



*The Gospel of Matthew:
A Primer for Discipleship*

Jim Denison, PhD

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Introducing the Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship

A “primer” is an elementary textbook. While the Gospel of Matthew may not seem elementary, considerable evidence shows it was intended to be a basic instruction book for the early church on what being a follower of Jesus means. Its usefulness for that purpose was recognized early on. A major purpose of the Gospel of Matthew is instruction for discipleship.

Can there be any doubt that today’s church needs a book like this and needs to give attention—elementary attention, even—to the theme of discipleship? The word *Christian* is bandied about so loosely and applied to so many questionable things and actions. So don’t we need to return to the New Testament to discover what exactly being “Christian” means?

Being Christian is not about merely getting saved. Salvation is indeed important, but it is often talked about in a misguided, superficial manner. Being Christian is about being a disciple of Jesus.

The priority of discipleship

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian who was martyred by Hitler in the closing days of World War II, wrote in his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, that Christianity is not about adhering to an abstract idea or set of teachings but rather is about adhering to Christ, following Christ, being a disciple of Christ. As Bonhoeffer wrote so eloquently, “Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” Bonhoeffer spoke of “cheap grace,” which he defined as “grace without discipleship.” Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* relies on the Gospel of Matthew as a guide to genuine discipleship.

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard also makes frequent reference to the Gospel of Matthew. He writes of “A Curriculum for Christlikeness,” definitely a needed curriculum. In speaking of the need for such a curriculum on discipleship, he uses the image of learning to ride a bicycle. He states, “When you teach children or adults to ride a bicycle or swim, they actually do ride bikes and swim. . . . You don’t just teach them that they *ought* to ride bicycles, or that it is *good* to ride bicycles, or that they should be ashamed if they don’t.”

Yet that is what happens in too many churches and Bible study classes with the instructions on discipleship in the Scriptures, including the Gospel of Matthew. That is not what we want to happen in this study.

This study of the Gospel of Matthew is indeed a study of the Gospel of Matthew. It moves sequentially through the Gospel. The Scriptures selected for study, though, relate specifically to the matter of discipleship. The study is intended to focus on discipleship as a major theme in the Gospel of Matthew. The study will encourage seeing that the Gospel of Matthew indeed is “a primer for discipleship.”

Further, to be as clear as possible, the intent is not that you learn from this study that you ought to live as Jesus' disciple, or that it would be good if you were to live as Jesus' disciple, or that you should be ashamed if you don't live as Jesus' disciple. Rather, the intent of this study is that you learn to actually live as Jesus' disciple. An additional intent is that you participate with your church in focusing on actually doing what Jesus commanded us to do: "make disciples . . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20).

Lesson 1:

The birth of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1:18–2:15, 19–23)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 1–2
- **Main idea:** The circumstances of Jesus' birth show that he is the Messiah and thus worthy to be followed.
- **Question to explore:** How do the circumstances of Jesus' birth show him worth following as his disciple?
- **Study aim:** To identify from the circumstances of Jesus' birth why Jesus is worth following as his disciple.
- **Quick read:** Wise people still make Jesus their King.

Commentary

My favorite Christmas ornament depicts Santa Claus bowing at the crib of the Christ. But we will all be deluged this month with opportunities to become distracted from the "reason for the season." Centuries before there were Christmas trees and cards, tinsel and toys and traditions, there was a baby in Bethlehem. Remembering who he was and why he came is vital to experiencing the transforming joy he brought.

The central function of Matthew's nativity stories was to persuade his readers that Jesus is the "Messiah." Who was this person? Why did his coming matter so much? How does he relate to our problems and challenges today?

Waiting for Messiah

All their religious observances and legalistic zeal could not change the fact that the Jews of Matthew's day lived in an occupied country. They had exchanged Babylonian rulers for Persians, then Greeks for Romans. Roman soldiers standing at every significant street corner were constant reminders that the Jews were subjects of the Empire. Jesus' admonishment to carry a soldier's pack not just one mile but two (Matthew 5:41) was born from the real-life frustration of living under the sandaled heel of Rome.

How was it possible that the nation chosen by God among all the peoples on earth could have come to such subjugation? How could a nation with no military and no independent resources throw off their yoke of oppression? The answer lay in a single word: *Messiah*.

God's promise had been clear:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Israel was to have a global purpose and achieve global and eternal significance.

This global dominance of the Jewish people was soon tied to one who would rule Israel and the world: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (Genesis 49:10). This ruler would "crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth," and all the other enemies of Israel (Numbers 24:17).

He would be a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). As a ruler even greater than David, "he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne" (Zechariah 6:13). In that glorious day, "ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech. 8:23).

Some saw this great redeemer as the Lord himself, others as the nation Israel. But many saw this figure as an individual, the "anointed" (*Messiah* in the Hebrew, *Mesiha* in the Aramaic, *Christos* or *Christ* in the Greek).

Some believed that the Messiah would function primarily as a prophet. Malachi had quoted God: "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come" (Malachi 3:1). The Old Testament ends with this prediction: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5).

In this light, it was natural for some to wonder if John the Baptist was the Messiah: "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ" (Luke 3:15). Their hopes were running so high that John had to state clearly, "I am not the Christ" (John 1:20).

Likewise, the Samaritans were expecting the Messiah to come as a prophet. The woman at the well expressed the conventional wisdom of their culture: "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us" (John 4:25). Jesus' rabbinic ministry caused Andrew and John to associate him with the Messiah (John 1:41). But most of the nation was not seeking a prophet to be their Messiah and liberator.

Some in the period following Malachi thought the Messiah would be a priest. A book called *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, while not on a par with Scripture, gained a wide following. It predicted that the Messiah would come as a priest from the tribe of Levi. However, Genesis 49:10 convinced most that the Messiah would be from the tribe of Judah and not a priest.

Others expected a miracle-working Messiah. Jesus' supernatural powers gained the attention of vast numbers, so that "many in the crowd put their faith in him. They said, 'When the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?'" (John 7:31).

But most expected their Messiah to be a military conqueror, a warrior who would destroy Rome and lead their nation into global dominance. God had promised David, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). The Scriptures later promised the restoration of David's line as the ruler of the nation:

- "Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky" (Psalm 89:35–37).
- "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this" (Isaiah 9:7).
- This ruler would "come up from the stump of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1), a reference to the Davidic line.
- Jeremiah heard the Lord say, "The days are coming when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:5–6).

The "intertestamental literature," books written after Malachi but not accorded the status of Scripture by the Jewish people, also claimed the promise that David's line would lead to a future ruler of the nation:

- "David, because he was merciful, inherited the throne of the kingdom for ever" (1 Maccabees 2:57 RSV).
- There would be a "Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days, who will arise from the posterity of David" (4 Ezra 12:32 RSV).

This prediction from 1 Enoch gives us a sense of the heightened expectations placed on the coming military Messiah:

And thus the Lord commanded the kings and the mighty and the exalted, and those who dwell on the earth, and said: Open your eyes and lift up your horns if ye are able to recognize the Elect One. And the Lord of Spirits seated him on the throne of His glory, and the spirit of righteousness was poured out upon him, and the word of his mouth slays all the sinners, and all the unrighteous are destroyed from before his face. And there shall stand up in that day all the kings and the mighty, and the exalted and those who hold the earth, and they shall see and recognize How he sits on the throne of his glory, and righteousness is judged before him, and no lying word is spoken before him. Then shall pain come upon them as on a woman in travail, and she has pain in bringing forth] when her child enters the mouth of the

womb, and she has pain in bringing forth. And one portion of them shall look on the other, and they shall be terrified, and they shall be downcast of countenance, and pain shall seize them, when they see that Son of Man Sitting on the throne of his glory. And the kings and the mighty and all who possess the earth shall bless and glorify and extol him who rules over all, who was hidden. For from the beginning the Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High preserved him in the presence of His might, and revealed him to the elect. And the congregation of the elect and holy shall be sown, and all the elect shall stand before him on that day. And all the kings and the mighty and the exalted and those who rule the earth shall fall down before him on their faces, and worship and set their hope upon that Son of Man, and petition him and supplicate for mercy at his hands. Nevertheless that Lord of Spirits will so press them that they shall hastily go forth from His presence, and their faces shall be filled with shame, and the darkness grow deeper on their faces. And He will deliver them to the angels for punishment, to execute vengeance on them because they have oppressed His children and His elect. (1 Enoch 62.3–11, RSV)

As David had been their military hero, the one who defeated the Philistines and established their nation in peace and security, so the Messiah coming from his line would be a military conqueror.

Of course, these expectations were unfulfilled by a would-be Messiah who died on a Roman cross ("Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse," Deuteronomy 21:23; cf. Galatians 3:13). But the Messiah as military conqueror was not God's plan for his Son's first advent on earth. Jesus was "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). The Father had always planned for his Son to die on the cross to pay for our sins.

The Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah made clear this purpose for the Messiah (cf. Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–9; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). While the Jewish people have usually applied these statements to the nation of Israel and her sufferings through the centuries, the New Testament consistently applies these predictions to Jesus (cf. Matthew 8:17; 12:18–21; 26:67; John 12:41).

When Jesus returns at his Second Coming, he most assuredly will come as the long-awaited military Messiah, the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16). On that day "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10–11).

It was the job of his first followers to explain his first coming to the world so people would be prepared for his second coming. This is why Matthew wrote his gospel and why he began with infancy narratives that demonstrate Jesus' right to the title of Messiah. That responsibility falls to you and me today.

Jesus was sent to the Jews (Matthew 1:18–25)

Our text is so significant that we could easily spend a month in its study. Rather than explore each important word in its grammatical and historical context, as I typically attempt to do, I will offer cultural exposition in hopes of clarifying the background and meaning of the narrative.

Matthew's gospel begins with his famous genealogy (Matthew 1:1–17), proving that Jesus was descended from both Abraham and King David. While his enemies sought other means to

discredit Jesus' ministry, they never suggested that he was unqualified by ancestry to be the Messiah. In this way, Matthew accomplished his first goal in demonstrating the Messianic credentials of his Lord.

Now he moved to his second goal: showing how the circumstances of Jesus' birth further reinforced his Messianic claims. Our study begins: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (vv. 18–19).

Joseph's dilemma

Engagement in Mary's culture was a year-long process during which she was pledged to Joseph as though she were his wife. At the end of the year, the two would become formally married and consummate their union. Marriage could be arranged at birth, but the girl was typically consulted before her engagement became official. She was likely a young adolescent at this time, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age. Her fiancé was probably much older, perhaps thirty or so.

Joseph was a resident of Galilee and a "righteous" man (v. 19). Taken together, these facts mean he was probably descended from Jewish missionaries who had moved from Judea a century earlier to evangelize this Gentile region. Joseph was a carpenter (thus Jesus was called the "carpenter's son," Matthew 13:55). He worked with wood to build malls, mend roofs, repair gates, make ox-yokes and plows, kitchen tools and beds, furniture and even houses and ships. He worked with metal as well. Joseph taught his son this trade so that Jesus was called a "carpenter" himself (Mark 6:3).

Since Joseph and Mary were pledged to be married, any sexual activity with another person would have been considered adultery. When Mary was "found to be with child," this must have been the greatest blow of Joseph's life. For many years he had kept himself for her, waiting for her to grow to the age of marriage. Now to learn that she has been with another man was devastating in the extreme. He did not yet know that her child was conceived "through the Holy Spirit" and would never have guessed such a miracle. Who would?

As he was a "righteous" man, one who kept the law in every dimension of his life, Joseph could not marry an adulteress without becoming complicit in her sin. He had two options.

One: he could "expose her to public disgrace," calling the town elders together and accusing his fiancée of adultery. If she was convicted, she could be stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10). In this way his public reputation would be preserved.

Two: he could "divorce her quietly." He could bring two witnesses, go to her family's home and declare himself divorced from her, pay the fine to the priest, and be done. He would give her a certificate of divorce (cf. Matthew 5:31) and their engagement would be broken. In kindness, Joseph chose the second option.

As a result, Mary would have had no home or family. Since she was pregnant, she could no longer claim her father's protection. She would have been a single mother raising a child in a very hostile world. Joseph's role was vital as the husband of Mary and adoptive father of Jesus.

Joseph's obedience

The narrative continues: "But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'" (vv. 20–21).

Dreams were a common way for angels to speak to people in the Bible. An angel appeared in this way to Jacob (Genesis 31:11), Daniel (Daniel 4:13), and Zechariah (Zechariah 4:1). He would speak to Joseph in this way again later (Matthew 2:13, 19). He called him "son of David," the only time a person other than Jesus is given this title in the New Testament.

Now Matthew made his point: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us'" (v. 23). Since Matthew wrote to show the Jews that Jesus was their Messiah, he quoted at least forty-eight Old Testament prophecies, more than any other New Testament writer, and always made clear their fulfillment in Jesus. Here he quoted Isaiah 7:14 (using the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), a prediction made seven centuries before it was fulfilled by Jesus' virgin birth.

Some controversy surrounds Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14. In the Hebrew original, the prophet had predicted that a "young woman" would be with child and bear a son. The Hebrew word is *almah*, translated "young maiden" elsewhere (cf. Genesis 24:43; Proverbs 30:19).

Isaiah could have used the more common word *betulah*, which always means "virgin." But in the context of Isaiah 7, it is clear that the prophecy refers to a naturally born baby who would be only a young boy when the kings then threatening Israel would be defeated. If Isaiah had meant that a physical virgin birth would occur seven centuries before Christ, two such virgin births would have occurred in history.

The Hebrew word leaves the sexual status of the young woman in question. But the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) rendered the word as *parthenos*, the typical word for a virgin. This is the word used in Matthew 1:23; Matthew did not misuse the Isaiah passage in any way. The Hebrew *almah* does not preclude the possibility of virginity, pointing only to the young age of the woman in question. Thus translations such as the New Revised Standard Version, which translate "young woman" in Isaiah 7:14, are not denying the virgin birth but rather giving the literal meaning of the Hebrew word.

All that said, the translation of Isaiah 7:14 is not crucial to the doctrine of the virgin birth. Mary made clear her sexual status (Luke 1:34), and Joseph knew that the child was not his (Matthew 1:18–19). He had no sexual relations with her until the child was born (v. 24).

As a result, "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus" (vv. 24–25).

Joseph obeyed the angel at considerable risk to himself. When he married a pregnant woman, society would assume that the child was his and that the couple had been promiscuous. In agreeing to provide parental protection for this child, he was obligating himself to a dangerous and difficult life. How dangerous, he would soon discover.

Joseph was obedient in three ways. He "took Mary home as his wife," completing their engagement and giving her the protection of his home and name. He "had no union with her until she gave birth to a son," so that there would be no question that the child was not his. And he "gave him the name Jesus" rather than a family name, to reveal to the world the purpose of the Son of God.

Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Joshua* or *Yeshua*, from the root meaning "to save." He is our "Savior," the one who saves us from the penalty of our sins. Our failures have separated us from our holy God, and the payment for sin is death (Romans 6:23). Jesus' death in our place paid this debt so we could be given eternal life.

Joseph is the silent man of Christmas. He never speaks a word in all the gospels. But his life and faith were so surrendered to God that Jesus could refer to his Father by the title he first used for his father: "Abba," Daddy (Mark 14:36).

Jesus was sent to the Gentiles (Matthew 2:1–12)

Now Matthew introduces Gentiles into his narrative. In so doing, he showed his readers another of Jesus' Messianic credentials. The prophets had predicted that when Messiah came, Gentiles would worship the God of Israel:

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Isaiah 2:2–4; cf. 60:1–6).

Historians date the death of King Herod at 4 BC. Prior to that time, "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him'" (Matthew 2:1–2).

Who were the Magi?

The "Magi" or Wise Men are one of the most intriguing and mysterious elements in the narratives of Jesus' childhood. Nearly everything in our traditions about them is wrong. We usually put three wise men in our manger scenes since they brought three kinds of gifts. But they usually traveled in groups of twelve or more for safety.

We have given them strange names as well. By the sixth century they were named Bithisarea, Melchior, and Gathaspa. The Syrians called them Larvandad, Hormisdas, and Gushnasaph. Tradition has amended their names and given them descriptions: Balthasar, sixty years of age, an African with a newly grown, stubbly beard; Melchior, forty years old, an Asian with a long, flowing beard; and Caspar, age twenty, a white, clean-shaven man. But all of this is legend, none of it fact.

Matthew records that the Magi came "from the east" (Matthew 2:1). They lived in Persia (Iran today). Second-century Christian art in the Roman catacombs depicts them in Persian garments. In fact, the reason invading Persians spared the Church of the Nativity in AD 614 was that they saw a golden mosaic over its doorway which depicted the Magi in Persian headdress and clothing.

Ironically, theirs was that part of the world to which the Jewish people had been exiled for seventy years during their Babylonian Captivity (a fact important to the story, as we will see shortly). As Gentiles, they could never have attended a Jewish worship service. In addition, they practiced magic and astrology, two skills forbidden by the Old Testament: "The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so" (Deuteronomy 18:14). Their belief in two gods is also forbidden by the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

In no sense would the Magi have been welcome in the Jewish temple or synagogue. They could never have attended a public worship of Yahweh God. But by God's grace, they were the first foreigners invited to worship the Christ. By his continued grace, they were not the last.

The Magi were the most learned people of their society, scholars in philosophy, medicine, and science. Herodotus (born 460 BC), the ancient Greek historian, records that after Cyrus the Great and the Persians defeated the Babylonians (539 BC), their religion held sway in Persia. However, Cyrus's son Cambyses severely repressed their movement. They revolted and set up Gaumata, their chief, as King of Persia under the name of Smerdis. He was beheaded along with his brother Patizeithes, and Darius became king (521 BC). The Persians dedicated a national holiday to this event, called *Magophonia* (*Histories* 3.63, 73, 79).

Their religious influence continued throughout the Achaemenian dynasty of Cyrus in Persia and flourished under Parthian dominion (beginning 247 BC) into the time of Christ. Strabo (born 63 or 64 BC) says that the Magian priests formed one of the two councils of the Parthian empire.

They were wealthy, of such independent means that they could leave their homes and families for a journey lasting more than two years and could afford the finest gifts for the Child when they found him.

Above all, they were religious men. Unfortunately, their name gives us the wrong impression of their religious activity. The word *magoi* often means "magician" in the Bible (cf. Acts 8:9; 13:6,

8; Daniel 1:20; 2:2; 10, 27; 4:4; 5:7, 11, 15). But they were far more than this. They were leaders among the people of faith in ancient Persia, much like the Levites of ancient Israel. In fact, no sacrifice could be made unless one of them was present.

Their supreme god was Ahura Mazda (sometimes called Auramazda), "All-Wise Lord." He was believed to be a pure spirit, known for wisdom, truth, goodness, majesty, and power. They saw him as the creator of all good creatures, but not of evil or evil beings. He was their supreme lawgiver, rewarding good and punishing evil. To them, he dwells in eternal light. In fact, they believed light to be a manifestation of his presence (explaining why they would identify a star with a divine king).

Opposing Ahura Mazda was Anro Mainyus, the evil spirit. He was viewed as the creator of all evil, both moral and physical, to be destroyed at the end of time. Good spirits, corresponding to our angels, were thought to hover around Ahura Mazda. Of these, Mithra was the most important. A sun deity in origin, he was thought to be the Spirit of Light and Truth and was their favorite "spirit." He was linked so closely with Ahura Mazda as to sometimes seem almost his equal. Atars, the Genius of Fire, was also crucial to them. And so we can see how they might believe that a star, made of fire and giving light, could be trusted to lead them safely to the One they sought to worship.

For Persians, worship was an essential duty in venerating their creator. No animal sacrifices were made, but gifts were brought as offerings. If they had been Jews, they would have brought animals to sacrifice to God; in their religion, gifts were their appropriate offerings.

The religion of the Magi mandated the highest ethical standards. Goodness was required in thought and action, as a means of serving Ahura Mazda and refusing Anro Mainyus. All heresy, untruthfulness, and immorality were specifically rejected. They believed that they would be judged on their merits after death. The just would pass into heaven, the abode of Ahura and his blessed angels. The wicked would fall into hell. At the end of time, a last Prophet or Savior would come. He would bring the resurrection of the dead, the general judgment of the entire world, the burning of the existing universe, and the eternal destruction of the evil spirits.

Why did they come to Jesus?

The Magi combined these expectations of a coming Savior with the Messianic traditions they learned from the exiled Jews and considered the King of the Jews to be the very Savior they were expecting. And so we understand their gifts of gold (for a king), frankincense (for a priest), and myrrh (for a sacrificial Savior).

The ten northern tribes of Israel had been deported by Assyria in 722 BC; the southern kingdom of Judah was exiled to Babylon for seventy years beginning around 600 BC. In their oppression, the Hebrews especially elevated their expectations of a Messiah who would liberate them. And so their teachings regarding a coming Messiah would be known to the Persians and especially interest the Magi.

What did they learn from Jewish scripture and tradition about a coming Savior? The Wise Men could know that he would be born of a woman's seed (Genesis 3:15), of a young virgin (Isaiah 7:14), and be descended from Abraham (Genesis 22:18), Isaac (Genesis 21:12), and Jacob

(Numbers 24:17). He would be part of the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:19), thus surviving the Assyrian assimilation of the northern tribes. He would come from the line of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1) and the house of King David (Jeremiah 23:5). And so they would naturally call him "king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) and bring him gifts (Psalm 72:10).

They understood that a "king of the Jews" was coming; that he was for all peoples, not just the Hebrew nation; and that he deserved their worship and willing service. And so they were waiting for their Savior to consummate history. They believed that light and fire would show the way to him. They understood their sacrificial journey and lavish gifts to be a means of obedience to their god, Ahura Mazda, and a means of securing their own places in heaven.

And so they set out on the journey which would change their history, and ours.

For centuries, Magi in the East had watched the stars as windows into the future, believing that they would announce the birth of those who were destined for greatness. During the time of Jesus, it was widely believed that a universal ruler would come from Judea.

The Roman historian Suetonius (AD 69–122) recorded, "There had spread all over the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world" (*Vespasian* 4). Tacitus (AD 56–120), the greatest of ancient Roman historians, made nearly the same reference: "There was a firm persuasion, that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judaea, were to acquire universal empire" (*Histories* 5.13).

This advent of a special star would announce to the Magi that the long-awaited King of the Jews had come. The star they saw on that magical night rose *en anatole*, "in the east." This was the Magi's technical term for an acronical rising, when an object rises at sunset and is visible all night. The phrase does not mean that they were led to the east, but that they saw the star in that direction.

In fact, they did not follow the star to Jerusalem at all, despite our legends. The Magi saw his star, and then journeyed to the capital of his country to find him. Only then did the star make its second appearance: "The star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:9). To this point, the star of Christmas could have been a natural phenomenon. But nothing in the skies had ever pointed travelers to a specific house. And that's precisely what the star did for the Wise Men on that miraculous night.

Who was Herod?

Naturally, the Magi went to the present ruler of the country to find the newborn king. However, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3). Why?

Herod captured Jerusalem in 37 BC and made himself into Herod the Great. In many ways he was. He rebuilt the Jewish temple, making it far grander even than Solomon's first temple had been. He constructed fortifications which still stand today. He built Caesarea by the Sea, naming it for Caesar (Octavian, or Augustus). He constructed a magnificent palace for himself at Jerusalem.

But his paranoid fear of any potential threat to his power led Herod to execute his wife and most of his family. When the Magi informed him that a new "King of the Jews" had been born, his paranoia grew to insanity. His subsequent slaughter of the Bethlehem infants (Matthew 2) was completely in keeping with his character. He died on April 1, 4 BC, leaving a political structure in shambles.

When the Magi came to him, Herod found himself in a difficult position. If he allowed this news to spread, the new king could gain popularity. If he ignored the situation, it might escalate into a threat to his power. He chose a third option: "When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born" (v. 4). They replied, "In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel" (v. 5, quoting Micah 5:2).

Now what was Herod to do? If he went to Bethlehem himself, he would only call attention to the new king and might be seen as honoring his authority. His solution was ingenious and manipulative: "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared" (v. 7). In this way he would know the age of his rival to the throne.

Then "he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him'" (v. 8). He sent the Magi secretly to Bethlehem so news of the new king would not spread. He commissioned them to bring back news to him so he could end this threat to his throne.

How did the Magi worship the King?

Of course, the Magi were oblivious to such palace intrigue:

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (vv. 9–12)

It had been two years since the Magi first saw the Star of Bethlehem. We know this because Herod, after realizing that he had been outwitted by them, "gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (v. 16). He had earlier called the Magi and discovered the exact time the star had appeared (v. 7). Perhaps he was being thorough in ordering that all the boys from two years of age be killed. More likely, this was the length of time that had elapsed since the Magi had seen the star.

They did not spend the entire two years in travel. Upon witnessing the star, they spent considerable time studying its appearance and significance. They gathered expensive gifts which were not readily available to them. They traveled with a large group for safety in consideration

of the valuable treasures they brought. And so they journeyed over nine hundred miles to find the King of the Jews.

Travel during the winter months was harder than in summer, and tribal warfare could lengthen a journey significantly. The Magi spent life-changing time with the Holy Family upon their arrival in Bethlehem. And some time elapsed before Herod realized that the Wise Men would not return to Jerusalem. In all, they invested years of their lives and considerable resources in their pilgrimage. And when they arrived, their gifts completed their story and made it ours as well.

Picture it: Magi from the East, at least twelve in number, riding on camels, in flowing robes, with all the wealth and grandeur of their culture. They wound their way through narrow stone and mud streets to a carpenter's "house" (not the "manger" of Luke 2:16, further indicating that they arrived some time after Jesus' birth) in a tiny village, bowing before a two-year-old peasant boy.

And made him their Lord.

The Wise Men gave him gold, making him their king. This was the gift of royalty, the costliest present they could offer. Magi, the subjects of the Persian king, gave their highest loyalty to a small boy. Though they were men of wealth and prestige, they surrendered their lives and goods to a carpenter's son.

The Magi gave the Christ child their frankincense as well. This was a fragrant gum burned as incense by priests. It was made of small white beads that were ground into powder and gave off an odor like balsam wood when burned. Priests used it to cover the scents of their sacrifices. It was a gift for a priest, as no other person would have use for it. Even though they were the priests of their culture, they made this child their priest.

In the ancient world, a priest was thought of as a "bridge-builder," one who brings mankind to God and God to mankind. The Wise Men had served this function in their veneration of Ahura Mazda and the worship they led for others. Now they found a greater priest, one who could build a bridge between them and God. In giving him their frankincense, they gave him their faith.

And they presented the child with myrrh. This was an orange-colored resin from small thorn trees. It was expensive, used for perfumes (cf. Esther 2:12; Psalm 45:8), anointing oil, embalming, and medicine. It made its first appearance in the Bible with the Ishmaelites who purchased Joseph from his brothers: "Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt (Genesis 37:25). Jacob directed his sons to bring myrrh among their gifts to the Egyptian authorities in seeking their favor (Genesis 43:11).

Ironically, myrrh was offered to the Child again some thirty years later on his cross: "Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it" (Mark 15:23). He refused its narcotic effect so that he might have all his senses to the end. Its most significant purpose was for the embalming of a body. After Jesus' death, "Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds" (John 19:39). He unknowingly fulfilled the Magi's prediction that the Christ would be a sacrificial Savior.

The Magi would soon prove their obedience to their new king by obeying the dream which sent them home by another way (Matthew 2:12). The Wise Men risked their lives to transport gold

from Persia. Now they would risk their lives again to serve the King they honored. Had Herod found them, he would have executed them for treason. They gave their total allegiance to this boy they crowned their King and Lord.

And so the Wise Men brought to Jesus the three gifts which most signified his true nature and mission: to be our king, our priest before God, and our Savior. In his death he saved us from our sins as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). He is now our "high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebrews 8:1). And when he returns to our planet, he will wear on his robe and on his thigh his name, "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 19:16).

No greater single Christology can be found in all of Scripture than the gifts of the Magi to the Christ child. Now we are invited to join their worship. We may not have myrrh to give him, but we can still make him our Savior. We can ask him to forgive our sins and failures and turn our lives over to him. We can invite him to save our souls and make us God's children. And he will answer our prayer and save us for all time.

We may not have frankincense to give him, but we can still make him our Priest. We can pray to him and through him to our Father. We can spend this day in his presence, communing with his Spirit, listening to his voice. We can practice the presence of God with Jesus as our Priest and intercessor.

We may not have gold to offer him, but we can still crown him our King. We can read and obey his word. We can live by his will. We can surrender our lives, ambitions, and future to his purpose today.

He is greater than Herod (Matthew 2:13–23)

Even though the Magi did not disclose his location to Herod, Jesus was still in grave danger. Given the close proximity of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, it would not take long for him to realize that the Magi were not going to return. He could quickly send soldiers to find Jesus.

So, that night, "when they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him'" (Matthew 2:13).

This was a great sacrifice for Joseph—leaving his homeland, his extended family, and the business he had established in Bethlehem. Egypt was a logical location for their exodus, however. A large Jewish population had fled there during the time of the Babylonian captivity five centuries earlier. While the country was under Roman rule, it was outside Herod's jurisdiction. The Romans treated their provinces as independent, with little extradition from one to another.

So Joseph "got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son'" (vv. 14–15).

In this way Jesus reversed the Exodus, returning to the land which had sheltered and then enslaved his earliest ancestors. This fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called my son." As God called Israel out of Egypt fifteen centuries earlier, so he would call his Son from there back to his people.

Now comes the tragic conclusion to Herod's part of the nativity narrative:

When Herod realized he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15).

Herod was "furious"—the Greek means that he was furious beyond words. He did not know the exact location of the threat to his throne, but he knew the village. He took no chances. As the Magi had seen the star some two years earlier, Herod executed all the baby boys from that age and under. Historians estimate that as many as twenty or thirty families were devastated by this horrific tragedy.

Matthew found precedent for this tragedy in the time of Jeremiah (cf. Jeremiah 31:15). Ramah was a town through which the Jews passed on their exile to Babylon. Rachel was the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh, and by extension the children of Israel so devastated by the Babylonians.

Our study ends with Jesus' return to Israel:

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:19–23).

Herod the Great, the most powerful ruler in recent Jewish history, was no match for the infant Son of God. After Herod's death, his son Archelaus took control of the southern region of Judea. He was so cruel a despot that he was deposed after ten years, the region given to "procurators" (governors) by Rome.

So Joseph returned to Galilee, his original homeland, and settled in Nazareth. Joseph's decision fulfilled "what was said through the prophets"—note the plural. There is no single Old Testament statement, "He will be called a Nazarene," so Matthew did not mean that Jesus' home town was a linguistic fulfillment of Scripture. Rather, to be a "Nazarene" was a despised thing in the first century (cf. John 1:45–46), and David (Psalm 22:6) and Isaiah (53:3) had predicted that the Messiah would be despised and rejected.

(Some linguists offer a second explanation. Isaiah 11:1 predicted that from Jesse's roots "a Branch will bear fruit." "Branch" is the Hebrew *neser*, which may be the source of "Nazarene.")

Conclusion

As you relate Matthew's narrative to your life, consider emulating Joseph's obedience. Without his submission, the story would have turned out very differently.

Or consider emulating the Magi's sacrifice as well. These Gentile scholar/priests gave up much to make a Jewish infant their King.

What will it cost you to follow their examples?

Lesson 2:

God's beloved Son, baptized by John (Matthew 3)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 3
- **Main idea:** Jesus' baptism by John showed Jesus' identification with John's call to genuine repentance in preparation for God's kingdom and brought God's affirmation of Jesus as his beloved Son.
- **Question to explore:** What response does Jesus' baptism call for from his disciples?
- **Study aim:** To state what Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist means and identify how it relates to discipleship.
- **Quick read:** Disciples make God their King every day.

Commentary

A machinist at Ford Motor Company in Detroit became a Christian and was baptized. He took his baptism seriously. He had been stealing parts and tools from Ford for years. The morning after his baptism, he took all the stolen parts and tools back to his boss. He explained his situation and his recent conversion and baptism, and he asked for forgiveness.

This response by an employee was without precedent. Mr. Ford was visiting a European plant at the time, but he was cabled concerning the details of this matter. His response was requested. Mr. Ford immediately returned a cable with his decision: "Dam up the Detroit River, and baptize the entire city."

Jesus went even further. In his Great Commission, he ordered his church to baptize *all* nations (Matthew 28:19). Why? Because baptism is an external symbol of an internal submission to God as our King. Such a commitment is at the heart of discipleship and is vital for Christians long after their baptism is conducted.

You may have surrendered your body physically to baptism years ago. When last did you surrender your life to God as your King?

Choose God to be your King (Matthew 3:1–6)

Our text begins: "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea" (v. 1). "In those days" refers to the nearly thirty years Jesus spent in Nazareth and links the previous narrative to the present text. "Came" translates *paraginetai*, "to appear suddenly." We might say that he "burst on the scene."

Meet John

"John" means "Yahweh is gracious." "Baptist" is literally "one baptizing" or "baptizer." We have given him the name "John the Baptist" by virtue of his most noted activity. "Preaching" translates *kerysso*, which means to "announce" or "declare."

The "Desert of Judea" was the wilderness area around the Dead Sea. It is honeycombed with caves, several of which were found in 1947 to contain the Dead Sea Scrolls. Here individuals and small communities lived apart from society, separated to the service of God in a kind of monastic lifestyle. From the time he was a child, John "lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:80).

What do we know about John? Let's gather the biblical facts regarding this fascinating person.

- He was related to Jesus (Luke 1:36), perhaps as cousins.
- His birth was announced by an angel (Luke 1:11–20).
- At his birth he was set apart by his parents as a Nazirite (Luke 1:15; cf. Numbers 6:2–3).
- As a result, he grew up in the desert (Luke 1:63, 80).
- He identified Jesus as the Messiah (John 1:29–36).
- And he exalted Jesus (John 3:25–36) by his witness (John 5:33).
- He baptized Jesus (Matthew 3:13–16), but later came to doubt him (Matthew 11:2–6).
- Many identified him with Elijah (Matthew 11:13–14).
- After he chastised Herod for adultery (Mark 6:17–18), he was imprisoned (Matthew 4:12) and beheaded (Matthew 14:3–12).
- Jesus paid John the highest compliment: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11).

The only information we have about him outside the New Testament comes from Josephus:

Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they

seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure against him.

Observe his ministry

John's message was bold and urgent: "and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (v. 2). John was "saying"—the syntax indicates repeated and consistent delivery of a message. "Repent" translates *metanoete*, a change of mind that results in a change of life. Why were his hearers required to change their ways? Because "the kingdom of heaven is near." What is this kingdom?

"Kingdom" translates *basileia*, "rule, reign, realm." "Of heaven" indicates that this kingdom belongs to the realm of heaven and thus of God. "Near" translates *engizo*, "drawing near" or "approaching." As God is king in heaven, so he is coming to be king on earth. If a messenger in medieval France were to announce that "the kingdom of Britain is near," he would mean that the British king was coming to extend his rule on French soil.

Jesus gave us the most succinct definition of the kingdom of God when he taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). God's kingdom comes whenever and wherever his will is done. When we make him our King by obeying his word and will, we live in his kingdom and extend his reign on earth.

Matthew, writing to persuade his Jewish audience that Jesus is their Messiah, never missed an opportunity to demonstrate ways that his Lord fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Here is an example: "This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him"' (Matthew 3:3).

"Prepare" translates *hetoimazo*, "to make ready, to get everything in readiness." "Lord" renders *kyrios*, "king," a term typically reserved for the Roman Emperor. Messengers were typically sent ahead of a king to announce his coming and to make all necessary preparations. Where roads were obstructed, they were cleared; where they were crooked, they were made "straight." "Roll out the red carpet for him" catches the sense of John's message.

Moses had predicted such a prophet: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18). Matthew substantiated John's ministry by quoting Isaiah 40:3, a connection made by all four Gospels (cf. Mark 1:2–3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23). The original context of Isaiah's prophecy referred to highway construction workers who were called to clear the desert roads for the return of the Lord as his people returned from Babylonian captivity in 537 BC. Now John fulfilled that ministry by calling the people to prepare spiritually for the coming of their Lord and King.

Everything about his ministry was intentional, beginning with his clothing and diet: "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4). Jews typically wore an undergarment covered by an outer cloak. This cloak was their protection from the elements; when they slept out at night, it was their bedding. It was a square piece of fabric, with holes for the head and arms, bound around the waist with a belt. "Camel's hair" made a coarse but durable and effective cloak; a "leather belt" was the most common kind.

In a day when many people wore embroidered cloaks and jeweled belts, John wore the clothes of a common laborer. His appearance reminded the people of Elijah, the prophet who wore "a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:8). John's appearance was another way he fulfilled the Lord's promise: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5–6).

John's diet was equally austere: "His food was locusts and wild honey." "Locusts" translates *akris*, referring to grasshoppers or locusts. These desert insects are still eaten by Bedouin today—they are roasted over an open flame, boiled, or baked. "Wild honey" was naturally occurring in the desert and made a good source of energy and vitamins. He ate the simplest of foods, identifying with the commoners of his day as he called the nation to their King.

Respond to his message

John's message and ministry were extremely effective: "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan" (Matthew 3:5). Jerusalem was the capital of Israel, of course, and the home of the wealthiest and most influential people in the nation. "All Judea" describes the region in which Jerusalem was situated, something like its "county" or "state." "The whole region of the Jordan" identifies the Jordan River valley, running from the Dead Sea north into Samaria. Matthew's description includes people from every walk of life and strata of civilization.

They did not come merely to see and hear this unusual messenger but to respond to his message: "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (v. 6). "Confessing" renders *exomologeo*, to acknowledge or admit. As their baptism was public, we can assume that their confession was public as well.

"Baptism" (from the Greek *baptizo*, meaning "to immerse") was a custom predating John. Gentiles immersed themselves in water when they became Jews. Jews took ritual baths for purification purposes before coming to certain functions at the Temple. But John's baptism was different: it required repentance and symbolized the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism did not produce such forgiveness—it pictured it. Burial under water was the symbol of burying the old person and raising up the new. In the same way, Paul taught that we are "buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4).

Why should Christians be baptized?

Christian denominations vary widely in their understanding of baptism and its significance. The Catholic tradition views baptism as the first sacrament children receive, a step by which they begin their journey in the Christian faith. Some Protestant traditions similarly view infant baptism as an act of faith on the part of believing parents, a kind of New Testament circumcision.

Churches who baptize believers by immersion do so for the following reasons.

First, we view baptism as an act of obedience. Jesus commanded us to baptize every person who becomes his disciple. The early church followed this command very carefully, baptizing those who became Christians at Pentecost (Acts 2:41) and those who trusted Christ as a result of personal witnessing (Acts 8:38). Baptism does not make us Christians, but it is a very important response to God's call to obedience. And it is a call only believers can answer.

Second, baptism is an act of witness. By baptism we tell others of our new life in Jesus Christ. Again, baptism does not create this life; the water does not wash away our sins, nor must we be baptized to be saved. Rather, baptism shows others that we have already received this salvation. In the act of immersion, we are laid under water to symbolize the burial of the "old person" we were before trusting Christ as Lord. We are then raised out of the water to symbolize the resurrection of the "new person" we are now in Christ. This symbolism is best portrayed by the immersion of those who have trusted Jesus personally.

Traditions that practice infant baptism do so to dedicate children to God upon the faith of their parents. However, the only baptisms described in the New Testament involved persons who had come to personal faith in Christ as Lord. And so churches that practice the immersion of Christians believe they are continuing the New Testament model. In the churches I have pastored, I explained to those who were baptized as infants that their immersion as a believer in no way invalidates the faith their parents demonstrated in baptizing their child. Rather, it completes their dedication as the person makes public his or her own faith commitment.

Now John's ministry continues through Matthew's inspired narrative. As he called the people of his day to prepare for their King, so he calls us to make the Coming One our Lord. And he invites us to continue his ministry through our own.

Great people plant trees they'll never sit under. In a very real way, we are all the fruit of John's ministry to his King.

Serve God as your King (Matthew 3:7–12)

God is our King to the degree that we obey him, whether we want to or not. There will be times when such service will be easy and times when it will be very challenging. What comes next is an example of the latter: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'" (v. 7).

To understand the courage of John's response, it is essential that we know the significance of "Pharisees and Sadducees." When the Greek Empire displaced the Persians (332 BC) and

attempted its Hellenization of Judea, opposition arose from a party known as the "Hasidim" ("pious ones"). These laymen were champions of orthodox religion and repudiated all things Gentile. They evolved into the party known as "Pharisees" ("Separated Ones"). They accepted both the written Scriptures and the teachings of the rabbis, believed in an afterlife, and focused on legalism and tradition.

The Pharisees were the spiritual athletes of their day, much respected for their zeal and legalistic sacrifice. The Sadducees were a very different force in first-century Judaism. The high priest and his political cronies had embraced the Greek leaders and their culture and evolved into the "Sadducees." They accepted only the written text, rejected the existence of afterlife or angels, and were extremely involved in politics.

While both groups were viewed as significant religious authorities, John knew their hearts and motives. "Brood of vipers" (literally "offspring of vipers") was an extremely significant deprecation. Ancient tradition held that vipers were "mother killers," snakes that ate their way out of their mothers, killing them in the process. John's metaphor was meant to indicate that these religious leaders were "killing" the One they claimed as their Father. As snakes would flee a field on fire, so they should flee the coming "wrath" (*orge*, anger, punishment).

And they should "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8), literally "fruit that is the appropriate result of repentance." Jesus warned us:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. (Matthew 7:15–20)

John knew their hearts: "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). Their religious pedigree as children of Abraham (pure-blooded Hebrews) was not enough, nor their elevated positions in society.

Their repentance was urgent: "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (v. 10). Every time the Hebrew Bible uses the metaphor of a tree cut down or burned, it refers to God's judgment against a nation (Ezekiel 31:12–18; Daniel 4:23; Jeremiah 11:16). By cutting the tree at its roots, the farmer would destroy it so that it had no chance to regenerate. When it was "thrown into the fire," it was totally destroyed.

John continued his warning: "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11). "I" is emphatic, literally rendered "I indeed." "I baptize you with water for repentance" does not mean that water baptism produces repentance or substitutes for it, but that it serves as an external symbol of an internal reality.

"Whose sandals I am not fit to carry" points to a custom in Jesus' day by which only slaves could be made to handle the sandals of another (cf. John 13, where Jesus performed a slave's task by washing his disciples' feet). John meant that he was lower than a slave in relation to the One coming. He would baptize his followers "with the Holy Spirit and with fire," a prediction that was fulfilled at Pentecost, when tongues of fire came on those being filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:3–4).

There was no time to waste, for "his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). When grain was harvested, it was then threshed by oxen or other animals, a process that separated the grain from the husks. A "winnowing fork" was then used to toss both wheat and husks into the air; the heavier wheat would fall to the floor, while the lighter husks would be blown away. If the farmer had his winnowing fork in hand, this meant that the separation between wheat and chaff was about to begin. He would soon sweep the chaff together and throw it into the "unquenchable fire."

The Jews expected such judgment to come against the Gentiles. John shocked them with his warning that this judgment would come against all who do not bear the fruit God requires. But to the faithful of God, the promise that the wheat would be protected and rewarded was good news.

We show that God is our King when we serve him. We serve him by acting in ways that honor him and obey his word. Our spiritual heritage or status carries no significance with the Lord. It is vital that we submit our lives to his service today, for we are one day closer to his judgment than ever before.

Please God as your King (Matthew 3:13–17)

The best way to choose and serve God as our King is to measure success by what pleases him. Ask of every thought, word, and action, "Will this please my Lord?" As Jesus lived his life to please his Father, so he empowers and directs us to do the same.

Our text continues: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John" (v. 13). Why would he need to participate in John's baptism? He had never sinned (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26; 1 John 3:5). The Baptizer had the same question: "But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (Matthew 3:14). John was the sinner, not Jesus.

Our Lord's response is puzzling at first: "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented" (v. 15). Jesus meant that he would be baptized to identify with all who were coming to God in repentance, affirming and endorsing the kingdom movement begun by John. "To fulfill all righteousness" means to do everything God requires.

The larger purpose behind Jesus' baptism was then revealed: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him" (v. 16). His baptism was by immersion, for he "went up out of the water." While he was still in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended on him

"like a dove." The Greek could mean that the Spirit took the visible form of a dove but more likely means that he descended as a dove descends. At creation, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:2) as a bird hovers over her nest.

In this same moment, "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:17). This statement combined two significant Old Testament quotations. "This is my Son" is taken from Psalm 2:7: "I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'" Every Jewish teacher believed that this psalm would be fulfilled by the Messiah when he came.

"With him I am well pleased" comes from Isaiah 42:1: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations." This verse begins the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah, which continue to Isaiah 53. Taken together, they pointed to the sufferings Jesus would face, culminating with the cross. He would be the Messiah of the people, but he would conquer their sin by dying for them. The Father would repeat this affirmation at the Mount of Transfiguration: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 17:5).

The appearance of the Spirit and the voice of the Father together constituted the two public witnesses necessary to confirm Jesus' status as the Suffering Messiah. Deuteronomy 19:15 specified that "a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses"; this requirement would be affirmed later by Jesus (Matthew 18:16).

The Father could say of his Son's humble sacrifice, "I am well pleased."

Will he say the same of your service?

Conclusion

The kingdom of God is the central theme of Scripture. Making God our King is the most vital, urgent commitment we can make today. God is looking for another John the Baptizer, one who will model submission to his rule and call others to join his realm.

Who has made God their King because of you?

I often explain baptism as a wedding ring. Wearing such a ring does not make us married. Nor does the absence of a wedding ring prove that we are not married. Rather, a ring shows the world our marital status. It is a public symbol of a personal commitment. So it is with our baptism as Christians—we tell the world that Jesus is our Lord, inviting others to join our faith.

Will your life proclaim the same message?

Lesson 3: Called to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:12–22)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 4:12–25
- **Main idea:** Jesus changed the disciples' lives when they responded to his call, "Follow me."
- **Question to explore:** What kind of response does Jesus' challenge, "Follow me," call for?
- **Study aim:** To decide how I will respond to Jesus' ministry in light of the response of disciples whom he challenged, "Follow me."
- **Quick read:** When we "fish for men," we extend Jesus' kingdom and ministry today.

Commentary

The boy was very young when his father died, and his family was so poor that the creditors literally took everything. They lost it all, including the firewood. Their family was so poor as he grew up that when they went to church, his mother had them carry their socks and shoes until they got within sight of the church, then put them on—so they wouldn't wear them out.

The young man began a business selling shoes. In the back of his shoe store, a Sunday school teacher named Ezra Kimball led him to faith in Christ as his Lord. He started inviting his friends and neighborhood children to his church. The church didn't want the children, so he went out on the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago and began a ministry. He was a layman, never licensed or ordained, yet in his day he grew the largest church in the world.

Then, in Dublin, Ireland, he heard a man named Henry Varley say in a sermon, "The world has yet to see what God will do with, and for, and through, and in, and by the man who is wholly consecrated to him." He decided then and there to be that man. And it is believed that one hundred million people heard the gospel through Dwight L. Moody.

Can one person change the world?

In this chapter we will watch Jesus begin his public ministry in Capernaum. We will listen as he calls businessmen to join his kingdom enterprise. And we will decide whether or not to join them.

If we follow our Lord, he will use our lives to change our world. If not, he won't. Choose wisely.

Be strategic (Matthew 4:12–16)

After Jesus' baptism, he was immediately "led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1). Here he refused to use his divine power to meet his own needs (vv. 2–4), impress the crowds (vv. 5–7), or serve the Enemy (vv. 8–11).

Now Matthew picks up the narrative: "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee" (v. 12). Matthew doesn't tell us how Jesus "heard" (*akousas*, "received the news") that John had been imprisoned. Perhaps John's disciples brought him the news, or the event became so significant that the populace was discussing it.

Matthew 14 tells us the larger story: John opposed Herod Antipas' decision to cohabit with his brother's wife, a clear violation of the law (Leviticus 18:16). Herod, the ruler of Judea, wanted to kill John but feared his popularity (Matthew 14:5), so he imprisoned him instead. John was eventually beheaded at the request of Herod's wife and her daughter (vv. 6–12).

Jesus knew that his close identity with John's ministry would limit his ability to travel and serve in Judea during this time, so "he returned to Galilee." "Returned" translates *anechoresen*, to "take refuge" or "withdraw." But where would he go? Galilee was seventy miles long by forty miles wide. According to Josephus, the commanding general of the region in AD 66, it had 204 cities and villages (*Wars* 3.3.2). Which would he choose?

A strategic place

Jesus had lived his entire life (except the time his family sought refuge in Egypt) as a resident of Nazareth, a small village in Galilee. In Jesus' day, it likely housed no more than twenty families. It gave the Son of God a safe place to grow up far from the public eye, but its obscurity would now prove an obstacle to his kingdom ministry: "Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali" (Matthew 4:13).

"Leaving" translates *katalipon* to "leave to one side" or "give up." He left his hometown, not just physically but permanently. "Went" renders *erchomai*, to "come, go, make one's way toward." "Lived" translates *katokesen*, to reside, settle down, choose to inhabit. Jesus closed the door to Nazareth as he chose to make his home in Capernaum. Why there?

Capernaum was the largest city in that part of Galilee. A major fishing and trading center on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, it would give Jesus access to the larger population of the region.

In addition, its residents would prove more receptive to his ministry than those in his hometown. Luke tells us that Jesus returned to Nazareth after his baptism and wilderness temptations, where he spoke from Isaiah 61:1–2 and claimed his Messianic office. However, the people of Nazareth rejected his message and tried to kill him (Luke 4:22–30).

As a result, "he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people" (v. 31). They responded very differently from those in Nazareth: "They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority" (v. 32).

A strategic prophecy

In addition to Capernaum's cultural significance and receptive populace, its location proved strategic for a third reason as well: "to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned'" (Matthew 4:14–16).

"Fulfill" translates *plerothe*, to complete, finish, fill up. This prophecy was given by God "through" Isaiah to the nation. It referred to the "land" or region of Zebulun and Naphtali (to be discussed below), located on "the way to the sea." This is the road known as the Via Maris, one of the most significant highways in history. It runs from Egypt in the southwest along the Mediterranean before turning inland toward Damascus. Armies marched along its path across millennia; the main western highway connecting Judea and Galilee today retraces its route. Every time I lead a study tour of Israel, we travel along the modern version of this road for much of our time in Israel.

It parallels the "Jordan" River, running north and south, to "Galilee of the Gentiles." This was the name of the region after the Assyrians destroyed the ten northern tribes and repopulated the area with Gentiles (ca. 722 BC), setting the stage for Matthew's narrative and its fulfillment of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy.

This connection between Jesus' ministry base and Isaiah's prediction was extremely significant for Matthew's purposes. Remember that he wrote his gospel to persuade Jews that Jesus was their Messiah. In Isaiah 9, the prophet promised, "There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan" (v. 1). What was their "distress"?

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve tribes of Israel. During the conquest of Canaan, they were given land along the northeast border of the nation. Along with the rest of the ten northern tribes, they had been destroyed by Tiglath-Pileser III and his Assyrian armies. In this way God "humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali" for their sins.

However, the prophet foresaw a day when the Lord would "honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan." Now seven centuries had passed, but the area was still more Gentile than Jewish, far from the temple in Jerusalem and the pious people who lived in its Judean precincts.

Jesus' decision to base his ministry in this city and region fulfilled Isaiah's promise. It was just one of many ways that our Lord fulfilled the Old Testament predictions regarding the coming of Messiah.

Because many who lived in the region were Gentiles, they were living in spiritual "darkness" (*skotos*, gloom, evil). But Jesus' coming brought them a "great light" (*mega phos*, large light, torch, lamp) as he was the "light of the world" (John 9:5). They had been living in the "land of the shadow of death" spiritually, but now "a light has dawned."

Jesus chose to live and work in Galilee, where he would be free from the intrusions of Herod Antipas. And he chose to base his ministry in Capernaum, where he could reach the larger population while serving a city that was receptive to his message and demonstrating his fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. Each of these decisions was strategic in its import and consequences.

Those who would continue Jesus' ministry must seek to be just as strategic. Paul would base his Macedonian ministry in Philippi, as it was "a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia" (Acts 16:12). He spent more time in Ephesus and Corinth than anywhere else, as these were two of the largest cities in the ancient world. Peter centered his ministry in Rome, the capital of the ancient world, while John pastored in Ephesus.

Martin Luther used the printing press, the internet of his day, to advance the Reformation. C. S. Lewis used BBC radio during World War II to defend the gospel to his countrymen. Billy Graham used television to advance his evangelistic ministry around the world.

How would God use your spiritual gifts and cultural influence to advance his kingdom today?

Serve the kingdom (Matthew 4:17–22)

His ministry begun and his base established, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matthew 4:17). This message was given to Jesus by his Father: "I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it" (John 12:49).

"From that time" points to a change in Jesus' strategy. "Preach" translates *kerysso*, to proclaim, announce publicly. He called the people to "repent," *metanoeo*, a change of mind that results in a change of life. John the Baptist issued a similar call for life change (Matthew 3:1, 7–10), as did God through his prophets: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!" (Ezekiel 14:6). This statement is especially powerful:

O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live! (Ezekiel 18:30–31).

Why must we "repent" today? Because "the kingdom of heaven is near."

What is the "kingdom of God"?

The "kingdom of heaven" is found thirty-two times in Matthew's Gospel, while he uses "kingdom of God" only five times (Matthew 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43). The two phrases are synonymous; Jews often substituted "heaven" for "God" to avoid speaking the holy name of the Lord. When the prodigal confessed that he had sinned "against heaven," he meant that he had sinned against God (Luke 15:18).

Jesus gave us the kingdom's most concise definition when he taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). God's kingdom comes wherever his will is done.

Scripture consistently teaches that our God is a King:

- "The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity" (Psalm 93:1–2).
- "The Lord will reign for ever and ever" (Exodus 15:18).
- "The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever" (Psalm 29:10).
- "O Lord, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth" (2 Kings 19:15).
- "The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name" (Zechariah 14:9).

Jesus came to inaugurate his Father's kingdom on earth. He spoke of the kingdom 108 times. He taught us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). When he returns, he will consummate the kingdom as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 19:16). On that day "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

How do we serve the kingdom?

By this point in his ministry, Jesus had called John, James, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael (John 1:35–50). They accompanied him as he served in Cana (John 2:1–11) and Jerusalem (2:12–23) and ministered to Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). At this time, John the Baptist was still active in ministry (vv. 22–36); when Jesus became aware of the Pharisees' resentment, "he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee" (John 4:3). Along the way he brought the Samaritan woman to faith (vv. 4–42).

By this time, John had been imprisoned and Jesus chose to live in Capernaum. His disciples had served and traveled with him for more than a year, but they lived with their families and continued their professions. Now Jesus was ready to take the next step in his kingdom plan and needed their full-time commitment to his cause: "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen" (Matthew 4:18).

"Walking" should be rendered "walking around." Jesus was walking along the coast of the Sea of Galilee when he saw Simon Peter and Andrew "casting a net into the lake." Their net was known as the *amphiblastron*. It was circular, with pellets of lead around its circumference and a rope tied to its center. When thrown into the water, it collapsed around whatever fish might be in its path; the fishermen would then draw it back into their boat.

When Jesus saw them he extended his invitation: "'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men'" (v. 19). "Come" translates an imperative, "come here." "Follow me" is another imperative; in their culture, when issued by a rabbi, it meant to become his formal disciples. In this way they would live with him, learn from him, and imitate his lifestyle and priorities.

While most students chose their teachers, Elijah had called Elisha (1 Kings 19:19–21) as Jesus now called his followers. He would later say, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16).

He called them to this purpose: "I will make you fishers of men." "Fishers of men" was Jesus' metaphor for describing his call to these professional fishermen. For centuries, Greek and Roman philosophers had used this phrase to describe a person who tries to "catch" others through persuasion. As these men had devoted their lives to catching fish, so they would now devote their lives to catching "men."

How? With his help: "I will make" means to call and equip for a specific purpose. His Spirit would gift them for their ministries (cf. Romans 12:4–8; Ephesians 4:11–13; 1 Corinthians 12:28–31). He would direct them to those places where they were to serve (cf. Matthew 10:5–6), give them the message they were to share (v. 7), show them the ways they were to minister (v. 8), and provide for their needs (vv. 9–10).

Jesus warned us: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). As we "remain" in him by submission to the Spirit, he gifts and calls us to be "fishers of men." His will is "good, pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2). He has a kingdom assignment for each of us, and is calling us to fulfill it today.

His first disciples responded as we should: "At once they left their nets and followed him" (Matthew 4:20). "At once" translates *eutheos*, immediately, without hesitation. "Left" translates *aphiami*, to abandon and leave behind. "Left their nets" meant that they "left everything" (Matthew 19:27), their homes, families, and livelihoods.

Jesus then called their fishing partners to join them: "Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets" (Matthew 4:21). "Preparing" translates *cautarize*, to cleanse, heal, fix. When Jesus called them, "immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him" (v. 22). They also left the "hired men" (Mark 1:20).

How do we "fish for men"?

In what ways do we "fish for men" when we advance God's kingdom?

We serve with hard work and courage. Fishermen must brave the elements and risk their lives. We choose to be innovative and creative, using whatever methods catch the "fish" we are called to reach. Paul could testify, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). And we live and work in ways that attract rather than repel those we seek: "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

Our Lord's example is our model in "catching" people for the kingdom: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Matthew 4:23). When we teach his people, announce his gospel to the community, and meet needs in his love, we continue his ministry today.

Then his Spirit will draw people to our service: "News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him" (vv. 24–25).

"Who were ill" translates the Greek for "those who had it bad." Their Greek doctors could not cure them, but Jesus could. In fact, he healed all who were "ill with various diseases," as no problem is beyond his compassion and power.

Others were "suffering severe pain." "Suffering" means "being pressured by"; "severe pain" translates "tortures, torments." Still others were "demon-possessed"; their healing showed that Jesus has power over spiritual illness as well as physical. "Those having seizures" is literally "lunatics," those suffering from mental illness. "Paralyzed" refers to those whose physical handicaps were beyond medical cure. Matthew simply says that Jesus "healed them."

Jesus later called his disciples to extend his healing ministry: "He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matthew 10:1). Jesus' strategy for ministry then and now is simple: teach believers, evangelize nonbelievers, and help hurting people.

In what ways are you continuing his kingdom ministry?

Conclusion

There is no greater privilege than serving the King of kings by inviting others to join his kingdom. Such service is his definition of success and significance. How would he measure your life and work? How would those you influence today?

William Booth was the founder of the Salvation Army. A scene on a calendar depicts Colonel Booth, out on a rough sea at night in a small lifeboat. As the waves rage, Booth is reaching out his hand to pull in a survivor who is lost at sea. A small vignette in the corner shows Booth's granddaughter asking her grandmother, "Grandma, is granddaddy trying to save that man or only shaking hands with him?"

What would your friends say you're doing for them?

Lesson 4:

The distinctive life of disciples (Matthew 5:1–16)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 5:1–16
- **Main idea:** Distinctive qualities and actions are to characterize Jesus' disciples.
- **Question to explore:** How is living an ordinary human life different from living as a disciple of Jesus?
- **Study aim:** To lead the group to identify distinctive qualities and actions of Jesus' disciples and to evaluate their lives by them.
- **Quick read:** Those who live by the Beatitudes change the world.

Commentary

A Muslim who became a Christian offered this prayer:

O God, I am Mustafah the tailor and I work at the shop of Muhammad Ali. The whole day long I sit and pull the needle and the thread through the cloth. O God, you are the needle and I am the thread. I am attached to you and I follow you. When the thread tries to slip away from the needle it becomes tangled and must be cut so that it can be put back in the right place. O God, help me to follow you wherever you may lead me. For I am really only Mustafah the tailor, and I work at the shop of Muhammad Ali on the great square.

Whose thread are you?

This chapter's study will help you answer that question in a transforming way.

Live a life God can bless (Matthew 5:1–2)

When our sons were growing up, my wife consistently encouraged and taught them to "live a life God can bless." Jesus did the same for his followers.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is the most famous sermon of all time. It takes about fifteen minutes to preach and a lifetime to obey. It is the first of five teaching sections in Matthew's Gospel (cf. chapters 10, 13, 18, and 23–25). Here our Lord reversed our definition of success. We are not "blessed" by being prosperous and popular. Rather, we are blessed by our Father if we admit our need of God, mourn for our sins, submit to our Master, hunger for righteousness, show mercy to all, seek his purpose in all we do, strive for peace, and suffer for right living.

By the time he preached the Sermon, Jesus had been engaged in public ministry for about eighteen months. He had called his first disciples (Matthew 4:18–22); with them, he "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (v. 23). As a result, "large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him" (v. 25).

Now our text begins: "When he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down" (Matthew 5:1). Jesus' sermon was delivered at one of the most famous places in Israel. The "Mount of Beatitudes" marks the traditional location for the Sermon on the Mount. It is located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, between Capernaum and Gennesaret.

Christians have commemorated this site for more than sixteen centuries. A beautiful Roman Catholic Franciscan chapel was built here in 1938. Every time I lead a study tour of Israel, we stop in the gardens of this chapel and monastery. Here I recite the Sermon and we take time to consider its transforming application to our lives.

Somewhere on this hillside, Jesus sat down, the traditional posture of a rabbi and teacher (cf. the academic "chair" today) while his listeners stood. As the crowds gathered on the mountainside, "his disciples came to him" (v. 1b), drawing close to their Master. "He began to teach them" (v. 2), Matthew's indication that the Sermon was intended for Jesus' followers. It does not explain how to become a Christian but rather how to live as one.

He began his message with statements known as "Beatitudes." The term comes from the Latin *beatus*, meaning to be "blissful." Each statement begins with the word "blessed," which translates *makarios*, a great Greek word. It describes a sense of tranquility that transcends circumstances. Happiness depends on happiness; God's blessing does not. Our Father is waiting to bless his children today: "The Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18).

The Sermon on the Mount is not legalism, a set of rules we must follow to earn God's favor. Rather, it details the life God is able to bless and how we can position ourselves to receive the grace he intends to give.

Admit your need of a King (Matthew 5:3)

The first Beatitude lays the foundation for all the rest: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3). There are two Greek words translated by the English "poor." *Penes* describes an impoverished person, someone who has nothing to spare. *Ptochos* describes a destitute person, someone who has nothing at all, who has no means of survival. Jesus used the latter, rendered "utterly destitute."

"In spirit" shows us the kind of poverty Jesus commends. To be destitute in spirit is to recognize our complete and utter spiritual need, the fact that we must have the help of the Spirit. The New English Bible translated the phrase best: "Blessed are those who know their need of God."

Jesus' culture and ours taught just the opposite. The more self-reliant you are, the more others will admire you. The self-made person is the hero of our culture. We don't like depending on anyone for anything.

By contrast, those who depend entirely on God's Spirit are "blessed." Why? Because "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." As we learned in the last chapter, the kingdom of God is that realm where his will is done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). When we make God our King, he is able to bless us and meet all our needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). When we make him our King, we position ourselves to experience his "good, pleasing, and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). But only when we make him our ruler and master.

It's been said that there is a single throne in every human heart and two candidates for it. Either God is enthroned in your life or you are. Because we are fallen people with an inherited sinful nature (Romans 5:12), our "default" position is self-rule. Unless we intentionally and consciously crown Jesus our King every day, we sit on the throne of our lives.

Another way of stating this truth is similar: there is a crown and a cross in every heart. If he is wearing the crown, you're wearing the cross. If you're wearing the crown, Jesus is wearing the cross.

When last did you crown him your King?

Mourn for your sins (Matthew 5:4)

The closer we get to God, the further away we realize we are. The stain I didn't notice on my jacket in the dark is visible in the light.

Jesus' second promise follows from the first: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (v. 4). "Mourn" translates *pentheo*, which means "to grieve with a grief which so takes possession of the whole being that it cannot be hid." Such people "will be comforted" (*parakaleo*, encouraged, lifted up).

Did Jesus encourage all mourning for all reasons? How would such teaching align with the biblical exhortation to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4)? How would it fulfill Jesus' promise to give us life "to the full" (John 10:10)? How can he promise that every person who mourns, every time they mourn, will immediately be comforted? How would such a statement relate to Jesus' theme of discipleship?

While Jesus came "to comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:2; Luke 4:21), it is clear from the discipleship context that his Beatitude relates especially to those who mourn for their sin. The more we know our need of God, the more we will mourn for the sins we recognize in our lives.

When Isaiah entered the temple on that fateful day, he saw himself in the light of his contemporaries and culture. But when he saw the Lord "seated on a throne, high and exalted," and heard the angels proclaim his holiness (Isaiah 6:1, 3), he then responded: "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty'" (v. 5).

The Holy Spirit must have a holy vessel to use. Disciples need a regular time for spiritual inventory. This is a simple but important discipline for Jesus' followers. Take a piece of paper and a pen. Set aside thirty minutes to be alone with God. Invite the Spirit to show you anything that hinders his work in your life and write your thoughts on the paper. Confess each sin, specifically and deliberately.

Then throw away the paper and claim his forgiving grace.

Know that your Father separates your sin as far from you as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12), buries it in the depths of the deepest sea (Micah 7:19), and remembers it no more (Jeremiah 31:34). But he can forgive only what we confess. He can heal only what we trust to his grace. If we refuse to admit that we need his forgiveness, "we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Even worse, "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives" (v. 10).

When last did you mourn for your sin?

Submit to the Spirit (Matthew 5:5)

Jesus' Beatitudes are arranged in a strategic order. First we admit we need Christ to be our King. Then we confess anything that hinders his rule in our lives. Now we choose to submit our lives to his Lordship: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (v. 5).

"Meek" translates *praus*, a fascinating Greek word. It can be rendered "mild" when describing things, "gentle" or "pleasant" with regard to people, "lenient" or "kind" in relation to activities or punishments, and "tame" when describing animals. Which meaning is intended in the third Beatitude?

The Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) uses *praus* almost entirely with regard to inferiors or servants and their superiors. As a result, it never uses *praus* of God. It does, however, use the word in describing Moses: "Moses was a *very humble* man, more *humble* than anyone else on the face of the earth."

Jesus used the word twice to describe himself: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am *gentle* and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29); "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, *gentle* and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'" (Matthew 21:5, quoting Zechariah 9:9).

Praus is a result of the Spirit's work in our lives: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, *gentleness* and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). It enables Jesus' followers to disciple others without arrogance: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him *gently*" (Galatians 6:1).

Paul endorsed *praus* for God's servants:

The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must *gently* instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and

that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24–26).

He encouraged Titus to "remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show *true humility* toward all men" (Titus 3:1–2).

Peter counseled us to exhibit *praus* as we defend our faith:

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with *gentleness* and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (1 Peter 3:15–16).

James taught us that divine understanding must be demonstrated "by deeds done in the *humility* that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13).

In summary, the Bible uses *praus* to describe those who are "humble" toward God and "gentle" or gracious toward others. The first leads to the second—if I submit my life to God's Spirit, I will manifest his grace to those I meet. In relation to disciples, where the context refers to those who follow their Master, the third Beatitude encourages us to be "tame" toward our Lord and King, that we might encourage others to make him their Master as well. This is a decision we must make every day of our lives.

We become Christians once: when we ask Jesus to forgive our sins and become our Lord and Master. But we must submit to his rule every day. Scripture requires us to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18), controlled by his power and direction. The best time to make this decision is early in the morning. Make time to be alone with your Father. Ask the Spirit to bring to your mind anything that displeases God in your life and confess all that comes to your thoughts. Ask your Father to forgive you and cleanse you, claiming his grace and mercy (1 John 1:9).

Then ask the Holy Spirit to take control of your life. Pray through your day, giving each element to him. Crown him the King of your plans and problems. As you go through the day, pray about each opportunity and challenge you face. Ask the Spirit to lead and empower you. Seek the glory of God by obedience to his word and Spirit. Practice the presence of Jesus. And the *praus* you exhibit toward God will enable the Spirit to produce *praus* in your relations with others (Galatians 5:23).

A power drill must stay connected to its power source to accomplish its intended purpose. We must stay connected to the Holy Spirit to fulfill God's purpose for our lives. So begin every day by admitting your desperate need of God. Turn your life over to his Spirit, making him the King of your day. And you will be "blessed."

When last did you submit to the Spirit?

Seek to be right with all (Matthew 5:6)

Remember that Jesus' Sermon was directed to his disciples and was intended to be understood as a roadmap for discipleship from his time to ours. When we admit that we need a King, mourn for the sins which separate us from him, and submit our lives to his Spirit, we are now ready to apply the fourth Beatitude to our lives: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (v. 6).

"Hunger" translates *peinontes*, to be hungry, to desire strongly; "thirst" renders *dipsontes*, to thirst strongly. "Righteousness" translates *dikaiosynen*, to be upright with God, others, and ourselves.

This drive to be righteous in our relations with our Father, his children, and ourselves cannot be fulfilled in our ability: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10–11). Religions try to climb up to God, but all of them fail. We have all sinned and fallen short of his glory (Romans 3:23), earning the physical, spiritual, and eternal death which results from our sins (Romans 6:23). No matter how hard we try, we cannot achieve righteousness in our lives for long. Our best efforts and strongest resolutions inevitably fail us.

But if we make God our King, asking his forgiveness and mercy for our sins, and submit our lives to the control of his Spirit, he will make us what we cannot make ourselves to be: we "will be filled." "Filled" translates *chortasthesontai*, to eat one's fill, to be fulfilled and satisfied. Not, "they might be filled" or "they can be filled." Righteousness with God, others, and ourselves is the inevitable product of the Spirit's unhindered work in our lives.

However, there is a balance between divine power and human initiative. Noah was told to build the Ark, then God would close the door. Moses held his rod over the Red Sea while God parted its waters. The children of Israel marched around Jericho, then God destroyed its walls. Jesus sent his disciples to preach to all nations, with the promise of his presence and enabling power (Matthew 28:18–20).

Seek righteousness in every relationship of your life. Desire it strongly, above all that would compete with it. Seek to do the right thing every time in the way you serve God, treat others, and relate to yourself. Then as you work, God works. Your desire becomes his fulfillment.

How would God describe the purity of your relationship with him? How would those you know say you treat them? How healthy is your relationship with yourself? When last did you ask the Spirit to help you be righteous?

Forgive as you have been forgiven (Matthew 5:7)

To be right with others, there will be times when you must forgive them. Jesus' fifth Beatitude leads us to this commitment: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

"Mercy" translates *eleemones*, to be sympathetic, compassionate. It can be defined as pardoning, refusing to punish. While grace is getting what we don't deserve, mercy is not getting what we do deserve.

We have received great mercy from the God "who is rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4). He showed us this mercy when he granted us salvation: "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3–4).

Paul reminded us that "he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5). Now we "wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life" (Jude 21).

Now we are to tell others of his mercy toward us: "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). And we are to extend to others the mercy we have received from our Father: "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" (Matthew 18:33).

Jesus quoted his Father, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13, quoting Hosea 6:6). He chastised the teachers of the law and Pharisees for neglecting "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). The Samaritan fulfilled the law when he "had mercy" on the injured traveler (Luke 10:37).

God's wisdom is "full of mercy" (James 3:17). However, "judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful" (James 2:13). When God pardons us, he expects us to pardon others.

Such behavior is vital for disciples. How can others believe that God is love (1 John 4:8) if they don't see such love in his followers? People judge Christ by Christians. We are the only Bible most will read. If they see mercy demonstrated in our lives and relationships, they may believe that the One we serve is merciful.

Remember Jesus' terrifying parable of the man who owed his king ten thousand talents, worth 160,000 years' wages, but was forgiven this unimaginable debt (Matthew 18:24–27). In turn, he found a servant who owed him a hundred denarii, one hundred days' wages, and threw him into prison until he repaid the debt (vv. 28–31). The king said to his servant: "You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" (vv. 32–33).

Who has injured you? Who has treated you unfairly, gossiped about you, slandered you? Have you done the same and much worse to your Lord? Has he forgiven every sin you've confessed to him, extending mercy greater than all your sin?

When last did you pardon a "fellow servant"?

Love God and others (Matthew 5:7)

Remember the progression of Jesus' Beatitudes in the context of discipleship:

- Make God your King, grieving your sins and submitting to his Spirit.

- Seek to be right with God, others, and yourself, and the Spirit will produce such righteousness in your life.
- Express that righteousness toward those who have harmed you by extending God's mercy in yours.

Now we are ready to apply Jesus' sixth Beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (v. 8).

"Pure" translates *katharos*, to be clean, free, ritually pure, unstained. In world religions, worshipers are expected to cleanse their bodies as they enter the presence of their god(s). However, Jesus' expectation is different: he wants us to be "pure in heart." "Heart" translates *kardia* (from which we get "cardiac"), the interior and center of our lives.

Viewed in this context, *katharos* acquires the sense of integrity, consistency, to be of one mind. It means to have a single purpose to our lives. To quote Kierkegaard: "Purity of heart is to will one thing."

What should be that "one thing"?

When Jesus was asked that question, he replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). We love him with our "heart" by entering a personal relationship with him by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9). We love him with our "soul" by worshiping him daily: "Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (Psalm 86:11). To "fear" God is to honor and worship him. We love him with our "mind" by knowing and obeying his word: "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Then we are able to love our neighbor as ourselves: "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart" (1 Timothy 1:5).

This is God's standard of success: a personal, passionate, growing relationship with him that empowers us to love others as he loves us. In a culture that measures us by what we have and how we look, Jesus' Beatitude is liberating. It sets a standard anyone can meet, with his help. When he is our King and we are cleansed and empowered by his Spirit, seeking righteousness and showing mercy, he will enable us to live with this single-minded focus on loving God and others.

Picture a group of disciples who lived every day by this one purpose. Imagine their impact on their fragmented, fallen culture. Envision the power and joy they would experience in their intimacy with the God of the universe. You're picturing early Christianity, a movement that "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

We can continue that movement today. When last did you make God's "one thing" yours?

Seek peace (Matthew 5:9)

What will be the result of such a movement of committed disciples? They will be persecuted peacemakers. Jesus' seventh Beatitude illustrates the first: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they

will be called sons of God" (v. 9). Peace translates *eirene*, the Greek word for the Hebrew *shalom*. These words picture a person at peace with God, others, and self, in that order.

God wants us to be at peace with him: "The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace" (Psalm 29:11). Jesus assured us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). Later he added, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Peace is one of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22). It is the product of the Spirit's work in our lives, not human ability. We cannot create peace ourselves. We can only receive it from God: "He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14). As a result, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

Knowing we are at peace with God by grace, we choose to obey his word: "Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble" (Psalm 119:165). God said through his prophet, "If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river" (Isaiah 48:18).

Now we can give our problems to God: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6–7). Trust the will of God, and you'll say with the prophet: "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3).

On this foundation, we are able to be peacemakers with others: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:18–19).

Scripture teaches that "God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15). It exhorts us: "Live at peace with each other" (1 Thessalonians 5:13). God commands us: "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Hebrews 12:14–15).

At peace with God and others, we can be at peace with ourselves. Jesus said that peacemakers "will be called sons of God." He did not claim that we *become* sons of God—that would be works righteousness. But people will know that we are God's children as we give his peace to them: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Disciples of the "prince of peace" (Isaiah 9:6) will exhibit his peace in all their relationships. Would God say you are at peace with him? Would those you know say you are at peace with them? Are you at peace with yourself today?

Serve courageously (Matthew 5:10–12)

Such discipleship comes at a price: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 10). Jesus' eighth Beatitude continues: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (vv. 11–12).

Verse 10 can be translated literally, "Blessed are the ones who have been and now are being persecuted for the sake of righteousness." "Persecuted" translates *dediogmenoi*, to be pursued, pressed on, driven away. Jesus knew his disciples would suffer for following him. And they did.

They were "insulted" (v. 11), translating *oneidisosin*, to be reproached, reviled, insulted, mocked. They were made the objects of gossip, slander, and ridicule. Enemies of Christ said "all kinds of evil" against them. "Evil" translates *poneros*, those who are wicked, vile, degenerate, vicious.

Jesus warned them that "in this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Paul warned early disciples that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Peter added: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12–13).

Persecution has been a constant theme of Christian discipleship from Jesus' day to ours. An estimated "more than 70 million Christians have been martyred over the last two millennia, more than half of which died in the 20th century under fascist and communist regimes" and an estimated "1 million Christians were killed between 2001 and 2010 and about 900,000 were killed from 2011 to 2020."

Our ultimate enemy, of course, is Satan. Jesus called him "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). Peter warned us: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

But there's another side to the story. Those who suffer for Jesus will experience great joy—we will be "blessed" by him (Matthew 5:11). We can "be glad" (v. 12), literally "leap with inexpressible joy."

The early apostles did: "They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:40–41).

Early martyrs did. Justin, one of the earliest martyrs, wrote to his accusers: "You can kill, but not hurt us."

They knew that "great is your reward in heaven" for courageous faithfulness. Paul could testify: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). While imprisoned on Patmos, John saw the reward for those who

suffer for Jesus: "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:16–17).

We can rejoice to be part of an enduring community of fellow faithful: "In the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The writer of Hebrews described those who suffered for serving the one true God:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them" (Hebrews 11:35–38).

And we can rejoice because of the kingdom we will inherit: "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The first Beatitude made this promise; the last repeats it. When we suffer for Christ we prove that he is our king. And then we join him in his kingdom. Paul assured us, "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:12). John was told that those who stood faithful to Christ in the face of persecution "they came to life and reigned with Christ" (Revelation 20:4). We will suffer for a short while and then reign with Jesus in his kingdom forever.

We show the depth of our discipleship by our willingness to pay the price it requires. When last did it cost you something significant to serve Jesus?

Conclusion

Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. As his Beatitudes prove, his rule is different in every way from the reign of mankind. The results of living by his word make us even more distinctive: "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" (Matthew 5:13). Salt purifies, preserves, and seasons—the same functions Jesus expects of us in our fallen, decaying world. When we taste salt, we know it. There is nothing like it. So it is to be with us.

Further, Jesus called us "the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (vv. 14–16).

The "city on a hill" in Jesus' sermon may have been one of the cities further up the mountainside from him—such communities stood out at day and especially at night. The "lamp" to which he referred was a small clay vessel filled with olive oil. Its floating wick was difficult to light; once lit it was shielded by a "bowl" at night so those in the house could sleep. When its light was needed, it was put on its "stand," typically a protrusion in the wall of the single-room peasant house, where "it gives light to everyone in the house."

In the same way, we are to show the light of our love for God and others for this purpose: "that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Light always defeats dark, but it must contact that which it is to influence.

If we were to live by Jesus' Beatitudes, our lives would produce the effects of salt and light in our world. Note that his pronouns are plural: "All of you" are the salt of the earth (v. 13); "all of you" are the light of the world (v. 14). No clergy-laity distinctions here. Every believer, living by the Beatitudes, accomplishes this kingdom purpose in our world.

Would those you know characterize you as salt and light in their lives?

Lesson 5:

Live by Jesus' interpretation of God's will (Matthew 5:17–48)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 5:17–48
- **Main idea:** Jesus instructs his disciples to live a life of complete goodness springing from a heart grounded in the character of God.
- **Question to explore:** How can a life of discipleship be measured?
- **Study aim:** To decide how I will respond to Jesus' interpretation of God's will.
- **Quick read:** Living by Jesus' ethic would revolutionize your life and world.

Commentary

A spider began his web at the top of an old, abandoned barn. He dropped a single line from the highest beam of the roof and began to spin his web from it. Over time his web became larger and larger and caught for him more and more food. He became happy, then complacent, proud of his success.

One day he noticed that single thread running from his web up into the darkness above. "I wonder why that is there," he thought to himself. "It doesn't catch me any food." So he climbed up to that single thread and cut it. And slowly the entire web came tumbling to the ground.

What is the single thread on which the Christian life depends?

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus set out the two options his disciples could choose: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." On one side stood the Jewish law with all its regulations. By seeking to fulfill them, the people thought they could earn standing with God and his blessing on their lives. But no one can keep the law fully; all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory and standards (Romans 3:23).

On the other side stood an itinerant carpenter/rabbi from tiny Nazareth and his revolutionary teachings. He offered not legalism but grace. He taught a life dependent on the love of our Father and the power of his Spirit. The Jewish authorities focused on outward law; Jesus focused on the spirit. They centered on rules; he offered principles to be fulfilled by his leading. They worked to avoid things and practices; he taught his followers to embrace life in the power of the Spirit. And he called them to the perfection only his Father could demonstrate and enable.

If his disciples would choose his path, they would find themselves fulfilling the Jewish law more completely than they could ever have accomplished in their self-dependent efforts. But first they must make him their King and Lord.

We face the same choice today. We can seek to obey the rules of our religion as we understand them, but we will fail God and ourselves. Or we can submit to Christ as our King and fulfill his word by his strength. Choose wisely.

In this chapter's study, we will survey much more material than can be taught in a single chapter. I encourage you to focus on those topics that are especially urgent to you and hope that this extended commentary will help.

Live biblically (Matthew 5:17–20)

Jesus continued his sermon: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (17a). "Do not think" is very strong in the Greek, literally "Never think that" "That I have come to abolish" means to deny the divine authority, to demean. "The Law or the Prophets" refers to the entirety of God's word to this point in revelatory history.

Jesus went even further: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (v. 18). "I tell you the truth" translates a phrase known to be used only by Jesus in all of ancient Judaism. It means literally, "I guarantee you this"

"Until heaven and earth disappear" refers to the end of time (Revelation 21:1). "Not the smallest letter" refers to the Hebrew *yod*, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. "Not the least stroke of a pen" refers to the points on a Hebrew consonant. We would say, "not the dotted I or the crossed T." "Will by any means disappear" utilizes the double negative, will "no, not ever disappear." "Until everything is accomplished"—until the Bible does its work, fulfilling its purpose.

Here Jesus endorsed the power and purpose of Scripture for his followers. He knew that God's word keeps us from sin: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11). It guides our lives daily: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). It brings us joy: "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (Psalm 19:8). And it gives us hope: "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Now he applied his principle: "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). Here Jesus shows us who will be great in heaven and who will be least.

The "great" will be those who "practice and teach" the word of God. Both are crucial, and in this order. The "least" will be those who break the "least" of the commandments of God and

influence others to do the same—those who do not live by the word and will of God and lead others away from his word as well.

So Jesus shows us how to be great in heaven. Now let's ask an even more urgent question: How do we get there? "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20). "I tell you"—these words come from Jesus himself. Your righteousness must "surpass," an emphatic word which means to go far beyond, to outdistance greatly. Your "righteousness" must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. What was theirs? What must ours be?

The Pharisees were a small group, never more than six thousand men. Their name meant "separated ones," and it describes their passionate commitment to separation from regular life in obedience to the minutia of the Torah, the law of God.

The Pharisees calculated that the law contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they aspired to keep them all. No group in human history has been more religious than the Pharisees. If it were possible to go to heaven through human effort, their reservations in paradise would have been guaranteed.

But they were not: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." "Certainly not" is a double negative: "by no means," "there is no way that" you can enter heaven unless you are more righteous before God than were the Pharisees, the most religiously righteous people on earth.

In other words, you cannot do enough or be religious enough to go to heaven. The ladder doesn't climb high enough. Religion won't work, no matter how much of it you do. If it didn't work for the Pharisees, it won't work for us.

In the introduction to our study, our Lord made clear his insistence that we live by the intent of Scripture and his ability to enable us to fulfill that intent. If we submit to his authority and Spirit, he will empower us to live abundantly and joyfully. Every dimension of our lives will be transformed by his word and will for us.

What follows are six illustrations of that fact.

Seek reconciliation (Matthew 5:21–26)

The first illustration: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment'" (v. 21). They "heard" this because the rabbis read the law to them in the synagogue each Sabbath, including this Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13). A murderer was "subject to judgment," the local tribunal composed of seven persons. These tribunals inflicted punishment for capital crimes with the sword. Then Jesus responded: "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (v. 22a).

When is anger wrong?

Jesus was not dealing with the simple emotion of anger. This is an inevitable human reaction to hurt or harm. And it was an emotion Jesus felt himself. In Mark 3:5 Jesus "looked around at them in anger" for their unbelief; in John 2:15 he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple. Ephesians 4:26 tells us, "In your anger do not sin." The emotion of anger is not a sin.

He was dealing with a different thing here. In the Greek language, *thumos* describes the spontaneous and unavoidable emotion of anger; it is not the word here. *Orge* is this word; it means anger which is long-lived, cherished in the heart, nursed and kept alive—the deliberate choice to continue holding onto your anger, an absolute unwillingness to pardon and move on. Such cherished anger makes us "liable to judgment." In other words, hating my brother is as wrong as the murder which hate spawns.

"Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin" (Matthew 5:22b). "Raca" was an Aramaic term of contempt which literally meant "empty-headed" or stupid. In ancient Judaism, names were much more significant than they are for us. A name denoted a person's character, and a word took on its own life and power.

So expressing your cherished anger by a term of contempt made you answerable not to the local tribunal but to the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of ancient Israel. They typically required reparations in money for such an insult to a person's reputation and status.

"But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (v. 22c). "Fool" was the worst, most slanderous term you could use against a person in ancient Israel. It comes from the Greek word for "moron" and meant a person who is morally deficient, corrupted, immoral, a person with no character or value whatsoever.

This level of anger deserves "the fire of hell." The Greek says "the gehenna of fire." The Valley of Gehenna stood to the south of Jerusalem. During the reigns of wicked kings Ahaz and Manasseh, children were sacrificed to idols there. King Josiah stamped out such heinous sin and made the valley a trash dump. Fires were kept burning there constantly to consume the trash; worms lived there which fed on the refuse. Jesus would later make Gehenna a metaphor for hell "where the fire never goes out . . . their worm does not die" (Matthew 9:43, 48).

What was Jesus teaching us? Refuse to hate or hurt your brother. No matter what he may have done to you. In a moment Jesus will teach us how to reconcile with him. For now, how do we handle the anger our pain has caused?

How do we handle anger?

Act on your anger immediately, before it takes root in your soul: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26–27). Deal with this infection before it spreads. Admit it, and give it to God.

Guard your tongue, especially while you are angry: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26). What we say shows who we are. Choose to pardon, for your sake and his. A wise old saint said, "I will never allow another person to ruin my life by making me hate him."

The Didache is the oldest theological document outside the New Testament. It gives us good advice: "Love those that hate you, and you will have no enemy" (1.3). Ask God's help, and it will be yours. Who has made you angry lately?

Now, how do we reconcile your relationship with this person? Jesus tells us: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23–24).

"Offering your gift at the altar" describes the holiest moment a Galilean peasant might ever experience. Very rarely were non-priests allowed before the altar at the Temple in Jerusalem, and only when they were bringing animal sacrifice for a very special occasion. Some would prepare for years or all their lives for this moment. This was something akin to baptism for us.

There you "remember that your brother has something against you"—not just that you have something against him. "Something" is anything. There is no distinction here as to whether this is just or not, whether you are wrong or wronged. If anyone has anything against you today, you qualify.

Leave your gift. Don't give it to the priest but leave it where it is, despite the holiness and significance of this moment. The person comes first: "go and be reconciled." Take the initiative to make things right. Only then can you give your gift to God. You cannot be right with me if you are wrong with one of my children. Our heavenly Father feels the same way.

How do we attempt this reconciliation? Go to the person directly: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (Matthew 18:15). Don't talk about the person, but to him.

Jesus paints the picture: "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way" (Matthew 5:26a). According to Roman law, the plaintiff could carry the accused with him to stand before the judge. No arresting officer was needed. The Greeks called this *apegagon*—the legal act by which a man could catch another by the robe at the throat and drag him before the courts. Crimes that were subject to this action were stealing clothes at the public baths, picking pockets, house-breaking, and kidnapping.

The Jews allowed this action in the case of financial debt. A man owes you for services rendered but won't pay. You see him walking down the road and are legally allowed to grab him and haul him before the judge. The defendant may be innocent of the charges, or guilty. But he can be arrested in this way nonetheless.

Why should we handle anger?

So you have such a situation, legally or relationally. You are at odds with someone. They accuse you, or slander you, or condemn you. Perhaps they're right or wrong on the merits—Jesus doesn't say. But you're wrong with each other. What do you do?

"Settle matters." The Greek word means to "make friends," to seek good will with someone. It is a word describing the attitude which comes before the action, your heart before your hand. Don't

react to your adversary by becoming his. Don't seek to repay his accusations with your own. Don't hit back. Don't plot revenge. Seek reconciliation.

When? "Quickly . . . while you are still with him on the way." The adversaries could settle "out of court" before they reached the judge. But once before him, the law must prevail. Do it now. Don't wait. No conditions. No exceptions.

Why? "He may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny" (vv. 25b–26). If you delay, things will only get worse. Your private conflict becomes public.

And your debt becomes harder and harder to pay. You must pay "the last penny," the Roman quadrans, a coin worth 1.5 cents today. But you're in prison, so earning the money to pay this debt is harder than ever before. Your family and friends will likely be required to help. The ripples of this conflict spread ever further and further. Things inevitably go from bad to worse.

When I taught at Southwestern Seminary, I had a student who missed three weeks of school and nearly died from a blood infection that had started with a splinter in his thumb he'd ignored. In my first pastorate, we had a member who nearly died from a spider bite he'd ignored. In another pastorate, one of my best friends nearly died from a black mole on his shoulder he'd ignored until it became melanoma. Cancer always spreads. Make right what is wrong, now.

The poet Edwin Markham lost everything when an unscrupulous banker betrayed his business confidence. He hated that man. And he could not write poetry, but doodled circles on paper for hours. Finally he realized he must forgive the man or die. He said aloud, "I forgive him." For the first time in months, words began to flow. Looking at the circles on his paper, he wrote:

*He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!*

Start your circle today.

Seek purity (Matthew 5:27–30)

Our second illustration: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery'" (v. 27). Here our Lord quoted the Seventh Commandment, cited specifically in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18.

Value sex as God does

From the very beginning, God made clear to his creation that sexual activity within marriage is normal and good. In fact, he commanded it: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'" (Genesis 1:28).

But God also made very clear that sex is his gift for marriage. Extramarital sex is always wrong:

If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death. If a man sleeps with his father's wife, he has dishonored his father. Both the man and the woman must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. If a man sleeps with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be put to death. What they have done is a perversion; their blood will be on their own heads. If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. If a man marries both a woman and her mother, it is wicked. Both he and they must be burned in the fire, so that no wickedness will be among you. (Leviticus 20:10–14)

If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel. (Deuteronomy 22:22)

Premarital sex is as wrong as extramarital sex:

- If a man accuses his new wife of violating her virginity before their marriage "and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you" (Deuteronomy 22:20–21).
- "If a man happens to meet in town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the girl because she was in town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you" (Deuteronomy 22:23–24).
- "If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives" (Deuteronomy 22:28–29).

Sex is God's gift for marriage. We are to refuse all adultery, of any kind. We are not to engage in sexual activity until we are married, and then with our spouse alone. This is the clear word and will of God.

Guard your mind to guard your life

How do we keep this commandment? How do we resist sexual temptations, especially in a culture which so surrounds us with them every day? To refuse adultery of body, first refuse adultery of mind. Aristotle claimed, "What is a crime for a person to do, is a crime for a person to think." Jesus proved that this is so: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

The "I" here is emphatic—Jesus was asserting his own divine authority. This is just as much the command of God as the Seventh Commandment. "Anyone"—regardless of religious title, status, or significance. No exceptions are granted here.

"Who looks at"—the sin is not noticing a woman or a man. The sin is not the first look but the second. Luther was right: you cannot keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.

"A woman"—not specifically a wife, though this is implied. But adultery of the mind can be practiced with any woman, or with any man. "Lustfully"—"who looks at a woman for the purpose of lusting." "Adultery with her in his heart"—the "heart" includes the intellect, the emotions, the will. The place from which actions find the origin. The source of all that follows. When we poison the mind, we poison the body. We poison the headwaters, which pollutes the river which flows out from them. The heart becomes the life.

Refuse the thoughts before they become actions. It will never be easier to refuse lust than when it first appears to your mind:

- "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1).
- "Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished." (Proverbs 6:25–29).
- Remember how David's sin began: "One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful (2 Samuel 11:2).
- Paul counseled us: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8).

Stay pure at all costs

What if you cannot? What if there is an area or activity in your life which continually leads you into lust of the mind? Luther was picturesque: if your head is made of butter, don't sit near the fire. Here's how Jesus advised us: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matthew 5:29).

The "right eye" was considered the better of the two (cf. 1 Samuel 11:2, Zechariah 11:17), as is the "right hand" in verse 30. If it "causes you to sin"—the phrase specifically means the stick in a trap that holds the bait; when the prey touches the stick, the trap snaps shut. So it is with the eye, the trap which baits the mind.

What are we to do with a sinful "eye"? Rabbinic hyperbole was a common teaching technique in Jesus' day. The rabbis would teach a deliberate exaggeration to make a point. It is so here. Taken literally, one leaves the left eye with which to view lustfully. Take both eyes, but a blind man can still think sinful thoughts.

Jesus' point was simple: rid yourself of anything that causes lustful thoughts in your mind, e.g., premium channels on TV or television altogether. Use internet pornography filters on your computer, or even get rid of the internet itself. I have known of men and women who have changed their working relationships to avoid such temptation and admire them for their courage in doing so. Do whatever you must. This is spiritual surgery—amputating the diseased limb to save the life of the patient. In this case, the soul. Because the malignancy is spreading.

Another illustration follows: "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell" (Matthew 5:30). The right hand was indispensable for work in the ancient world. People typically saw the left hand as a symbol for evil, so they used it only for the most menial and demeaning tasks. Even today in many places in the East, to gesture to someone with the left hand is obscene.

Jesus' point: get rid of anything you cannot control sexually. Anything which is causing you to lust must go no matter how valuable you think it is. You would amputate your hand to save your life. So you must here.

Do it now: "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body" (1 Corinthians 6:18); "Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2:22). These are commandments from our holy God who is also our loving Father.

You cannot obey the teachings of this text alone. You were not meant to. There is not one word of the Sermon on the Mount that can be fulfilled in human ability. We must have God's help to do God's will.

So ask Jesus to deal with the source—your heart. Ask God to forgive your every sin and claim his cleansing and renewal: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Then stay close to Jesus. Stay connected to the source of your power by praying and worshiping all day long, communing with Christ: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). When your enemy is shooting arrows at you, you'll stay behind your shield.

Keep your mind focused on God: "Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God . . . Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:1, 5). And you will have the victory of God.

Value marriage (Matthew 5:31–32)

Our third illustration: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'" (v. 31). "Anyone who divorces his wife" points to an extremely common practice in Jesus' day.

The Jews typically allowed divorce for any reason whatsoever. A man could divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner by putting too much salt in his food; if she went into public with her head uncovered; if she talked with men in the streets; if she burned the toast. Rabbi Akiba said that a man could divorce his wife if he found someone more attractive. Divorce was so common in Jesus' day that many women refused to get married.

To divorce his wife, the husband presented her with a "certificate of divorcement." The most common form: "Let this be from me your writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that you may marry whatever man you will." If he handed this document to his wife in the presence of two witnesses, she stood divorced, with no legal proceedings or protection whatsoever.

So Jesus spoke to an extremely common situation, in which the structure of family life was collapsing and national morals were disintegrating. His words are significant and radical: "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (v. 32).

"Marital unfaithfulness" means adultery, sexual relations between a wife and a person not her husband. Such an act breaks the marriage union, rendering it null and void. Divorce otherwise "causes her to become an adulteress" since she will have to remarry to support herself but is still bound to her first husband in the eyes of God. "Anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" as well.

Jesus repeats the very same words in Matthew 19:9. Divorce except for adultery is outside the word and will of God. This is the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What constitutes a biblical divorce?

This is a very difficult subject, so let's look at the larger counsel of God's word on the issue of divorce. What follows is my interpretation of the Bible, not an official position of any group. If it is helpful to you, I will be grateful.

In addition to Jesus' clear teaching, the Bible also says, "If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15). If a believer is married to a non-Christian and the unbeliever deserts the marriage, the believer is innocent.

Abandonment by a believer must be considered as well. What if your spouse is a Christian but refuses to stay in your marriage? What if you want to work, to seek help and restoration, but he or she will not? This person has misused the freedom of will given by God. The Bible forbids this divorce, but the laws of our land do not. And the Bible clearly teaches that we are not responsible for the sins of others, but only our own.

Abuse is a third area we must discuss. Physical, emotional, verbal, or substance abuse are epidemic in marriages today. While the Bible nowhere addresses abuse specifically with regard to divorce, we can draw two conclusions from biblical truth.

First, abuse is always wrong: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). And wives are to be just as loving, supportive, and sacrificial with their husbands. Second, life must be protected: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). You must protect yourself and your children from abuse.

So biblical counselors recommend that an abused person separate from the spouse immediately. Get yourself and your children to safety. Seek intensive counseling. But don't give up—God can heal any marriage if both partners will surrender fully to him. I've seen abusers repent and be restored. Consider divorce only as the lesser of two evils in order to protect the abused and only if there are no other options.

As I understand Scripture, these are the conditions under which divorce is permissible biblically: adultery, abandonment, and abuse. Note that the Bible does not prescribe divorce even in these painful circumstances but only permits it.

If your marriage is struggling, remember God's plan: one man and one woman joined for life (Genesis 2:24). He wants to help and heal your home. Seek help. If you've gone to biblical counseling without success, try someone else. Try again. If your spouse won't go, go alone. To work on your marriage, work on yourself.

Don't wait for your spouse to make you happy—find ways to make yourself happier. Seek new activities, work, ministries, friendships. And seek God together. It is a fact that couples who attend worship together have the lowest risk of divorce. Seek God's strength and help. Ask his family to help you, to pray for you. Ask him to guide you to those who can help you most. Your Father wants to give you a new life together. There is wonderful hope for you today.

If you've been divorced

What if you've already experienced divorce as a result of adultery, abandonment, or abuse? You are the innocent party. You will need counseling, healing, and help. But you must reject the guilt you may feel and move forward into God's grace and hope.

What if your divorce was not for biblical reasons? Here I must be very careful. I want to do nothing which will encourage someone considering a divorce to do so. The consequences of divorce are very real, and those of you who have experienced them know their pain better than anyone else.

But at the same time, know that divorce is not the "unpardonable sin." God can forgive any person who repents and returns to his word and will. Scripture is clear: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). "All" includes divorce.

God wants to help you and heal you. He plans to prosper you and not harm you, to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). The Bible is clear: "The Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion" (Isaiah 30:18). God grieves with you, cries with you, walks with you, and accepts and loves you, just as you are, right now.

As I understand Scripture, remarriage is a biblical option for you. With counsel and help, restoration and healing, I believe God can lead you into another marriage. In every church I pastored, our ministry staff and deacon leadership included people who had experienced the pain of divorce in their lives or their families. And God used them in wonderful ways.

Billy Graham stated: "I am opposed to divorce and regard the increase in divorces today as one of the most alarming problems in society. However, I know that the Lord can forgive and heal." He is right.

Seek integrity (Matthew 5:33–37)

The psalmist complained, "The godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men. Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception" (Psalm 12:1–2). What was the last lie you told?

In our fourth illustration, Jesus addressed truth telling. He began: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord'" (Matthew 5:33). Here he summarized passages from Leviticus 19, Numbers 30, and Deuteronomy 23. And he agreed: lying is wrong.

So what is lying? It is speaking false words—half truths, exaggerations, misquotes, slander. It is giving false impressions—misleading about our accomplishments, or income, or relationships. We sometimes do this in spiritual garb: "Pray for the Smiths, they're having trouble at home" or "Pray for the Joneses, their child is struggling in school." Gossip in the guise of spirituality is sin.

And it is withholding truth: "If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible" (Leviticus 5:1). Listening to slander or gossip without correcting it; agreeing tacitly to falsehood; refusing to pay the price of truth—all these are covered by Jesus' prohibition.

Why tell the truth?

Why tell the truth? Because God consistently commands and commends truth-telling:

- Without exception: "These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts" (Zechariah 8:16).
- Every one of us: "Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25).
- No matter how tempted we are to lie: "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place" (Ephesians 6:14).
- This is the key to peace with God and ourselves: "True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin" (Malachi 2:6).

Why tell the truth? Because God condemns lying:

- Here is what the Lord thinks of lies: "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful" (Proverbs 12:22).
- He warns us: "A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare" (Proverbs 21:6).
- Lying breaks our relationship with God: "No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence" (Psalm 101:7).
- God must punish those who lie: "You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors" (Psalm 5:6).
- So God commands us: "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices" (Colossians 3:9).

Why tell the truth? Because our words reveal our souls. Jesus said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). Our words are windows into our souls, and a witness we can never retract. How do we unring a bell?

Why tell the truth? Because our words mold our souls. James, the brother of our Lord and pastor of the first church at Jerusalem, makes the point clear: "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:6).

When we lie we become liars. Our words take on a power and life of their own. I don't fully know why, but the words I speak shape how I think and feel. When I fail and then condemn myself, I become more of a failure. When I succeed and then encourage myself, I become more of a success. Our words reveal us, and they mold us.

How do we tell the truth?

How do we tell the truth? Here's the key: give every area of your life to the Lord Jesus. Refuse to divide your days into sacred and secular, religious and the "real world." Believe that God's commendation of truth and condemnation of lying applies to your business practices as much as your Bible study teaching, to your private finances as much as your public faith.

Jesus continued: "Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King" (Matthew 5:34–35). The Jews of Jesus' culture believed they could make an oath and then break it so long as they did not swear by God himself. They could swear by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem. They could swear by their heads, as though to say, "My head's on the line if I don't do this." They could swear by the "secular," just not the "sacred."

But Jesus was blunt: there's no distinction. Heaven is God's throne room, the place where he lives. If someone slanders America, we are upset. Earth is his footstool, his possession, and Jerusalem his city. Jesus continued: "And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this

comes from the evil one" (vv. 36–37). Our heads are his creation. If you criticize this commentary I feel criticized because I wrote it.

Greek philosophers taught that soul and body are separate, spiritual and secular distinct. Keep your faith and your life in separate compartments. Tell the truth at church but lie when necessary at work. Except that God is as present at work as in church. You belong to him as much there as here. The "secular" does not exist. There is no place that stands outside God's hearing, his caring, his judging, or his rewarding. Every word is spiritual, for it is spoken by a tongue God made. It reveals a heart that should be his. It shows who is on the throne of our mind and soul.

In the night fog, a ship's captain saw what appeared to be another ship's lights. To avoid a collision, he signaled the approaching ship: "Change your heading 10 degrees west."

Back through the fog came the reply: "Change your heading 10 degrees east."

The captain replied with clear irritation: "I am an admiral—change your heading 10 degrees west."

Came the response: "I am a seaman fourth class. Change your heading 10 degrees east."

Furious, the admiral blazed his message: "This is a United States Navy vessel under orders of the US government. Change your heading 10 degrees west."

Came the reply: "Change your heading. I am a lighthouse."

Live by the truth. Speak the truth. Or you're sailing your ship in a foggy night, and the rocks are near.

What heading do you need to change this week?

Refuse vengeance (Matthew 5:38–42)

Our fifth illustration: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'" (v. 38). And it was.

This statute, known to history as the *Lex Talionis*, is the oldest law in the world. It first appeared in the Code of Hammurabi, the man who ruled Babylon (ancient Iraq) from 2285 to 2242 BC. Exodus 21:24–25 states it clearly: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."

Note that the law was intended not to justify conflict but to limit it. Without it, if you scraped my car I could wreck yours. If you injured my son, I could kill all your children. This law limited revenge. It also took vengeance out of individual hands and put it into the courts. The judges of ancient Israel determined what constituted proper restitution for injury and levied monetary fines as a result. They developed elaborate ways to ensure the rights of all citizens.

Jesus added: "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person" (39b). Even though you have the right, don't insist on your rights. Then he gave us four examples of this principle in action.

The first regards our *honor*: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (39b). "Strikes" in the original means to "slap." The right hand was almost always the one used in public. So to slap your right cheek with my right hand is a backhanded insult. This was not a threat to life and limb, but an insult to character and reputation. It was a sign of great contempt and abuse so that the rabbinic fines for such an action were twice those of other physical injuries.

Jesus says: Do not retaliate. Do not slap back, though this would be within your rights. Do not prosecute for financial gain, though this also would be within your rights. Turn the other cheek instead. Do not insist on your rights.

Next, Jesus spoke to our *possessions*: "If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (v. 40). The "tunic" was the inner garment, an undershirt with sleeves. It could be taken in a lawsuit. But the "cloak" could not—it was the outer garment that protected a poor person from the elements and served as his bed at night. And so Exodus 22 forbids keeping the cloak. But not Jesus: "Let him have your cloak as well." Even though it is your right to keep it and he has no right to take it. Do not insist on your rights.

Now Jesus came to an issue of great urgency for us today: our *time*. He says, "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (v. 41). Here Jesus refers to a custom known and despised by every person who heard his Sermon. A Roman soldier could require any Jew to carry his military pack for a distance of one mile. No matter where you were going or what you were doing, the soldier could "force" you to do this. But none could force you to carry his pack for two miles. Jesus says to do it anyway. Sacrifice the time. Even though it is your right not to. Do not insist on your rights.

Finally, he dealt with our *money*: "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (v. 42). Give when you are asked to give and lend when you are asked to lend. Not foolishly; God's word counsels us to be wise in our use of money (Proverbs 11:15; 17:18; 22:26–27).

But Jesus does teach us to help when we can. As Augustine commented, we are not told to give everything that is asked for but to give to every person who asks. Even though you don't owe this person anything. Even though it is your right not to. Do not insist on your rights.

Instead, return hate with love, harm with kindness, evil with good. Do not lower yourself to the one who has taken from you. Simply refuse. You can choose not to insult those who insult you, not to hurt those who hurt you. When your honor or possessions or time or money are taken, do not take back. Take the high road. Show the high character. Be the presence of Christ.

Jesus is our example: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). He was insulted for us and suffered for us. He wore our sins on his body, our failures on his soul. He had the right to call ten thousand angels to his side, to end his crucifixion before it began, to condemn all of humanity to a hell we deserve. But he did not claim his rights. Now he invites us to faith in him, to experience his forgiveness for our sins and the eternal life he died to give. Do you have his eternal life today?

If so, where will you share it with someone else? What personal conflict is troubling you most today? Will you show the selfless love of Jesus Christ to that person this week?

Sometimes a disciple of Jesus must wield the sword in love to protect his neighbor from an enemy. Sometimes that disciple must sheath his sword in love to protect an enemy from himself. Let us pray for the love, wisdom, and courage to know the difference.

Love your enemies (Matthew 5:43–48)

Our last illustration begins: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy" (v. 43). "Love your neighbor" is a familiar biblical injunction. We find it as early as Leviticus 19:18, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." "Neighbor" comes from "nigh-bor," one who is "nigh" or near. Loving our neighbor is a basic and familiar Christian ethic.

But were Jesus' hearers really taught, "hate your enemy"? In fact, they were. The Jewish rabbis considered fellow Jews their neighbor. Everyone else, the Gentile world, was not, and was in fact their spiritual enemy. The Gentile world would corrupt them with its defiled food, customs, and paganism.

Here we find basic humanity exposed. It's easy to love those who like us and are like us. It's hard to like those who are not like us and do not like us. It's human nature to love our neighbor and hate our enemy.

Then Jesus took his stand: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (v. 44). This statement has no parallel in the Jewish tradition or literature. No religious teacher in world history ever defended such an ethic. This is the action that makes our love both real and possible.

Jesus expanded these words by saying, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27–28). When we pray for our enemies, our love becomes real. It moves from sentiment to substance, from feeling to action. It takes wings and grows feet. It becomes practical and tangible. And when we pray for those who persecute us, our actions produce feelings. We act out love, and eventually feel love. It's a process that takes time, but it works.

Such forgiving love in action reveals our spiritual genetics: "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (v. 45). God blesses both the evil and the good. Sun shines and rain falls on the unrighteous and the righteous. And we're glad, for we've all been evil and unrighteous.

A father should love his children, whether or not they love him; and so God loves us. A sibling should love his sister or brother, whether or not they love him; and so should we. Such love shows us to be our Father's children.

Otherwise, we are no different from the children of the world. The tax collectors, the most despised people in Israel, love those who love them. The pagans destined for hell greet those

who greet them. It is human nature to love those who love us. It is divine nature to love those who do not.

Such selfless, forgiving love fulfills the purpose for which we were created: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48). "Perfect" translates the word *teleios*. In this context it means to achieve the purpose for which we were intended. In this sense a screwdriver is "perfect" if it does its job. It is not "sinless"—it may have nicks on the handle and paint on the blade. But if it turns the screw it was meant to turn, it is *teleios*.

What is our intended purpose? Jesus made it clear: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. God is love (1 John 4:8), and he has created us to love as he does, to forgive as he does, to love our neighbor because we love our Father and to prove we love our Father by loving our neighbor. And so selfless, forgiving love is the purpose for which we exist.

According to legend, when Barabbas led his revolt in Jerusalem, several people were killed, among them the only son of a carpenter in that city. With revenge in his heart, that father bribed the Roman soldiers to let him make the three crosses used on the day of Jesus' execution. He made the cross for Barabbas much heavier than the other two, to increase the suffering of his son's murderer. However, when Barabbas was freed and Jesus crucified in his place, our Savior had to carry his cross. That's why it was so heavy that Jesus stumbled and Simon of Cyrene had to help carry it.

It's only a legend, but its spiritual point is true. Jesus' cross *was* heavier than any other. Not because it weighed more physically, but spiritually. He carried the sins of the world on it. Including mine. Including yours. From that cross he prayed that his Father would forgive us. And so he does. Now he asks only that we give what he has given to us. And he will help us give it.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have studied some of the most revolutionary principles that have ever been taught. Whether you must deal with anger, divorce, sexual purity, integrity, vengeance, or enemies, choose to follow Jesus by depending fully on his word and Spirit.

J. I. Packer called the Bible "God preaching." Nowhere is his sermon more practical than in this chapter's study. Or more urgent.

Lesson 6:

Show your faith this way—not that way (Matthew 6:1–18)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 6:1–18
- **Main idea:** Jesus calls for the kind of religious practices that seek God and God’s way rather than human applause and approval.
- **Question to explore:** What’s so bad about calling attention to one’s religious acts?
- **Study aim:** To evaluate how I practice my faith publicly.
- **Quick read:** When we seek to honor God with our public and private spiritual practices, we glorify the Father and serve the world.

Commentary

Do you remember when "Tebowing" was added to our cultural dictionary? Tim Tebow, the son of missionaries and then quarterback of the Denver Broncos, sparked a national debate on the role of public faith in our society. He would pray on the football field before games, point toward heaven when his team scored, and credit God for his every success.

Some thought his public demonstrations of faith were obtrusive and unwarranted. Others felt he had every right to express his commitment to Christ so long as he did not force his beliefs on others. Still others applauded his stand for Jesus as a model for all believers.

This debate was an example of a controversy that goes back to the ministry of Jesus. When should we make our faith public? Why? How?

This chapter's study will challenge us to find ways we can glorify God most effectively. John the Baptist's testimony must be ours: "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). How do we make Jesus "greater" by our public witness?

How to make faith public (Matthew 6:1)

Our text begins: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven" (v. 1). Let's understand the words Jesus employed, then gather together their meaning for us.

"Be careful" translates *prosechete*, to be alert, take heed, concerned, pay careful attention to. "Not to do" could be translated "not to perform." "Acts of righteousness" rendered *dikaiosynen*, referring here to very specific acts expected by the Judaism of Jesus' day.

"To be seen by them" translates *theaomai*, from which we get "theater." The phrase utilizes syntax that could be rendered "for the purpose of being seen by others." At issue is not whether people will know that we have done these "acts," but whether we did them for that purpose. "Have" translates *echete*, to hold, possess, experience. "Reward" translates *misthon*, wages, pay, recompense.

We could translate his warning thus: "Pay close attention to yourself so that you do not perform your 'acts of righteousness' for the purpose of being seen by others. If you do, you will have absolutely no reward from your heavenly Father."

What were the "acts of righteousness" to which Jesus referred?

The Book of Tobit, an apocryphal volume, contains wisdom reflective of the Jewish culture of Jesus' day. It counsels:

Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies (Tobit 12:8–10, NRSV).

Alms, prayer, and fasting were widely affirmed in Judaism as three ways of demonstrating religious piety. In a moment we will study Jesus' commentary on each. First, however, it is critical that we understand the motives by which these acts should be performed.

Earlier he enjoined us to "let your light shine before men" (Matthew 5:16a). Here he warns us about doing our "acts of righteousness" before men. Is this a contradiction? Not at all. Jesus' earlier statement identifies the motive behind our public faith: "that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (v. 16b). In our text, he did the same: "to be seen by them," literally "for the purpose of being seen by them."

At issue is the motive behind our actions. If we seek to honor God and serve others, our public acts of righteousness will be effective for both purposes. If we demonstrate our faith to impress others, we will fail to serve them or honor our Lord.

The prophets consistently warned the people against such hypocrisy:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:21–24)

"The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings!" (Isaiah 1:11–13)

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6–8)

How can we be sure our motives are pure?

First, stay close to Jesus: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). As we submit to the Spirit and commune with our Father, he molds our character in the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). Then we manifest the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22–23) and the humility that characterized our Savior (Philippians 2:5–11).

Second, ask the Lord to reveal and correct your motives whenever needed. David needed to ask God: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23–24).

When last did you make his prayer yours?

How to give (Matthew 6:2–4)

Now we turn to three illustrations of Jesus' call to God-honoring motives. How should we give, pray, and fast in public?

Our first illustration: "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (v. 2).

What to give

"Give to the needy" translates *poies eleemosynen*, literally "perform alms." In Jesus' day there was no social security, food stamps, or other governmental subsistence for the needy. The Jewish people took care of their own through a variety of alms-giving programs. The Hebrew Bible required them to help the poor (Leviticus 19:9–10); land was to be unplowed every seven years for the benefit of those in need (Exodus 23:11).

This extended statement demonstrates the compassion they were to demonstrate toward all in need:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty

of sin. Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:7–11)

One specific way the Jewish people cared for the poor in their midst was through a daily collection called the *Tamhui* ("Table," the subject of Acts 6:1) and a Friday collection called the *Kuppah* ("Basket"). Almsgiving was so consistent in his culture that Jesus could say, "When you give to the needy." Like them, God expects us to care for the poor in tangible and practical ways.

Why to give

However, the motive behind such benevolence was a major issue in Jesus' culture: "Do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men." "Hypocrites" translates *hypokrites*, actor, pretender. Greek actors wore masks to portray their characters. In addition, females were not typically allowed on stage, so males wore feminine masks when playing women. A "hypocrite" was an actor who was adept at changing roles to suit the needs of the moment.

What was acceptable on the theatrical stage is disastrous in the family of God. "Hypocrites in the church" is one of the leading excuses offered by non-Christians when asked why they don't attend worship services. God sees through our masks: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus quoted Isaiah's statement when condemning the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day (Matthew 15:1–11).

"Do not announce it with trumpets" (*salpises*, to blow the trumpet) has been interpreted in various ways. Some suggest that Jesus had in mind the thirteen trumpet-shaped chests of the temple treasury (Luke 21:2), with the possibility that the hypocrites would throw their coins against them so others would know of their gifts. Others point to the blowing of trumpets in the streets to announce public fasts and the possibility that the same was done on occasions of almsgiving.

However, there is no evidence in ancient Jewish writings of such conduct with regard to almsgiving. The hypocrites of Jesus' day could certainly have engaged in such behavior without their acts being recorded by historians. But it may be that Jesus used this phrase metaphorically, in a fashion similar to our "don't honk your own horn."

By calling attention to their almsgiving "in the synagogues and on the streets," they made sure that everyone in their community knew what they had given and they could be "honored by men." If their strategy worked, it furnished the only reward for such hypocrisy: "I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (Matthew 6:2), literally "they have already been paid all the wages they are going to get." The verb is common in ancient papyri for receiving a receipt—i.e., "they have their receipt in full."

By contrast, "When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," (Matthew 6:3). "You" is emphatic in the original. We can picture Jesus raising his voice

and pointing his finger at his disciples. He expected them to "give to the needy" as did their contemporaries; they kept a moneybag for this purpose (John 13:29). However, their motive was to be very different from the hypocrites Jesus criticized.

They were not to "let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." The right hand was and is used publicly in the Middle East, while the left is kept at the side or hidden in one's garment. Alms would typically be offered to others by the right hand. As the left hand could not "see" the right, so our gifts are to be private.

When we give

In this way, "your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (v. 4). "Secret" translates *krypto*, from which we get "cryptic." It means to be hidden from others. What others do not see, our Father does: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). When we give to others out of a desire to glorify him rather than ourselves, he "will reward you" both now and in eternity.

Part of our Father's reward is the communion and intimacy we experience when our hearts are right with him. It is the sense of well-being that comes from accomplishing our created purpose. And it is the knowledge that one day we will hear the most cherished words of all: "Come, you are who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). This is not legalism. Altruism does not earn his favor; it positions us to receive what his grace wants to give to all.

Does Jesus' statement mean that all giving must be anonymous? Not at all. When church members contributed to the needs of others, they did so in a public forum: "Those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:36–35). Everyone in the early church knew that Barnabas had sold a piece of land and given the proceeds to the church (Acts 4:34–37). But Ananias and Sapphira soon illustrated the pitfall of following his example for the wrong reasons (Acts 5:1–11).

Have you given to those in need lately? For what reason? With what reward?

How to pray (Matthew 6:5–15)

Jesus' second illustration of ministry motivated by God's glory and the good of others centers on prayer: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (v. 5).

Why to pray

Again, Jesus assumed that we would pray: "When you pray . . ." The Jews of his day observed three specified times of daily prayer (cf. Psalm 55:17, "Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice"). The Shema was recited (Deuteronomy 6:4), followed by petitions, expressions of worship, and a plea for the Messiah to come. These petitions evolved

into the Eighteen Benedictions (the *Shemoneh Esreh*) and were prayed in liturgical fashion.

Men were supposed to go to the synagogue or temple for these prayer times; if they could not be there in person, they were expected to pray wherever they were. As a result, Jesus spoke of those who "pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners." During the hour of prayer, observant Jews would stop wherever they were to pray, even if they were on a "street corner."

The problem was not that men prayed at these times—it was that they did so "to be seen by men." "Standing" translates *hestotes*, which implies the practice of standing in position for a long time. "Street" translates *plateion*, a "wide street" where more people would see them. It seems that some hypocrites would arrange their days so they could be in the most visible places when the hours of prayer came. As with hypocritical almsgiving, their purpose was to glorify themselves rather than God and meet their needs rather than those of others. As with earlier hypocrites, they already "have received their reward in full."

By contrast, Jesus taught his followers to "go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). "Room" translates *tameion*, referring to a private chamber, inner room, closet, or storeroom. Its location is important only for the anonymity it confers.

As with almsgiving, Jesus did not mean that all public prayers are wrong. He prayed in the presence of his disciples (Luke 11:1) and when he blessed food before feeding the crowds (Matthew 14:19). Public prayers at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 6:1–42) and for covenant renewal after the exile (Nehemiah 9:5–38) were both appropriate and effective. The disciples prayed publicly at the temple (Acts 3:1–10) and after Peter and John were released by the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:24).

Not only were some hypocritical by where they prayed—they demonstrated their hypocrisy by how they prayed: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words" (Matthew 6:7). "Pagans" translates *ethnikoi*, the "heathen" or "unbelievers." Gentiles of Jesus' day believed in a pantheon of gods and were convinced that they could impress and persuade these gods by the length and fervency of their prayers (1 Kings 8:26; Acts 19:34).

Jesus did not mean that we could not repeat our prayers; he prayed three times in Gethsemane, "saying the same thing" (Matthew 26:44). Rather, he spoke to the motives behind our prayers: "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). We do not pray to inform an omniscient God of our needs or to persuade an omnipotent God to meet them. Why pray, then? To position ourselves to receive what his grace intends to give.

When a child asks for his allowance, he does not inform or persuade his father. Rather, he draws near to the one who wants to give what he needs and more. Our loving Father longs to be gracious to us and rises to show us compassion (Isaiah 30:18). He wants to be with us more than we want to be with him.

When we pray to experience communion with the Almighty and not to impress others, we pray rightly. What motivated your last time of prayer?

What to pray

From motives, Jesus turned to methods for prayer. What follows is the most famous prayer of all time. Thousands of volumes have been written on it; I once taught a two-month series on its words and felt I only began to explore their significance. In the context of disciple-making, let's focus on this prayer as a model for disciples.

It is not really the "Lord's Prayer" since it contains a petition for forgiveness that Jesus would never need to make (cf. Hebrews 4:15). Nor are these words to be repeated in rote fashion as though they contained mystical and magical powers. If that were the case, we could not pray them as Jesus spoke them in Aramaic (Matthew translated them into the Greek we have today). He intended them as a model for us to follow. Let's explore the principles they teach and find ways to apply them to our prayers today.

We begin with *worship*: "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name' (Matthew 6:9). "Hallowed" translates *hagiastheto*, to consecrate, sanctify, reverence. God's "name" denotes his character and person. To pray that his "name" be "hallowed" is to ask that he be glorified and honored by our prayer and life.

The first element of transforming prayer is worship that honors our Father. We enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise (Psalm 100:4). As the Jews of Jesus' day ascended the steps into the temple while reciting psalms of worship (Psalms 120–34, known as "Psalms of Ascent"), so we step into his presence with praise. Make time to reverence your Father. Sing or say psalms, hymns, or chorus to him. Praise him for who he is and thank him for what he has done in your life.

Second, we move to *submission*: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). As we noted in lesson 4, God's kingdom is his rule and reign on earth. Jesus came to inaugurate this kingdom (Matthew 4:17); when he returns, he will consummate it (cf. Revelation 19:16). To pray for his kingdom to come is to submit to him as our King.

Transforming prayer requires that we surrender our words and lives to our Father. He can give only what we will receive and lead only those who will follow. Submit your life and your day to your King and know that he will lead you into his "good, pleasing, and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

Third, we offer *petition*: "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). First-century Jews baked enough bread at the beginning of each day for that day's needs. They had no means of preserving bread and would not want to waste such a precious commodity. As bread was their basic staple, it stood symbolically for all needs.

By asking for this day's needs to be met, we surrender our problems to our Father's providence and power. We name them specifically and place them in his hands. We do this when the day begins and through all that we experience. And we claim the fact that "my God will meet all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

Fourth, we move to *confession*: "Forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12a). "Debts" translates *opheilemata*, obligations, transgressions, sins. It refers to that which we owe to God. (When

Jesus taught the prayer again in Luke 11:4, he used *hamartias*, "sins.") Our sins place us in his debt, as we can do nothing to repay or erase them. We can ask only that he "forgive," translating *aphes*, to emit, cancel, dismiss, pardon. As when a governor pardons a criminal, so we ask God to pardon us. Not to pretend that we did not sin, excuse our behavior, or ignore it, but to choose not to punish it.

Such forgiveness from God must be extended to others: "as we also have forgiven our debtors" (v. 12b). As we are to love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:37, 39), so we are to seek from God the pardon we give to others. We are the debtor who owed more than he could ever repay (Matthew 18:23–27); those who have sinned against us are the debtor who owed very little (vv. 28–34).

As with our words, our actions do not earn God's favor. Rather, when we forgive others we position ourselves to experience our Father's forgiveness. If I am close to God, I cannot be distant from his children. In confession we admit our sins to the Lord and forgive those against us. Both lead to cleansing and renewal.

Fifth, we seek *direction*: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13). "The evil one" translates *ponerou*, wicked, evil, evil spirit, the wicked one. Jesus' petition does not suggest that God would lead us into temptation unless we asked him not to do so. On the contrary, it exhibits the parallelism so common in first-century Jewish teaching. Rather than lead us into temptation, he will "deliver" (*rhyomai*, preserve, save, rescue) from the one who would.

We must have such leadership if we would avoid sin and exalt Christ. God wants us to know his will more than we want to know it. When we seek his direction, we will always have it.

You are familiar with the customary benediction to the Model Prayer, "for yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen." While a good way to end our time of prayer, it is not part of the original text. Its inclusion arose when the prayer began to be recited liturgically in worship.

It may have been adapted from this remarkable prayer of praise by David: "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name" (1 Chronicles 29:11–13).

When you pray

The last section in Jesus' teaching on prayer highlights the importance of forgiving others: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14–15).

Forgiving others is counseled repeatedly in Scripture. We are to forgive because we have been forgiven: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). We do so in gratitude for grace (Luke 7:42) on the basis of Jesus'

shed blood (Hebrews 9:22).

Such forgiveness is to be extended every time it is needed (Luke 17:3–4; Matthew 18:21–22) as a means of restoring fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:7–10) and health (James 5:15–16). As Stephen (Acts 7:59–60) and Paul (2 Timothy 4:16) followed Jesus' example of forgiveness (Luke 23:34), so should we.

When we pray for forgiveness, we must show others the reality of its experience in our lives. Who will know tomorrow that you offered this prayer to God today?

How to fast (Matthew 6:16–18)

Jesus' third illustration of the proper motives for ministry involved the common spiritual discipline of fasting: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (v. 16).

"Fast" translates *nesteuo*, referring to the practice of abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose. This discipline has a long history in biblical revelation. Moses fasted while receiving the law from God (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9). Fasts were proclaimed during times of emergency or distress (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:21–23; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16; Jeremiah 36:9). Fasting often accompanied mourning (2 Samuel 1:12; 12:21; Isaiah 31:13) and prayer (2 Samuel 12:16; Psalm 35:13).

The tenth day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement, was a required fast day for all Jews (Leviticus 16:29). Fasts varied from an evening (Daniel 6:18), one day (1 Samuel 14:24; 2 Samuel 3:35), three days (Esther 4:16), seven days (1 Samuel 31:13; 2 Samuel 12:16–18), and forty days (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8).

John the Baptist required his disciples to fast, as did the Pharisees (Matthew 9:14). Jesus fasted before his temptations (Matthew 4:2; Mark 1:13). Paul fasted after his Damascus Road encounter with Christ (Acts 9:9), before his first missionary journey (Acts 13:2–3), when choosing elders for the churches he established (Acts 14:23), and during a storm on the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27:33).

Jesus assumed that his followers would practice this discipline as well: "When you fast . . ." As with the previous subjects, his concern was focused on motives rather than methods: "Do not look somber as the hypocrites do." "Somber" translates *skythropos*, to be sad, gloomy. They "disfigure" (*aphanizo*, to make unattractive or ugly) their faces "to show men they are fasting." These hypocrites would wear old, torn clothes, cover themselves with ashes and dirt, and use makeup to appear sickly.

The Pharisees fasted on the second and fifth days of the week (Luke 18:12), claiming that this was because they were the days when Moses made his trips to receive the law from God on Mount Sinai. However, they were also the major Jewish market days, when they would have the largest audiences for their pretension. Jesus warned his disciples that such hypocrites "have received their reward in full."

By contrast, "when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face" (Matthew 6:17). "Put oil on your head" referred to using ointment or perfume to condition the hair and face. "Wash your face" contrasted with the dirt and ashes often worn by the hypocrites. In other words, look and act normally.

As a result, "it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (v. 18). As with almsgiving and prayer, when we fast for the right reasons our Father sees, is pleased, and rewards us now and eternally.

While fasting in Scripture is limited to food, I believe that this practice can relate effectively to a variety of other applications in our lives. Fasting is abstaining from the physical for the sake of the spiritual. Meals were time-consuming affairs in Jesus' day; to spend this time in prayer and communion with God rather than in the company of others would strengthen a person's relationship with the Father.

If Jesus were teaching the Sermon on the Mount today, would he suggest that we fast from other distractions as well? Would a fast from mobile phones, computers, television, and other electronics be helpful? Is there a time-consuming habit in your life that could be neglected today so you could focus on your Lord?

Conclusion

Which of these three illustrations is most relevant to your life and ministry today? Will the poor benefit from your study and teaching this week? Will your time alone with God be strengthened by following Jesus' model and praying with proper motives? Will you abstain from the physical for the sake of the physical?

When Bill Moyers was press secretary during the Johnson administration, Mr. Johnson invited him to a family dinner at the White House. Since Moyers is an ordained Baptist minister, the president asked him to return thanks before the meal. Moyers began to pray, quietly asking the Lord's blessing on the food before them.

Mr. Johnson, sitting at the other end of the table, soon called out, "Speak up! I can't hear you."

To which Moyers replied, "I wasn't speaking to you, Mr. President."

Who will be the audience of your public faith this week?

Lesson 7:

Trust God and stop worrying about things (Matthew 6:19–34)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 6:19–34
- **Main idea:** Disciples are to trust God and value God's way so much that they stop emphasizing and worrying about material things.
- **Question to explore:** Which has your closest attention—God or material things?
- **Study aim:** To decide how I will focus my life on God rather than on material things. (Be aware of other passages in Matthew that deal with this theme, including 13:22; 19:16–30; 25:31–46. See also 7:7–11.)
- **Quick read:** When our Father is our King, we can trust our needs to his grace.

Commentary

Dr. Bill Hinson was the longtime pastor of First United Methodist Church in Houston. His father came to faith late in his life, primarily through Bill's influence. The day he had his fatal heart attack, Bill was away taking his college finals. His family called and he came immediately, wrecking his car in his haste, but he didn't arrive in time to see his father before he died.

His father's last words, repeated over and over and over, were, "Go get Bill, ask him to hold my hand and help the hurt." Bill said he was overwhelmed with guilt over being late. He told God he would have given ten years of his life to be able to hold his father's hand. Finally, God began helping him to see that as long as he lived there would be hands to hold and hurt to help.

With this difference: It's not that we hold our hurting father's hand. It's that our heavenly Father holds ours.

Why do you need his healing touch this week?

Store up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–24)

Greek philosophy made a distinction between the "spiritual" and the "secular," but Jesus did not. God made all that is (Genesis 1:1) and called it "good" (v. 31). As a father cares for every dimension of his children's lives, so our Father has a "good, pleasing, and perfect will" for everything we experience (Romans 12:2).

That will extends to our possessions. Contrary to popular characterizations today, Jesus' disciples were people of means. Peter's home in Capernaum was the largest yet discovered and was

situated closest to the Sea of Galilee. He and Andrew formed a fishing enterprise with James and John (Luke 5:10) that included hired servants (Mark 1:20). Matthew was a tax collector, a despised but very lucrative occupation. The other apostles were financially able to leave their work for months or even years.

But few people have enough money not to want more. And few are so well off that they don't worry about their financial future. So Jesus addressed this issue headlong: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal" (Matthew 6:19). Let's examine his words and their meaning in our lives today.

Guard your heart

"Do not store up" could be translated, "Stop storing up." "Store up" translates *thesaurizete*, to treasure, gather, save, lay up. "Treasures" translates *thesaurous*, repository, storeroom, treasure book. "Rust" translates *broxis*, that which eats or consumes. "Destroy" translates *aphanizei*, to ruin, perish, disappear, make ugly. "Thieves" translates *kleptai*, from which we get "kleptomaniac." "Break in" translates *dioryssousin*, to break in.

Here Jesus referred to the three ways wealth was stored in his culture. Some invested in clothes. Since styles did not often change, garments could be kept and worn for many years. Expensive fabrics such as purple clothing were a very public sign of one's financial success. However, moths could do what styles and thieves could not. An expensive garment stored through the winter could be ruined by springtime, no matter what steps were taken in the first-century world to protect it.

Others invested in grain and other nonperishable foods. As drought and famine were constant threats, wealthy people built very large cisterns in which to store food. (For instance, Solomon's grain storage facility at Megiddo was massive.) But rats and mold could "destroy" grain despite all efforts to protect against them.

Still others measured wealth by money. Most people had no access to banks or other means of storing their funds, so they buried them inside their homes. Since commoners brought their animals inside at night, they buried their money boxes near the walls of their homes where they would not be trampled. However, most coins were susceptible to rust and thieves. Walls were typically made of thin adobe. If a thief knew where to look, he could put his fist through the wall and steal what he found. In this way, "thieves break in and steal."

James chastised the wealthy of his day: "Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire" (James 5:2–3). Such was the outcome of earthly goods, especially when they were chosen above heavenly priorities.

Jesus did not mean that financial means are inherently sinful. Paul assured us that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17). At issue was not what his disciples had, but why they had it.

Scripture consistently warns us against the sin of coveting more than we should own:

- "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17).
- "Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word" (Psalm 119:36–37).
- "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).
- "Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5).
- "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

Our Lord did not warn us against possessing money but against allowing money to possess us: "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:20). "Store up" translates *thesaurizo*, to gather together, store for the future. It is a present tense imperative—continually seek to store up treasures in heaven with God. In his perfect paradise there are no moths to destroy, no rust to corrupt, no rats to consume, no thieves to steal.

We can see why such priorities are important in eternity. However, they are also critical in the present: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (v. 21). The "heart" was seen as the seat of emotions, intellect, and will. We value most what we invest with our greatest treasure of time, talent, and possessions. Politicians know that if they receive our financial support they have our vote. Where we put our energy and resources reveals what matters most to us.

A historian once published a biography of Napoleon Bonaparte based on the discovery of his personal checkbook. He claimed that it revealed the emperor in a way nothing else could. What would such a biography reveal about you?

Guard your mind

Jesus continued: "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22). The Greek words are straightforward even if their meaning requires interpretive clarity today. "Eye" translates *ophthalmos*, from which we get ophthalmology. "Lamp" translates *lychnos*, the common light source for homes in Jesus' culture. "Body" translates *somatos*, the physical body. "Good" translates *haplous*, to be single, without guile, sincere, healthy, or generous. "Full of light" translates *photeinon*, shining, bright, full of light.

The ancients saw the eye as emitting light from the soul. When sculptors portrayed a living subject, they included details of the eye; when their subject was deceased, the eye was blank. If the soul is "good"—sincere and generous—the whole body would be filled with "light," that which is good and godly.

However, "if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (v. 23). "Bad" translates *poneros*, evil, wicked, worthless, or stingy. "Darkness" translates *skoteinos*, a word that was used to describe both physical and spiritual darkness. Darkness of the eyes produces sorrow (Lamentations 5:17). It expresses captivity (Psalm 107:10ff) and wickedness (Psalm 10:7–8). The realm of the dead is one of darkness (Psalm 88:6; Job 17:12–13; Matthew 8:12).

If the soul is stingy and covetous, the entire life will be "full of darkness" that consumes the personality and actions. Solomon observed that "a man with an evil hastens after wealth and does not know that want will come upon him" (Proverbs 28:22 NASB). His spiritual "eye" was "dark" and blind so that he could not see where he was going and would inevitably fall into ruin.

Jesus' point is clear: if our thoughts are ungodly, our lives will follow suit. If our thoughts are gracious, generous, and Spirit-led, our lives will produce the fruit of the Spirit. Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, was right: the happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts.

Guard your will

From money and mind, Jesus turned to our will: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24). "No one" translates *oudeis*, nothing, nobody; it describes a categorical fact without exceptions. "Can" translates *dynamai*, to be capable, able. "Serve" translates *douleuo*, to be a slave.

No one has the ability to be the slave of two "masters" (*kyrios*, lord, owner). This was a logical fact. Since a slave belonged to his master every moment of every day, two people could not own the same slave. You and I cannot drive the same car at the same time.

Rather, we will "hate" (*miseo*, to disfavor, disregard, detest) the one and "love" (*agapao*, to give unconditional commitment to) the other. Or we will be "devoted" (*antecho*, to cling to, hold fast to) the first and "despise" (*kataphroneo*, to feel contempt for, to devalue) the other.

The bottom line is the bottom line: "You cannot serve both God and Money." "Money" translates *mamona*, an Aramaic term for worldly wealth. The NIV capitalizes the word to emphasize its status as a rival to God.

Paul echoed Jesus' warning:

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. (1 Timothy 6:6–10)

There are only two choices: either we serve God as our King or our hobby. He is either Lord of all or he is not truly Lord at all. Because we are fallen people living in a fallen world, our "default" position is to exalt and serve ourselves. If you have not consciously and intentionally submitted your resources, thoughts, and decisions to Christ today, he is not your King—you are.

Do not worry about treasures on earth (Matthew 6:25–34)

Jesus has taught us to serve heaven's priorities with what we have, think, and do. Now he shows us how to relate to the fallen world in which we seek to serve our King: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" (v. 25).

This was not the only time Jesus warned us about worry. In his parable of the sower he said, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22). To the rich young ruler he said, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). Tragically, "When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (v. 22).

In our text, "I tell you" demonstrates the divine authority with which Jesus taught. The rabbis of his day cited the authorities of their scribal traditions, but Jesus spoke directly from the Father. At the end of his sermon, "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:28–29).

"Worry" translates *merimnao*, to have anxiety, care for, be concerned about, to divide the mind. James warned us that "a double-minded man" is "unstable in all he does" (James 1:8). "Is not life more important than food" could be rendered, "Is there not more to life than what you eat?"

Jesus' warning is a present-tense imperative, literally "stop worrying about your life." Are you worried about some problem you're facing today, perhaps with finances, health, family, or other relationships? Jesus says to stop it, now.

Why? For two reasons. The first is logical: If God provides for his creation, won't he provide for his children? As Jesus taught on this beautiful hillside, undoubtedly there were birds flying nearby to which he pointed as he spoke his next words: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26). They are busy finding food for the present, but they do not worry about keeping it for the future.

"Valuable" translates *diaphero*, to be worth more, superior to. Here we find another example of the *qal wahomer*, "from the lesser to the greater," a common teaching technique in Jesus' day. If God would provide for birds, how much more will he provide for his children? By analogy, if a father would feed the family pets, wouldn't he provide for his sons and daughters?

The second is practical: What good has worrying done for you? "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Jesus asked (v. 27). "Single hour" translates *heis pechys*, literally

"one cubit." It can refer to physical stature or length of life. Has your worrying extended your life or health in any way? Has it done anything constructive? To the contrary, doesn't it lead to elevated blood pressure, ulcers, and a host of other physical maladies?

Returning to his first line of argument, Jesus shifted from the birds above his disciples to the lilies of the fields around them: "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin" (v. 28). "See how" translates *katamanthano*, "to observe well, to learn thoroughly. "Labor" translates *kapaio*, which does not refer to work but to weariness.

They don't worry about tomorrow, but "I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these" (v. 29). By some estimates, Solomon would be worth \$58 billion in today's currency. But nothing the wealthiest humans can make is as magnificent as nature in her finery.

Then Jesus made his point: "If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (v. 30). Grass was used to start fires for cooking, but it possesses a beauty our wealth cannot match. If God takes such care with such temporary parts of his creation, how will he provide for his eternal children?

In conclusion: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (v. 31). "Do not worry" is literally "stop worrying." This is the kind of thing Gentiles do, for they have no heavenly Father to trust: "For the pagans run after all these things" (v. 32a). "Run after" translates *epizetousin*, to search for, wish, seek after, desire. Could his words be more descriptive of our materialistic, consumer-centered culture?

Don't ever wonder if God knows about your problems and needs: "and your heavenly Father knows that you need them" (v. 32b). "Knows" translates *oida*, to understand, be familiar with, comprehend. We do not pray to inform God but to position ourselves to receive all that his grace intends to give.

Rather than worrying about our needs, we should focus our energies on our Father and his purposes: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (v. 33). "Seek" translates *zeteo*, to look for, strive for, seek earnestly to obtain. "First" translates *protos*, in the first place, before all other things. "Righteousness" translates *dikaioyne*, justice, fairness with all. As verse 32 made clear, "all these things" refers to the needs of life, not its luxuries. "Will be given" translates *prostithemi*, to provide, add, grant, give.

We must choose—we can live for God's kingdom or our own. We can trust God with our needs or worry about them. Jesus warned us: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (v. 34). "Trouble" translates *kakia*, baseness, depravity, vice, wickedness. The word was used to describe a crop damaged by hail. Such problems are inevitable, but our Father's provision is more than sufficient to our needs.

God continually assures us that he will care for his own. He told Jacob, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go . . . I will not leave you until I have done what I promised

you" (Genesis 28:15). He reassured the psalmist that "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4). We can respond: "You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great" (Psalm 18:35). The Lord promises his people: "I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you" (Isaiah 46:4).

What about tomorrow worries you today?

Conclusion

Billy Graham writes: "Physicians tell us that 70 percent of all illnesses are imaginary, the cause being mental distress or worry. In reading hundreds of letters from people with spiritual problems, I am convinced that high on the list is the plague of worry. It has been listed by heart specialists as the number one cause of heart trouble.

"Psychiatrists tell us that worry breeds nervous breakdowns and mental disorders. Worry is more adept than Father Time in etching deep lines into the face. It is disastrous to health, robs life of its zest, crowds out constructive, creative thinking, and cripples the soul."

Jesus prescribed the remedy for worry. If his disciples would live by these words, wouldn't our witness be strengthened? Wouldn't others want the joy and tranquility they see in us? Wouldn't our faith lead to our Father?

Lesson 8:

Make the right choice

(Matthew 7:1–27)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 7:1–29
- **Main idea:** Truly living as Jesus' disciple demands deliberately choosing to follow Jesus' teachings in relating to other people and to God.
- **Question to explore:** What difference would following Jesus' teachings make in how you relate to other people and to God?
- **Study aim:** To identify ways I will put Jesus' teachings into practice as his disciple.
- **Quick read:** When we live by the word of God, we find and share true life.

Commentary

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. Safe in America, he returned to his native Germany to fight Hitler and paid for his commitment and courage with his life. Bonhoeffer wrote one of the great classics of Christian literature, a study of Jesus' teachings called *The Cost of Discipleship*. He began: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace."

What did he mean? "Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. . . . An intellectual assent . . . is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins." So long as we believe that the Bible is true, Jesus is the Son of God and Savior and Lord, that's enough. No life-transforming personal relationship is needed.

As a result, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

On the other hand, "Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life."

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is the most famous discourse in history, and the most challenging. It calls us to give our lives to God's word and will so that we might find them. We can keep its instructions only by the power of the Holy Spirit. When we do, we prove to the world that we are

true disciples of our Lord. And when they see the authenticity of our lives, they will want what we have.

Now we will once again survey more material than can be explored by a single Bible study.

How to relate to others (Matthew 7:1–6)

Our text begins: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (v. 1). "Judge" translates *krino*, to discriminate or separate, to subject someone to harsh, sharp, unjust criticism in a habitual way. Jesus' words are a present tense imperative: never judge. Stop judging. No exceptions, conditions, or loopholes. Don't do it.

Speak to others, not about them

This prohibition applies to all unjust criticism. But typically we criticize people in their absence more than in their presence; we slander and gossip. We need to know that we will be treated by others as we are treating them now: "In the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (v. 2). If someone will gossip about you to me, they will gossip about me to you.

God is paying attention to such slander and gossip: "Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure" (Psalm 101:5). Jesus warned us: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs" (Luke 12:2–3).

So refuse to speak about those who are not present. Scripture is adamant on this point:

- "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (Matthew 18:15).
- "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (Romans 2:1).
- "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!" (James 2:12–13).
- "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." (James 1:19–20); "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (v. 26).

St. Augustine placed a sign on his dining table written in Latin and large enough for all to see:

*Whoever thinks that he is able
To nibble at the life of absent friends
Must know that he's unworthy of this table.*

Confess your sins first

Jesus continues: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). The "speck" (*karphos*) was a splinter from a piece of dry wood or chaff. It would not damage the eye or limit eyesight but would be irritating. The "plank" (*dokos*) was a log upon which planks in a house rested in a pier-and-beam kind of construction, the largest and strongest "plank" they knew.

When we see the speck in someone else's life and ignore the plank in our own, we are "hypocrites"—Greek actors who wore two masks and played two roles. We act spiritual when, in fact, we are carnal. We appear to be helping when, in fact, we are hurting and hating. We transfer our sins and problems to others, looking for their faults so we can avoid our own.

To stop slandering and gossiping about others, begin by examining yourself. A wise Bible teacher once taught a truth I've not forgotten: there is no sin I cannot commit. Your sins may not be mine, but mine may not be yours. And I cannot see or judge your heart. There is always something I don't know or have wrong. And we tend to see in others those wrongs we commit ourselves. Otherwise we wouldn't see them. Gossips reveal their own sins in the slanders they repeat.

Remember the words of the aged apostle John: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives" (1 John 1:8–10).

Practice spiritual discernment

Jesus taught us to refuse gossip and slander by examining our own sins before we give attention to those of others. But he did want us to see sin for what it is, and to refuse its contaminating influence in our lives: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6).

In Jesus' culture, "dogs" (*kyon*) referred to ethnic impurity (Gentiles), "pigs" (*choiros*) to ethical impurity (eating meat forbidden by Torah). Giving dogs what is "sacred" refers to meat consecrated for worship and sacrifice, symbolically to giving Gentiles that which is sacred to Jews. Pearls (*margaritas*) looked like peas or acorns and would deceive the hogs until they discovered the deception.

Wild dogs and pigs were nothing like the domesticated animals with which we are familiar. If you were close enough to them to toss them meat and pearls, and angered or threatened them, they would likely attack you. Think of bears in Yellowstone or coyotes on the open plain.

We are called not to slander or gossip, but to practice spiritual discernment. How? We are to test others spiritually: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether

they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1);
"Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21–22);
"Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24).

And we are to refuse the ungodly:

- "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people" (1 Corinthians 5:9).
- "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve" (2 Corinthians 11:14–15).
- "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving the Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people" (Romans 16:17, 18).
- "They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (1 Peter 4:4–5).

But do so in love, with a view toward prayerful reconciliation in grace.

During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so he could control them. Among the Brethren churches, half complied and half refused. Those who complied were treated well by the government; the others were persecuted, and many died in concentration camps.

After the war, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the two sides. Finally they determined that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met in a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together.

As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to his control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred.

With whom do you need to follow their example this week?

How to relate to God (Matthew 7:7–12)

From the horizontal, Jesus turned to the vertical.

How to pray

This section begins: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (v. 7). "Ask" translates *aiteo*, seeking by an inferior from a superior, as a beggar requesting help from a donor. "Seek" translates *zeteo*, to strive to find, to look for earnestly. "Knock" translates *krouo*, to rap on a door in seeking entrance.

Note the ascent. A child asks for his mother's help. But he cannot find her, so he seeks her. He still cannot find her, but there is a closed door. And so he knocks at the door, hoping to find the one he seeks so he can ask for the need she can answer. So with us. We ask, but it seems he does not hear. We seek, but it seems he is not to be found. We knock, but it seems the door is closed. But it is not. Your Father will always open to you.

But you must pray. How? First, *with urgency*. Jesus' words are imperatives, commands. Clearly praying means something to God. And it must mean something to us. Charles Spurgeon said, "He who prays without fervency does not pray at all. We cannot commune with God, who is a consuming fire, if there is no fire in our prayers."

Maltbie Babcock observed, "Our prayers must mean something to us if they are to mean anything to God." And Spurgeon added, "Do not reckon you have prayed unless you have pleaded, for pleading is the very marrow of prayer."

Pray with urgency, and pray *continually*. Jesus' words are in the present tense: pray and keep on praying. Jesus prayed before light, after dark, all night long, continually. His word commands the same of us: "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

George Mueller, the great minister and man of faith, prayed patiently for five personal friends who did not know the Lord. After five years, one came to Christ. In ten more years, two more were saved. After twenty-five years, the fourth friend came to Christ. He kept praying for the last friend for fifty-two years, then died. The fifth friend came to know Jesus a few months afterward. Keep praying.

Why to pray

Now we come to the hard question: Why? Why pray with continual urgency, especially when it seems God is silent? Because *your Father always hears you*. Jesus promises: "Everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:8). He lists no exceptions. God has an "open door" policy with the universe. Billions of people pray in thousands of languages, all at the same time, and God hears each one.

God always hears you—Jesus' parable proves it. Stones along the Sea of Galilee were small limestone balls, in appearance much like the bread of the day. Fishlike snakes grew in the Sea; they were without scales and thus forbidden to the Jews as food (Leviticus 11:12). This is the background for Jesus' illustration:

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (vv. 9–11)

If you were a father in those days and your hungry child asked for bread, would you trick him with a stone? If he asked for a fish, would you give him a snake? Of course not. And compared to God, we are "evil." Our perfect Father who is love always hears us. This is the promise of God.

When we pray with continual urgency, God always gives us what we ask or whatever is best. But what do we do when it seems he has not?

The Greeks told a story about Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, who fell in love with Tithonus a mortal youth. Zeus offered her any gift she might choose for her mortal lover. She naturally chose that Tithonus might live forever, but she had forgotten to ask that he might remain forever young. And so Tithonus grew older and older and older and could never die, and the gift became a curse.

Our God is no Zeus. He loves us so much he watched his Son die in our place, on our cross, for our sins. Do you know anyone who loves you enough to send their child to die for you? One did.

But he cannot give us everything we ask. A farmer prays for rain; a baseball fan prays for sunshine that same day, for that same county. And God loves us too much to give us all that we ask for. When one of our boys was very small, he watched me use a razor blade to scrape paint from a window and wanted to play with this new, shiny toy. He was incensed that I refused.

When God seems silent, perhaps he's still preparing you for his answer; you need more time in prayer to be able to hear him and obey. Perhaps he's still preparing your circumstances. You're praying for a job, for instance; God must move the person in your job to their next place so you can take theirs. He's not done with what he must do to answer you.

Perhaps you're not obedient to what he is saying; maybe sin clouds your eyes and ears, and you need more time in prayer to be right with him. Often he has a better answer than the one for which we are asking. He has already answered us, but we must keep praying until we see that he has.

Why are these truths relevant to your faith today?

How to relate to God's will (Matthew 7:13–23)

From trusting God in prayer, we turn to trusting God's providence. Our text continues: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (vv. 13–14).

Choose the best map

"Narrow" translates *stenos*, to be compressed or narrowed as a tight place between rocks or walls. The word pictures a gate leading to a narrow alley between buildings. This is a gate you can enter only by yourself. No baggage, no companions. Just you.

Other gates are "wide" (*platys*, broad). Jesus' hearers would have pictured the gate leading into the city. It was so wide an army could march through it, and ranchers and shepherds could bring their animals to market. It was easy to see, to choose, to enter, with as much baggage and as many companions as you like.

Next, our Lord told us about the two roads in life, connected to these gates. One is "narrow." This time, "narrow" translates *thlibo*, a different word from the one found in verse 13. It means to be pressed down, describing the weight used to crush grain into flour. This is the road that leads to oppressing and suffering, the way of unpopular persecution. The other is "broad," the Main Street to which the city gates opened, and the wide highway that led to it. A road which is level, easy to walk, with as many people and as much luggage as you like. The way that is popular.

Now Jesus told us about the two crowds we will find in life. The narrow gate and road have on them "only a few" (v. 14). The wide gate and broad road have large crowds, for "many enter through it" (v. 13). And these gates and roads lead their crowds to the two destinations of life. One is "life" (*zoe*, to be alive). This is the first use of this word in the Sermon on the Mount. It means life now and eternally, the "abundant life" Jesus came to give us (John 10:10). The other is "destruction" (*apoleia*). The word means absolute ruin, total despair, death now and eternally.

According to the Lord Jesus, this is the way life is. There are only two gates, only two roads, only two crowds, only two destinations. We can choose between life and destruction. There is no third choice.

Of course, his words are not popular or politically correct today. Intolerance is the great evil in our society. Live and let live. There's no such thing as absolute truth (which is an absolute truth claim). Just do what's right for you. All roads lead up the same mountain. Whatever God is to you is fine, so long as you're sincere.

But may I ask you: Upon what basis are you sure that you are right and God and the Bible are wrong? What evidence? Do you want to stake your eternal destination on what you hope is true, or have heard somewhere, or seems popular? Would you do that with surgery for your temporal body? Investments for your temporal money? Don't we want the best experts giving us the best advice, backed by the best evidence and facts?

Here the God of the universe, the One who created all that exists, the only One who knows the future, tells us how life and eternity really are. Trust his direction, for only he knows the way to his home.

Look past looks

Our study continues: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matthew 7:15). Our Lord begins with an imperative: "Watch out." "Beware"—be on your guard, pay attention. This is in the present tense: "Keep watching out for this . . ." It is an imperative, a command, with no options. This must be a real problem, or the Lord would not warn us of its existence.

Watch out for "false prophets." "Prophet" (*prophetes*) signifies one who "speaks forth" under divine influence, as the ambassador of God to men. God's spokesperson. "False" translates *pseudo*, one who appears to be genuine but is not.

Those who pretended to speak the word of the Lord but did not were a problem all through the Bible. Moses warned his people about them (Deuteronomy 13:5), as did Jeremiah (Jeremiah

23:31). Jesus warned his followers repeatedly that "false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Paul, Barnabas, John, and Peter all met false prophets and condemned their deception (Acts 13:6; 2 Corinthians 11:13; Galatians 1:7; Acts 20:29–32; 1 John 4:1–3; 2 Peter 2:1–3; Revelation 2:20–23). Such false teachers "come to you"—they take the initiative to attack the people of God.

Their appearances are deceiving in the extreme. They wear "sheep's clothing"—shepherds wore sheepskins, with the fleece against their skin. But "inwardly they are ferocious wolves," in places we cannot see with our eyes. Wolves are the deadliest enemies of sheep. Four times the Bible condemns false spokesmen for God as such "wolves" (Ezekiel 22:27; Zephaniah 3:3; Acts 20:29; John 10:12).

So how are we to tell who they are, if appearances cannot be trusted? "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:16). A wolf can disguise himself, but a tree cannot. It must be what it is by nature. An apple tree must grow like one, be the size of one, have the trunk and bark and leaves and roots of one, and produce apples. It cannot help it. The way to tell what someone is by nature is to examine what they do, the results of their way of life.

We bear good fruit through our relationship with Jesus: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Then our character exhibits the "fruit of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

Our lives lead others to our Lord. We reproduce spiritually by helping people follow Jesus, as a tree reproduces physically through the fruit it bears. And we glorify God as a result: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8).

Such living evidence is proof of who we really are, in our souls: "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:16–18). Thorns don't produce grapes, or thistles figs. A healthy tree must make healthy fruit; a sick or diseased tree cannot. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

So look past looks. Success is not how we appear, but who we really are. Our communion with God, connected to him as a branch to its vine. Our character as we demonstrate the Spirit at work in our lives. Our ministry and witness, as we produce disciples who follow us to Christ. This is success with God. This is what matters to him and should to us.

Bear good fruit

Why is this definition of success so urgent? Because "every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 7:19). What is this "fire"? Let's review briefly the word of God on the subject.

A judgment day is coming for every person who has ever lived and ever will: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Who will judge us? "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). When will this "final

exam" occur? "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him" (Matthew 25:31–32), and he will judge them.

What will happen? Revelation 20:11–15 is the setting. Here, first our relationship with Christ will be judged from the "book of life" (v. 12a). Moses said to God: "Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." The Lord replied, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (Exodus 32:32–33).

God has your name in his book and must "blot it out" if you choose to reject his free salvation in Christ. When you die without Christ, God is forced to remove your name from his book of life, and you'll be "thrown into the lake of fire." Scripture is very clear: "Nothing impure will ever enter [heaven], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:27).

But if you have accepted Christ as Savior and Lord, your name will be there forever. Jesus said to his disciples, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Paul addressed the Philippian Christians as "my fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3).

Then the other book is opened, the "book of works," and we are judged according to what we have done (Revelation 20:12b). Here, all unconfessed sin is judged by God. Secret sins will be judged: "God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14). Jesus confirms it: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs" (Luke 12:2–3).

Our words will be judged: "I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36–37). After listing all sorts of unconfessed sin, Peter declared that those who do such things "will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (1 Peter 4:5).

What will happen to them? "His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. . . . If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Corinthians 3:13, 15). Ungodly, unconfessed sins, thoughts, or words will be revealed at the judgment and burned away. Because heaven is perfect, these things cannot enter in; they must be burned off, destroyed. Sin is forgiven, but reward is lost.

That's the bad news. Here's the good news: the "good fruit," all work done for the glory of God, will be recognized by heaven and rewarded by God. When we pay a price to follow Jesus, we receive the "crown of life": "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). Jesus said, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

When we share our faith, we receive the "soul-winner's crown": "What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy" (1 Thessalonians 2:19–20).

When we stay faithful to God for a lifetime, we receive the "crown of righteousness": "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7–8).

When we lead others faithfully we receive the "crown of glory": "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:2–4).

Enduring temptation; winning souls; staying faithful to God's purpose; serving God's people in love—these lead to rewards which will last forever. They can be yours. But you must choose them now.

Don't trust in religion

Jesus continues: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21). These are the right words; "Jesus is Lord" is the first and central affirmation of the Christian faith. We find it written in Greek on catacomb walls in ancient Rome. Those who are baptized in our church say first, "Jesus is my Lord." Many will say the right words, calling Jesus their "Lord." They will have the right urgency, repeating their affirmation of faith.

And they will have the right works: They will "prophesy" or preach "in your name," representing Jesus, claiming to speak his words and carry his message. They will "drive out demons and perform many miracles." They will demonstrate religious works of the highest magnitude and worth.

We can say the right words and do the right works and still hear the most terrible statement in all of eternity: "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (v. 23). "Knew" (*ginosko*) means personal, intimate knowledge, a personal relationship, not just a performed religion. As we will see shortly, this is the only basis for admittance to heaven, for assurance of eternal life. God must know us. It's not enough that we know about God. If a sitting president were to walk into your room today, you'd know them. But would they know you?

Jesus makes clear the fact that performance is not the basis for assurance. Saying the right words and doing the right works are the essence of religion. And yet they are not enough to know that you will be in heaven, to be sure of your faith and eternity.

I read once of a ninety-year-old preacher who became a Christian. A new pastor drove by his church one evening to see a crowd assembling. He stopped and asked someone what was happening. The man said, "They're meeting to pray for the conversion of their new pastor." The man went to the meeting and came to saving faith in Jesus.

No seminary degree can give assurance of salvation. No words preached or works performed are enough. Don't trust in religion—it will fail your soul.

Trust in relationship

How can you be absolutely assured that you will "enter the kingdom of heaven"? There is only one way: "Only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). So it is imperative that we ask, What is this will?

Jesus told us: "My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40); "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (v. 29). John added: "This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (1 John 3:23).

Then our words and works will reflect our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We will bear the "fruit of the Spirit" as a natural result of branches connected with the vine. We will walk on the road to abundant life, and our words and actions will witness to that life. We will serve Jesus with sacrificial commitment, repentant hearts, and transformed souls. And one day, instead of hearing "I never knew you," we will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:21), the most blessed words in all of eternity.

How to relate to God's word (Matthew 7:24–29)

We are fallen people, living in a fallen world. Jesus warned us: "In this world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). Some of our trials are our fault; some are not. But problems are part of life. The question is not whether rain will come, floods will rise, winds will rage. The question is whether we will still be standing after they do.

There's only one way to withstand the inevitable storms of life. We'd best know what it is, for the rain is going to fall. Maybe today.

Trust Scripture

Our final section begins: "Everyone who hears these words of mine" (Matthew 7:24a). No exceptions, no qualifications. Every person among us can qualify. Each can hear the words of God. But then we must "put them into practice." Many do not.

The Lord warned the prophet Ezekiel: "My people come to you . . . and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice" (Ezek. 33:31–32). It's one thing to hear the word on Sunday, but another to obey it on Monday.

James adds: "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:23–24).

Every time you and I look into the mirror which is the word of God, something about our lives should change. Conviction of sin, direction of life, leadership from the Spirit—there should always be life-transformation for hearing from the Lord of the universe. When did the word of God last change your life?

When we seek God's word for our problems and decisions, and do what it says, we are "like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (v. 24b). "The rock" (*petra*) refers to a strata, not just a specific stone. In the limestone country of Galilee, when a builder digs down through the topsoil and sand, he will always find such a level of solid stone. It was common to dig down to this level and build the house's foundation on it.

Now "the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house" (v. 25a). Rain bombarded the roof, streams flooded the flooring, winds pounded the walls. Every part of the house was assaulted. But "it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock" (v. 25b). Proverbs 10:25 says, "When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever." This is because our foundation is solid.

Refuse every other foundation

We have another option: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand" (Matthew 7:26). The "foolish" (*moronic*) man hears exactly the same words. He has access to the same revelation of God's holy truth. He knows the same biblical revelation. But he does not put these words into practice. He does not stop to ask God's word for guidance before his decisions. He chooses behavior which contradicts God's word and will. He pays deference to the word on Sunday but ignores it on Monday.

He "built his house on sand." The "sand" (*ammos*) here is not a beach or sand pit as we might imagine it, but loose topsoil and rocks lying above the underlying strata of solid rock. The most common place to find such soil was in a dry riverbed.

During the dry season, the region went for months without a drop of water. So a man builds his house, moves into it, and all is well. Until the first storm. Then the same rains which bombarded the wise man's roof fall on his; the same streams which flooded the wise man's flooring rise against his; the same winds which pounded the wise man's walls assault his. But the fool's house has no foundation. No underlying rock. No place to stand.

And so the house "fell with a great crash." It was a "mega" crash, according to the Greek. This is the crash which is coming to every life not built on obedience to the word of God.

How do people build on sand today? If your salvation is resting on intellectual acceptance of the truths of Christianity, you're building on sand. Only when Jesus is your Lord, your Master, your King and Boss and God, are you standing on the rock. When the storms come, we'll all know which foundation is yours.

Lost people build their salvation on the sand. And some saved people build their lives next door to them, on the same sand of self-sufficiency. We who follow Christ are tempted to

compartmentalize our lives. To build one room on Christ and one on the world, our friends, our resources, ourselves. Or to stand on the rock part of the time and the sand the rest of the time.

Is there a room in your house which is disobedient to the revealed word of God? When last did you consult that word before your decisions, your actions, the day before you? When last did the word of God change your behavior?

Jesus was a master carpenter. He knew that appearances are deceiving. The roof, walls, and flooring can look excellent in workmanship. It takes a rainstorm to reveal the leaks, the cracks, the faults.

What do the storms of life tell you about your soul? Do hard times frustrate you? Discourage or depress you? Do they cause you to turn from God in anger? Or do they draw you closer to your Lord, make you more dependent on him, reveal more of his love and truth through your life to others?

To discover the quality of a grape, crush it. To find out what's inside a bottle, shake it. To learn the nature of a tea bag, drop it in hot water.

Live by God's word

When Jesus finished the most famous discourse in history, Matthew says that "the crowds were amazed at his teaching" (Matthew 7:28) "Amazed" translates *ekplesso*, a word which means to be beside yourself with astonishment, to be spell-bound, literally "struck out of themselves."

Why? Because "he taught as one who had authority" (v. 29). "Authority" (*exousia*) means literally "out of your own being." It is power that you possess which no one need confer on you. I have authority to call a staff meeting, but not a special session of the Texas Legislature. You have authority to do some things, but not others.

Jesus had "authority" to speak these words, and "not as their teachers of the law." The prophets typically began, "Thus says the Lord." Jesus never did because he was and is the Lord.

The priests and professors quoted the law, the Prophets, and writings about both. They collected verse-by-verse commentaries (*Midrah*), topical commentaries (*Mishna*), commentary on legal matters in Scripture (*Halakah*) and devotional applications (*Haggadah*). Then they made commentary on the earlier commentary (*Gemara*) and collected it all into their Talmud. A rabbi would quote a rabbi who quoted a rabbi. If my sermon today were to quote Barclay quoting Bruce citing the Greek New Testament, I would teach as their "teachers of the law."

Not so with Jesus. Twelve times in this Sermon he says, "I say unto you." No rabbi in Jewish history had ever done this. His words were the word of God.

They will be so forever: "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8); "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35). They lead us to salvation: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

They keep us from sin: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11); "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (Psalm 119:9). They instruct and guide our lives: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

So choose now to live by the word of God. What decision is facing you today? Decide that you will consult Scripture before making it and live by the light of God's word. What actions or attitudes in your life are unbiblical? Where is there bitterness toward another person, coveting toward a possession, lust of eye or mind, pride of heart? Decide that you will confess it and live by the light of God's word.

You face a future which is dark. Trust the only light you own.

Conclusion

Dr. Earl Palmer pastored a church in California for decades. In his excellent commentary on the Sermon on the Mount he writes,

I live in earthquake country. And the church I serve in Berkeley, California, is next to the campus of the University of California which sits astride the Hayward fault, itself connected to the gigantic San Andreas Fault that stretches from Mexico to Alaska and directly under the city of San Francisco.

Earthquake specialists have pointed up several important facts about home construction in earthquake terrain: A wood structure is ideally suited for the stresses of horizontal land movement, which is the terror of an earthquake, provided that the wood structure is bolted to its foundation. . . . The nonbolted home moves a few inches away from its foundation, [causing] the collapse of the structure. . . . A safe house is that house which relates as much of the house as possible to its foundation. It not only rests upon a rock; it is built into the rock.

Dr. Palmer adds that the strategy behind the Golden Gate Bridge is similar: its two great towers are deeply imbedded into the rock foundation beneath the sea. As he says, "The bridge is totally preoccupied with its foundation. That is its secret!"

Is it yours?

Lesson 9:

Face the radical nature of discipleship (Matthew 8:18–22)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 8:16–22
- **Main idea:** Jesus demands that his disciples place him over the most legitimate and precious of human concerns, even shelter and family, as well as cultural expectations.
- **Question to explore:** How far should we go in following Jesus?
- **Study aim:** To describe how the radical nature of discipleship to Jesus applies to my life.
- **Quick read:** Jesus calls us to give everything to him as Lord.

Commentary

"If Jesus is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all." I remember being impressed by this statement as a young Christian. "Jesus is Lord" is the central affirmation of our faith, the formula we repeat in baptism, one of the earliest confessions in Christian history. But what does it mean for Jesus to be "Lord"?

Our culture separates Sunday from Monday, religion from the real world. Conventional wisdom dictates that making Jesus "Lord" means that we are more religious than most. We attend church more frequently, serve and give more sacrificially. Many Christians adopt this cultural ethos without knowing it. If we are more godly in our lives and more active in our faith than others in our church, we must be more committed to our Lord. We measure spirituality by time spent in church buildings and on church causes.

In this lesson we will learn that Jesus made no such distinction between the "spiritual" and the "secular." He called God a King and challenged us to repent of our own kingdom and join his (Matthew 4:17; 6:33). A king sits on the throne every day of the week and rules every dimension of the realm. If God is your King, you're reading these words on his computer or his paper while wearing his clothes and breathing his air.

I'm convinced that the greatest need in the American church is for believers to exchange cultural Christianity for kingdom commitment. What does it mean for Jesus to be your King and Lord? Let's ask him.

Trust your possessions to his kingdom (Matthew 8:18–20)

In our previous lesson we left Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount. Before the Sermon, "large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed

him" (Matthew 4:25). When Jesus descended from the mountain, these "large crowds" continue to throng around him (Matthew 8:1).

Then a leper who likely heard the Sermon from his legally prescribed distance came forward and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" (v. 2). Something in Jesus' words caused this man to know that he was "Lord," that he was capable of cleansing the most dread disease of their day, and that he would care for this rejected child of Israel.

Jesus responded by touching the man, an act required not to heal him (our Lord often healed just with words, as he would in verse 13) but to show compassion for him. Immediately the man was cleansed and sent to make the offerings needed for his reinsertion into Jewish society (vv. 3–4).

When Jesus continued into Capernaum, another unlikely ministry recipient emerged—a Roman centurion, commander of one hundred soldiers, enforcer of the Empire's rule over her enslaved subjects (v. 5). He asked Jesus to heal his suffering servant (v. 6). As he touched a leper, so Jesus was willing to enter a Gentile home (v. 7). However, the man understood Jewish sensibilities and was convinced that Jesus could heal the servant just by his authority and proclamation (vv. 8–9). Jesus was astonished by his faith and acted on it to heal the suffering servant (vv. 10–13).

Later that Sabbath, our Lord healed Peter's mother-in-law then cleansed demoniacs brought to him from the surrounding area (vv. 14–16). By these acts of compassion he fulfilled the prediction of Isaiah 53: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (v. 4).

An unlikely disciple

Now our text begins: "When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake" (Matthew 8:18). There were times when our Lord saw the crowds' presence as an opportunity for teaching (cf. Matthew 5:1) or personal ministry (cf. Matthew 14:13–21). At other times he needed to leave them for rest (cf. Matthew 8:24) or ministry to individuals (vv. 28–34). However, he typically returned to continue his kingdom work with the multitudes as well (cf. Matthew 9:1–8).

On this occasion Jesus "saw" (*eidon*, to perceive and understand) the crowd pressing in around him, and immediately "gave orders" (*ekeleusen*, to command or urge) to his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee to its eastern shore (Matthew 8:18). This route would take them from the Jewish population and deter the people from following.

As the disciples were preparing the boats for their excursion, "a teacher of the law came to him and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go'" (v. 19). "Teacher of the law" translates *grammateus*, a scribe or expert in the law. Ezra was one such "teacher" (Ezra 7:6) serving as a public instructor to the nation (Nehemiah 8:4). These men were responsible both for copying the Scriptures and for teaching them to the people. Such a scholar, because he was an expert in the Torah, was sometimes referred to as a "lawyer" or "expert in the law" (cf. Matthew 22:34).

Many of these scholars were members of the Sanhedrin. They stood alongside the chief priests and elders as leaders of the nation. As a result, many joined the authorities' opposition to Jesus (cf. Luke 22:2, 66; 23:10). Had they used their influence for good, however, they would have rendered valuable service to the kingdom: "Every teacher of the law who has been instructed

about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52).

This particular "teacher of the law" was apparently committed to following Jesus as his rabbi: "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." "Teacher" translates *didaskalos*, instructor, master. It was typically meant as a term of respect and was attributed to Jesus forty-one times in the Gospels as an indication of the central role teaching played in his ministry. In fact, he called himself "the Teacher" (Matthew 26:18).

In Matthew's Gospel, however, those who used the title in addressing Jesus did not believe fully in him:

- "Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you'" (Matthew 12:38).
- "Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'" (Matthew 19:16).
- "Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'" (Matthew 22:15–17).
- "That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. 'Teacher,' they said, 'Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him'" (Matthew 22:23–24).
- "Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'" (Matthew 22:34–36).

Whatever the man in our text meant by his title, his commitment seemed clear: "I will follow you wherever you go." "I will follow" translates *akoloutheso*, to come after, accompany, be a disciple. Jesus typically called his disciples to "follow" him (cf. Matthew 4:19; 9:9; 19:21). He promised that "whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

This man was already among Jesus' disciples, as Matthew describes the next man in our text as "another disciple" (Matthew 8:21). He had become a follower of our Lord, but now he wanted to make this commitment unconditional, "wherever you go." If Jesus had made public his intention to sail to the Gentile regions east of the Sea of Galilee (v. 28), such a statement would take on even greater substance. This man, a noted religious authority in the community, was offering to align himself fully with a Galilean carpenter. The apostles would likely have seen this commitment as a significant step forward for their movement.

The cost of commitment

But our Lord knew that discipleship requires more than words: "Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head'" (Matthew 8:20). "Foxes" (*alopekes*) were so common in Israel that Samson could catch three hundred of them (Judges 15:4). They "have" (*echousin*, to own or possess) "holes" (*pholeous*), lairs or dens made in the natural caves and crevasses of the region.

From the ground, Jesus turned (and perhaps pointed) to the sky: "birds of the air have nests." "Birds" (*peteina*, wild birds) were so common that Jesus used them as teaching examples (cf. Matthew 6:26; 13:4, 32); pagans sometimes made idols in their image (Romans 1:23). I purchased one such idol while serving as a missionary in East Malaysia, a wooden image meant to represent the deities living in the heavens.

Such birds in Galilee have "nests," translating *kataskenoseis*, lodges, places to live. The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses this word for the "house" David desired to build for God (1 Chronicles 28:2).

While the most common animals of their day had dwelling places of their own, Jesus warned the scribe that "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite self-designation; this is its first use in the Gospel of Matthew. It is used in Daniel 7:13–14 to describe a coming ruler from heaven:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

The apocryphal book of 1 Enoch develops this figure of a transcendent, coming "righteous one" (37–71). By contrast, the phrase is used in the Book of Ezekiel ninety-three times to address or describe the prophet himself and seems to emphasize his humanity.

The term is found eighty-two times in the Gospels; each time it is used by Jesus himself (except John 12:34, where his words are quoted by the crowd). Taken together, the Old Testament references describe Jesus' incarnation well. He is the "son of man," fully human; and he is the "Son of Man," fully divine.

However, even though he is the divine Son of God, Jesus "has" (*echei*, owns) nowhere he can "lay his head" (*kline kephalen*, to incline the head, to rest). In other words, he had no home of his own. If this respected religious authority were to cast his lot with Jesus, he could expect to face a life of similar sacrifice.

When possessions possess us

Did Jesus mean that his followers must not have homes of their own, that they should always live in extreme poverty? Not at all. But he did indicate that we must be willing to give up everything to follow him, even our possessions if necessary.

In the Sermon he just concluded, Jesus stated:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10–12)

He warned his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Paul advised early believers, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 16:22). He warned Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Some suffering is basic to Christian discipleship. This cost did not always include the loss of home and possessions, as Peter had a home (Matthew 8:14; it was the largest yet discovered in Capernaum if the traditional site is, in fact, his house). Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, and Joseph of Arimathea were not required to abandon their wealth to follow him.

By contrast, he counseled the Rich Young Ruler to "go, sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Matthew 19:21). In this case, the man needed to forsake his possessions because they had come to possess him.

Here we find the heart of the issue: we are not necessarily called to abandon everything for Christ, but we must be willing to lose whatever keeps us from being fully his. This world is not our home, for "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). In the meanwhile, we are "strangers in the world" (1 Peter 1:1).

Is Jesus King of your possessions?

Trust your relationships to his Lordship (Matthew 8:21–22)

A second professing follower then stepped forward on the shore of the Sea of Galilee: "Another disciple said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father'" (Matthew 8:21). "Disciple" translates *mathetes*, pupil, apprentice, follower. He called Jesus "Lord," translating *kyrios*, owner, master, ruler. But then he contradicted his title with his request: "First let me go and bury my father."

"Let" translates *epitrepo*, to permit, allow; it can mean to instruct or order. It could be rendered, "Give me leave to . . ." The man wanted Jesus' public blessing on his decision to turn back from the disciples' group. "First" renders *proton*, earlier, something done before others. "Go" translates *apelthein*, to go away, leave, travel to another place. This man would follow Jesus fully, but only after he left him to complete another task.

That task was to "bury my father." His request seems completely appropriate to modern readers. His father had died, and he needed to return home to oversee his burial; then he would rejoin Jesus and the other disciples. If your father had just died, wouldn't you make the same request?

Our Lord's response therefore seems abrupt and even uncaring: "But Jesus told him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead'" (v. 22). "Follow" again translates *akolouthei*, to become a person's disciple. "Let" renders *aphes*, to send away, depart from, give to others. "The dead bury their own dead" is a straightforward translation of the Greek: *tous nekros thapsai eauton nekrous*. Why did Jesus respond in this way?

Clues and options

The cultural context gives us three clues essential to solving this puzzle.

First, this man's father had not just died. If he had, burial would have occurred within twenty-four hours; the son and the rest of his family would have been in reclusive mourning, not in public.

Second, he was apparently the oldest son of his father, as he felt responsible for his parent's burial. Such a duty was incumbent upon him for as long as his father lived.

Third, the Jews buried in stages. The initial burial took place within twenty-four hours of death; typically, the body was placed directly in the ground. A year later, after the flesh had rotted from the bones, a second burial occurred as the bones were disinterred and placed in an ossuary (a stone burial box).

Given these facts, we can envision five possibilities behind our text. Remember that Jesus knew the thoughts of others (Luke 6:8) and responded to the motives he discerned behind the man's seemingly understandable request. Given these facts, we can envision five ways to interpret our text. I have ranked them in ascending order of probability:

- The man's father was ill and would likely die soon. The son wanted to leave Jesus to be with him and to oversee the immediate first-stage burial that would soon be required.
- The man's father had already died, his remains buried in the ground, but the time was approaching when they would be removed and the bones placed in an ossuary; the son wanted to go home to oversee this task.
- "Let me go and bury my father" means, "Let me wait until my father has died" and will no longer object to my commitment to you.
- The man's father has just died and been buried; the son wants a year-long reprieve from following Jesus and uses the second-stage burial as his excuse.
- The man's father was in good health, but his son wanted to return home and used his burial responsibilities as an excuse to leave Jesus.

Given Jesus' consistent compassion for hurting people, the first option seems the least likely. This son was under legal and cultural obligation to bury his father—surely Jesus would recognize his grief and offer comfort, not challenge.

Regarding the second option: Jesus' edict, "let the dead bury their own dead," could refer to interred remains. The second-stage burial was not nearly as significant or symbolic as the first and could be handled by others. However, leaving to attend to this task would not remove the man from discipleship for long. If this was his motive, Jesus' response would indicate that the son was using the coming second-stage burial as an excuse to leave Jesus' movement more permanently.

The third option makes sense in light of the biblical requirement to honor one's parents (Exodus 20:12). It is possible that Jesus' reply, "let the dead bury their own dead," was meant spiritually rather than physically (which would be impossible) or metaphorically. In this case, the man's father and family were not true believers in the Lord, so that they were spiritually dead.

Either they had already objected to his commitment to Jesus, or the son knew they would oppose his faith. Whichever was the case, he wanted to wait until his father's death to continue following our Lord. However, Jesus consistently called us to place him before all others, even our families (Matthew 10:37). Our Lord's stern answer would indicate that the man needed a strong reminder to order his priorities correctly.

The fourth option seems more likely than the previous three, given the nature of Jesus' response to the man. He knew that the son's request was a disingenuous excuse and wanted to expose his motives.

The fifth option seems most likely to me. "Let me go and bury my father" would seem to refer to the first-stage burial more than the second-stage reinterment. Jesus' very strong rebuke would be especially appropriate if the man were offering such a disingenuous excuse to abandon his commitment to the Lord.

Principles for life

What lessons can we discern in Jesus' response to this man?

Our Lord did not reject or devalue our commitment to the family. Jesus chose to perform his first public miracle at a wedding, blessing and endorsing marriage and the family (John 2:1–11). He looked sternly on divorce (Matthew 19:9) and those who abandoned their commitment to their parents (Matthew 15:3–9).

Scripture teaches us to care for our families: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). It also requires believers to stay in marriage even to unbelievers, so long as the lost person does not abandon them: "If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him" (1 Corinthians 7:12–14).

However, our commitment to God must come before all others. Jesus told the crowds, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). There is a cost to following Jesus, one we must count before we make our commitment to him:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish."

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:28–33)

Is there anything God cannot ask you to give or do for him? Is there any relationship you value more than your relationship with your Father?

Conclusion

Jesus' call to discipleship was radical. While the priests asked for some of the people's time and possessions, and the pagan religions required occasional rituals and commitments, our Lord wants to be King of every dimension of our lives.

Paradoxically, the churches that ask the most of their members are those congregations growing most quickly today. Over one Christmas break year ago I spoke with a Korean Christian in Dallas. She asked if my church would be holding a New Year's Eve prayer service; I told her that most American churches no longer offered such events. She smiled and nodded in understanding.

Then I asked if her Korean church would be holding such a prayer meeting. She said they would, from 8 p.m. through midnight. I asked how many would come. "Seven or eight hundred," she replied. Her congregation prayed every Saturday at 5:45 a.m. and often held similar meetings throughout the year.

In my travels to Cuba I have witnessed apostolic Christianity at work. These believers sacrifice so much to follow Jesus, yet their churches are packed every Sunday. My last time to preach at First Baptist Church in Camaguey, Cuba, on that Sunday morning they watched 330 people make professions of faith. Their sanctuary is located four feet from the Communist headquarters in their city. The greater their sacrifice, the stronger their experience of God's power and grace.

When I first began going to Cuba, I told the pastors there that I was praying for persecution against their churches to lessen. They asked me to stop, explaining that it was the persecution they faced that showed them real Christians from false and strengthened their faith. Then one confided in me that he is praying for more persecution to come against American Christians, to strengthen us.

Should we join him?

Lesson 10:

What Jesus' disciples do (Matthew 9:35–10:15, 24–31)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 9:35–11:1
- **Main idea:** Jesus calls his disciples to engage in his mission and provides instructions for doing so.
- **Question to explore:** How do Jesus' instructions to his disciples to follow as they participated in his mission apply to us today?
- **Study aim:** To evaluate how I am following Jesus' instructions as I participate in his mission.
- **Quick read:** When we follow Jesus' ministry strategy, he will use us to reach the world.

Commentary

In late 1966, Herb Kelleher, John Parker, and Rollin King met at San Antonio's St. Anthony Club to talk about the need for an air carrier in Texas. Their idea was simple: to connect Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. The result is the most profitable airline in aviation history. But their cause was their real genius: to make air travel affordable for people who could not otherwise fly. That cause is the reason Southwest Airlines is still a low-fare airline and still constitutes the airline's passion and purpose for being. From the chief executive to baggage handlers, their cause *is* their corporation.

Elton Trueblood, the great Christian philosopher, said that every organization, to be successful, must have a passion, a philosophy, and a program. I'm convinced he's right. So was Herb Kelleher. So is Jesus.

What is to be our passion as disciples of Christ? Our philosophy? Our program?

Our passion: love those God loves (Matthew 9:35–10:1)

Our text begins: "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (v. 35). "Went through" translates *periegen*, to go about; it describes continued action to travel throughout a region. "All the towns and villages" encompasses a significant ministry tour—Josephus states that there were no less than 204 such villages in the first century.

Jesus continued his threefold ministry strategy: "teaching in their synagogues" on the Sabbath as a visiting rabbi, "preaching the good news of the kingdom" to the crowds wherever he found

them, and "healing every disease and sickness." This approach was consistent across his ministry (cf. Matthew 4:23).

In the midst of this Galilean tour, "when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). "Saw" translates *eidon*, to look with attention, to understand and perceive. "Compassion" translates *esplanchnisthe*, literally "to feel in the bowels." The word is used often to describe Jesus' concern for the people (cf. Matthew 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). He felt their pain to the depths of his being.

In his compassion, Jesus knew that the people were "harassed" (*eskylmenoi*, to be weary, troubled, burdened) and "helpless" (*errimmenoi*, to be thrown down). The text likely refers to the legalistic burdens placed on them by their spiritual authorities, as they were "like sheep without a shepherd." "Shepherd" translates *poimena*, the word rendered "pastors" in Ephesians 4:11.

Moses (Numbers 27:17) and the kings (1 Kings 22:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16) had been the "shepherds" of the nation. After them, God raised up spiritual leaders who were to shepherd and care for his people (Ezekiel 34:2–6). However, as in the time of Ezekiel, the spiritual shepherds of Jesus' day had failed.

Our Lord indicted them: "You load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them" (Luke 11:46). As a result of such dereliction, Jesus "said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few'" (Matthew 9:37). The religious authorities would not care for the people, so Jesus commissioned his disciples to take up this responsibility.

Their first response was to pray: "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (v. 38). "Ask" translates *deethete*, to request or plead. "Lord" renders *kyriou*; in this context it could be translated "master" or "owner." "Send out" translates *ekballo*, to drive out, send forth.

I once heard Chuck Swindoll at a Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference state, "You can do great things for God after you pray. But you cannot do anything for God until you pray." Andrew Murray agreed: "Most churches don't know that God rules the world by the prayers of his saints." John Wesley was even more specific: "God does nothing but in answer to prayer." And E. M. Bounds claimed, "The church upon its knees would bring heaven upon the earth."

Once we pray, we are then to go as God sends: "He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matthew 10:1). "Authority" translates *exousian*, capacity, power, the ability to do something. Jesus would later state, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). Now he conferred this spiritual authority on those who would go forward to continue his ministry.

Our passion, our highest calling, is to love God and then love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37, 39). As we love our Father, we will love his children. And we will serve because we are compelled by compassion to do so.

I learned this lesson in a powerful way many years ago. While serving as pastor of First Baptist Church in Midland, Texas, I attended a missions banquet sponsored by our WMU. The speaker was Sam James, a retired Southern Baptist missionary to Vietnam.

During his talk, he described a particularly hard period in his ministry to the Vietnamese. The people were unresponsive, the church was troubled, things were difficult. At the end of an especially long and hot day, he returned to his apartment to discover that thieves had stolen all their possessions. Everything was gone except their couch.

That was too much. Sam collapsed on that couch and cried out to God, "You have to get me out of here. I just don't love these people. I don't love the Vietnamese any more." Sam told us that late that night, as he lay on that couch, the Lord spoke to him and said, "You're not here because you love the Vietnamese—you're here because I love the Vietnamese."

Why do you serve the kingdom? Do you love God so much that you love those he loves? Would those you serve say that you do so out of love for them?

Our philosophy: join God at work (Matthew 10:2–6)

Many years ago, Henry Blackaby popularized this philosophy of life and ministry: "Join God at work." Jesus' disciples, then and now, do not serve their purposes but his. We are commissioned to advance the kingdom he came to inaugurate. As our Lord had been ministering throughout Galilee, now he called his disciples to join him in that service. He invites us to do the same.

The Twelve

Our text continues: "These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him" (Matthew 10:2–4).

These men were the "apostles," a smaller group within the larger crowd following Jesus as his "disciples": "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles" (Luke 6:12–13). Early Christians later understood the "apostles" to be those who had seen the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1) and served alongside him (Acts 1:21–22).

Jesus "sent them out two by two" (Mark 6:7), which explains why Matthew listed them in pairs. But note his arrangement. The first two sets are expected, as they were brothers. The third is interesting: "Philip and Bartholomew." "Bartholomew" ("son of Tolmai) is likely the last name of the disciple whose first name was "Nathanael" (John 1:45; 21:2). He is always listed with Philip in the Synoptics. As Philip led Nathanael to Christ (John 1:45–49), his pairing with Bartholomew makes sense.

Thomas and Matthew make an interesting set as well. Tradition states that Thomas became the apostle to India while Matthew served in Parthia and Persia, regions close to Thomas' ministry assignment.

The last two pairs may all have been members of the *Zelotes*, a band of guerilla nationalists fighting to free Israel from Roman tyranny. We know that "Simon the Zealot" was part of this movement. "Judas Iscariot" may have been as well. He may have been named for "Kerioth," a town in Judah; however, it is plausible that "Iscariot" was a Semitic form of *sicarius*, "dagger bearer" or "assassin." The *sicarii* were aligned with the Zealots in their hatred of Rome. Judas pairing with Simon the Zealot adds credence to this theory.

"Thaddaeus" was likely a nickname, as it means "breast child." He was probably "Judas son of James," the disciple linked by Luke with Judas Iscariot (Luke 6:16; note that Luke does not list Thaddeus in his Gospel). If Judas Iscariot was a Zealot or *sicarii*, his association with Judas son of James could implicate him in their movement. And an early document called *The Apostolic Constitutions* states that Thaddaeus was "surnamed Judas the Zealot." "James son of Alphaeus," by virtue of his pairing with Thaddaeus, may have been part of the Zealots as well.

Their assignment

The identities of the Twelve are not as important to us as their assignment: "These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans'" (Matthew 10:5). "Sent out" translates *apostello*, describing one sent by the authority of another. "Instructions" renders *parangeilas*, commands, orders, direct edicts.

"Do not go among the Gentiles" could be translated, "Do not go on the way of the Gentiles," perhaps describing roads leading to Gentile cities. Nor were they to "enter any town of the Samaritans." The Samaritans populated the region between Galilee and Judea. They were descendants of the Jews who intermarried with Gentiles transplanted into their area by Assyria after 722 BC. Since Galilee was surrounded by Gentile populations on three sides and Samaritans to the south, Jesus' instruction would limit his apostles' work to their immediate region.

Our Lord did not give this order because he cared any less for these peoples; he had already healed Gentiles (cf. Matthew 8:5–13, 28–34) and ministered to Samaritans (cf. John 4). Matthew 10:18 states that the apostles "will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles."

I can think of at least two reasons for Jesus' instructions in our text. First, he wanted his apostles' initial ministry tour to be as effective as possible. By limiting their scope to the towns and people they knew best, he focused their attention on those they could most easily reach. In preventing their travel into Gentile and Samaritan regions, he also helped ensure that they would not be rejected because of racial discrimination by the Jews they sought to serve.

Second, his instruction set a strategy for others in the early church to follow. These were obviously not the only precepts Jesus gave his followers: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). Matthew was inspired decades later to include

this section in Scripture, not for the sake of the apostles (many of whom had either died or left Israel by the time he wrote his Gospel), but for us.

We find this Jews-then-Gentiles pattern across the apostolic era. As Paul stated, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). Though he was called to be God's "missionary to the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:15–16), Paul typically began his work among the Jewish population:

- "Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: 'We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles'" (Acts 13:46).
- "When the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'" (Acts 18:6).
- "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:8–10).
- After the Jews in Rome rejected Paul's message, he declared, "I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" (Acts 28:28).

As the gospel spread further from Jewish populations, this strategy changed over time. But Jesus clearly wanted his own people to hear the gospel from his apostles: "Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10:6). "Go" translates *poreuesthe*, to proceed, travel, walk. "Lost" translates *apololota*, perishing, ruined, destroyed. "Lost sheep" calls to mind Isaiah 53:6, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The Lord lamented:

My people have been lost sheep;
their shepherds have led them astray
and caused them to roam on the mountains.
They wandered over mountain and hill
and forgot their own resting place.
Whoever found them devoured them;
their enemies said, "We are not guilty,"
for they sinned against the Lord, their true pasture,
the Lord, the hope of their fathers. (Jeremiah 50:6–7)

Jesus' disciples are still commissioned to take the gospel to "all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Today, our missionary work joins the Spirit in the explosion of Christian growth occurring around the globe. More people than ever before are turning to Christ. More Muslims than ever before are converting, many after seeing visions and dreams of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is on the

march. As we share God's love with our community and world, we join him in his kingdom advance.

Emil Brunner, the brilliant theologian, was right to say, "A church exists by missions as a fire exists by burning."

Do you have a church?

Our program: find effective ways to share the gospel (Matthew 10:7–15)

It's been said that God does not call the equipped—he equips the called. When we make his passion and philosophy ours, he directs and empowers us to fulfill his program for kingdom growth. What is this strategy?

Preach the kingdom

First, Jesus gave his apostles their message: "As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matthew 10:7). "Near" translates *engiken*, approaching, coming near. What is this approaching "kingdom"?

Jesus defined the kingdom of God most succinctly when he taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). God's kingdom comes wherever his will is done, where and when he is the King of our lives.

The Gospel of Mark introduces the ministry of Jesus with the words, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). Matthew records Jesus' first preaching in the same way: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17).

This emphasis is consistent with the Old Testament's view of God. All Semitic peoples thought of their gods as kings, but none more so than the Hebrews. Listen to this song of their faith: "The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity" (Psalm 93:1–2).

Moses and his people sang, "The Lord will reign for ever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). The prophet Balaam said of the Jews, "The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them" (Numbers 23:21). At the end of his life, Moses again proclaimed God King over Israel (Deuteronomy 33:5). The Lord claimed his rule over his people: "I am the Lord your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King" (Isaiah 43:15). The Jewish belief in God as King was the foundation of their faith.

This rule is not confined to Israel, for the Lord's claim to kingship extends to all the earth. Hezekiah prayed to God: "O Lord, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth" (2 Kings 19:15).

David declared the same: "The Lord sits enthroned over the floods, the Lord is enthroned as King forever" (Psalm 29:10). The other psalmists joined him in similar praise: "How awesome is the Lord Most High, the great King over all the earth!" (Psalm 47:2); "Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns'" (Psalm 96:10); "The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice" (Psalm 97:1). The Jewish hope was founded on the belief that their God is King of all the earth.

One day "the Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name" (Zechariah 14:9). One day, the King promises, "I will create new heavens and a new earth. . . . I will create Jerusalem to be a delight, and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people, the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more" (Isaiah 65:17–19).

Jesus came to inaugurate this kingdom. Isaiah said of him, "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (Isaiah 9:7). When our Lord returns, his name will be King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16).

In the meantime, we are to preach the kingdom as the central theme of our mission and ministry. We are called to invite people to make God their King, to surrender their lives and resources to his will and word. As we exalt the King, we advance his kingdom. This is the message God empowers and blesses.

Meet needs with God's love

We are to preach the kingdom both with words and with deeds: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). "Heal" translates *therapeute*, from which we get "therapy." The "sick" (*asthenountas*) are those who are weak, ill, or in need. To "raise" (*egeirete*) is to "wake" or help to rise.

"Cleanse" translates *katharizete*, from which we get "catharize." "Leprosy" translates *leprous*, a generic word for skin diseases, not necessarily Hansen's Disease. The principle here is clear: God calls us to meet physical needs so we can meet spiritual needs. When we begin where people are, we can lead them where they need to go.

This was Jesus' consistent pattern of ministry—he healed bodies so he could heal souls. He healed a man born blind so he could bring him to faith (John 9). When a Samaritan woman came to Jacob's Well for water, Jesus began a conversation with her need that led her to living water (John 4). Nearly every gospel record of a physical miracle by Jesus describes a spiritual result.

The apostles continued this strategy:

- Peter and John were used to heal a man lame from birth (Acts 3:1–10), a miracle that enabled Peter to preach the gospel to the Jerusalem crowd (vv. 11–26).

- God used Peter's shadow to heal the sick (5:15–16); these miracles were part of the explosive growth of early Christianity, so that "more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (v. 14).
- After God raised Aeneas through Peter, "All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord" (9:35).
- When God raised Tabitha from the dead, "this became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord" (9:42).
- After God struck Elymas the sorcerer with blindness during Paul's first missionary journey, "when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed" (13:12).
- When "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul" in Ephesus (19:11), illnesses were cured and demons were cast out of people (v. 12). Demons then attacked Jews who tried to mimic Paul; "when this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power" (vv. 17–20).

As the saying goes, people don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. Ministry begins with commonalities. If you know people who need to hear the gospel, begin by finding a way to meet the needs they recognize. If they're new to your community, welcome them. If they're lonely at work, befriend them. If they're suffering physically, try to help them. Earn the right to share your faith by sharing your love.

Jesus' strategy still works. Who needs to see God's love in yours?

Rely on the provision of your Father

You cannot fulfill this kingdom assignment in your ability. Human words cannot change human hearts. Oswald Chambers warned that "all our vows and resolutions end in denial because we have no power to carry them out."

Jesus taught us to rely on our Father's provision for our needs: "Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts" (Matthew 10:9). "Take along" translates *ktesesthe*, which means to "acquire" or "gain." Jesus did not prohibit possessions (note that Peter still owned his house after joining Jesus' movement, Matthew 8:14). Rather, on this occasion he told his disciples not to try to make money while on their missionary tour. Their focus was to be on ministry, not finances.

In addition, he instructed them to "take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff" (v. 10a). These were typical travelers' supplies—a "bag" or knapsack, an extra "tunic" or shirt, extra sandals, and a walking staff. Why were they not to equip themselves in this way? Because "the worker is worth his keep" (v. 10). As they served, they would be served. As they shared God's word, others would share their resources.

In this way, the apostles would demonstrate absolute reliance on God. Since many of Jesus' disciples were well-known business leaders in the area, such dependence would be notable and persuasive. Imagine some of the leading businesspeople in your church and community setting out on foot to share the gospel, with no provisions for their journey. Their faith in God would be strong evidence that their message was worthy.

Influence the influential

Where would the apostles stay on their ministry tour? "Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave" (Matthew 10:11). "Worthy" translates *axios*, to be deserving, fit. Most communities have leading citizens, those whose character is commended by their neighbors. For the disciples to stay with such people not only ensured their safety—it added credibility to their ministry.

Once they identified such leading citizens, how would the apostles know if they were to stay with them? "As you enter the home, give it your greeting" (v. 12). Their "greeting" would have been *shalom*, an expression of peace and good wishes. Some would accept them, while others would not: "If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you" (v. 13). The apostles were to stay only with those who welcomed them and whose reputation would enhance their ministry.

Otherwise, they were to leave immediately: "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town" (v. 14). To "shake the dust off your feet" was to symbolize a rejection of the place, as if even the dust of its streets was unworthy of the apostles. Here's an example: "The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium" (Acts 13:49–51).

God's judgment against such unbelievers is certain: "I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town" (v. 15). As these cities were destroyed by divine wrath (Genesis 18:20–19:28), so those rejecting Jesus' apostles would face his judgment.

In our ministry strategy, it is important to concentrate our efforts where we can maximize results. Paul spent two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:10) but only three weeks in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2). He sought to share the gospel with leaders wherever he could. Every soul matters to the Father, of course, but utilizing methods that multiply and maximize our work is important in getting the gospel to as many as possible.

What is your strategy for reaching your community?

Persevere (Matthew 10:24–31)

I once heard a radio announcer state, "If you haven't quit, you haven't failed." Perseverance is essential to kingdom service.

Jesus knew that his disciples would be "sheep among wolves" (Matthew 10:16), that they would be persecuted by the authorities (vv. 17–20) and their own families (v. 21). In fact, "all men will hate you because of me" (v. 22), so that they would need to flee persecution (v. 23).

However, those who reject our message are actually rejecting our Master: "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (vv. 24–25a). A "student" was an apprentice, always subservient to his teacher. A "servant" (*doulos*, "slave") was always subservient to his "master" or owner. These relationships were the same every hour of every day.

When the teacher or master treats the student or servant as a peer, this is a great honor. Jesus extended this honor to us: "If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!" (v. 25b). "Beelzebub" was a title for the "lord of the high abode," the head of pagan deities, all of which were considered demons by the Jews.

Jesus had already been subjected to such an insult: "The teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons'" (Mark 3:22). Now he warned his disciples that they would face similar opposition.

When they did, they were not to be discouraged: "So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known" (v. 26). "Afraid" translates *phobethete*, from which we get "phobia." Jesus' statement is a present tense imperative, a command never to fear his opponents. Their attacks are not "hidden" (*krypton*, from which we get "cryptic") from God and will one day be "disclosed" (*apokalypthesetai*, to "unveil") to all.

The apostles' ministry should be equally public: "What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs" (v. 27). "Proclaim" translates *keryxate*, to "preach." They should minister boldly, trusting their protection to their Father.

We are not to fear our enemies: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (v. 28a). Justin the Martyr announced to the Roman emperor, "You can kill us, but you cannot harm us." But we are to fear our Lord: "Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (v. 28). Such judgment against those who reject the gospel is inevitable: "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15).

Our Creator knows all that happens in his creation: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (v. 29). A "penny" was an *assarion*, equivalent to 1/16 of a "denarius," which was a day's wage. Each sparrow was worth the smallest unit of money in Jesus' day, equivalent to fifteen minutes of a man's labor. Yet the Lord knows about every one of them, so that they cannot fall to the ground in a forest apart from his providence.

If he knows about such seemingly insignificant creatures, how does he feel about those he made in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27)? "And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (v. 30). Jesus later warned his disciples that they would face great persecution (Luke 21:12–16), such that "all men will hate you because of me" (v. 17). Then he made this promise: "But not a head of your hair will perish" (v. 18).

Our Lord concluded: "So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (v. 31). In fact, your Father considered your eternal life worth the death of his Son.

Remember Martin Luther's advice:

*Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever.*

Isaiah encouraged us to "trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal" (Isaiah 26:4). It's always too soon to give up on him. After David was delivered from his enemies, he counseled us to "taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him" (Psalm 34:8).

Our Father promises, "Let us not become weary in well doing, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9). Here's a verse that inspired me when I found it recently: "Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God" (Isaiah 50:10).

However black the night, remember: if you haven't quit, you haven't failed.

Conclusion

A young pastor once asked Spurgeon why he was seeing so few respond to his preaching. Spurgeon asked, "Well, you don't expect someone to respond every time you preach, do you?"

"No, of course not," the man replied.

"That's why they don't," Spurgeon concluded.

When we follow Jesus' ministry strategy, he will use us as he used his first followers. We will join his Spirit in reaching our community and world with his love. Is there a greater privilege?

By contrast, losing our passion for reaching the world is always the first step to decline and death. An insightful artist painted his subject, "A Dying Church," in a startling way. He portrayed a beautiful sanctuary, sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows, the pews filled with worshipers, the pastor preaching and the choir in the loft. All looked healthy, even vibrant. But in the corner of the painting, on a table in the vestibule outside the sanctuary, stood a box with the sign: "Offerings for Missions."

There was a cobweb over the box.

How alive is your church?

Lesson 11:

Believing means following (Matthew 16:13–17, 21–26)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 16:13–26
- **Main idea:** Truly believing in Jesus means following Jesus no matter the cost.
- **Question to explore:** How much do you believe in Jesus?
- **Study aim:** To decide to express my belief in Jesus by following him.
- **Quick read:** True disciples submit everything to their Master.

Commentary

Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher of the First Great Awakening, once wrote in his diary: "Resolved: That every man should live to the glory of God. Resolved second: That whether others do this or not, I will." William Carey, the pioneer missionary to India, stated: "I am not my own, nor would I choose for myself. Let God employ me where he thinks fit." F. B. Meyer, perhaps the greatest preacher of his generation, said, "If I had a hundred lives, they should be at Christ's disposal."

Do you see a common theme to their lives? What have you sacrificed to serve God? What is he asking you to give for his kingdom today?

Profess Christ as Lord (Matthew 16:13–17)

In the previous lesson we watched Jesus commission his apostles for their first tour of ministry. Matthew's narrative continues with our Lord's endorsement of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:1–19), his judgment against unbelieving cities in Galilee (vv. 20–24), and his invitation to the weary to follow and trust in him (vv. 25–30). He pronounced himself Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–14) and faced growing criticism and opposition (vv. 15–50).

Jesus then taught various parables about the kingdom of God (Matthew 13) and performed miracles to substantiate his claim to be Messiah (Matthew 14). He clarified his expectations of his disciples (Matthew 15:1–20), welcomed a Canaanite woman's faith (vv. 21–28), and fed four thousand families (vv. 29–39). Facing further opposition (Matthew 16:1–12), he led his disciples to a remote region for a time of spiritual retreat.

Going to the Gates of Hades

Our text begins: "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'" (Matthew 16:13). This "region" (*mere*, area) stood 1,150 feet above sea level on the southwest base of Mount Hermon, the tallest peak in Israel (standing more than nine thousand feet above sea level). The area is one of the most beautiful sites in Israel; whenever I lead study tours to the Holy Land we always take a day to visit.

The site was known as "Caesarea" in honor of Emperor Augustus, who gave the district to Herod the Great in 20 BC. His son Philip rebuilt and beautified the town after his father's death in 4 BC and named it in honor of both Caesar and himself.

An ancient cave is prominent; before earthquakes filled in its floor it led to a shaft that bored so deeply into the earth, its depth was never discovered. To the ancients this was the "Gates of Hades," the doorway to the underworld. The Romans built a magnificent white marble temple in front of this cave, dedicated to the worship of the emperor.

Pagan worshipers traveling through the area left idols on shelves they carved into the rock of the hillside. They believed their god Pan to have been born in the cave and called the area Panias (or Banias). Fourteen temples to the worship of Baal were scattered around the region as well.

The site is located 120 miles from Jerusalem and twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee; it was north of Israel's historic boundaries, in the heart of Gentile paganism. Jewish pilgrims seldom if ever visited the area. Jesus and his disciples had to hike for days, climbing 1,700 feet uphill, to reach it.

Claims about Jesus

When they did, he spent some time in private prayer (Luke 9:18) and then asked them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" In the previous lesson, we learned that "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite self-designation, a metaphor combining both his divinity (cf. Daniel 7:13–14) and his humanity (cf. Ezekiel 2:1).

His disciples were quick to answer: "They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets'" (Matthew 16:14). The first option was the opinion of Herod: "At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, 'This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him'" (Matthew 14:1–2). Those who agreed with him saw Jesus as a reincarnated messenger sent to prepare the way for the military Messiah to come.

"Others say Elijah," they reported. Most Jews considered him the greatest of their prophets. God had promised: "I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5–6). Since he did not die (2 Kings 2:11–12), many expected him to return in person. Modern Jewish Passover celebrations include an empty chair for Elijah, in hopes that he will come to announce the Messiah's arrival.

"Still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets," they added. In the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees we read:

It was also in the same document that the prophet [Jeremiah], having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. Jeremiah came and found a cave-dwelling, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance. Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way, but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated." (2:4–8, NRSV)

Some Jews apparently expected Jeremiah to return before the Messiah came, to bring the Ark and other Temple furnishing back to their rightful place. In addition, Jesus' judgments against the people (Matthew 11:20–24) and about the temple (Matthew 12:6; 24:1–2) may have reminded them of this prophet.

Professing the Christ

Now we come to the point of Jesus' question: "'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'" (Matthew 16:15). The first "you" is emphatic in the Greek; we could paraphrase, "But what about *your* opinion?" The One who knew "all things" (John 21:17) did not need the disciples to give him popular estimates regarding his identity. His purpose in asking was to compare conventional wisdom with the growing understanding of his own followers.

Then Peter spoke up: "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'" (Matthew 16:16). "Christ" identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the promised deliverer of the nation. But "Son of the living God" clarifies—he would not be a mere man come to deliver the people, but God himself come to save his people.

This was not the first such declaration made by Jesus' followers:

- "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ)" (John 1:41).
- "Then Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel'" (John 1:49).
- "Those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (Matthew 14:33).
- Peter himself earlier stated, "We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:69).

Our Lord accepted and agreed with his lead apostle's declaration: "Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven'" (Matthew 16:17). "Simon bar Jonah" was Peter's given name. By using it rather than the nickname he assigned him, Jesus emphasized his humanity. He did not want Peter to become

prideful as a result of his correct declaration (this was a consistent temptation for Peter; cf. Matthew 26:33; Luke 22:33).

We cannot know God unless he reveals himself to us:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Matthew 11:25–27)

Peter made the first essential step toward sacrificial discipleship: know the One you serve. Focus on him as your King and Lord. Proclaim him with what you say and do. Seek to glorify him with your service, whatever its cost. Remember that you serve him, not yourself.

Busyness is no substitute for kingdom service. Consider this pastor's description:

Perhaps the ministry was never busier than it is now. Hundreds of men are hoarse from continual speaking, and are wearied out with running here and running there. If things slow down, we evolve yet another type of meeting. And when this new and added wheel is spinning merrily with all the other wheels, there may be no spiritual outcome whatsoever, but there is a wind blowing in our faces; and we hot and sticky engineers have a comfortable feeling that something is going on.

Is this a portrait of the strain and stress of ministry in these challenging days? Actually, these words were written by Arthur John Gossip in 1952. How much busier are things today?

Be sure you do all you do for his glory alone.

Suffer for Christ as Lord (Matthew 16:21–26)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer made famous the statement, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Our words are important, but the depth of our commitment to Jesus is measured by the degree to which we will suffer for his sake. James warned us: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (James 2:19). Faith is proven by actions.

As our text continues, Jesus responded to Peter's declaration with the pronouncement, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). The church is his, not ours. Anything we do in its service on earth is dependent on his will in heaven (v. 19). We must say what he tells us to say, when he tells us to say it (v. 20).

Choosing the cross

And we must be willing to pay any price to follow him faithfully. Our study continues: "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (v. 21).

This was not Jesus' first reference to his coming death:

- "Then the Jews demanded of him, 'What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days'" (John 2:18–19).
- "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40).
- "'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me'" (John 12:7–8).

Later he would continue reminding them:

- "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead'" (Matthew 17:9).
- "Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands" (v. 12).
- "When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.' And the disciples were filled with grief" (vv. 22–23).

Why was it necessary that "he must go to Jerusalem"? Because Jesus' entry to Jerusalem would fulfill the prophetic promise: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9).

Only there could he "suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law." Why was such persecution necessary to his atoning sacrifice? Because it would fulfill Messianic prophecy: "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him'" (Psalm 22:7–8).

For these reasons, Jesus was clear: "I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:33). All this was because Jesus "must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matthew 16:21).

The writer of Hebrews affirmed: "Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:27). Peter agreed: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Avoiding the cross

At this, "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" (Matthew 16:22). "Took him aside" translates *proslabomenos*, to pull aside, to take by the hand and draw away. "Rebuke" translated *epitiman*, to admonish strongly. "Never" translates *hileos*, "may it never be" or "be it far from you." "This shall never happen to you" is literally, "This shall not never come about to you."

Peter was horrified that Jesus would be willing to be so persecuted by his enemies. But the apostle did not know that his words, while well-intentioned, were actually a temptation from the Enemy: "Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matthew 16:23).

"Get behind me" translates *hypage*, to go away, to withdraw, depart, to die. This was not the first time Jesus had to command Satan to leave him alone (cf. Matthew 4:10). However, the Enemy's tempting strategies would continue across our Lord's earthly ministry (cf. Luke 4:13), as this episode indicates.

In his earlier temptations, Satan did all he could to lead Jesus away from the cross. He tried to entice him to use his miraculous powers for his personal benefit (Matthew 4:1–4), to incite popularity with the crowds (vv. 5–7), and to gain "the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" (v. 8). As in his wilderness temptations, once again the enemy placed an alternative to the cross before our Lord. Such a suggestion was a "stumbling block," translating *skandalon*, literally the trigger of the trap, the place where the bait is placed. Such sin always leads to ruin (cf. Romans 11:9).

Peter's dependence on his own misguided wisdom is a warning to us all: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 14:12). The Lord cautioned us: "'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8–9).

Taking up our cross

After rejecting Satan's attempt to lead him from the cross, our Lord then made such sacrifice essential for those who would follow him: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Matthew 16:24). "Would" translates *thelei*, to wish, will, purpose. "Come after me" renders *elthein*, to follow along, a reference to discipleship.

"Deny himself" translates *aparnesastho*, to refuse or disregard oneself. The tense indicates past action, a decision that must be made before the person can move forward. A second decision follows: "take up his cross." "Take up" translates *arato*, to lift up, carry along. This verb is also in the aorist tense, indicating past action. Then we can "follow" Jesus—the verb translates *akoloutheito* and is in the present tense, "continually follow me as Master and Lord."

To "take up his cross" meant simply a willingness to die. As many as thirty thousand people were crucified by the Roman Empire during Jesus' lifetime. We might say, "Be willing to go to the electric chair" or "be willing to be hanged." Once a person took the crossbeam onto his

shoulders, he began the march to his own execution (cf. John 19:17). True disciples have already shouldered their own instrument of death.

Here's why this decision is so necessary: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25). "Save" translates *sosai*, to preserve or keep from harm. "Lose" translates *apolesei*, to ruin, perish, destroy. All our attempts to protect ourselves are doomed to fail, for we will all one day die. On the other hand, when we give up our lives for Jesus' sake we "find" (*heuresei*, to obtain) them eternally.

Earlier, Jesus made a similar statement:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:37–39; cf. John 12:25)

Here he amplified his assertion: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). "Gains" translates *kerdese*, to make a profit. "Forfeits" translates *zemiothe*, to give up, lose. Early Christians took this call to suffering seriously: "They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:40–41).

Peter would later extend this example to his readers:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (1 Peter 4:12–14)

When last did your commitment to Jesus cost you something significant?

Conclusion

Disciples profess Christ as their King, then prove their commitment with their sacrifice. We do this, not so God will love us but because he already does. We serve out of gratitude, not guilt.

On March 15, 1985, Mr. Wayne Alderson appeared on *The Today Show*, on the fortieth anniversary of his being wounded as the first American to cross into Germany during World War II. He had a permanent crease in his head from the wound he received on that date.

Asked about his most important memory of the occasion, Mr. Alderson replied that it was of a red-headed friend who saved his life that day. Alderson had come face to face with a German soldier. He shot the German, but not before the man had thrown a grenade at Alderson which exploded and sent him face down and wounded into the mud. Nearby, a German machine gun

began firing in his direction. Alderson knew that if the grenade wound did not kill him, the machine gun would.

But this friend turned him over so he could breathe and threw his own body over him. He died protecting him from certain death. With tears welling up in his eyes, Alderson said, "I can never forget the person who sacrificed his life to save me. I owe everything to him. I can never forget . . . I owe everything."

What do you owe Jesus?

Lesson 12:

Be genuine, show grace, be humble (Matthew 23:1–12)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 23:1–36
- **Main idea:** Disciples of Jesus are to practice their faith with genuineness, grace, and humility.
- **Question to explore:** Why do religious people sometimes become hypocritical, harsh, and arrogant, i.e., lacking in true discipleship?
- **Study aim:** To identify ways I need to put these teachings of Jesus into practice in my life.
- **Quick read:** Jesus calls us to model his servant leadership to a skeptical world.

Commentary

Woodrow Wilson was one of our most religious presidents. The son of a Presbyterian minister, his faith motivated all he did. Yet he claimed that "there is no higher religion than human service. To work for the common good is the greatest creed."

Jesus agreed: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

How did he love us? Sacrificially (1 John 3:16) and unconditionally (Romans 8:35–39). Imagine a society in which we imitated his altruistic commitment to each other. The Founders did: our Constitution exists to "form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, and promote the general Welfare." The government it formed can and must work to fulfill this vision.

What other institutions can help promote this common good?

Our schools should teach and reinforce the ethic of public service that motivated the founding of our republic. Service organizations, many in numeric decline today, should find ways to engage a new generation. But Christians have an especially crucial role to play.

Jesus consistently taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to serve as he served us. He proved his compassion by his actions and called us to do the same. In this lesson we'll examine the perils of hypocritical religion and the power of servant love.

Practice what you preach (Matthew 23:1–4)

We left Jesus at Caesarea Philippi with his disciples. In coming days he would reveal himself on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–13), heal a demoniac (vv. 14–23), and deal with the temple tax in Capernaum (vv. 24–27). He taught his disciples about true humility and forgiveness (Matthew 18). He dealt with Pharisaic opposition (Matthew 19:1–15) and the rich young ruler (vv. 16–30), then taught his disciples about humility in serving the King (Matthew 20:1–16).

As he prepared for his final trip to Jerusalem, he warned his disciples about his impending death (Matthew 20:17–19), called them to humility and service (vv. 20–28), and met two blind men outside Jericho (vv. 29–34). Following his Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:1–11), he cleansed the temple (vv. 12–17), cursed the fruitless fig tree (vv. 18–22), and taught in the temple courts (vv. 23–46). He called the people to prepare for the coming of the King (Matthew 22:1–14) and defeated the Pharisees (vv. 15–22) and Sadducees (vv. 23–33) in debate. He emphasized the Great Commandments (vv. 34–40) and confounded his opponents (vv. 41–46).

Now his last public sermon begins: "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples . . ." (Matthew 23:1). It was late Tuesday afternoon of Holy Week. It seems that most, if not all, of the Pharisees and Jesus' other opponents had left Jesus' presence by this time. To the remaining crowds and his disciples, he addressed what follows.

His statement related first to "the teachers of the law and the Pharisees [who] sit in Moses' seat" (v. 2). Who were they?

Meet the scribes and Pharisees

The "teachers of the law" were a specific group of religious authorities in Jesus' day. After the Jewish people returned from their Babylonian captivity, a group of scholars known as "scribes" or "rabbis" emerged. They were not Levites or priests, but laymen. Their passion was the transmission and teaching of the law in its every minute detail.

In Babylon, the people had learned to worship apart from the temple in homes and houses. They brought this new tradition back to Israel in the form of "synagogues" (from the Greek for "gathered together"), now built in any town where ten Jewish males resided. Here the rabbis or "teachers of the law" could do their work. Ezra was such a "scribe" (Ezra 7:6); Gamaliel was another "teacher of the law" (Acts 5:34).

By the time of Jesus, they were closely aligned with the Pharisees. "Pharisee" comes from the Hebrew root *prs*, "to separate" or "detach." The Pharisees were the spiritual heroes of their day, the most religious people in the nation. Ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel would serve as an analogy today.

The Pharisees were never more than six thousand in number. But their influence outweighed their size; they are mentioned more than one hundred times in the New Testament. Their movement may have begun during the Second Temple period, when they rejected the

Hasmonean dynasty in power (134–104 BC) with its alleged secularisms. But most think they were named for their separation from ritual uncleanness and the impurities of daily life in Israel.

The Pharisees were devoted to the oral tradition that explained and expanded on the written law. In this regard they disagreed sharply with the Sadducees, who accepted only the written Torah. The Pharisees also believed in the resurrection of the body, unlike the Sadducees (Mark 12:18–27), and focused on personal piety above all other priorities. They tried to obey Leviticus 11:44, "I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy"; and Exodus 19:6, "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

As a result, they fasted regularly (Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:12). They sought converts to the faith (Matthew 23:15). They prayed frequently (Matthew 6:5). They tithed their goods and possessions (Luke 11:42; 18:12). They were zealous in their desire for a purified Jewish faith (cf. Galatians 1:14). Some of the Pharisees became followers of Jesus (cf. Nicodemus, John 3:1), but many opposed his ministry and supported his execution.

Reject their example

Jesus described their prideful zeal in a phrase: they "sit in Moses' seat." "Seat" translates *kathedra*, from which we get "cathedral." To sit in "Moses' seat" was to take the place of their supreme lawgiver in Israel, the most esteemed teacher in their history. This would be akin to assuming the academic "chair" of a venerated professor.

Jesus did not reject their teachings so much as their example: "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:3). The law required the people to follow the teachings of their authorities:

You must act according to the decisions they give you at the place the Lord will choose. Be careful to do everything they direct you to do. Act according to the law they teach you and the decisions they give you. Do not turn aside from what they tell you, to the right or to the left. (Deuteronomy 17:10–11)

The problem was that they were unwilling to do what they required of others: "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4). The religious authorities called the people to lives of unrealistic legalism, but they did not help them fulfill these requirements or set an example in their own lives.

By contrast, Jesus issued this invitation to experience his grace: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28–30).

Like the Pharisees, we are tempted to call people to higher standards than we fulfill. If our personal lives do not match our public profession, God cannot use us effectively. Dwight Moody was right: what we are in the dark is what we are.

Are you the same in private as in public? Do you say the same things to people that you say about them? Are you the same on the telephone as when you hang up? Are there thoughts and practices in your life that you don't want anyone to know?

To be a servant leader, we must first be true servants.

Seek the glory of God (Matthew 23:5–12)

Why was Jesus so upset with the authorities' influence and example? Because he knew their true motives. Our text continues: "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long" (Matthew 23:5).

"Phylacteries" were small boxes known as *tefillin*, strapped to the head and left hand during morning and evening prayers. This practice was intended to obey Deuteronomy 6:8, "Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads." They contained four strips of parchment on which were written the words of Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; and 11:13–21.

The black strip used to affix the box to the hand was wound seven times around the arm and three times around the hand. When they were "wide," they were more obvious and indicated greater religious zeal.

Their "tassels" (*zizith*) were worn in obedience to the law:

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God." (Numbers 15:38–41)

The longer their tassels, the more obvious their religious fervor. This practice would be something like wearing a very large cross or carrying a giant Bible everywhere you go.

Furthermore, "they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues" (Matthew 23:6). The "place of honor at banquets" would be near the host or significant guests. "The most important seats in the synagogue" refers to the most visible seating, near the bema, the platform where the law was read. While most hearers sat on the floor or mats, the distinguished guests were given chairs.

Continuing his critique, Jesus stated that "they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi'" (v. 7). "To be greeted in the marketplaces" was to recognize them as religious authorities, something like saluting an officer in the military. "Rabbi" means "teacher"; in Jesus' day it was a title of respect, something like "Reverend" today.

Now Jesus made his application, shifting from "them" to "you": "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers" (v. 8). "You" is emphatic in the Greek: "You are not to be called 'Rabbi.'" "Rabbi" in this context referred to an esteemed spiritual leader, a "master" of men.

Our Master continued: "And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven" (v. 9). "Father" here translates "Abba," a word typically used for people of honor and respect more than for one's biological father. He did not forbid us from addressing our earthly fathers by this word, of course (cf. Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children"). Rather, he insisted that we not elevate one another spiritually, as God is our heavenly Father is our only King and Lord.

Jesus' point is that we are all equal at the foot of the cross, the children of one Father:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26–29)

We are not to elevate a person above God or others: "Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ" (Matthew 23:10). "Teacher" translates *kathegetai*, found only here in the Greek New Testament. (*Didaskalos* is the more common word for one who taught the people.) It meant "professor" and was a title of great respect, akin to "Master."

To the contrary, "the greatest among you will be your servant" (v. 11). This was Jesus' consistent requirement of his disciples: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26–28).

With this result: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). Jesus taught us that "whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). Peter cautioned us to "humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

This principle is taught consistently in the Hebrew Bible as well:

- "Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, 'Come up here,' than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman" (Proverbs 25:6–7).
- "The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day" (Isaiah 2:11).
- "Man will be brought low and mankind humbled, the eyes of the arrogant humbled. But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness" (Isaiah 5:15–16).

- "All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. 'I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it'" (Ezekiel 17:24).
- "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low" (Ezekiel 21:26).

The axiom is true: to learn if you're a servant, see how you respond when people treat you like one.

Conclusion

Max De Pree, the former CEO of Herman Miller and author of bestselling business literature, defines leadership:

The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader.

Jesus modeled such leadership and called us to do the same. Would those who know you best say that you are the same person in private that you are in public? Would they agree that you seek God's glory rather than your own advancement? When you stand before your Lord one day, will he humble or exalt you?

None of us knows when we will step into eternity.

But each of us can choose to be ready, today.

Lesson 13:

A command, not a suggestion (Matthew 28:16–20)

Context

- **Background:** Matthew 28:16–20
- **Main idea:** Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all people.
- **Question to explore:** If you and your church were as serious as Jesus is in the command “make disciples,” what would you do?
- **Study aim:** To describe what Jesus’ command to “make disciples” means and decide on actions I will take to be more faithful in carrying it out. (Note: Read Matthew 24:1–28:15 to set this lesson in context.)
- **Quick read:** When we make disciples, we fulfill Jesus' purpose for his people.

Commentary

Once upon a time there was a stonecutter. He lived all alone. Though he had great skills, he was very poor. He lived in a tiny bamboo hut and wore tattered clothing.

One day as the stonecutter worked with his hammer and chisel upon a huge stone, he heard the king's procession approaching his humble village. Joining the crowd, he stood in awe at the marvelous silk robes and regal splendor of the king. "Oh, how I wish I had the power and glory of the king," he thought. "He has soldiers at his command. No one is more powerful."

His cry was heard, and immediately the humble stonecutter was transformed into a powerful king, riding a great horse, waving at the crowds who flocked to see him. "This is power," he thought.

As summer came, however, the king watched the power of the sun on his people. Men, animals, and plants withered under its powerful rays. "How I wish I were as powerful as that," he thought. "I wish I were the sun." And immediately his wish was granted.

The stonecutter relished his new role as the sun and gloried in his power over the earth below. Then one day a tiny cloud moved over the land, shielding the earth from his bright rays. Seeing that here was something more powerful than himself, he thought, "I want very much to be a cloud."

Again his wish was granted. Now he blocked the sun's rays and felt important. He poured rain on the earth, flooding the streets and farmlands below. Everything was under his power, except the

rocks. Again he had found something more powerful than he. "There is nothing as powerful as a rock," he thought. "How I wish I were a huge stone." His wish was granted.

As a stone he remained motionless and powerful, unmoved by sun or wind or rain. He felt exempt from all the forces that shaped the existence of those around him. Then one day a man approached, carrying a bag. When he stopped, he pulled out a chisel and hammer and began to chip away at the rock. Realizing that the man with the tools was more powerful than any rock, he cried out, "Oh, I want to be a stonecutter."

Once again his cry was heard, and he became a stonecutter. Once again he lived in a bamboo hut and made his living with hammer and chisel. And he was at peace, for he had found his life's purpose at last.

We must each find our reason for being. What is your purpose, your vision for your life? What did Jesus believe it should be? In this lesson we will explore the mission statement he assigned to every church. While the "Great Commission" is familiar to most Christians, there is more to its imperative than meets the eye. So long as a single person remains un-disciplined, we must continue to study it and commit ourselves anew to its fulfillment.

Obey his last word to you (Matthew 28:16)

Our last study left Jesus in the temple precincts, where he confronted his critics and taught his followers. As he left the temple, he warned his disciples that it would soon be destroyed and they would face severe persecution (Matthew 24:1–35), but that he would return at an hour known only to the Father (vv. 36–51). He illustrated the urgency of preparation for his return by the parables of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), the talents (vv. 14–30), and the sheep and the goats (vv. 31–46).

Meanwhile, his enemies were plotting his arrest (Matthew 26:1–5) as he was anointed at Bethany (vv. 6–13). Judas agreed to betray him (vv. 14–16) before the disciples shared the Last Supper together (vv. 17–30). Jesus predicted their denials (vv. 31–35), prayed in Gethsemane (vv. 36–46), and was arrested there (vv. 47–56). His Jewish trials (vv. 57–68) and Peter's denials (vv. 69–75) set the stage for Good Friday.

Matthew 27 tells the story of Judas' suicide (vv. 1–10), Jesus' trials before the Roman authorities (vv. 11–26), his torture (vv. 27–31), and his crucifixion (vv. 32–56) and burial (vv. 57–66). Matthew 28 then proclaims the miraculous news of his resurrection (vv. 1–10) and the cover-up by the authorities (vv. 11–15).

Now our text begins: "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go" (Matthew 28:16). "Then" translates *de*, probably better rendered "but" in this context. The word serves to separate the manipulative intrigue of the religious authorities (vv. 11–15) from what comes next.

"Disciples" translates *mathetes*, pupils, apprentices, adherents, followers. Jesus chose the "twelve" from the larger group of five hundred or more followers (1 Corinthians 15:6) associated with his movement:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:12–16)

They went to "Galilee" in obedience to his command: "After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (Matthew 26:32; cf. Mark 14:28). The risen Christ told the women at his empty tomb to "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28:10).

So they returned to their homeland, specifically to "the mountain where Jesus had told them to go." Mountains served as places of revelation throughout Matthew's Gospel (cf. 4:8; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 24:3; 26:30). Jesus ate with his disciples beside the Sea of Galilee prior to this event (John 21:1); this "mountain" was likely in the vicinity of the lake, perhaps the Mount of Beatitudes.

This event probably occurred near the end of the forty-day period that the risen Lord spent with his disciples (Acts 1:3). If they had refused his order to meet in Galilee, they would have missed his commission. It is the same with us—obedience leads to revelation. When we submit to God's word and will, we position ourselves to hear his word and receive his direction for our lives. He can lead only those who will follow.

Have you obeyed the last word you heard from God? Are you open to the next?

Worship even when you doubt (Matthew 28:17)

What comes next is one of my favorite phrases in Scripture: "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (v. 17). "When they saw him" (*idontes auton*) renders a phrase which means that the disciples did not see Jesus until they reached the specified mountain. "Worshiped" translates *proskyneo*, to prostrate oneself before another. "Doubted" renders *distazo*, to waver or hesitate.

The juxtaposition of the two describes the response to the risen Christ that many of us offer today. They worshiped Jesus, as the women had done earlier (v. 9) and as billions of Christians do today. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30), a commitment that expresses itself in public and private worship. When we see God as he is, we cannot help but be moved by his majesty. From Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1–8) to John on Patmos (Revelation 1:17), those who meet God are awed by him.

At the same time, some of the eleven "doubted," as their minds were "divided" or "troubled." Jesus used this same word in describing his disciples' fear and doubt on the stormy Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:31). Why did they still harbor doubts about the risen Christ?

It could be that they were not sure that this was really Jesus. Remember that the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize the risen Christ (Luke 24:16) and that the disciples in the boat did not know him on the shore (John 21:4). Or it could be that some were not yet convinced that his resurrection was real. Like Thomas (John 20:25), they struggled to understand and accept his

glorified presence. The Easter miracle was so stupendous that it might have shocked them into incredulity.

Some scholars suggest that others beside the Eleven were present with them at this time and that the doubters were in their number. However, the text describes the Eleven and no others. It is most likely that they were struggling intellectually with the kind of risen Lord he would be. They still wanted a military Messiah, one who would "restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6). Yet he was taking no apparent steps toward such a political initiative.

We should not be surprised by doubts, even in the minds of those who worship Jesus. In Isaiah 1:18 our Lord invites us to "reason together" with him—the Hebrew literally says, "argue it out." John the Baptist had doubts about him (Matthew 11:2–3), as did his own family (Mark 3:21). As long as we are fallen people living in a fallen world, we will struggle with questions about our faith. But we can worship even as we doubt, knowing that the former will help us deal with the latter.

When last did you worship Jesus personally and passionately? Do you remember the hymns or choruses you sang to him last Sunday? What doubts about his person or ways are present in your mind today? Would you name them and take them to him?

Submit to his purpose (Matthew 28:18)

What follows is the most stupendous claim ever made in human history: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'" (v. 18). "Authority" translates *exousia*, "official power or rights." No Napoleon, Caesar, Hitler or Tsar ever suggested that he was the ruler of both the Earth and the heavens. But Jesus did.

This assertion fulfilled the vision given to Daniel centuries earlier:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

Now this authority "has been given" (*edothē*) to Jesus. The Greek forms a "timeless aorist," a past decision with ongoing consequences. This authority has already been given by the Father to the Son and will last forever. Jesus earlier claimed that "all things have been committed to me by my Father" (Matthew 11:27) and that "the Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands" (John 3:35). Now he claimed this authority in the context of his purpose for his people.

Make disciples

What does he command us to do? "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19a).

Making disciples was Jesus' central purpose and task. The word *disciple* appears in the Gospels

230 times. As we have seen, Jesus prayed all night before selecting his first disciples (Luke 6:12–13). He lived with them for three years. He entrusted his mission into their hands. His first priority was making disciples. Now he tells us that it is ours as well.

Unlike the Jewish rabbis of his day, Jesus chose his students (Mark 1:16). He called them to leave everything to follow him. A disciple of Jesus was a person who followed him with full commitment and devotion and led others to do the same, a "reproducing imitator of Jesus."

We are called to make such disciples "of all nations." "Nations" translates *ethnos*, from which we get "ethnic." It refers to people groups. Every population on earth deserves to hear the message of God's redeeming love. We are to go to them, not waiting for them to find us.

Why is disciple-making so critical to global evangelism? Because multiplication is the only way to reach the world. If I win one person to Christ every day for thirty-three years, 12,045 people would be in heaven. But if I win one person a year and disciple him so that he can reproduce himself by winning another, and this process continues at the rate of one per year for thirty-three years, 8,589,934,592 people would be in heaven, more than the entire population of the world. If I could win and disciple one a day, in thirty-three days the entire world would know Christ.

Baptize

How do we "make disciples"? First by "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," (Matthew 28:19b). What was baptism? Why was it so important to global missions and ministry? Let's gather together the biblical facts on this crucial subject.

First, baptism as a sign of Christian conversion is the consistent pattern across the New Testament:

- Peter exhorted the Pentecost crowd, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). With this result: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (v. 41).
- When the Ethiopian met Philip, "The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him" (Acts 8:34–38).
- When Peter met the Gentile Cornelius and his family, "Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:46–48).
- When Lydia became the first European convert, "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home" (Acts 16:14–15).

- After God sent an earthquake to free Paul and Silas from their Philippian jail, "The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of God to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds, then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family" (Acts 16:29–34).
- In Corinth, "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized" (Acts 18:8).
- Paul wrote to the Romans, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3–4).
- He instructed the Colossians, "In Christ you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11–12).

Second, such a commitment follows faith. At Pentecost, "those who accepted his message were baptized" (Acts 2:41). The Ethiopian heard the gospel before he was baptized by Philip. Cornelius received the Spirit before he was baptized; Lydia responded to the gospel before she was baptized; the Philippian jailer responded to the gospel before he was baptized. We do not find a single person in the Bible who was baptized before he or she came to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Third, baptism is for anyone who comes to Christ. Children can be baptized if they have trusted in Christ. With the Philippian jailer, after Paul and Silas "spoke the word of God to him and to all the others in his house," they baptized them (Acts 16:32). Crispus "and his entire household believed in the Lord" before they were baptized (Acts 18:8).

Anyone who is old enough to be a "disciple" (Matthew 28:19), who has chosen to follow and obey Jesus as their Lord, is old enough to be baptized. But they must come to Christ first. No other requirements exist. No denominational affiliation is necessary; no feelings or actions must be demonstrated first.

Fourth, baptism is by immersion. "Baptize" comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means "to dip." It is found in ancient literature to describe the act of dipping a cup under water or washing clothes. It simply means to "immerse."

After Jesus was baptized, he "went up out of the water" (Matthew 3:16). At the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, "both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized

him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:38–39).

According to Paul, baptism pictures the fact that we were "buried with him through baptism into death" and raised with him to new life (Romans 6:4). We have been "buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God" (Colossians 2:12).

Last, baptism is a symbol of conversion. In the context of the Great Commission, we are called to "make disciples" by "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Jesus spoke of the Father and the Son (Matthew 11:27) and warned about sin against the Spirit (Matthew 12:28) while promising his coming (John 15:26). Now he placed all three members of the Trinity in a baptism formula that eventually became common for New Testament faith.

Paul prayed for the Corinthians, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). Converts were baptized in the "name" (by the authority) of all three members of the Trinity in a public act by which they showed their faith to the world. As such, it indicates our commitment to evangelize the lost and lead them to witness before others. This is the first indispensable step in world discipleship.

Teach

The second is equally vital: "and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20a). "Teaching" translates *didasko*, to instruct. "Obey" renders *tereo*, to guard, keep, observe. "Everything" translates *panta*, "all." "Commanded" translates *entello*, to order. Jesus' commands, from the first of his public ministry to his last words, are his marching orders to his kingdom soldiers.

In response to this injunction, early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Paul instructed Timothy, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Such teaching is for the purpose of equipping God's people to extend the kingdom around the world:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11–13)

Are you living by Jesus' commands? Are you teaching them by your example and your words?

Trust

The last part of the Great Commission gives us the assurance that we can fulfill it: "And surely I

am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b). In what way is he "with" us today?

He is praying for us at this very moment (Romans 8:34). His Spirit indwells and guides us today (1 Corinthians 3:16). And one day he will take us to his home in paradise, where he will be with us forever (John 14:1–6). As the Lord promised his presence to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:12), so Jesus promises his empowering presence to us today. He has given us all we need to do all he has called us to do.

Do you teach and live in dependence on his Spirit? A. W. Tozer noted that "God is looking for those through whom he can do the impossible—what a pity that we plan only the things that we can do by ourselves."

Conclusion

When Lee Iacocca was chairman of Chrysler Corporation, he found that he had to remind his employees every twenty-eight days of the company's mission statement. Sadly, the "Great Commission" has sometimes been labeled "the great omission." No purpose is more urgent than the cause of world evangelism, beginning where you live with the people you know.

In that context, perhaps this extended reading from William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, may prove motivational for your class this week:

I saw a dark and stormy ocean. Over it the black clouds hung heavily; through them every now and then vivid lightnings flashed and loud thunders rolled, while the winds moaned, and the waves rose and foamed and fretted and broke and rose to foam and fret and break again.

In that ocean I thought I saw myriads of poor human beings plunging and floating, shouting and shrieking, cursing and struggling and drowning; and as they cursed and shrieked, they rose and shrieked again, and then sank to rise no more.

And out of this dark angry ocean I saw a mighty rock that rose up with its summit towering high above the black clouds that overhung the stormy sea; and all round the base of this rock I saw a vast platform; and on this platform I saw with delight a number of the poor, struggling, drowning wretches continually climbing out of the angry ocean; and I saw that a number of those who were already safe on the platform were helping the poor creatures still in the angry waters to reach the same place of safety . . .

And as I looked I saw that the occupants of that platform were quite a mixed company. That is, they were divided into different 'sets' or castes and occupied themselves with different pleasures and employments; but only a very few of them seemed to make it their business to get the people out of the sea . . . Some of them were absorbed night and day in trading, in order to make gain, storing up their savings in boxes, strong rooms and the like . . . Many spent their time in amusing themselves with growing flowers on the side of the rock; others in painting pieces of cloth, or in playing music, or in dressing themselves up in different styles and walking about to be admired.

Some occupied themselves chiefly in eating and drinking, others were greatly taken up with arguing about the poor drowning creatures in the sea and as to what would become of them in the future, while many contented themselves that they did their duty to the perishing creatures by the performances of curious religious ceremonies . . .

And all this time the struggling, shrieking multitudes were floating about in the dark sea, quite near by—so near that they could easily have been rescued.

Who is floating by you this week?

About Dr. Jim Denison

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Notes

Introducing the Gospel of Matthew: A primer for discipleship

- XX **“Christianity without the living Christ”**: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Book, 1995), 63–64.
- XX **“cheap grace”**: Bonhoeffer, 47.
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- XX **“When you teach children or adults to ride a bicycle”**: Willard, 314, italics in original.

Lesson 1: The birth of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1:18–2:15, 19–23)

- XX **[Mary] was likely a young adolescent**: Catholic tradition teaches the "perpetual virginity of Mary," believing that she and Joseph never consummated their marriage. Some who hold this view believe that Joseph was an elderly man at the time of his engagement to Mary and that he functioned more as her protector than her husband. This approach is one explanation for the fact that he disappears from the Gospels after Jesus reached twelve years of age.

Lesson 2: God’s beloved Son, baptized by John (Matthew 3)

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Lesson 3: Called to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:12–22)

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Lesson 4: The distinctive life of disciples (Matthew 5:1–16)

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Lesson 7: Trust God and stop worrying about things (Matthew 6:19–34)

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Lesson 8: Make the right choice (Matthew 7:1–27)

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