Jesus Said What? Hearing Jesus Again

Five-week Anytime Sermon Series

Jesus Said What? invites readers to listen again to the surprising, challenging and sometimes uncomfortable words of Jesus. It asks what might happen if we read Scripture through the lens of grace, love and belonging instead of fear, certainty and exclusion. The book makes room for people who love Jesus but have questions about what they've been taught, along with those who have been hurt or pushed away by the church.

This five-week series focuses on some of the places where Jesus challenges the assumptions we've picked up along the way. We'll wrestle with teachings that can make us squirm a little, but can also change how we understand God, treat other people and live out our faith. The sermons will stand on their own, while the book can help people continue the conversation through personal reading, small groups and churchwide discussion.

Using this outline

Adapt these directions to your congregation and preaching voice. Each week includes two brief creative suggestions, a hymn and a modern Christian song, and an invitation people can carry into the week. Choose the ideas that serve the sermon; there's no need to use everything.

The pairings emphasize grace, mercy, belonging and love expressed in daily life. Songs can serve as congregational responses or reflective listening selections, depending on your worship setting.

Week 1: Love Your Enemies. Seriously.

Scripture: Matthew 5:43–48

Sermon Description:

“Love your enemies” may be one of the clearest teachings of Jesus and one of the hardest to practice. Jesus calls us to a love that resists hatred without ignoring harm, surrendering wisdom or abandoning healthy boundaries. Even the people who hurt us don’t get to decide who we become.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Explore what enemy-love does and doesn’t require. It doesn’t mean pretending nothing happened or remaining in an unsafe relationship. It means refusing to let resentment reshape us in the image of the person who wounded us. Invite people to identify where anger may be controlling more of their lives than they realize and consider one faithful step toward freedom.

Creative suggestions:

The reply you don’t send. Describe drafting an angry message, then pausing before sending it. Ask what a truthful response shaped by love might sound like.

Open hands. Invite people to notice the tension in a clenched fist, then gently open their hands as a prayer for freedom from resentment. Participation is optional.

Song suggestions:

Hymn: Help Us Accept Each Other (Fred Kaan). A prayer for learning to love across the divisions we create.

Modern: Make Us One (Jesus Culture) A prayer for God to overcome our divisions and help us love across the boundaries we’ve created.

Invitation for the week:

Pray for someone you resent without excusing the harm. Choose one response that protects your boundaries and refuses to feed hatred.

Week 2: Jesus Read Scripture Differently Too

Scripture: Matthew 12:1–14; Hosea 6:6

Sermon Description:

Jesus takes Scripture seriously enough to challenge interpretations that overlook mercy and human need. When religious leaders use the Sabbath rules to condemn hungry disciples and prevent healing, Jesus brings them back to the heart of God: “I want mercy and not sacrifice.” Following Jesus sometimes requires us to hear familiar words in a fresh way.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Show how Jesus interprets Scripture through the character and purposes of God rather than treating every passage as an isolated rule. Ask where Christians may be protecting an interpretation while missing the person standing in front of us. Encourage the congregation to approach Scripture with humility, curiosity and a willingness to be changed.

Creative suggestions:

The empty chair. Place a chair beside a stack of rulebooks. Ask whose story might be missing when we discuss what the rules require.

A rule that helps. Describe a hospital’s quiet-hours policy and a compassionate exception for a frightened patient. Connect the purpose of a rule with the person it’s meant to serve.

Song suggestions:

Hymn: There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy (Frederick William Faber). Keeps God’s generous mercy at the center of the service.

Modern: Teach Us Your Ways (The Porter’s Gate, featuring Leslie Jordan). A prayer for teachability expressed through shared life and compassionate love.

Invitation for the week:

Read Matthew 12:1–14 again. Ask where attending to someone’s actual need might change your response this week.

Week 3: Who Gets a Seat at the Table?

Scripture: John 4:1–42

Sermon Description:

Jesus crosses social, religious and personal boundaries to speak with a Samaritan woman others have learned to avoid. He sees her fully, speaks honestly with her and includes her in what God is doing. Her story challenges the church to become a place of genuine belonging instead of a religious VIP section.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Examine the barriers Jesus crosses and the dignity he restores before the woman has everything figured out. Consider the difference between allowing someone into the room and helping them know they truly belong there. Invite the church to notice who may still feel watched, tolerated or treated like a problem to solve.

Creative suggestions:

Pull up a chair. Begin with one chair set apart from a table, then move it into the circle. Ask what changes when someone is welcomed into the conversation.

Walk the welcome. Tell the story of arriving somewhere new. Contrast being pointed toward a room with someone walking alongside you and introducing you by name.

Song suggestions:

Hymn: For Everyone Born (A Place at the Table) (Shirley Erena Murray). Joins belonging with dignity and justice for everyone.

Modern: House of God (Lovers Lane Worship). An invitation to belonging and grace for people who haven’t felt at home in church.

Invitation for the week:

Help someone feel at home through a personal introduction or an invitation to share a meal. Let them set the pace.

Week 4: Stop Auditioning for God

Scripture: Luke 10:38–42; Matthew 11:28–30

Sermon Description:

Many people live as though God's love is real but also constantly under review. We try to prove our worth by working harder, serving more and getting everything right. Jesus meets tired and anxious people with grace, reminding us that we don't have to earn what God has already chosen to give.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Use Martha's anxiety and Jesus' invitation to rest to explore the fear underneath our busyness. What are we afraid will happen if we stop producing, performing or taking care of everyone else? Help people distinguish faithful service from the exhausting attempt to prove that they're useful, worthy or lovable.

Creative suggestions:

The imaginary scorecard. Hold up a scorecard labeled "Productivity," "Usefulness" and "Getting it right." Set it down while asking who taught us to measure God's love this way.

A moment to receive. Allow 30 seconds of quiet. Invite people to rest their hands and receive Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11 without planning their next task.

Song suggestions:

Hymn: Come and Find the Quiet Center (Shirley Erena Murray). Makes room for stillness within a crowded and anxious life.

Modern: Come As You Are (Crowder). Offers a gracious invitation to bring weariness and shame into God's welcome.

Invitation for the week:

Set aside ten minutes to rest without accomplishing anything. Let that time become a way of receiving God's love.

Week 5: Maybe Jesus Meant What He Said

Scripture: John 13:34–35; Matthew 25:31–40

Sermon Description:

Jesus says his followers will be recognized by the way they love. That love eventually has to reach our relationships, calendars, priorities and the way we treat people who are easily overlooked. Following Jesus is about becoming people whose lives increasingly look like his.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Bring the series into everyday life by asking where the words of Jesus actually land. Explore what Christlike love looks like at home, at work, in the church and around people we find difficult or inconvenient. Invite each person to choose one specific way to put the words of Jesus into practice rather than leaving them safely inside the sermon.

Creative suggestions:

Give love an appointment. Display a blank weekly calendar. Add a meal, a visit or a call as you describe how love becomes part of an ordinary week.

A neighbor's voice. With permission, share a brief story from someone involved in a local ministry about what receiving practical care meant to them. Let their experience guide the illustration.

Song suggestions:

Hymn: The Gift of Love (Hal H. Hopson). Draws on 1 Corinthians 13 to ask for a life shaped by love.

Modern: God of Justice (Tim Hughes). Moves the congregation toward practical care for people who are hungry or hurting.

Invitation for the week:

Choose one act of care, put it on your calendar and follow through. Notice what you learn from the person you serve.