (<https://t.ly/fY3z4>) that just over half of Americans — 52% — and nearly one-third of evangelicals — 30% — affirm Jesus as a "good teacher, but...not God."

Two years later, the 2022 State of Theology study (<https://t.ly/aNlj7>; conducted in September of that year / PDF at <https://t.ly/NmH1o>) revealed that "43% of American evangelicals do not believe that Jesus is God. The report states:

This year's survey...revealed a significant increase in evangelicals who deny Jesus' divinity. Such a belief is contrary to Scripture, which affirms from beginning to end that Jesus is indeed God (John 1:1; 8:58; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:1-4; https://t.ly/If_Oa).

In other words, forty-three percent of those surveyed agreed (either strongly or somewhat) with the statement, "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God" (<https://t.ly/aNlj7>). In 2020 survey (<https://t.ly/fY3z4>), 30% agreed. The situation, therefore, has worsened.

In relation to a belief in objective, absolute truth, in 2022 (<https://t.ly/aNlj7>), 38% of evangelicals agreed (either strongly or somewhat) with this statement: "Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth." In 2020 (<https://t.ly/fY3z4>), 23% agreed. In this area, the situation also has worsened.

How would you respond to the following statements? Do you
1) strongly agree, 2) somewhat agree, 3) aren't sure, 4) somewhat disagree, or 5) strongly disagree?

Jesus was a great teacher, but He was not God.

Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth.

As we discussed in a post at Word Foundations (<https://t.ly/4rM1o>), "relativism isn't just embraced in the culture, but also in the church." Pastors and church leaders must help their people see why it is untenable to believe that "Jesus was a good teacher, but not God." Further, they must help their people "connect the dots" between Jesus' deity and absolute truth.

This is what this Bible study series is all about. We'll consider three major points.

1. Why Jesus is no ordinary teacher
2. What Jesus' teachings tell us about who He was and is
3. The implications of who Jesus is for our own individual lives and for society today, including implications regarding nature of truth

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We'll assume here that the Bible, including the New Testament, is fully reliable. Evidence for the reliability of the Scriptures is, after all, overwhelming (<https://t.ly/UDe-1>): "The Bible's reliability is proven in both its historical accuracy and its accurate transmission."

PART ONE

Why Jesus was no ordinary teacher

1A. As a teacher, Jesus was and is unique — explore and discuss these passages: Matthew 5:11; 5:43-44; 6:19-21; 16:24-25; 18:3-5; Luke 12:15; John 11:25-26; Mark 10:14-15; Matthew 23:11-12; Luke 21:3-4; Luke 23:34. (These are available as a handout at <https://t.ly/FjtOf>; and available online at <https://t.ly/F-iFb>). These passages showcase numerous things Jesus taught during His ministry. His teachings can appropriately be called "Unconventional Wisdom."

Discuss:

- How do these teachings demonstrate Jesus' uniqueness as a teacher?
- What claims did Jesus make in these passages about Himself?
- What claims did He make regarding heaven and eternal life — realms over which God has jurisdiction?

1B. People were amazed at Jesus' teachings, as well as the miracles Jesus performed as He taught.

Divide the large group into five smaller groups and give assign one of the following passages to each group.

1. Luke 2:41-49
2. Luke 4:31-37
3. Matthew 12:22-30
4. Matthew 14:22-33
5. Luke 9:37-45.

Here (<https://t.ly/F6Ypm>) is a printout of each Bible passage. Ask the members of each group to discuss the takeaways from their assigned Scripture regarding Jesus. Group members should use these questions as discussion starters:

- What happened in the passage?
- How did people respond?
- What qualities or traits see in Jesus in the event or events reported in the passage?

After giving groups a few moments to read their portions of Scripture and briefly discuss them, ask a volunteer from each group to report to the larger group his or her group's findings.

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Discuss: *What was so amazing about Jesus? How was and is He unique?*

1C. In His teaching ministry, Jesus claimed God’s authority; and in doing so He essentially claimed to be God. It is impossible to give the Gospels a fair reading and reach any other conclusion. These (chronologically arranged) events and the claims Jesus made when they occurred are great examples of this:

1. Mark 2:1-12
2. John 5:16-23
3. John 5:31-47
4. Matthew 12:1-14
5. Matthew 7:21-29
6. Matthew 16:13-17
7. Luke 20:9-19

For your convenience, here (<https://t.ly/epAZH>) are all seven of these passages.

Because of time constraints, consider exploring just two of them (numbers 1 and 5), with your group: Mark 2:1-12 and Matthew 7:21-29. A PDF file of these passages is available at <https://t.ly/LwdeW>.

Discuss —

How does Jesus’ healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 (parallel passages found in Matthew 9:1-8 and Luke 5:17-26; see <https://t.ly/0cZWK>), provide strong evidence that He was and is God?

How does Jesus’ conclusion to His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21-29 (Jesus essentially said the same thing in Luke 6:46-49; see <https://t.ly/fPYlv>) provide strong evidence that He was God, or at least that He was claiming to be God?

PART TWO

What Jesus’ teachings tell us about who He was and is.

In the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) we don’t read that Jesus ever explicitly said “I am God.” Instead, He made His claims to deity by using different words and by unmistakable implication.

See John 5:39-40; Matthew 16:13-20; John 7:37-38; and John 8:55-58 (also see Exodus 3:13-14). These are available online at <https://t.ly/XoGfM>. Discuss each of these passages. Ask: What was

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Jesus' central focus in each of these portions of Scripture? In other words, what was the main focus of Jesus' teaching in each instance?

Distribute this handout (<https://t.ly/3ldcR>). Emphasize that Jesus said a number of things about how to live in a general sense, but the main focus of His teaching was Himself — who He was.

Many, many more passages could be cited, including Luke 6:1-6; John 4:1-26 (especially verses 10, 13-14, and 25-26); John 5:18; John 10:22-33; John 11:25-26 (available online at <https://t.ly/FsXOm>).

Note that in Luke 6:1-6, Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of Man. It was one of His favorite ways to refer to Himself. A brief discussion of the term is available at <https://t.ly/qEaxG>.

Emphasize: Reading with an open mind the passages where Jesus claimed or even just exercised divine authority, one gains the understanding that if this carpenter-turned-teacher were not God, He either was deluded, or He was a deceiver of the worst sort.

Let's put it another way.

Jesus claimed to be God, and His claims were either true or false. If they were false, He either knew they were false or He didn't.

- If He didn't know, He Himself was deceived, and He was deceiving others, albeit unintentionally. In this case He likely was insane, a complete lunatic.
- If He *did* know He was making false claims, He was intentionally misleading others about the most basic kind of information — who He was. This would mean these actions on His part were completely inconsistent with everything else He taught, for He advocated honesty, truthfulness, and right living before God and humanity. If Jesus' claims to deity were false and Jesus knew they were false, He was and is the ultimate liar and deceiver.

So, if Jesus' claims to deity were untrue, Jesus either was crazy or a shyster like none other. Yet the evidence indicates He was neither. He did not talk or act like a raving madman. Not at all! He was more than brilliant. He gave His critics responses that confounded and frustrated them (see Matthew 22:15-46; Luke 20:1-8 for five instances: <https://t.ly/E5DM1>). Jesus was consistent in both His words and actions. Further, He spoke with a steady confidence that demonstrated He knew exactly who He was and what He needed to do.

Was Jesus a legend? No. He couldn't have been created in the minds of His closest followers because if He had been, they would have all died for what they knew was a lie. Moreover, there is ample evidence that those who claimed Jesus had risen from the dead and thereby proved He was God were eyewitnesses (see Luke 1:1-4; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8; 1 John 1:1-4; <https://t.ly/jXTWI>).

A handout highlighting the above points is available at <https://t.ly/dzeiQ>.

Key point: Jesus was a good teacher if and only if His claims to be God were true.

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In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis put it this way (<https://t.ly/ah-fs>):

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

A PDF slide of this quote by C. S. Lewis is available at <https://t.ly/Ms0uD>.

PART THREE

The implications of who Jesus is for our own individual lives and for society today, including the implications regarding the nature of truth.

In part 2, **we indicated that if Jesus' teachings were false,**

- A. He was a lunatic because He believed Himself to be God and wasn't, or**
- B. He was a deceiver of the worst sort.**

Further, we said that Jesus was a good teacher if and only if His claims to be God were true. If His claims were true, there are huge implications for everyone, everywhere.

Let's assume Jesus is indeed who He claimed to be, even as the overwhelming evidence indicates. This means He is God's Son, and therefore God Himself. **Brainstorm:** What are some of the implications of this idea? Here are eleven:

1. Jesus' teachings are true, even those that seem especially contrary to conventional wisdom (<https://t.ly/FjtOf>).
2. The Bible is true.
3. Jesus isn't just a way to God, but the only way to Him (see John 14:6; Acts 4:8-12; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; <https://t.ly/ir1nH>).
4. We are accountable to God.
5. We — all people — are sinners, guilty before God and hopelessly lost in our sins unless we come to Him on His conditions.
6. When we are in a right relationship with God, we find our ultimate purpose in life.

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7. People cannot make up and live according to “their own truth” without paying a high price. Distribute “Rules for Relativists” (<https://t.ly/JwCdw>) and discuss how people who claim to believe that truth is relative can’t live by their own stated beliefs.
8. If relativism is true, right and wrong do not exist, and there is no such thing as sin. If relativism is true, Jesus didn’t have to die, and He didn’t die to pay the price for anyone’s sin. See “Jesus’ Death and Resurrection Refute Relativism Decisively” at <https://t.ly/GYTLY>.
9. Feelings are not the standard for determining right from wrong. The standard is God Himself, and what God says is right. He has revealed the truth about right and wrong in His Word, the Bible.
10. Absolute truth is a reality. Absolute truth includes a set of moral and ethical standards of right and wrong that applies to everyone, everywhere.
11. Truth matters.

Ask your participants if they can think of other implications of Jesus’ teachings about Himself.

Let’s consider points 10 and 11 in the above list more closely.

The nature of truth: Truth is absolute. What does that mean?

We could examine many passages of Scripture to validate this point, but I can think of none better than Matthew 7:21-29 (<https://t.ly/Ot5Tn>; we looked at this passage earlier, in part 2).

Discuss the similarities and differences between the lives of those who choose to build on sand, and the lives of those who choose to build on the bedrock of Jesus’ teachings.

A brief discussion of eight elements in Matthew 7:21-29 is available at <https://t.ly/xWvKZ>.

Commenting on Matthew 7:21-29 in an article available at <https://t.ly/qGGMq>, we said,

Is it wrong to murder? to lie? to steal? to cheat on one’s husband or wife? Does it matter how a person treats his or her parents? Does it really matter if a person ignores or reveres God?

Relativism says, “Well, it depends.” Relativists will prop up arguments for doing what they wish to do with euphemisms that make evil actions more palatable. Yet,

- if the God of the Bible is real and His Ten Commandments are authentic moral and ethical guidelines for living [all of these are realities if Jesus was who He claimed to be], then absolute truths exist, and right and wrong exist. Moreover, people are accountable to God. See Romans 14:12; Hebrews 4:13 (<https://t.ly/VVqbe>).
- Further, if Jesus was God and could not lie (as the Bible teaches), then His words are indeed are a foundation of bedrock. This means they are absolute.

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Therefore, murder, lying, stealing, and adultery really are wrong because each one is an affront to God's character and His revealed will. Also, it matters *a great deal* how a person treats his or her parents and how he or she responds to God. As we have said, God will hold people accountable for the choices they make and the actions they perform.

The English word *sayings* in Matthew 7:21-29 (<https://t.ly/Ot5Tn>; see vv. 24, 26, and 28) represents the Greek word *logos*, which means "word" or, in its plural form, *words*. In Luke 6:47 the word *sayings* stands for the very same Greek word. The bedrock foundation upon which Jesus' followers are to build their lives is made up of *His words, which include His affirmations of God's moral law* (<https://t.ly/yEQNq>). Mark it down. Jesus' words are not relative. They are true! They are absolute. You can take everything He has said to the bank!

Emphasize that the teachings Jesus likened to bedrock (His own teachings) primarily were about Himself and the need to respond to His claim to be God — even though they also included moral and ethical teachings. Recall Jesus' asking His disciples who people were saying he was, then who they believed he was. Peter answered, <https://t.ly/-yQbE> "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus didn't respond to Peter by saying, "Wait a minute, Peter. You've misunderstood! He instead indicated Peter was exactly right in his answer.

How would you answer the question Jesus asked Peter?

How has your answer affected how you live?

CONCLUSION

>> How, then, would you respond to the following statements? Would you respond any differently now than you would have responded before taking part in this study?

Do you 1) strongly agree, 2) somewhat agree, 3) aren't sure, 4) somewhat disagree, or 5) strongly disagree?

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Final exam: Could Jesus have been a great teacher without being God? Explain your answer.