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The Gospel of Matthew

A Practical Bible Commentary by Terry Baxter



Matthew was a tax-collector for the Romans in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Because of his occupation, he was almost certainly reviled and hated as a traitor by fellow Jews. But Jesus radically and totally changed his life when he called him to be a disciple. His Gospel is clearly written from a Jewish perspective. He refers often to the Old Testament and cites numerous prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. His goal was to present to Israel the evidence that Jesus Christ was indeed the promised and long-awaited Messiah. He does so with unwavering accuracy and attention to detail, starting with His genealogy; the calling of His disciples; His sermons, teachings, parables, and miracles; the heart-wrenching events of the Passion Week; His glorious resurrection; and culminating in The Great Commission that would change the world more than any other event in history.



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Edited by Dan Jones.

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(Edited and occasional comment by Dan Jones)

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Introduction To Matthew: Matthew 1:1

“The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:”
Matthew 1:1

Some believe the first verse of this book was actually its original title. The early church held that the book was written by the Apostle Matthew and that eventually became the common name for this Gospel, though in no place does the book itself attribute it to Matthew.

The name “Matthew” means “gift of God” in Hebrew. He was formerly a tax collector. Matthew 9:9-13 tells of his call by Jesus. Matthew 10:3 lists him as one of the twelve apostles that Jesus called. Jesus radically changed his life.

As you read the book, it becomes clear that he wrote to the Jewish mindset. He refers often to the Old Testament and cites numerous prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. His goal was to present to Israel the evidence that Jesus Christ was indeed the promised Messiah.

For the most part, the book follows a very chronological account of the birth and public ministry of Jesus. The first two chapters cover his birth and the flight of Mary and Joseph to Egypt followed by their return to Nazareth. Then Chapter Three picks up abruptly with the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus.

A full harmony of the life of Jesus requires a study of all four gospels. Matthew stands out as being very logical and factual. It aimed at answering the Jewish skeptics.

I look forward to studying this amazing gospel. Years ago as a teenager, I was on a Bible Quizzing team. That year, we focused on the gospel of Matthew and our coach had us commit it to memory. Subsequently, this Gospel has a special place in my heart. God used it to greatly impact my life as a new believer.

History = His Story (Matthew 1:1-17)

The book of Matthew here records the genealogy of Joseph. Luke Chapter Three records the genealogy of Mary. Both place Jesus as a descendant of both Abraham and King David. Luke goes all the way back to Adam. They make the case that history is indeed the story of the Messiah.

Notice that Matthew 1:3-5 includes three gentile women in the lineage of Jesus Christ. Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth were all Gentiles. These three mean that Jesus represented all humanity.

The history of the entire Old Testament can be covered by studying all the men and women named in these two genealogies. The whole span of human history is represented in these two chapters. When Luke 3:34-38 is added, pre-flood people like Noah, Methuselah, and Enoch are also included. Notice, from King David backward, both genealogies are the same.

A serious Bible student can also see much Bible prophecy in these genealogies. Jesus was indeed the seed of the woman traced through Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, King David, and the virgin Mary. No other figure in human history past or present can fulfill these prophecies of the Messiah. History is indeed His Story.

The Birth of Jesus: Matthew 1:18-25

“18) Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. 19) And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. 20) But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21) And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” 22) Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23) “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” 24) And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, 25) but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.”

True to form, Matthew records the birth of Jesus from the perspective of Joseph. They were engaged and he was busy preparing a place for his new bride. It was during this phase of their engagement that he discovered that Mary was pregnant.

His response was very natural. He assumed she had been unfaithful, so he prepared to quietly call off the wedding. According to the Law, he could have had Mary stoned. In keeping with Jewish tradition, he was likely much older than Mary. Hence the text calls him “a righteous man.” He may have been in his late twenties and well established in his trade.

It was at this point that an angel appeared to him in a dream with divine revelation. Mary was indeed the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.”

Matthew 1:21 records another part of the revelation. He was to be named “Jesus” because He was going to save His people from their sin. The angel effectively communicated the gospel to Joseph.

Joseph then becomes an example of faith. He obeyed the word of the angel and immediately took Mary as his wife and he kept her a virgin until he gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name “Jesus.”

Though not recorded in this text, the naming of Jesus broke tradition just as the naming of John the Baptist. (See Luke 1:57-66) The eldest son should have been named after the father. It was

expected for Jesus to be named “Joseph.” This was another act of humility and obedience on behalf of Joseph.

It is very difficult to assign any fault to Joseph in this context. He consistently acted according to the information he had about Mary being pregnant. It took divine intervention to change his mind. Angelic activity surrounded every stage of the life of Jesus.

The Bible becomes silent about Joseph after the brief trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve. (Luke 2:41-52) We do know that he was a carpenter and true to form taught his eldest son the family trade.

Most scholars assume Joseph passed away before Jesus became an adult. Jesus waited until age 30 to begin His public ministry. Most believe He became the family provider for His widowed mother and step-brothers and sisters.

The “Tuned Out” King. Matthew 2:1-3

“1) Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2) “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” 3) When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”

The most significant event of human history unfolded right under Herod’s nose and he was oblivious. The King of the Jews, the Promised Messiah, the Savior of mankind was born and he and his administration missed it.

When he finally called the chief priests and scribes of the people to consult the Scriptures, he aligned himself against God and His Divine plan. He was self-focused and not God-focused. He was earthly-minded and not heavenly-minded. Instead of protecting life, he killed all the male children in Bethlehem and all its environs and attempted to wipe out the child.

He ended up dying a fool's death. Such is the fate of all who live a self-centered life and ignore God.

Unfortunately, this is descriptive of many world leaders today. They live as if God does not exist! An even bigger event in biblical prophecy is about to unfold and they are oblivious. The stage is being set for the return of the King of kings and they are blind.

The “Tuned In” Magi. Matthew 2:1-12

“7) Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 8) And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” 9) And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east,

went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. 10) When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11) And they came into the house and saw the child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12) And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.”

These magi stand in stark contrast to Herod the king. They were “tuned in” to what God was doing. Approximately two years earlier, they saw a star that indicated the birth of the King of the Jews. They gathered their treasures and followed the lead of the star.

Scholars are divided over the star. Some view it as planets lining up, others point to an angel. It is not uncommon for angels to be called stars in Scripture as in Revelation 12:4.

I tend to lean toward angelic intervention because of the specific guidance to the house where the young family was staying. The star pointed to the exact house where Mary and Jesus were lodging. There was no guesswork.

The trip by the magi from the Far East to Bethlehem stands out as one of the most significant short-term mission trips in the Bible. Here are twelve lessons we can learn from them.

1. They were “tuned in” and open to what God wanted to do through them.
2. They were obedient to follow the leading God had given them.
3. They understood that the star meant the King of the Jews had been born.
4. Upon arriving in Bethlehem, they asked appropriate questions. (Vs 2)
5. The announcement that they came prepared to worship the infant King indicates they understood His Divine nature. (Vs 2)
6. They reported truthfully to Herod about the time the star appeared. (Vs 7)
7. They followed the star to the exact house where Jesus and the baby were staying. (Vs 9)
8. They rejoiced exceedingly as they continued to follow God's leading. They found joy in serving God. (Vs 10)
9. They were the first to recognize and worship Jesus as the King of the Jews. (Vs 11)
10. They presented gifts to Jesus that may have helped finance the young family's flight to Egypt and eventual lodging in Nazareth. (Vs 11 ... If it's God's will... it's God's bill!)
11. They obeyed God's leading in a subsequent dream to return to their own country by another way without returning to Herod. (Vs 12)
12. They completed their mission and may have helped pave the way for the eventual spread of the gospel to the east. (History tells us the Apostle Thomas carried the gospel all the way to India)

I admit; there is plenty of mystery surrounding the magi, but they illustrate how God can work through people who are “tuned in” to Him and willing to follow His leading. This is especially true

today in this age of the filling of the Holy Spirit. Christians should be “tuned in” and ready to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit!

The Careless Chief Priests and Scribes of the People: Matthew 2:3-6

“3) And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4) And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5) And they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6) “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’ ”

We now come to the careless chief priests and scribes of the people. When the magi arrived with their question, they were also taken off guard. But notice, when Herod questioned them, they knew exactly where the Christ was to be born. They searched the Scriptures and came up with the correct answer about the birth location, but missed the full story of the Messiah.

They were derelict in their duty. There are around 300 prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament that foretell significant details about His birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. Though they got the location of His birth correct, they became enemies during His public ministry and actively worked to bring about His crucifixion.

This illustrates the claims of Paul about Israel as recorded in 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:4. A veil remains over their minds when they read the old covenant. Satan actively blinds the minds of the unbelieving.

It is baffling how they answered Herod correctly but utterly missed the many other prophecies about the Messiah. A light was about to shine in Israel and this group worked hard to extinguish it from the onset. Their ignorance of the Scriptures and determined resistance of Jesus Christ were inexcusable.

Sadly, I believe a similar trend will accompany the end times and the second return of Christ. Many today are correctly reading the signs of the times, but many are devoid of spirit. As the bride is preparing to meet Jesus, the apostasy is also spreading quickly. Many religious leaders are walking the path of the careless chief priests and scribes of the people as recorded in Matthew Chapter Two.

Becoming a Star Witness for Jesus Christ: Matthew 2:1-12

“9) After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. 10) When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11) After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

The story of the star and the magi are unique to the Gospel of Matthew. It is not mentioned in the other three gospels. I must confess, this story intrigues me for many reasons.

I can only imagine the conversation between the magi and their wives as they packed for this journey. The first question was obvious; “So, where are you going?” That brought a blank look and a shoulder shrug. Following a star to an undisclosed location sounded rather suspicious.

But there was another question; “So, how long are you going to be gone?” That was followed by more shoulder shrugs. I also suspect their wives noticed the gold, frankincense, and myrrh they packed. Let’s be honest, the whole conversation was at best awkward. There were many more questions than answers. It was packed with suspicion.

It’s the same way for every man or woman who is drawn to Jesus Christ. Their whole life seems interrupted. They begin following an inner tug that is hard to explain or describe. Those close to them may think they’ve gone crazy.

I confess, I love hearing the stories of how people came to Jesus. Everyone is special. I also like being on the other side of the story. I enjoy being in the role of the star and pointing people to Jesus.

It just happens that Matthew Chapter Two provides helpful insights on what it takes to be a star witness for Jesus Christ. Let’s take a moment and look at seven characteristics of the star that were used to lead the magi to Jesus. These seven points give helpful insights on what it takes for you and me to be effective witnesses for Jesus Christ.

First, the star had a heavenly perspective. They saw the star in the sky. According to Colossians 3:1-2, we need to keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. We need to live with heavenly enthusiasm. We need to be salt and light for Jesus.

Second, the star had an earthly mission. It guided the magi from the far east all the way to Jesus. (Matthew 2:2) It provided direction. In the same way, we should provide direction for people who are seeking Jesus.

Third, the star had a royal focus. The magi came looking for the newborn king of the Jews because they saw “His star” in the East and had come to worship Him. (Matthew 2:2) We must keep in mind that they are not seeking us, they are seeking the King of kings. They didn’t come to worship the star, they came to worship the King.

Fourth, the star had consistent radiance. According to the context, it guided the magi for two full years. (Matthew 2:7, 16) We need to be patient with the evangelism process. It takes time. We need to be real and continually shine for Jesus. Clouds are normal when looking at stars. Our struggles add to our witness.

Fifth, the star gave a specific direction. The magi came from the far east all the way to Jerusalem. It pointed them to the newborn king. According to Acts 4:11-12, Jesus is the only way to God. We need to point people to Jesus and not merely to a religion. Don't stop short of sharing the gospel.

Sixth, the star brought them to Jesus. According to Matthew 2:9-10, they went into the house and began to worship Him. Of the billions of stars in the sky, this star pointed exclusively to Jesus. Of the millions of people on earth, this star brought them only to Jesus. The star became the divine connection between the magi and Jesus. We share the same calling. God calls us to connect people to Jesus Christ.

Finally, the star completed its mission when the magi went into the house and worshiped Jesus. (Matthew 2:11) This star is never mentioned again in the Bible. From that point onward all attention was on Jesus. Our evangelism mission is complete when people meet Jesus Christ. He becomes their sovereign Lord.

For some people this application of the star might seem like a stretch, but every Christian is called to be a witness. (See Acts 1:8) Ironically, the above seven points help clarify our mission. God wants you and me to point people to Jesus.

The Flight to Egypt: Matthew 2:13-15

"13) Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord *appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." 14) So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. 15) He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called My Son.""

After the magi departed for their own country by an alternative route, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in another dream. This time the dream included a sober warning.

Herod was going to search for the child to destroy him. To save the child, Joseph was to arise from his sleep and flee to Egypt. The timing was urgent.

We now have the story of another Joseph in Egypt. It is a second story of God using Egypt to preserve life. Egypt was off limits to Herod and his wicked plans.

Ironically, it was Pharaoh in Egypt who years earlier had devised a plan very similar to Herod to put all the male children of the Jewish people to death. His plan was also aimed at destroying the lineage of the Messiah.

God intervened with the birth of Moses who eventually led the captive people out of slavery from Egypt. The Exodus became a prophetic picture of the Messiah as well. Matthew 2:15 points out

the prophecy from Hosea 11:1 that says; “Out of Egypt did I call My Son.” Another obscure prophecy of the Messiah was being fulfilled.

Time was of the essence. That very hour of the night, Joseph arose and took the child and his mother and fled to Egypt. They remained there until the death of king Herod.

One can now see how providential the gifts from the magi were to fund this trip. God the Father had underwritten the care of His Son and this trip to Egypt. Joseph and Mary were able to keep a low profile while in Egypt. The text indicates that they remained there for an extended time.

I believe God is providential over geography in our lives as well. He wants to be our Provider as we sojourn through this life. Like Joseph, we need to follow His lead. His will for us also includes an Exodus from our Egypt. The work of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection provided for our freedom. Jesus wants to save us and set us free from slavery to sin.

Herod's Great Atrocity: Matthew 1:16-18

“16) Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. 17) Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 18) “A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; And she refused to be comforted, Because they were no more.””

We now come to Herod's Great Atrocity. When he realized he had been tricked by the magi, he became enraged and issued a decree that all male babies from two years old and under in Bethlehem and its surrounding area should be rounded up and put to death.

The anguish, agony, and pain must have been horrendous as babies were stripped from their parents arms and slaughtered before their eyes. The injunction most likely carried an offer of clemency; “Give up the baby Messiah and your child lives!”

It is reasonable to assume with the public spectacle surrounding the nativity story, the identity of Jesus was common knowledge. At this point in the narrative, it appears that Mary and Joseph had moved from the manger to a house. They may have taken up residence in Bethlehem. (See Matthew 2:11)

But to everyone's dismay, Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus had suddenly vanished. They had secretly fled to Egypt. It is probable in this night of horror that Jesus would have been betrayed by numerous parents in an effort to save their own babies.

We now have the first irony of Jesus. Had He died at the hands of Herod, many other babies would have been saved. This serves as a foretaste of His eventual mission as Savior. But His

calling was to die to redeem all of humanity and not merely this localized group. Yet this tragic episode marked His life with a destiny that eventually ended on the cross.

It is not unreasonable to assume that some of these bewildered parents may have been in the crowd years later during that fateful Passover crying out, "Crucify! Crucify Him!" Animosity often lingers for decades. They represented one group that may have added a passionate voice to the chorus.

Note the prophecy from Jeremiah 31:15 quoted in Matthew 2:18 stresses that, "She refused to be comforted for her children, because they were no more." I admit this application may be a stretch, but it is well within the realm of human nature.

Herein may be another reason why Joseph and Mary opted to settle far north in Nazareth rather than near Bethlehem upon their return from Egypt. It appears they had roots in both locations but the obscurity of Nazareth suddenly became very inviting. It allowed them to slip into community and live under the radar.

I would be remiss if I did not point out the evil bent of Herod in these verses. It is hard for me to comprehend the full scope of this atrocity. Human depravity and the evil god of this world often become willing bedfellows.

There is no limit to the potential evil in this present world. Blame must never be placed on God! It was man's rebellion against God and constant allegiance to Satan that was and is the root cause of all corruption and suffering in the world.

When humanity runs from God it automatically runs into the arms of the devil. He feeds on death, destruction, and human misery. The same holds true in every generation and for every individual.

Jesus came as light into this dark and fallen world. He indeed came to save His people from their sin. (Matthew 1:21) He is the solution and not the problem. Turning to Him in simple but sincere faith is the first step to a new life.

Jesus the Nazarene: Matthew 2:19-23

"22) But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, 23) and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

We now have a unique twist of events. As Joseph was returning from Egypt, God warned him not to go to the region of Judea, instead he picked the city of Nazareth in the region of Galilee.

This proved providential in many ways. First, as John 7:48-52 indicates, the religious leaders were thrown off in their viewing Jesus as being from Galilee. They missed His prophetic birth in Bethlehem of Judea.

Second, over 15 times the gospels refer to Him as “Jesus the Nazarene.” Many other times, He is identified as being from the region of Galilee. At the time of the New Testament, the land was divided into three regions. Judea was in the south. Samaria was in the middle. And Galilee was in the north.

When Israel was divided in the Old Testament into two kingdoms, Judah was in the south and Israel was in the north. Separate kings ruled over each area. Because Jerusalem was the capital of Judah, it was home to the temple and generally held better loyalty to God.

Note that the Messiah was prophesied as being from the tribe of Judah. With Jesus growing up in Nazareth, He was from the region originally given to the tribe of Naphtali. This was typically looked upon as being a sinful area with more gentile influence.

Third, the cultural influence on Jesus growing up near Nazareth meant that He was considered a commoner. He was at home with country folks without the legalism or pious Pharisee shadow that resided in and around Jerusalem. Everything from His accent to His dress style labeled Him a Nazarene. Though He was born in Bethlehem of Judea, He was the cultural byproduct of Nazareth of Galilee.

Finally, in one sense this is a beautiful picture of God trying to bring the two kingdoms back together. In another sense, it smelled of tension and rivalry from centuries of conflict and even war between Judah and the northern kingdom. It guaranteed that Jesus would never be welcomed or respected by the religious elite that ruled Jerusalem.

God often uses common and ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. Being born in a manger in Bethlehem was the most humble of beginnings in Judah. Being raised in Nazareth meant He came from the most common and humble region of Galilee.

A careful reading of 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 can be applied to “Jesus the Nazarene.” The title was by no means meant as a compliment. A modern title from US culture could be rendered “Jesus the Hillbilly.” Jesus was in every human way very common and ordinary.

Never look down on your social, economic, ethnic, or cultural status. God chooses those who are small in their own eyes to accomplish great things. God wants the glory for the mighty things He accomplishes through people. The smaller your view of yourself the bigger God can shine through you.

Meet John the Baptist: Matthew 3:1-3

“1) Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2) “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” 3) For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight!’ ””

As Chapter Three opens, a very notable shift takes place in the text. It is like an action movie that shifts scenes to develop another part of the story.

Chapter Two ends with Mary and Joseph moving to the northern region of the District of Galilee and taking up residence in Nazareth. The focus is on “Jesus the Nazarene.” It is likely that this is where Joseph started his carpenter shop. This is about 20 miles west of the Sea of Galilee.

Chapter three picks up the story twenty-eight years later over 100 miles south of Nazareth in the District of Judea. The focus also shifts from Jesus the Nazarene to the ministry of John the Baptist. He was baptizing in the Jordan River to the north of the Dead Sea.

Matthew is very abrupt with his transition and leaves out many details in the story. Luke chapters 1-2 includes other vital details skipped by Matthew.

One important detail is recorded in Luke 1:39-45. After becoming pregnant, Mary made a trip to the hill Country of Judah and stayed with Zacharias and Elizabeth for three months. According to the text, Mary arrived when Elizabeth was six months pregnant (Luke 1:26; 39) and stayed for three months. (Luke 1:56)

An important detail is mentioned in Luke 1:7; both Zacharias and Elizabeth were advanced in years and Elizabeth had been barren. The relationship between Mary and Elizabeth is not known. Luke 1:36 merely mentions that Elizabeth was a relative.

One contrast remains: Mary was very young and Elizabeth was advanced in age. However, God was working miraculously in both of them. They needed each other! Elizabeth was able to confirm the divine origin of the baby in the womb of Mary.

Notice, a unique event happened when Mary entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. Luke 1:41 says; “And it came about that when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” She immediately recognized that Mary was the mother of the Lord, though Mary had no outward sign of being pregnant. We can learn three vital truths from this story.

First, it can be argued from this story that life begins at conception. After conceiving Jesus, Mary went in haste to see Elizabeth (Luke 1:39), and Jesus was very alive in her womb. Mary stayed approximately three months. Twelve weeks is when the heart beat starts. Jesus was alive and recognized by Elizabeth way before His heart even started beating!

Second, years later, John the Baptist noted that Jesus is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. (See Matthew 3:11 & Luke 3:16) We now have an interesting twist to this story. I would argue that shortly after conception, Jesus started this ministry while still in the womb of Mary, and that is why Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary greeted her. Note He began this ministry before His own heart was even formed. Never minimize the baby in the womb!

Third, we discover that God is not in a hurry to fulfill His promises. Keep in mind, around 28 years transpired between Matthew 2:23 and Matthew 3:1-3. God honors natural processes and time. He is not worried, filled with anxiety, or pressured. He is in control.

I believe in the sanctity of all human life. I believe all people have value, dignity and purpose. God's timing is perfect and He loves people.

The Message of John The Baptist: Matthew 3:1-3

"1) Now in those days John the Baptist *came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2) "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3) For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight!' "" Matthew 3:1-3

John came as a forerunner to Jesus. His message and ministry focused on a call to repentance. John was a revivalist. He was preparing Israel to welcome the Messiah.

His ministry was most likely based on 2 Chronicles 7:13-14; "13) If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, 14) and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land." He was calling Israel to return to God.

These verses unpack God's universal principles for revival. They apply to the nation of Israel and to every individual. God honored these principles for the gentile city of Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah and He will honor them for any nation today that repents and begins to seek Him.

As people openly repented of their sins and turned to God, John baptized them in the Jordan River. Personal repentance preceded baptism.

The word repentance includes regret accompanied by a change of heart toward God. It involves a change of moral direction from sin and toward righteousness. It includes a change of mind regarding sin. It embraces biblical holiness based on the Word and ways of God and rejects worldliness.

His message likely leaned heavily on Isaiah 55:6-13. It is important to quote these verses at this point:

“6) Seek the Lord while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7) Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the Lord, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. “8) For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. 9) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. 10 “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; 11) So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. 12) For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, And all the trees of the field will clap their hands. 13) Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up, And it will be a memorial to the Lord, For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.”

An awesome awareness of the holiness of God always accompanies revival. When people humble themselves and turn from their wicked ways to seek God, He always responds. He listens to prayers of repentance, forgives sin, and heals the land. As many people turn to God, revival gains momentum and turns into national awakening. This was John's message to Israel.

John was calling Israel back to God. He was preparing them to welcome Jesus at His first coming. The same message of revival will be relevant for the church before the second return of Christ. The Spirit of God is even now preparing the bride for the coming of the groom. The call to repentance and holiness is being stressed around the world.

The gospel is at the heart of this message. Placing faith in Jesus Christ involves repentance. (See Acts 26:19-20) It increases the conscious awareness that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The gospel invites people to receive Jesus Christ and turn from their own sinful ways.

(As Terry correctly points out, John the Baptist's ministry took place about five miles north of the Dead Sea. It's known as Bethany Beyond the Jordan and it's a popular tourist stop. Many places in Israel are places we think or are likely to be the place something in the Bible occurred. There is little doubt that present-day Bethany Beyond the Jordan is the actual spot where John the Baptist was baptizing people, including Jesus.

What makes that interesting are two facts: 1.) The Bible says, in Mark 1:5, that “all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem.” Matthew also says this in 3:5. 2.) It was a 25-mile walk through hot, dry, and very unpleasant desert to get to Bethany Beyond the Jordan from Jerusalem.

So, why would *all* the people of Jerusalem and Judea walk that far through such nasty

conditions to hear some crazy guy wearing camel hair and eating bugs tell them to repent? It would have been a lot easier to repent and be baptized in Jerusalem. This was a three or four day commitment for most of them.

The answer is that the Jewish people had been praying three times a day for hundreds of years for their Messiah to come: "I believe with complete faith in the coming of Moshiach (Messiah). And though he may tarry, I shall wait anticipating his arrival each day." This is the prayer that is still repeated to this day.

John the Baptist was preaching that the Messiah had finally come, right here and right now! He was saying that the prophecy of Isaiah that all of Israel had been waiting for was fulfilled, their prayers had been answered, and the Kingdom of God was at hand! That meant repentance was essential because their Warrior King was finally here, the Romans would be defeated and expelled, and Israel was about to become a great nation once again!

It was a message so amazing that even the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to hear it.)-dj

The Methods of John the Baptist: Matthew 3:4-10

"4) Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5) Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; 6) and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7) But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8) Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9) and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 10) The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

There is no doubt that John was a unique man. He came from the wilderness and preached in remote regions. His message focused on repentance.

He is dressed in leather garments made from camel's hair with a leather belt about his waist. He may have looked a bit like the prophet Elijah and had the same direct message. He definitely preached with authority and confronted sin and compromise with no respect for persons.

His diet was also odd. He lived on locusts and wild honey. Some believe this related to the locust plant and not grasshoppers. Whatever the case, his looks and mannerisms were more barbaric than civilized.

So why the great success? Why were people attracted to Him? I believe there were three unique characteristics about John.

First, he was uniquely himself. He didn't try becoming someone he was not. He was comfortable with his own persona.

Second, his preaching was biblical, authoritative, and persuasive. He did not mince words or sound like the Pharisees. He was very direct.

Finally, he was totally dependent on the Holy Spirit. He came in the spirit and power of Elijah. His relationship with God and dependency on God was his spiritual secret. I would place his prayer life in this category as well. He was a man of God.

Though seldom talked about in modern methodology classes, the above three characteristics of John the Baptist are crucial. I place huge weight on these points. There is no shortcut to Spiritual fruitfulness.

The Mission of John the Baptist: Matthew 3:11-12 (John 1:29-34)

“‘11) As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12) And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’”

John the Baptist had one primary mission and it was not baptizing. His mission was to introduce the Messiah to Israel. He made this very clear in John 1:29-34. Listen to a few of these verses; “32) And I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ 33) I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.” John 1:33-34

He introduced Jesus as the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world and the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. John was a forerunner for Jesus. He was the advance man sent to prepare the way for the Son of God.

John's mission was not to glorify or promote himself. His mission was to point Israel to Jesus. When Jesus stepped up, John gracefully stepped down. (John 3:22-36)

I cherish his response to his disciples in verse 30; “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Every pastor and spiritual leader should have the same single mindset. Our mission is to point people to Jesus Christ and make sure that He gets all of the glory and attention. John faithfully fulfilled his mission.

This may have been the greatest virtue of John the Baptist. Though his ministry gained huge momentum and fame, he never competed with or distracted from Jesus Christ. It is tempting to

market and promote ourselves, but John died to that prideful carnality. He made sure that every eye, ear, mind, and heart was pointed to Jesus Christ!

The Manifesting Role of John: Matthew 3:13-17

“13) Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. 14) But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” 15) But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted Him. 16) And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, 17) and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.””

If I could travel back in time to biblical history and be present for key historical events, this story would make my top ten list. What transpires in these few verses literally attracted the undivided attention of every eye in heaven. Let me try to unpack these verses.

We now come to the climax of John's entire ministry. Keep in mind, his main mission was to introduce or manifest the Messiah to the world. Without understanding the full script, his baptizing would somehow set the stage for one of the greatest Revelations of God in the Bible. Let's try to grasp a panoramic view of the broader scene unfolding in this chapter.

Against the backdrop of many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to John for affirmation and receiving scorn, Jesus suddenly shows up at the Jordan. As the text unfolds, all eyes are focused on John and Jesus, but to the dismay of everyone, the demeanor of John totally changes. He switches from loud and animated with disdain toward the Jewish religious leaders, too being meek, humble and even shy in the presence of Jesus. Certainly the crowd noticed this unprecedented mood change in John. They could sense something unusual was happening.

Initially, John was reluctant to baptize Jesus for two reasons. First, he viewed himself as being in need of being baptized by Jesus. I assume this is a reference back to his words in Matthew 3:11 that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John viewed himself as being in need of that baptism. That greatly intrigues me!

But second, John was stuck in a genuine theological crisis. Because Jesus was sinless, He was not a candidate for a baptism of repentance. The thundering prophet suddenly stood speechless with no clear pathway foreword. This was a huge affirmation of the utter holiness of Jesus Christ. “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5)

The issue was resolved when Jesus pointed out the higher righteous mission of John's baptism. According to John 1:32-34, the Messiah would be manifest to John and Israel through baptism. At the moment the Messiah would be baptized, the Holy Spirit would descend from heaven and remain upon Him. That's exactly what happened!

As John proceeded with the baptism, the most significant heavenly manifestation recorded in the Bible took place. The crowd was obviously transfixed as the scene unfolded. I cannot imagine the impression made on any religious leaders lingering in the crowd. Let's briefly examine four components of this manifestation.

First, the heavens were opened. I do not know how to paint this scene or what it looked like. It must have included marvels beyond human comprehension surpassing the vision in the book of Revelation. This may have been an actual glimpse into the heavenly realm.

But let me make an observation, Jesus is the One who opens heaven to sinful people. He became the mediator between heaven and earth. Jesus is still the door to the heavenly realm. Acts 4:12 says; "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given to men, by which we must be saved." At the moment of salvation, the new believer is spiritually seated with Christ in the heavenly places. I can only imagine.

Second, the Spirit of God descended as a dove and remained upon Jesus. (John 1:33) What was the significance of this? In John 1:34 John the Baptist said; "34) And I have seen and bear witness that this is the Son of God." This sign confirmed the Deity of Christ! He did not become Deity at His baptism, it merely confirmed His true identity. Jesus became the Son of God because of His immaculate conception, not because of His baptism. Baptism always confirms what already exists. It is an outward sign of an inward reality.

Third, the Father Spoke. "17) and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."" (Matthew 3:17) This was an audible voice not unlike the voice that thundered from heaven when the Children of Israel came out of Egypt and stood before Mt. Sinai to receive the Law. (See Exodus 19:18-20:21) Seldom in the Bible does God speak from heaven with an audible voice. When He does, He expects people to listen. Something much greater than Moses and the Law had come.

His message was loud and clear; "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." God was speaking to mankind. He was affirming Jesus Christ as His only begotten son. All else that follows in the book of Matthew and the four Gospels is based on this Revelation of the true identity of Jesus Christ.

A final observation is often made from this text. All three members of the Godhead are present in these verses. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are seen as separate and distinct from each other in this story and yet Scripture presents the mystery that they are one and the same. I simply point out the evidence of the Trinity encased in these verses.

You cannot read these verses without wrestling with the true identity of Jesus Christ. Apart from a right relationship with Him, heaven will forever remain closed to you!

Tempted By The Devil: Matthew 4:1

“1) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

This verse is profound but confusing to our natural mind. I confess, I’ve wrestled with it numerous times. Why would the Spirit of God lead Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil? The answer is complex but important to understand. Let me share a few thoughts on the subject of trials and temptations and try to squeeze some helpful insights from this verse.

First and foremost, tempting is Satan’s primary role in this fallen world. It’s hard to wrap our mind around this point, but tempting is what God uses Satan for in this world. That’s why he is called “the tempter.” He actually fills an important role.

James 1:13 unequivocally states that God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself does not tempt anyone. At the time of his fall, Satan unwittingly stepped into the role of “tempter.” Be patient with this point, It may need to simmer in your mind for a while. There are many implications behind this point that we do not have time or space to develop.

Second, the words “tempt” and “trials” are the same basic Greek word. An example is the context of James 1:2-18 where both words appear repeatedly. Context actually determines which English word is used. They are often interchangeable. Sometimes it’s nearly impossible to discern if you are being tempted or tested by a trial. Both may be happening.

Third, both trials and temptations are intended to make the Christian stronger. The picture in 1 Peter 1:6-9 is that of refining gold. In the case of trials and temptations, it is our faith that is being refined and strengthened. The bottom line is that faith grows through struggles. What Satan intends to bring us down, God uses to build us up! (See Romans 8:26-30)

Fourth, based on the above point, we begin to understand that God turns Satan’s temptations and trials into our ultimate good. God is for us and not against us when we go through the valleys of testing. He wants us to succeed.

Fifth, the good news of Matthew 4:1-11 is that Jesus has walked in your shoes. The book of Hebrews states that Jesus was victorious when being tempted in all ways that we are so He can both understand our struggles and come to our aid. (Read Hebrews 4:14-16)

Sixth, when we are tempted, God always provides a way of escape. We are never trapped when in a temptation. (See 1 Corinthians 10:13) God is faithful to us even when we are being tempted. He does not abandon us.

Finally, trials and temptations are intended to draw us closer to God. They reveal our weaknesses and our need for Him. They both stretch us and expose us. They motivate us to cry out to Him.

God uses this present fallen world as boot camp for all people. It will either make us or break us. It is the ultimate testing and training ground. For the Christian, the struggles of this life can be used to refine, strengthen, build, and transform us into mature, godly, and fruitful people for the glory of God. For the non-Christian, this present fallen world can entice, deceive, distract, wound, and calcify a bent toward sin and Satan. The same fallen world leads to radically different outcomes and destinies.

But here is the key take away from Matthew 4:1: Jesus not only lived in this present fallen world with all the frailty of humanity, He was also subjected to the tempter's most vicious schemes. Satan tried his hardest to bring Jesus down. Jesus not only passed every test, He utterly defeated and destroyed the works of the devil. (1 John 3:7-10) Jesus is therefore able to help you and me in our journey through this life. Embrace Him!

The Purpose of Fasting: Matthew 4:2

“2) And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.”

This verse describes the launching pad of the public ministry of Jesus Christ. The first thing Jesus did after His baptism was fast and pray for forty days and nights. His public ministry started with prayer, was sustained by prayer and ended with prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Holy Spirit led Him to first and foremost commune with His Father in prayer through a prolonged time of fasting. I dare say that prayer and fasting became the fuel that launched and powered His ministry.

This begs the question; “Why did the Son of God need to undergird His life and ministry with persistent prayer?” Didn’t He automatically walk in divine power and enablement?

We now discover the mistaken fallacy about prayer and fasting. These callings are not about gaining more power, they are about deep intimacy with God. The focus is not about God doing more “through” you, the goal is God doing more “in” you. The main calling of the Christian life is not doing the Great Commission, rather it is about entering into Great Communion with God. The first is the outgrowth of the second.

This is the emphasis of Isaiah 58:5-12 which is the greatest explanation of the call to fasting found in the Bible. Fasting is not merely about going without food, it is about seeking and connecting with God. It is about removing the blinders that hinder the glow of God in and through our lives. It is about turning on the light of the Spirit in our life and our geographical region.

It is surprising that Moses, Daniel, Jesus, the early church, and Paul all focused on prolonged times of prayer and fasting. God used each of them to turn on the light of revival and awakening. The same can happen today!

Let me close with a comment about the physical component of fasting. Note that after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, Jesus then became hungry. Jesus was on a genuine fast during which He consumed only water.

Around day three of this kind of fasting, hunger cravings subside. The body switches to burn stored fat for energy. The immune system also kicks into high gear and removes toxins and damaged cells. New stem cells are produced in abundance and they go to work renewing and healing the body. The health benefits of fasting have become a craze in modern medicine.

When actual hunger cravings return, the body has burned its reserve and needs food and nourishment again. If good nutrition is not added at this time, the body will start burning muscle and organ mass and the ravages of starvation will begin. Depending on fat reserves, most people are capable of fasting for extended periods of time.

If you are considering an extended fast, take time and study the subject. There is ample information available from good sources online. Beware lest you get caught up on the physical benefits of fasting to the point of missing the more important spiritual calling of communion and intimacy with God.

I beg you not to skip over Matthew 4:2 in your Bible reading. Many great spiritual insights come in small packages. Such is the case with this verse. It contains spiritual dynamite.

Three Levels of Temptation: Matthew 4:3-11

“3) And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” 4) But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” 5) Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6) and *said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, So that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.’” 7) Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 8) Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; 9) and he said to Him, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.” 10) Then Jesus said to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’” 11) Then the devil *left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him.”

In this text, Satan tempted Jesus three times. Let me make some basic observations that apply to us as well.

First, each temptation was aimed at a different level of the makeup of man. The first temptation recorded in verses 3-4 was aimed at the flesh. This is the seat of physical appetites and drives. The second temptation recorded in verses 5-7 was aimed at the soul. This is the seat of the

intellect, emotion, and will. The third temptation recorded in verses 8-10 was aimed at the spirit. This is the seat of the conscience and worship. Satan will tempt and seek a foothold on all three levels.

Second, each temptation embodied a seed thought that was based in a degree of truth. The first two temptations started with the phrase and challenge; "If you are the Son of God... prove it." The second temptation was even wrapped in Scripture. The final temptation offered him lordship over the realm of earth if He would bow down and worship Satan.

Third, Jesus responded to each temptation by quoting Scripture. He effectively used the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God in the face of temptation. The text indicates that He resisted audibly. He spoke the Word! Both James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:8 says that we are to actively resist the devil. Jesus provides a great example of how to use the Sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith in that process.

Fourth, Jesus was victorious and withstood each temptation. The war was not over, but the approach Jesus used worked. Submitting to God, standing on Scripture, and actively resisting the devil is the proven way to face temptation.

Fifth, after three intense temptations, Satan left him. Luke 4:13 says; "And when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." Satan was not done tempting, he was merely plotting and scheming his next move. Ephesians 6:13 says; "Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything to stand firm." I guarantee evil moments and future onslaughts of temptation will come!

Temptations seem to come in waves from various sources and at unexpected times. Some are triggered by appetites and hormones, others by random thoughts and emotions and others are disguised as ideas of inspiration. Always be dressed in your armor and never let your guard down.

Finally, according to verse 11, after the devil left Him, angels came and began ministering to Him. This is not a coincidence. Times of temptation are often followed by times of grace, growth, blessings, provision, or amazing open doors. God is in control and He is providential, yet He allows us to be tested. Become seasoned at the good fight of faith. God is on your side. (See 2 Thessalonians 3:3)

Angels on Assignment: Matthew 4:11

"11) Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him."

After His temptations were complete, according to this verse, two things happened to Jesus. First, the devil left Him. The New Testament principle is that when we resist the devil firm in our

faith, he must flee. Take a moment and review James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9. The same promise holds true for you and me.

But second, the text says that angels came and began to minister to Him. I used to skip over this phrase, thinking that Jesus received special treatment. But that is not in keeping with the testimony of Scripture.

This might stretch you, but I have come to the conclusion that apart from His identity, nothing unique happened in the life of Jesus during His incarnation to give Him an unfair advantage over you and me. He lived under the same trials and suffering that we endure in this fallen world and had the same spiritual graces made available to Him. In other words, He lived by the same rules that govern our lives in this world.

So the obvious question then is, “Does Scripture teach that angels are on assignment in this present world to minister to Christians as they did to Jesus?” Surprisingly, the answer is “Yes!” Let’s quickly survey the New Testament with this question in mind.

The word “angel” or “angels” appears well over 150 times in the New Testament. It appears 21 times in the book of Acts. There are seven separate occasions that angels helped or ministered to believers in the book of Acts. More from the book of Acts in a moment.

First, I want to point out that Colossians 2:18 warns us not to worship angels. They are silent servants of God and do not attract attention to themselves.

But Hebrews 1:14 connects angelic activity toward believers directly to the description of them ministering to Jesus in Matthew 4:11. This verse says, “(14) Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation.” Isn’t that profound? Part of their duty is to minister to believers in a way similar to what they did for Jesus.

But often they are unseen or unnoticed. Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Some may walk among us and appear to be ordinary people. Notice, they are “strangers.” They do not set up residence or have long-term interaction with people. They appear for a short moment of time and then are suddenly gone. They do not establish ongoing or sustained relationships with people.

My theology and life experience includes angelic intervention. I do not pray to them, but I often ask God to surround my home, family, travel, and ministry with angelic protection and provision. I have had numerous supernatural deliverances from danger that I attribute to angelic intervention.

I fully acknowledge the mystery of God's providence over life and death. In Acts 12:2 James the brother of John was put to death with the sword. In the same chapter, Peter was arrested and sentenced to the same fate, but Acts 12:7-11 describes how an angel supernaturally delivered

him from four squads of soldiers and set him free from his shackles in prison. It was a supernatural deliverance from death. Angels work to carry out God's sovereign will.

Again in the same chapter, Acts 12:23 credits an angel with carrying out divine judgment on Herod, and struck him and killed him. Angels are often pictured with a sword in Scripture. (Numbers 22:22-23; Joshua 5:13)

Later in Acts 27:23, Paul described how an angel appeared to him in the night and encouraged and strengthened him. Sometimes God sends His angelic servants to encourage and strengthen weary believers.

We could devote more space to this subject, but sufficient at this time to point out that God's angelic servants are on silent duty for you and me just as they were for Jesus. It is a mystery, but the Bible pictures angels and the Holy Spirit working in tandem in the life of believers.

Sovereign Over Geography: Matthew 4:1-16

“12) Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; 13) and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. 14) This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 15) “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 16) The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light, And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, Upon them a Light dawned.”

True to form, Matthew records another geographical move that Jesus made from Nazareth to Capernaum. He was still in the region of Galilee, but He was now about 25 miles northeast, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Though minor, this move fulfilled a prophecy made in Isaiah 9:1-2 about the regions originally given to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. The full chapter of Isaiah 9 is very significant related to the Messiah. From this region would come a child, the government would be on His shoulder, “and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) Wow!

This move literally fulfilled the greatest prophecy in the Old Testament about the Deity of the Messiah. As Jesus launched His public ministry from this location, indeed a great light began to shine in a former region of spiritual and moral darkness.

Let's take a moment and review the geographical prophecies that Matthew points out that Jesus fulfilled. He was born in Bethlehem, called out of Egypt, raised in Nazareth and from each of the two regions originally given to both Zebulun and Naphtali. Luke 2:21-38 adds the detail that as an infant He was dedicated to the Lord in the temple at Jerusalem when eight days old. His dedication in the temple fulfilled a Word of the Knowledge given to both Simon and Anna.

This string of geography was Divinely orchestrated. It was prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Had one address been missed it would have negated any claim Jesus had of being Deity.

These details may seem trite, but they absolutely fascinate me. We can conclude that God is sovereign over the small details in our lives like traveling and geography. He knows your comings and goings. It is impossible to hide from Him.

The Kingdom Calling: Matthew 4:17

“From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.””

The basic message of Jesus related to the kingdom of heaven. He focused on this same theme in the Lord's Prayer as recorded in Matthew 6:9-13 and just prior to His ascension in Acts 1:3. I am not sure of the difference between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. Jesus seemed to use them interchangeably. Both seem to relate to the tangible presence of God.

But there are a few key insights to be gleaned from Matthew 4:17. First, this verse closes with the phrase “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Some translate “at hand” as “near.” What I find interesting is that it is a verb that describes motion.

Notice the Lord's Prayer captures the same thought; “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Again we see motion. It's the idea of the presence of God coming and engulfing planet earth in the same way as in heaven.

Jesus tied this motion to repentance. He seems to indicate that the movement of the kingdom of heaven toward earth calls for repentance. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Certainly, there is coming a time when Jesus will literally set up His Kingdom on earth as pictured in Revelation 20:1-6 and rule for 1,000 years.

But there is also a sense in which the body of Christ is called to live out and bring kingdom values and dynamics to earth in this present age. I believe this relates to the presence of God among us collectively and even as individuals.

Isaiah 55:6-7 captures this thought when he said; “6) Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.” Then in verse 7 he also ties it to repentance. Notice, motion is again pictured in this context. What is significant is that he applies this “nearness” or movement to individuals. As individuals we each have motion relative to God.

The individual application seems to turn the proposition around. Rather than saying “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”, the emphasis would be, “If you want the kingdom of heaven to be near, repent!”

In this understanding, we are the ones that move. According to 1 John 1:3-10, we can move closer to God and His presence. Our fellowship with Him deepens as we walk in the light as He is in the light. But if we allow sin and darkness in our lives, we move away from His presence.

This motion might be a matter of perspective. For centuries, people thought the sun was in motion around the earth. When the theory that the earth was actually in motion around the sun was first presented, it sounded heretical but proved to be true.

The same is true of the presence of God in our life as believers. As the source of light, God does not move. We move closer or further from His presence based on the purity of our walk with Him. Keep in mind, we are not talking about salvation, we are talking about fellowship with God.

We are called and invited to live and walk in kingdom dynamics in this life. We can grow in our faith and deepen our walk with God. We can walk in the light as He is in the light. We are invited to abide in the presence of God. As we move deeper into His presence, we start experiencing Him working in our lives on earth as He does in heaven. We move deeper and deeper into kingdom principles and dynamics.

But notice, according to the emphasis of the message of Jesus, this is based on repentance. Or, as Isaiah said, it is based on turning from our ways and our thoughts and embracing His ways and His thoughts.

Repentance is an action that becomes a life process. We put off our old self and put on the new self "in Christ." As we do this, we "move" into kingdom living and abide in the presence of God. The subject of experiencing kingdom ways and dynamics in our lives as believers is huge in Scripture, but we need a basic starting point.

So let's get started with a question; "What is the basic motion in your life?" Are you moving closer to God or drifting away from Him? Are you going deep in the Spirit or are you staying shallow? By faith are you growing in kingdom values or is your life the expression of fleshly and worldly values? As a Christian are you walking in the Spirit or living in the flesh? Jesus made repentance the starting point for moving into an ever deepening walk with God.

If your sincere answer to these questions exposed you as moving away from God, take immediate steps to change the motion of your life related to God. Jesus said to start with repentance.

The Three Callings: Matthew 4:18-22

"18) Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. 19) And He *said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20) Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 21) Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son

of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. 22) Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.”

Jesus began His public ministry by calling His first disciples. Verse 19 tells us there were three parts to His calling. Let’s look at each briefly because they apply to you and me as well.

First is our calling to God. This includes both salvation and intimacy with God. It is very important to understand that God wants you and me to seek Him first and foremost. He wants us to grow in our walk and relationship with Him. Everything that follows is built in this relationship. This is a lifelong calling.

Second is our calling to personal growth. Jesus promises to build us. The Christian life is the beginning of a life of growth and development. God will use every trial and every circumstance to produce growth within us. It is important to know that we grow as we go. He wants to work deeply in us so he can work greatly through us!

Third is our calling for God! Jesus promised to make them fishers of men. This is where God wants to work through us to impact many other people and influence the world. The problem is that many people get so busy “for God” they begin to neglect their calling “to God!” Personal burnout is a danger to anyone who gets so busy they neglect to spend time with God.

Let me make another observation. Did you notice He promised to make them fishers of men. The word fishers is plural. It means Jesus wants to build a team. We are not in ministry alone. The Christian life is a team sport. God wants us to work together with others. The load is easier when many people carry it. Do not become isolated in your Christian calling.

Healing and the Gospel of the Kingdom: Matthew 4:23-25

“23) And He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. 24) So His fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought Him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. 25) And great crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” (ESV)

As Jesus began to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, amazing miracles began to happen. People were transformed from life in a fallen world that is full of sickness, pain, suffering, and demonic oppression into a foretaste of what things will be like when the Messiah sets up His kingdom on earth.

People were healed and set free from everything that afflicted them. What is unusual in this present age will be normal when the Messiah begins to reign. The sickness, pains, and suffering of this life governed by the consequences of sin and the fall all fled away in the presence of the Messiah as recorded in Matthew 4:23-25.

The news about Him spread far and wide. People came from great distances to see Him and the text says “He healed them.” That describes universal healing!

Keep in mind, this was before His work on the cross. Jesus was offering the kingdom to the nation of Israel with a full glimpse of the healing and freedom that would accompany His physical reign on earth. His gospel of the kingdom came with a glimpse of virtual reality.

But John 1:10-13 presents the saddest story in the Bible. “10) He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11) He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12) But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” (ESV)

I certainly believe Jesus can and does heal today, but what was happening during His public ministry was different. This was a foretaste of the kingdom for Israel and they rejected Him. This kind of universal healing, health, and longevity will happen when the Messiah comes back and rules on earth.

However, there is a difference between Matthew 4:23-25 and today. Those healings were based on His role as Messiah offering the Kingdom to Israel. Healing today is based on faith in His finished work on the cross. Universal healing during His public ministry was a foretaste of the kingdom for Israel. He came to His own and they rejected Him.

This helps explain the dialogue recorded in Acts 1:4-8 between Jesus and His disciples about Him restoring the kingdom to Israel. Because Israel rejected Him and He went to the cross, another system was put in place. Jesus summarized this as the age of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Take time to understand the significance of Acts 1:3-11 and how it shifted the dynamics of the gospel of the kingdom that Jesus as the Messiah was offering Israel in Matthew 4:23-25 and the age of the indwelling Holy Spirit that has now come by default.

The Gospel of salvation and regeneration through the indwelling Holy Spirit is different from the gospel of the kingdom with the rule of the Messiah present on earth. The promises of the restored kingdom to Israel in Old Testament texts like Isaiah 11:1-10 do not apply to today. They are still future tense.

Confusion comes when sincere believers try to force the universal healings of Matthew 4:23-25 and the gospel of the kingdom on today and the system we are under with the indwelling Holy Spirit. There is some overlap, but they are not the same.

Granted, healing is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit for this present age, but starting with the book of Acts things changed. Healings were frequent but not universal in the book of Acts and the Epistles. They served the purpose of opening the door for the gospel as seen in Acts 3-4 and the healing of the lame beggar. Peter and John didn’t use the miracle to start a healing

service, they used it as an open door for an evangelistic crusade... and there was only one healing!

So how does this harmonize with John 14:12 where Jesus promised that believers will do greater works than Him because He goes to the Father? Shouldn't we see more healings than Jesus performed? That's an awesome question. Let me give the short version.

Well, to start with, Matthew 4:24 says; "He healed them." The wording implies He healed them all. That's 100%. We can't improve on that, so it must relate to other areas beyond healing. Let me suggest a few areas He may have been talking about.

First, the gospel of the kingdom was rejected. That part of His mission failed. Instead of staying to set up the kingdom, Jesus went to His Father! Second, He came only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel and we are sent to the entire world. That is far greater. Third, His going to the Father instead of setting up an immediate kingdom brought the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit on every believer. That was not necessarily part of the kingdom promise. Finally, His work on the cross because of His rejection as Messiah by Israel paved the way for eternal salvation for every believer. This is a far greater work.

I praise God for the healing power of the Holy Spirit in the Name of Jesus Christ for today, but I do not expect it to be universal. We are not in the kingdom age. That is still the future for when Jesus comes back and sets up His Kingdom. When He rules on earth there will be no more sickness or oppression.

Here is the bottom line: Not everyone is going to be healed in this present age, but everyone who calls on the Name of Jesus will be saved! This present age is still governed by 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. People age, the body wears out and they die. No one is going to beat aging and death in this present age.

But God does call us to pray for healing and He often validates the gospel and His power by healing people for His glory. The purpose for healing at this present time is to advance the gospel. I believe in miracles and the power of God, but my faith does not waver when God gives grace to endure suffering instead of healing. Both are essential and glorious. I am fully content letting God be God and depending on Him for both sides of the coin of healing and suffering with grace and power. Paul did both and taught both.

Becoming A Matthew 5:1 Disciple: Matthew 5:1

"1) And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain, and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him."

A subtle change takes place in this verse. Crowds were starting to gather and follow Jesus. Up to that point, He had been seeking them, now people were starting to seek Him.

In response, Jesus went up on a mountain and sat down. Soon His disciples came to Him. I don't want to read too much into this, but at some point true believers will begin to seek and follow Jesus.

It seems that Jesus was not being accessible or user friendly in this verse. His disciples had to go out of their way to follow Him. The arrows had changed direction. He was not going to them, it was now up to them to go to Him.

This verse might capture a key difference between evangelism and discipleship. Evangelism goes to the lost with the gospel. Those who believe and become disciples begin going to Jesus and seeking His teaching. Notice, "His disciples came to Him."

It was His healing and miracles that attracted the crowds in the previous chapter, but it was His teaching and instruction that attracted the disciples for the sermon on the mountain. They were drawn to His message. They wanted to learn from Him. In Matthew 5-7 Jesus doesn't perform any miracles. His focus was on instruction.

Beware of merely chasing the miraculous and phenomenon. Jesus is the living Word. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. At some point you need to become a Matthew 5:1 disciple.

If you want to grow as a Christian, you need to start seeking Jesus through His Word. You need to study, learn and grow. You need to wear out a few Bibles. You need to spend time at His feet apart from the crowds. You need to go to Him in solitude, open your Bible and devour His Word.

Psalms 1:1-6 was the first chapter of Scripture I memorized. The Holy Spirit led me to it the night I became a Christian. This chapter set in motion the course of my walk with God. I started seeking Him daily in His Word way above and beyond church, Bible College and the latest seminars. I developed the discipline of memorizing and meditating on Scripture. God richly blesses those who go the extra mile to seek Him.

Take Matthew 5:1 to heart. Make it the pattern of your life to seek Jesus daily and sit at His feet. Do what the Apostles did in Acts 6:4 and do a reset in your life. Devote yourself to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Be proactive in seeking and pursuing Jesus in solitude.

Comparison and Contrast between the Beatitudes and The Ten Commandments: Matthew 5:1-12 & Exodus 20:1-21

"1) When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2) He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5) "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. 6) "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8) "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see

God. 9) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10) "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11) "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12) Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The Beatitudes given by Jesus stand in stark contrast to the Ten Commandments given through Moses. A short comparison and contrast between the two proves that things were changing with the ministry of Jesus. A transition was taking place.

The way Jesus opened the Sermon on the Mountain might not mean much to you and me, but His introduction with the Beatitudes grabbed the attention of every Jewish ear. These words were not casual, they were radical. This was not new wine in old wine skins. Jesus was signifying a change. Something new was coming.

When the reader understands that Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience, it is not coincidental that he devoted three entire chapters of his gospel to the Sermon on the Mountain. But what is more astounding is that Matthew was not even called to follow Jesus until Matthew 9:9-13. The timeline places his call after Jesus delivered this message. I find that very intriguing!

Could it be that he was a bystander listening to the Sermon on the Mountain? Or even more impressive, was the Sermon on the Mountain so impactful that it spread like fire among the common Jewish people who initially followed Jesus because of His miracles?

We can only speculate. In wrestling with these questions, I came up with the following comparisons and contrasts between the Beatitudes and the Ten Commandments. Undoubtedly you can come up with more, but I offer these as a starting point.

Eight Contrasts and Comparisons between the Beatitudes and The Ten Commandments:

1. The Beatitudes came after Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. The Ten Commandments came after Moses was on the Mountain for 40 days and nights.
2. The Beatitudes Open the Sermon on the Mountain. The Ten Commandments Open the Long Application of the Law!
3. The Beatitudes Were Spoken by the Mouth of Jesus. The Ten Commandments were Written by the Finger of God!
4. For the Beatitudes the People Came Near. For the Ten Commandments the People Stood Far Away!
5. The Beatitudes were recorded on Human Hearts. The Ten Commandments were recorded on Tablets of Stone!
6. The Beatitudes Focus on Internal Attitudes. The Ten Commandments Focused on External Actions!
7. The Beatitudes Stress What to Be. The Ten Commandments Warn of What Not To Do!

8. The Beatitudes Became the Source of Blessings. The Ten Commandments are the Source of Curses and Judgement.

Jesus was popular because of His miracles. He was crucified because of His teachings. It seems that His miracles were intended to open the door for His teachings. Devote time to studying the Sermon on The Mountain. It set the tone for the entire ministry of Jesus.

Poor in Spirit: Matthew 5:3

““3) Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

As Jesus begins to teach the beatitudes, He immediately exposes the proud and calloused hearts of the Pharisees and the religious elite. They looked good outwardly, but inwardly they were full of sin, self, pride, and self-deception.

The quality behind this first beatitude is difficult to describe. It might better be transliterated as “Blessed are the humble in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

I believe Jesus was elaborating a quality taught in Isaiah 57:15. It says; “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

This quality goes beyond being humble. “Poor in spirit” captures the idea, but does not communicate very well in English. It is hard to capture the meaning of lowly, contrite, poor in spirit, and sincerely humble.

Isaiah 66:1-2 returns to this concept and seems to connect it to the domain of God. Jesus may have referred to this domain as “the kingdom of heaven.” As we shall see, these two verses are profound.

“1) Thus says the Lord, “Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? 2) For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being,” declares the Lord. “But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.” Isaiah 66:1-2

It often takes a deep work of grace and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to bring a person to this point. It is a posture that sees the smallness and insignificance of self as compared to the greatness, glory, and magnificence of God.

This quality seems to run contrary to the modern Christian emphasis of self-significance, self-confidence, and self-promotion. Let me emphasize that this quality does not crush the human spirit, it merely aligns the believer with their proper position and identity “in Christ.”

I see this quality as the perfect marriage between John 15:5 and Philippians 4:13. On the one hand, “apart from Him I can do nothing”, on the other hand, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” Poor in human spirit is the pathway to becoming mighty in the Holy Spirit. We could conclude that being “poor in spirit is the only way to become mighty in Spirit.” It is the idea of being empty of self so you can become full of Christ.

I believe God will arrange trials and design circumstances to bring every believer to this heart posture. God will never be big in us or through us until we become small in our own eyes.

The Healing Power of Mourning: Matthew 5:4

“4) Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

The word “mourn” is a verb that describes deep grieving most often associated with the death of a loved one. It is an expression of inner hurt, emptiness, pain, and bewilderment and is often accompanied by grief, weeping, and remorseful crying. This is the word used in Mark 16:10 for the women who were mourning and weeping over the death of Jesus.

Mourning is an important part of the healing process in the face of death. It is normal and natural to mourn and openly express grief over the loss of a loved one. For the non-Christian, it is often an expression of hopelessness, despair, and fear over the power and permanence of death.

But something was coming that would bring great comfort. With the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a phenomenon took place for the early Christians. The fear and despair associated with death were replaced by hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 captures this concept when Paul acknowledged that Christians grieve, but not like those who have no hope. Why?

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 acknowledges that Jesus Christ has taken “the sting” out of sin and death through His resurrection. He conquered death and literally took the keys of death from the devil. (See Revelation 1:17-18) When the believer passes through death's doors a very immediate and tangible glory awaits them.

Paul elaborated in depth on this in 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10. Often in the case of those martyred for Jesus and the gospel, an inexpressible joy, grace, and glory comes upon the believer during the transition from this realm to glory. It is real and profound!

Stephen in Acts 8:54-60 is an example of this jubilation. The unusual joy and celebration of Christians in the face of death left a huge impression on Saul who was leading the charge to stone Stephen. After his conversion, Paul shared his own attitude toward life and death in Philippians 1:19-30. In verse 21 he said, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Inherit the Earth: Matthew 5:5

““5) Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Nine words packed with volumes of meaning. Some translations render this as “blessed are the gentle.” It embodies the idea of being emotionally, mentally, and spiritually composed no matter the outward circumstances.

Proverbs 25:28 says, “Like a city that is broken into and without walls, is a man who has no control over his spirit.” This picture is the opposite of meekness. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. It is the ultimate expression of peace, composure, and control. Make no mistake, meekness is not weakness!

Meekness is a personification of Jesus. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus said; “(28) Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29) Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. 30) For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (KJV) Notice the phrase “I am meek and lowly in heart.” Other translations say things like “gentle and humble in heart.” Jesus is giving us a glimpse into His inner tranquility.

Notice the context of these verses. Jesus is offering calm, peace, solitude, and healing to those whose lives are pressured, exasperated, or out of control. I dare say, Jesus is the only source of inner calm in this present world.

During his public ministry, Jesus calmed every storm He encountered. He offers to do the same for you and me. He doesn't *cause* storms –He calms them. If your life is raging out of control, you need to put your faith in Jesus Christ and invite Him into your life.

Now the promise; “they shall inherit the earth.” In the Old Testament, the Children of Israel yearned to move from the slavery of Egypt to the promised land. The New Testament has a different focus. It ends with Jesus returning and setting up His kingdom on earth. (Revelation 20-21)

His kingdom will bring peace, calm, goodness, love, health, and order to earth. Satan will be bound for one thousand years and there will be no pain, sickness, suffering, or corruption. Those who come to Jesus as Savior and Lord will rule and reign with Him during that time. This will be the literal fulfillment of the promise that “the meek shall inherit the earth.”

Let me stress; this present world is not our home, we are just passing through. Satan is the god of this present world. This present earthly chaos is the result of mankind rejecting God. There's not much here worth wrangling over. Don't waste your time hoarding treasures here and now. They will rust out, break down and become a source of contention. They cannot deliver inner peace, solitude or hope. You will forever be worried and preoccupied about someone stealing your fleeting treasures.

Let's face it, this present earth is a mess. It would be cruel humor for God to offer this present fallen and broken world as our inheritance. If this is where you are staking your claim, you are making a terrible mistake. He has a very different plan and something infinitely better.

As we read on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His Disciples to pray; "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (See Matthew 6:10) We now encounter the word "earth" again, only this time it is connected to His coming kingdom. That catches my attention. My heart is focused on Jesus and the promised future inheritance that will accompany His kingdom and reign on earth.

This will be followed by the mystery of eternity and a new heaven and earth. That will also include the New Jerusalem. (Read Revelation 21-22) This is way too much to unpack in this post, but... I can only imagine!

Inner Hunger and Thirst: Matthew 5:6

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

Have you ever been hungry? I'm talking really hungry. Jesus was. After He had fasted forty days and nights He then became hungry. (See Matthew 4:2) How about thirsty? Again, Jesus was. While on the cross He cried out "I am thirsty." (John 19:28)

I believe behind it all He was hungering and thirsting for righteousness. He came to destroy the power of sin and Satan. He wanted to set mankind free.

But you respond, "That's not fair, Jesus was God! Of course He hungered and thirst after righteousness. Can you point to people who longed after righteousness?"

The Bible does point out some. Genesis 6:9 says Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Psalm 11:3 asks; "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Luke 1:6 says both Zacharias and Elizabeth were righteous.

But you object, doesn't Romans 3:10 say "there are none righteous, not even one!" You are absolutely correct! Hungering and thirsting after righteousness is different from attaining it. Romans 3:19-24 points out that the Law fell short of making people righteous.

The only way to satisfy this yearning is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It's good to hunger and thirst for righteousness, but apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ you will never be satisfied! Jesus was about to satisfy the inner hunger and thirst.

I personally believe there is another group craving after righteousness today. They are the victims of crime, suffering, and human exploitation. Many people are hungering and thirsting after something good, righteous, and just. The Gospel is the inner hunger and thirst-quencher.

The Power of Mercy: Matthew 5:7

““7) Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

We are now introduced to the word “mercy.” This stands in contrast to the word “grace”, which means giving someone something they haven't earned and do not deserve. Salvation is a gift of grace. Mercy by contrast is not giving someone the judgment or condemnation they do deserve.

Another rule in Matthew 7:1-2 says; ““Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.”

This mercy beatitude is also closely related to the golden rule as recorded in Matthew 7:12; ““In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Notice that these are all found in the sermon on the Mount. God cares about the way we relate and interact with people. The theater of interpersonal relationships is boot camp for Christian growth and virtue.

Mercy has the power to build deep relationships. It is an expression of unconditional love.

Do you want mercy? Learn to show mercy. Do you want others to treat you with favor and grace? Do the same! Do you want others to cut you some slack? Don't be so judgmental yourself.

Peacemakers: Matthew 5:9

““9) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

This beatitude is nearly self-validating. Jesus as our Master and Lord is “The Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) He came to make peace between God and man, and redeemed people with one another and the world around them.

It is an utter contradiction for anyone to be the source of conflict, discord, tension, outbursts of anger, and strife... and still claim Jesus as Savior and Lord. These come from the flesh and not the Spirit. Something is tragically wrong! (Study Galatians 5:18-21) Look carefully, the third fruit of the Spirit is “peace.”

The contrast between the thief and Jesus in John 10:10 drives this point home. The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Jesus came to build up and not tear down. He came to heal and not wound. He came to make people whole.

Those who become whole become peacemakers. Blessings begin to pursue the peacemakers. Their inward makeup is transformed and their outward relationships begin to change. God surrounds them with favor.

My life is a testimony of this transformation. Before becoming a Christian, my life was driven by tension, inner torment and anger. I was abusive to people closest to me. When I invited Jesus into my heart, He immediately began a very deep work within me that He has been maturing over the years. I now live on the peacemaker end of the spectrum. My inner war is long over. For the most part, peace now reigns in me!

But let me make a final clarification. Peace itself is not the end game. For example, we do not sacrifice truth on the altar of peace. A right relationship with God is the goal of our ministry of reconciliation. A person can only have the peace of God if they have peace with God.

The Persecuted Church: Matthew 5:10

““10) Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

This verse is talking about proven character that is solid and stable no matter what is thrown against it. Are your convictions real or merely convenient? Do you love those who love you and line up with your theology, or do you genuinely love all people, even those who differ from you?

Persecution is the perfect test of character because it usually comes with a “get out of jail free card!” If you bend the rules, look the other way or concede, your ordeal will usually come to a quick halt.

Hebrews 12:4 says; “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;”. If you are not real, the sight of your own blood being shed or the pain of being beaten will most likely modify your stance very quickly. For most, it only takes open ridicule and they quickly abandon their faith. The flesh is a coward.

If you are merely legalistic as a show of religion, you are vulnerable to be pulled into all kinds of secret sins such as bitterness, pornography, fantasy romance novels and even substance abuse. Many Christian leaders have walked away from marriage and family for a more pleasurable lifestyle on the side of morality. This is simply another form of testing your true character.

True righteousness is a condition of the heart that defines you. It is tied to holiness and godliness. It deepens, grows, and matures over time. It is both deepened through trials and hardship and validated through the same. When you squeeze true righteousness, holiness oozes out, to the dismay and shame of the persecutors.

That's what happened to Jesus as the crucifixion progressed. The hate and venom that nailed Him to the cross became hushed admiration through the process. The confession of the centurion and the guards by the end of the crucifixion is recorded in Matthew 27:54; "... Truly this was the Son of God."

Many stories of martyred Christians through the centuries had the same impact on the mobs. They were deeply influenced for Jesus by the demeanor of the persecuted. The same happens today. Many come to Jesus through the silent voice of the Martyrs.

Acts 1:8 directly ties this to the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to His followers. The root Greek word for "witnesses" in this verse is the same root Greek word for "martyrs". The Holy Spirit supernaturally empowers believers to shine and witness for Jesus in the face of persecution.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who have suffered for Jesus. They live and walk in the reality and power of the Holy Spirit in ways the Western Church cannot comprehend.

The Western Church specializes in theology. The persecuted church walks in a supernatural kingdom reality reminiscent of the Christians in the book of Acts. The more time I spend with pastors and Christians leaders in less affluent countries and with the persecuted church, the more shallow, exposed, and pretentious I feel. I yearn for the kingdom unction that defines them.

Willing to Be Ridiculed: Matthew 5:11-12

“11) Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12) Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Over the years, I have conducted numerous evangelism training workshops. The reason most Christians give for not sharing their faith is fear of rejection. Second is fear of ridicule. Notice they both start with the word "fear."

Yet Jesus said it is a blessing to have people cast insults at you for the sake of the gospel. Why? False accusations and persecution help focus attention on the message.

Paul discovered in Acts 21-22 that bystanders become an audience in the face of persecution. It opened the door for him to preach the gospel time and again.

Acts chapter 4 makes the case that earnest prayer, boldness, and anointing grow out of persecution. The prayer meeting that spontaneously developed after the release of Peter and John was visited with a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The ground was shaken, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness. (See Acts 4:29-31)

There are many fillings of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 says, "Be continually filled with the Holy Spirit." Those who endure ridicule, name calling, public scorn, or persecution for the sake of the gospel are often given special unction before the throne of grace.

Look at the prophets. They endured rejection from men, but they had VIP favor with God. Many of them had "God encounters" that were beyond description. If you doubt me, read again Ezekiel 1-3 or Daniel 9-12.

If you aspire to be a soldier in the Army of God, you better die to any fear of ridicule or name calling. Ephesians 6:10-20 is not for sissies!

Paul nailed it in writing to Timothy. Listen to his admonition; "3) Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4) No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier." (2 Timothy 2:3-4) If you want to live in your comfort zone don't expect to experience the glories of the "God Zone."

Verse twelve concludes by saying there is a great reward waiting for those willing to endure hardship for the sake of the gospel. Being despised by the world for the sake of godliness translates to honorable stature before God.

I confess, I enjoy award ceremonies at the end of grueling events in the Olympics. It takes years of training, discipline, and dedication to get on the podium. The personal interest stories are often inspiring. Can you imagine the award ceremony when we all get to heaven?

The Floodgates of Regeneration: Matthew 5:12-13

""12) You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. "13) You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden;"

I believe Jesus was making an application from the beatitudes listed in verses three through twelve. He was saying; "As long as my people consistently live out these qualities, they become the salt of the earth and the light of the world!"

The problem is that fallen human nature is contrary to each of these qualities. God's people as a whole have fallen short of these qualities through the ages. Religion alone is a poor vehicle to change the human heart. If it had been effective, Judaism and the Law should have produced good salt and shining lights.

Jesus came to a thriving religious system, but the salt was tasteless and the light was hidden and dim. In the balance of the Sermon on the Mount in Mathew 5-7, Jesus exposes how broken the system had become.

So how do God's people consistently put on these qualities expressed in the Beatitudes? I believe Matthew 3:11 gives us a preview; "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The whole Sermon on the Mount was exposing a thirst and hunger for the deep inner ministry of the Holy Spirit.

This is "the Promise" Jesus talked about in Acts 1:4-5. This is the inner well He promised to the Samaritan woman in John 4:13-14; 22-24. These are the rivers of living water Jesus spoke about in John 7:37-39 that would flow from the innermost being on those filled with the Holy Spirit.

I certainly believe people should consciously plant and cultivate the Beatitudes into their lives. Character development takes time and effort. But I also know that the filling of the Holy Spirit can open the flood gates of regeneration.

Take some time and compare the Beatitudes with the Fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-24. The secret to becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the World will become obvious.

The past decade has launched me into a deep quest for the ministry of the Holy Spirit in my life. It had been a hunger and thirst for a long time, but my formal theological training inhibited me. My journey to faith, freedom, and fullness has taken longer than some, but God has been so good in helping me lay a deep biblical foundation for the liberating and powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit.

I see in these verses in Matthew 5:13-14 the hope of revival and awakening within the Body of Christ today. God is at work healing the breach between the evangelical/Spirit-filled camps.

I see this crucial, deep, and biblical work as the primary restraint against the rising tide of sin, compromise and false teaching coming in like a tide in the apostate church. I pray for and welcome genuine biblical revival and awakening... but I wholeheartedly reject the woke church movement!

If it is not Holy, it is not from the Holy Spirit! If it does not line up with Matthew 5:3-16 and Galatians 5:22-24, it is tasteless salt and fake light! If it is not biblical, it is tyrannical! If it does not bow to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, its origin is not in His Kingdom of light! (See Colossians 1:13-14)

The Salt of the Earth: Matthew 5:13

“13) You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”

Good salt was highly valued in the ancient world. It was used in the cooking industry as both seasoning and as a preservative. It was also essential in the tanning industry for making leather products. It furthermore was recognized for its medicinal value to fight infections way before the science of germs and bacteria were discovered.

In some cases salt was used as money and traded for goods and services. Hence we have the old adage of “not being worth your weight in salt.” If your weight in salt had more value than your labor, you were viewed as unemployable.

But salt has an inherent problem, it can go bad and become tasteless. It is water-soluble and can be degraded by excess moisture. Bad salt was viewed as worthless. It had only one use, it was carefully thrown into pathways to retard the growth of grass and weeds. That's right, it was used as a herbicide to prevent plant growth. Discarding bad salt was actually problematic because it could spoil otherwise fertile ground. Invading armies sometimes salted fertile ground to leave it barren.

This analogy that Jesus used now takes on special meaning. As long as His people displayed godly character as expressed in the Beatitudes, they are like highly valued salt in society. They made everything look better, smell better, and taste better. They were highly valued.

But when God's people are filled with sin, hypocrisy, and bad attitudes, they are like bad salt that is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. There is sometimes a reason why the world seems to be “stepping on Christians.” Some are not worth their weight in salt! They have become tasteless and odious.

Unfortunately, because of my itinerant ministry, I have met more than my share of them. Sadly, some leave such a foul taste in my mouth, I go out of my way to avoid them. I cannot afford the negative drag they cause to my spirit and soul. It is nearly impossible to persuade them that they are not suffering for righteousness sake, they are suffering because they have terrible attitudes, worthless people skills, and leave a distorted Christian persona.

Unfortunately, they are often the ones that shape and define Christianity for the world. If you are one of them, repent! You are damaging the cause of Christ!

But godly, virtuous, and mature Christians are invaluable for society. They are the salt of the earth. I recently read one agnostic sociologist acknowledge this crucial point. He argued that true Christianity fills an indispensable role in the world to hold evil in check. He then added that if they all suddenly vanished, society would need to reinvent them or face inevitable doom.

What kind of salt are you?

Blazing Lamps: Matthew 5:14-16

“14) You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15) nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16) Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus said His people are the light of the world in the same way that He was the light of the world. (See John 9:5) He intends for us to take His place and walk as children of light in an otherwise dark world. (See Ephesians 5:7-8) To the extent we allow the Holy Spirit to change our inner character to line up with the beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12, we shine in the world.

To the extent we allow our sinful flesh to reign on the inner throne of our life, we hide the light. It is like an oil lamp placed under a bushel basket that obscures its light. What an insane waste of oil.

Very possibly He used the oil lamp as a picture of the Spirit-Filled life which was about to be introduced after His resurrection. Oil is often a symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

Oil lamps were placed in a central location to give light to all in the house. I remember days from my childhood before some homes had electricity, they were dependent on the oil lamp to illuminate the living area.

Large public buildings actually had oil lines supplying oil to numerous lamps. It created a very real fire danger because the glow of the oil lamp comes from an actual small fire in the wick.

Jesus returned to this illustration in Matthew 25:1-13 when He used the ten virgins as an example of the end times. Five were foolish and took no oil for their lamps. Their fire went out! Make sure the fire in your spirit is blazing brighter and brighter as dark times approach.

He then painted a graphic picture of the Body of Christ. Our collective lamps should become like a city on a mountain side that cannot be hidden. The Greek word is actually mountain and not hill.

I confess, I like flying at night and looking down at the landscape. Every town and city can be clearly seen by the combined lights marking each home, business, or street. The sight can be so inspiring that I often break into praise, prayer, and intercession for a corresponding revival and awakening in the spiritual realm.

When pastoring a church, I would frequently schedule a night flight over my town and region just to burn the picture of my mission field into my mind. This helped me wrap my mind and spirit around my God-given charge.

As God began enlarging my borders, I started making bigger flights to add urgency to my prayers and unction to my spirit. I can now identify many of the key cities and towns in my state, the Midwest, and beyond from the night sky.

I very literally now spend time praying over my region and much of the world from 5,000 to 40,000 ft above sea level. Those silver tubes with wings are amazing prayer closets and places for divine encounters both with people and with God.

From His heavenly vantage point, I can only imagine the heavenly scene of the spiritual realm Jesus constantly monitors on planet earth. I wonder if the children of light are shining brighter or dimmer in these times? I have ample evidence to argue both sides of the question, but the essential question comes down to your lamp and your walk with God. Is your personal lamp blazing for the glory of God?

A Radiant Life: Matthew 5:16

“16) Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus wants to give you a radiant life. He wants to take away the darkness and replace it with light. He wants to heal the hurt, pain, and emptiness. He wants you to become a trophy of grace. As you seek Him, the Holy Spirit does a transformational work from the inside. Over time, He turns a light on from within that reflects the presence of God in your life.

Notice, Jesus said, “Let your light shine.” As you turn your focus from self to others, an inner glow from God begins to get brighter and brighter. Soon others will be drawn to God through your demeanor.

Part of this glow for the believer is “God within.” The other part can be traced to transformed attitudes and actions. The Beatitudes listed in Matthew 5:3-12 shine brightly in anyone.

But a warning, you cannot fake the fruit of the Spirit. You will quickly come to the end of yourself. Notice again, Jesus said “Let your light shine!” If you are born-again and Spirit-filled, the source of light and spirit life is within you. Stop suppressing it!

This may require dealing with some peck-measures or bushel baskets in your life. (See verse 15) Stop feeding your flesh. Stop feasting on bad attitudes and a critical spirit. Stop making excuses for being a grump. Deal with the things that are grieving the Holy Spirit in your life.

The Christian life is a process of putting off the old self, being renewed in your mindset and putting on the new self which is created in the likeness of Jesus Christ. (See Ephesians 4:22-24)

Be intentional about it! Constantly feed your soul “Power Foods!” Spend daily time in the Word and in prayer. Discover the value of good books. Redeem your time by listening to sermons and positive inspirational audios. Memorize and meditate on portions of Scripture. Invite the Spirit of God to transform you from the inside out!

Let your light shine! If you know Jesus, the light is already there. It's time to pull back the curtains and wash the windows of your soul. God called us to be children of light and to shine in His Kingdom. (Colossians 1:12-13, Ephesians 5:7-8) You *can* have a radiant life!

Truth Encounter: Matthew 5:17-19

“17) Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18) For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19) Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

If you have been following the development of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been talking about what allows the light to shine brightly for the glory of God in the world and what causes the light to be hidden or even go out. Certainly, living out the Beatitudes turns the lights on. (See Matthew 5:3-12)

Jesus then devotes the next two and a half chapters to things that dampen the light among God's people. Altogether, He identifies nearly 20 of them. Let's take our time and stroll through these slowly and invite the Holy Spirit to speak to us.

From the above verses we discover that the light grows dim when God's people ignore, minimize, or distort the Word of God. This is a sure sign that revival is needed among God's people. Nothing hides the light faster than when people trample God's Word underfoot.

This is true for the individual, the church, and society in general. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to inspire, instruct, guide, and correct the people of God. (See 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

When the counsel of God is set aside, then the flesh, carnality, worldly wisdom, and sin reigns without opposition. God's ways are lost! His character and nature are hidden. His will is obscured. When God's Word is neglected, the fire goes out. There no longer remains a restraint against sin.

Genuine revival and awakening are always accompanied by a return to God's Word. The Word of God is the fuel for revival and prayer is the spark that often ignites the fire. God's Word contains the truth that exposes and pulls down sin and leads to freedom.

Prayer and the Word of God go hand-in-hand to fan and feed revival. Dusting off your Bible and spending time in the Word leads to a truth encounter that can radically change your life.

The Self-Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees: Matthew 5:19-20

“19) Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20) “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus now states that unless your righteousness is more genuine than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, your salt is tasteless and your light is dim. They were religious, but it was only skin-deep. They had two primary problems.

First, they made up religious traditions that empowered them to selectively keep God's Word. They kept some points of the Law but openly neglected others. For example, they publicly tithed to look good before others, but they neglected caring for their elderly parents or showing love and compassion toward orphans and widows. Their religion was a façade.

This led into the second problem. They looked good outwardly, but were filled with lust, greed, and evil passions inwardly. They appeared righteous in public, but were wicked in private. They were filled with hypocrisy and lived double lives.

Revival is needed whenever God's people live double lives. When righteousness is done for show but the true condition of the heart is filled with sin and corruption, you are tragically lost.

This exposes the fallacy of mere religion. Unless you have a deep personal faith relationship with Jesus Christ, you are a fake. Self-made religion is void of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It leaves you legalistic but lost.

When the Spirit of God moves in revival and awakening, many religious people are exposed and genuinely converted. It is not uncommon for pastors, elders, deacons, and Sunday school teachers to come under conviction from the Holy Spirit and repent of their lost and sinful ways as they humbly bow before God with deep contrition. Being born-again by the Spirit of God is radically different from self-righteousness.

Devastation of Anger and Bitterness: Matthew 5:21-22

““21) You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ 22) But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”

Anger, bitterness, and broken relationships with other people cause the salt to become tasteless and the lights to go out quickly. Jesus equated these with *murder*. They share common roots.

In fact, they are so serious, He said they are worthy of criminal charges and even eternity in the fiery hell. In this garden and from these seeds come all the hate crimes. This is what motivated Cain to kill Able. (See Genesis 4:6-8) Anger, hate and bitterness are Satan's playground.

Don't brush this off or try to justify yourself. Ephesians 4:30-31 says these grieve the Holy Spirit in the life of believers. Hebrews 12:14-15 warns that bitterness causes trouble and defiles many. It spreads like cancer.

If anger is crouching at your door, you must master it or you will soon be mastered by it. Anger and bitterness will spoil the fruit of Spirit in your life and quench Agape love.

If these sins have overtaken you, then you are in a dangerous place. Your relationship with God is hindered and your influence with people is distorted. You have given ground to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27) You are in need of serious help. You are a prime candidate for repentance and revival. You need a fresh work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Do not move beyond this text without crying out to God!

Essential Principle of Revival: Matthew 5:23-24

"23) If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24) leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."

Jesus now lays out the principle that if your relationship with people is not right, then your relationship with God is hindered. Another slant might be that the way you treat people affects your relationship with God.

He then used an illustration of presenting gifts at the altar and there you remember that you have offended your brother. The appropriate thing to do is step out of line and go first and be reconciled to your brother before presenting your offering.

Later, in 1 Corinthians 11:27-28, Paul seems to apply this same principle to communion. Broken relationships with others can result in partaking of the Lord's Supper in an "unworthy manner." We are never worthy of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, but we can have a double standard.

Jesus illustrated this by a lack of forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35. He told the story of the slave who was forgiven much by his master but then refused to forgive his fellow slave a very small debt even though he was earnestly entreated. The end result was tragic and merciless for the wicked slave.

We are guilty of the same hypocrisy when we fail to forgive others. It goes beyond tasteless salt and hidden light. It places us in a place of trampling God's goodness and grace toward us underfoot. It is a violation of agape love. It hinders our relationship with God.

1 John 4: 20-21 says it very candidly; "20) If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21) And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also."

There is no wiggle room with this principle. Your relationship with God should directly impact your relationship with people. The opposite is also true. Your relationship with people affects your relationship with God.

One the primary principles of revival is taken from Matthew 5:23-24. Erwin Lutzer, after studying the revival that swept across western Canada in the late 1970's, concluded that "Revival requires the healing of all seared relationships." I have not found an exception to this principle in my study of biblical revivals.

Dealing with the anger and bitterness that results in broken relationships always takes center stage in deep, sweeping revivals. Genuine revival always restores broken relationships. This wave often pushes the momentum of revival to greater levels. Forgiving others pulls down huge strongholds and sets people free.

It is hard to describe the freedom, celebration, and worship that happens when a person comes back to the altar with a clean heart and a clear conscience. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus was giving far more than good advice. He was prescribing the pathway into the presence and glory of God!

The Danger of Debt: Matthew 5:25-26

"25) Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26) Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."

These are difficult verses. Jesus seems to be saying that if you have wronged someone or owe a debt, it's a good idea to humble yourself and make things right long before it goes to court.

"Make friends quickly" simply means "work out a realistic payment plan and be diligent to pay your obligations." Once a matter went before a judge, the guilty party got whatever sentence the judge decided. Once the verdict was announced, it was too late for negotiations. At that point, the court collected the debt in a most unusual way.

In the days of Jesus, delinquent debtors could be put in a labor prison. These prisoners worked every day but earned very minimal wages. Those wages were then garnished to pay the bill of being in prison and what was left went to pay off the judgment.

Here is the sad truth: A debt that might take six months to pay with diligence on the outside with regular labor wages, might take five years or longer to pay off at the wage of a prisoner. Prisoners liable for a debt were not released until the last cent was paid.

Jesus was making a strong point about spending habits and business dealings with others. Poor financial dealings ruin a reputation. Your salt is worthless and your light is hidden if you cannot manage your financial affairs with honesty and integrity.

Breaking Sexual Bondage: Matthew 5:27-28

“(27) You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; 28) but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Jesus now introduces the subject of sexual immorality. He referred to the sin of adultery, but He raised the standard. The Ten Commandments said, “You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14) But instead of the act of adultery, Jesus included sexual lust and fantasy.

Many New Testament Scriptures like Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, and Ephesians 4:17-19 lumps all sexual sins together under the category of “immorality.” Things like fornication, homosexuality, and pornography all fit into this category.

Those entangled in sexual sins and fantasy have tasteless salt and hearts full of darkness. These sins lead to bondage. They destroy lives, ruin relationships, and enslave people. Satan smears these people with shame, guilt, and condemnation. Sexual sin can become your master and control your life.

The point of the Sermon on the Mount was not to get people saved, it was to show them that they were sinful and lost. It was to prove that by the Law no one was righteous. Jesus was making the case that human redemption was needed and could only be accomplished by His coming work on the cross. Sin deserves judgment.

By the time He finished the Sermon on the Mount, all people were left with the realization of personal sin and guilt. There are none righteous, not even one. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The Sermon on the Mount clearly defines sin and leaves all people as candidates for salvation.

Sin has the illusion of pleasure, but it is devastating. It is costly. It is deadly. It enslaves people. Sin is universal because it affects all people. Sin leaves every person guilty before God.

By contrast, the grace found in Christ Jesus is amazing. It cost Jesus His life but is offered freely to all people. It is the only pathway to forgiveness. It imparts life. It sets captives free. It brings people into a right relationship with God. Best of all, grace is not earned, it is received by faith in Jesus Christ.

If you are a slave to sexual sin, Jesus Christ is the only basis of forgiveness and the only pathway to freedom and a new life. Your journey to freedom starts the moment you are born-again and place faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will begin an inner work of cleansing, purifying and sanctifying you. As you yield to Him, old things will pass away and He will turn you into a new person.

Depending on the depth of your sexual bondage, you may need intervention from mature and godly people. They can help you pull down demonic strongholds, break the bondage, reclaim surrendered ground, renew your mind, and discover the filling and power of the Holy Spirit.

If you are a victim of sexual abuse, Jesus offers healing and restoration. He can put your fractures back together and restore you to wholeness. The power of the gospel works equally on both sides of sexual sins. The goal for all people is healing, wholeness, and holiness.

Jesus was stressing an important point in His broader teaching. Religious legalism does not heal, it hurts. It leaves people with guilt, condemnation and hopelessness. John 3:16-21 makes it clear that Jesus did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He is for you and not against you! He wants to meet you at your point of sin or brokenness.

The Terrible Reality of Hell: Matthew 5:29-30

“29) If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30) And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Jesus now gives a sober warning of the reality of hell. During His public ministry He warned more about avoiding eternal judgment in hell than filling in the mysteries of heaven. (See also Luke 16:19-31)

It is not the will of God for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9) But the raw truth is that most people face eternal judgment in hell. (See Matthew 7:13-23 and Revelation 20:7-15) Jesus came to be a mediator between God and man and to open the doors of salvation. (See 1 Timothy 2:3-7)

So how tragic and terrible is the reality of hell? In our text today, Jesus warned that it is to be avoided at all costs. He said that if hell could be avoided by plucking out your eye or cutting your hand it would be worth the sacrifice. It would be better to go through life blind or lame than face eternity in hell.

There is only one problem, self-sacrifice cannot save us from our sin. We cannot erase our own sin nor can we become good enough to earn our own salvation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was making the case that all people are sinful and lost and worthy of eternal judgment in hell.

There is only one mediator between God and man, and that is Jesus Christ. His death on the cross paid the debt of human sin and opened the doors of salvation.

John 3:16-21 gives a clear presentation of the gospel. ““16) For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17) For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

Because salvation is based on faith in Jesus Christ, there is no excuse for anyone to spend eternity in hell. Jesus paid the price for sin so salvation is a free gift to those who trust in Him. We cannot buy our salvation. Many people could not afford its value. because Jesus was holy and sinless, salvation is based on His goodness and not ours. We do not earn our salvation. Jesus died in our place so that we can live through faith in Him.

Your eternal destiny comes down to how you respond to Jesus Christ. God does not ask you to pluck out an eye or cut off your hand. He simply invites you to humble yourself, confess your sin and guilt, repent, and place faith in Jesus Christ as your hope of salvation. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and mankind. He is the only way to God. (See Acts 4:12)

A Culture of Divorce: Matthew 5:31-32

““31) It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; 32) but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

In these two verses, Jesus tackles the subject of divorce and remarriage. He returned to this subject again in Matthew 19:3-12.

In that context, the Pharisees questioned Him about their practice of divorcing their wife for nearly any cause. Jesus rebuked them and shared that the root problem in their marriages came down to their own hard hearts. He stated that God’s original design for marriage was permanence because God joined them together. He was very candid that divorce and remarriage results in committing adultery.

Both in Matthew 19:9 and here in Matthew 5:32, Jesus gives what has become known as “the exception clause.” He seemed to be saying that divorce was permissible when immorality or adultery took place within the marriage. Let’s take a deeper look at what Jesus may have been saying.

The Greek word used for immorality in both cases was “porneia.” It is the same Greek word Paul used in 1 Corinthians 7:2 for sexual immorality. But we have a major difference in potential recourse between Jesus and Paul. Many scholars say Jesus was using sexual promiscuity within marriage as a just reason for divorce.

But Paul said the exact opposite. He said that those struggling with sexual sins should get married and fulfill sexual needs within marriage. (See the full context of 1 Corinthians 7:1-5) Was Jesus encouraging divorce where Paul was promoting marriage? Was Paul being more restrictive than Jesus or are we missing a few pieces in the puzzle?

Some scholars see a radically different meaning to what Jesus was saying with “the exception clause.” They believe Jesus was saying that divorce is only permissible if the marriage itself is an immoral or porneia marriage. They see Jesus as teaching that there are some marriages that God does not ordain, honor, or join together. Therefore, they should be ended because the marriage itself is porneia or immoral.

Examples from Leviticus 18 would include relationships of incest, adultery, homosexuality, and with animals. Moses concluded that these acts of immorality result in a curse on the land and were strictly off limits for God's people.

This view of the exception clause results in the teaching of Jesus harmonizing exactly with the teaching of Paul on marriage and human sexuality as recorded in 1 Corinthians chapters 5-7. Notice, in 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 Paul was demanding the end of an incest marriage between a man and his father's wife. In Matthew 14 John the Baptist lost his life because he rebuked Herod for having the wife of his brother Philip. He was saying; “It is not lawful for you to have her.”

Herein is a stunning insight: These are the only two recorded examples of singled-out relationships that were to be ended in the New Testament and both of them were viewed as porneia relationships. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 also states that other porneia relationships were ended or set aside by the early Christians including, fornication, adultery, and homosexual relationships.

This harmonizes with the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council for accepted morality within the Gentile church. (See Acts 15:19-20) This moral code of conduct lined up exactly with Leviticus 17-19. When the gospel went into Greek culture it changed the moral value system of those who became Christians. They turned away from their porneia relationships.

The modern phenomenon of rampant divorce and remarriage between Christians was totally absent in the New Testament church. I believe at the root of this practice is a misunderstanding of the teaching of Jesus regarding “the exception clause.”

Ironically, our modern interpretation puts Christianity right back in the seat and value system of the Pharisees who questioned Jesus; “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at

all.” (Matthew 19:3) The opposite side of the coin is also practiced today. A Christian wife can also now divorce her husband for nearly any cause at all.

Malachi 2:14-16 clearly states God's aversion to divorce. Why? Because it wounds people, fractures children, destroys families, and weakens nations. Divorce is Satan's playground.

When I embraced the truth that divorce was not an option for our marriage, I closed the escape hatch in my thinking and committed to seek God and His grace to build our marriage. I admit, I was looking for a way out!

This was one of the monumental hurdles I had to overcome to save our marriage and force much needed commitment, accountability, focus, growth, and change within me. I discovered that a happy marriage is not as much about finding the right person as it is about becoming the right person. If you want your marriage to change, you must be willing to change!

I now fight for strong marriages. We cannot undo the past, but I can encourage people to fight for the marriage they now have. Marriage struggles are often the leverage God uses to help people see their own weakness and cry out for grace, mercy, wisdom, growth, and change.

So are divorced and remarried people living in adultery? Keep in mind the Greek word is porneia. I believe the text is teaching that the practice of unchecked divorce and remarriage feeds a culture of sexual immorality, promiscuity, exploitation, fantasy, lusts, and even pornography. It is paramount that every Christian commit to chastity within lasting marriages because this value restrains the social tide of human depravity.

This is why you need to commit to and fight for your present marriage. Your moral values do have an influence on society. If you are separated or divorced, work toward the reconciliation of your present marriage while practicing total abstinence from all forms of porneia. Save all intimacy for within the bonds of marriage. God wants to pour out His grace and power within your present marriage. Make Him your focus. Avoid being sucked into the culture of porneia!

Vows and Oaths: Matthew 5:33-37

“33) Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ 34) But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35) or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36) Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37) But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.”

Jesus now devotes five verses to making vows and oaths. He warns against the practice for two reasons. First, as mere mortals, we do not have the power to keep some oaths. They may sound good, but many boil down to wishful thinking.

Second, God holds us accountable to keep our word. We can bring a curse upon ourselves by not keeping a vow or oath.

Breaking a promise is also serious. It taints our character. In my years of working with youth, I have seen many of them deeply wounded by broken promises from a parent. Unfulfilled promises can cut to the core.

How serious are vows or oaths? In the immediate context, Jesus devoted two verses to the subject of divorce, but He devoted five verses to breaking vows and oaths. Empty vows and oaths undermine society.

I was very careful as a State Representative not to make reckless campaign promises. I committed to do my best and consistently stand for conservative causes, but passing some legislation was beyond me or had attached amendments that I could not support.

It is much wiser to simply say “yes” or “no” with no attached consequence rather than make a binding vow. Oaths and vows are like legally binding contracts, they cannot be broken without consequence. Jesus was warning about placing ourselves in that position.

I believe in goal-setting, but I do not believe in making binding vows, especially in my relationship with God. I make the goal of reading several chapters in my Bible every day, but I do not make it a vow. I also make a goal of writing and posting the Daily Bible Commentary every day, but I do not make it a vow. I recognize there will be circumstances beyond my control that will prevent me from reaching my goals at times. When I miss my goal, I can move on with a clear conscience and pick up where I left off the next day. This is very freeing and liberating.

I believe in living by grace and not binding vows. My motto is: “I’ll do my best and trust God to do the rest.” He is the only one I know with the ability to both remember and keep His every promise.

A New Standard of Agape Love: Matthew 5:38-42

“‘38) You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39) But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40) And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. 41) Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 42) Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.”

Jesus now moves the standard from the letter of the Law to relationships based on agape love. The Law makes provision for anger, wrath, revenge, and self-centeredness. It puts self and things above the value of other people.

Jesus moved the standard from “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” to loving your enemies and caring for your adversaries. Agape love sees all people as part of the mission field and worthy of dignity, respect, and the gospel.

Roman soldiers could force any civilian to carry their gear for one mile. Going the first mile fulfilled the obligation. Going the second mile fostered a friendship. Jesus wants Christians to go the extra mile with forgiveness and serving others. This is what sets us apart from the world.

I remember listening to a message by Billy Graham when I was a new Christian. He compared different world philosophies. He said; “Communism says, “What’s yours is mine and I will take it! Capitalism says, “What’s mine is mine and I will keep it!” But Christianity says, “What’s mine is yours and I will share it!”

At the time I was in high school and on a Bible quizzing team. We were studying the book of Matthew. The Holy Spirit used that small comparison like a lightning bolt to help me capture the significance of the above five verses.

Agape love and forgiveness are the fuel that powers the gospel. These are what distinguishes Christianity from every other world religion and world view. These are what makes the salt tasty and turns the lights on among true believers. (Refer back to Matthew 5:13-16)

Spontaneous Flow of Gods Love: Matthew 5:43-48

““43) You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44) But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45) so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46) For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47) If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48) Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The primary place where your salt is tasty and your light shines is in your relationship with people. Jesus made it clear that those who know Him will be distinguished by their love. (John 13:34-35; 15:12-13).

This love is to be directed toward all people. It is for friend and foe, it is for the good and the bad, it is for the righteous and the unrighteous. That’s a huge call! Some people are hard to love.

This unconditional love is characterized by our Heavenly Father. He causes His sun to shine on the evil and the good. He sends His rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. In this respect all people share in His general grace and goodness.

So His people should reflect this quality. We should treat all people with love, dignity and respect. The love should overflow as much to strangers as to friends.

I have found this principle to be powerful and profound. I try to greet all people who cross my path with eye contact and a smile. I also like to share uplifting words of encouragement. People carry so much doom and gloom today. A cheerful smile overflowing from a heart of sincere joy is like a ray of sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

This also means we should listen to the Holy Spirit and be prepared to do good to strangers. I believe Divine Providence governs the people who come across my path. I also believe a stranger can be a best friend I have not yet met. There should be a natural and spontaneous flow of God's love from us to the people around us.

Think of the short prayer of Jabez mentioned in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. How does God expand our borders? Is it not through relationships with more people? How we treat people, especially strangers is where our salt becomes tasty and our light shines. Don't hide your love for Jesus, let it shine!

The Religious Show! Matthew 6:1

“1) Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus now exposes a significant weakness in Judaism and the temple worship system. It was by design very public. From presenting sacrifices at the altar, to the giving of alms and even citing long prayers, most of it was done in public. People were always watching.

Soon it digressed into a spectator sport. The motivation invariably became impressing people rather than connecting with God. Whether consciously or subconsciously, “the show” was always on display on the temple mound.

A great example of this is found in 1 Samuel 15 when Samuel the prophet confronted Saul about his sin and rebellion. In verses 24-30, half-hearted confession from Saul was absent of any repentance or contrition. He was more concerned that Samuel would join his parade as he put on the show to impress the people. “The King Saul Worship Show” was so important, he physically threatened Samuel to force his attendance at his side.

It is easy to fall into this trap! Whatever the culture of spirituality becomes in our religious or church circle, we quickly give into the pressure. It is easy to dress and conduct ourselves for “the show” rather than seeking to meet with God.

I have been privileged to travel extensively and minister in many churches. It amazes me how every church develops its own culture of spirituality. The longing to “fit in” can quickly displace our call to meet with God.

The opposite can also be true. My culture of spirituality might not fit some forms of worship. For example, raising of hands and dancing in the Spirit would quickly turn you into a spectacle in liturgical worship services. This kind of display would violate the spirit of what Jesus was teaching in this context. We should avoid bringing attention to ourselves.

So how can you enter into intimacy with God during public ceremonies without joining “the show”? Let me share a few insights I have learned over the years.

First, learn to value different forms of worship without passing judgment on them. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 teaches there are varieties of gifts, ministries, and effects. Maybe I have been ruined, but I can now enter into the spirit of worship through many different forms and with a broad spectrum of worship music.

Second, learn to meet privately with Jesus during public services. Be an active participant in worship and not a spectator. Focus your attention on Jesus without drawing undue attention to yourself. Anna the prophetess, mentioned in Luke 2:36-38, had this nailed in her personal life. She went about her calling without becoming a spectator or a spectacle. She was very real in her walk with God.

Third, set aside daily time to seek God privately. As a young believer, the public events were often my mountain-top experiences. This is true of many Christians. In fact, for many people the only times they meet with God is in church or at large events. The longer they are away from the public event the more they drift or dry up.

Then one day I had an illumination. I discovered in the Bible that the true transformational mountain top experiences came from people meeting in solitude with God.

This was true of Moses on the mountain and in the tent of meetings. It was true of Daniel in his house chamber. Jesus often withdrew alone to the mountain to pray and worship His Father. Paul was caught up to the third heaven while in solitude with God. He wrote many of his epistles while in prison. John was given the book of Revelation while a captive on the Island of Patmos. (Revelation 1:9)

The significant value of meeting in solitude with God is the utter absence of “the show!” It has zero to do with impressing others and everything to do with meeting with God.

But be careful, this was not true of Jonah going down to Joppa and taking a cruise. His time alone was because he was running from God and not seeking God. Many people spend time outdoors connecting with the god of nature because they are running from the God of Creation. Don’t forsake the call to public assembly with God’s people. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Finally, ask God to set you free from the “Show Trap.” Be yourself. Grow beyond your inhibitions. Allow yourself to be stretched by attending events with a different Christian worship

culture. Go on a cross-cultural missions trip. Form friendships with believers from different church backgrounds. Ask God to help you love the full bride of Christ made up of born-again believers from various backgrounds.

Here is a radical thought: As you travel or go on vacation, drop in on churches from different ethnic and social backgrounds. Over time, drop in on a white-collar, blue-collar, redneck, cowboy, county, inner-city, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Messianic Jewish, and even an incarcerated church in a prison. Ask Jesus to help you love and value His people from different worship cultures.

Keep in mind I am talking about different born-again Christian churches and not different world religions or liberal churches. When Jesus Christ is not center stage and the Word of God is disregarded, it is no longer worship. Churches can become apostate and teaching can become false and misleading. Avoid these churches, but welcome and value brothers and sisters “in Christ” from a different worship style or culture.

The Heavy Lift of Charitable Giving: Matthew 6:1-4

““1) Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. 2) “So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. 3) Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4) so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

The giving of alms usually related to the poor and needy. Every society has them. Acts 3:1-10 presents the story of the lame beggar who sat at the beautiful gate of the temple begging alms of those entering. He had the ideal spot and most likely had accumulated significant wealth. He may have even given a cut to the temple authorities to lock in his prime location. Everyone knew him. Entitlement living can become a career.

The big surprise came when Peter and John entered the temple. They fixed their gaze on him and said, “6)... I do not possess silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ— walk.” 7) And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. 8) And with a leap, he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.” The text goes on to say that all the people took note of him. The end result was a huge open door for the gospel.

This story paints a picture of alms-giving in Bible times. Caring for the disadvantaged, sick, poor, elderly, widows, and orphans is a good thing to do. The whole of Scripture commends this practice.

But Jesus took it to a higher level. He looked at the motive. Many people give alms for personal attention. Others do it to appease their own conscience. Still others give alms to “buy off” God lest they end up disadvantaged.

But Peter and John saw worth and value in the lame beggar. They knew that merely throwing money at the problem would not solve the real issue. The man needed healing. He needed something only Jesus could give. He needed a new life.

I totally recognize the need for charitable giving. GoServ Global is funded by charitable giving. But we also recognize that delivering hope is a much deeper commitment. A new life goes beyond food, clothing, and shelter. It includes sustainable living, a good education, job skills, the opportunity to hear and receive the gospel, and deep inner healing that only a right relationship with Jesus Christ can provide. It involves being enfolded in a loving and affirming community called “the body of Christ.” For many, this becomes the only family they have. We need to work hard to get it right for them!

Giving alms goes way beyond giving money. It includes delivering hope, giving your heart and a long term commitment to be a world changer. It involves “seizing people by their right hand and raising them up.”

This is what distinguishes GoServ Global from many humanitarian non-profits. We don’t show up for the photo opt and leave. We are there for the long haul and the heavy lift that offers people a pathway to a new life. Our reward is seeing lives transformed and the begging post at the temple gate permanently abandoned.

Deepening Your Prayer Life: Matthew 6:5-8

““5) When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6) But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. “7) And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 7) So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”

Prayer is intended to be intimate communion with God. It is communication between two friends. Even though God knows everything about us from our thoughts to our desires, He delights in dialogue with us.

Let me stress the word dialogue. Prayer includes listening to the whispers of the Spirit of God. For those who know Jesus and are filled with His Spirit, prayer is open-ended throughout the day and night. It is constant and ongoing. It becomes very informal but deeply precious.

By contrast, mere religion turns prayer into a theatrical act to be seen and heard by others. It practices flowery rhetoric and is intended to impress others rather than communicate with God. In this way it becomes hypocritical. It is pretentious to say it is directed to God because it is intended for the human audience.

This changes the moment you go into your inner room alone with God. Suddenly He becomes the only audience. Learning to commune with God takes on new dynamics at this level. The nonChristian may still use vain repetitions, but the Christian soon learns to communicate with God openly and spontaneously.

Prayer has many components. It includes praise and adoration. It involves ascribing worth to God. Prayer includes confession of sin and personal failure. Prayer includes making requests and petitions both for others and for yourself. As your prayer life evolves, it deepens into discerning and appealing for the will of God to be done on your life and the world around you.

During these times, prayer is often a wrestling with God. As your communion with God deepens so does this wrestling. From these times comes vision, clarity, motivation, inner resolve, courage and boldness. Prayer is not so much twisting the arm of God to get what I want as it is aligning with His heart and desires.

As you become more absorbed in God, prayer takes on a new dynamic of basking in His presence. At this point other people and the hectic pressures of life become a distraction. During these times of communion, prayer lists are set aside and being absorbed in the glory and presence of God becomes an end in itself. Jesus often slipped away to spend this kind of time with His Father.

It is valuable to pray with your Bible open. The Spirit of God can speak to you through Scripture. Therein you can discover and align yourself with the ways and will of God. You can also discover and claim the promises of God contained in His Word as the Spirit illuminates truth to your spirit.

I also believe in becoming a conduit of prayer through the unction of the Holy Spirit. These are times when God reveals His heart to you so you can align your intercession with His will, desires and passions for the world around you.

The above context in Matthew 6:5-8 in no way discourages group or public praying. Intercessory prayer groups can be anointed and powerful. The thing that separates prayer warriors coming together for concerted prayer from the hypocrisy condemned in the text is the intended audience. Intercessory prayer groups come together to worship, praise and wrestle with God. Merely religious people meet to impress and entertain one another with little or no thought of connecting with God.

My quest in recent years has been focused on deepening my communion with God. I consider myself a novice when it comes to prayer and communion with God, but this has become my

new vehicle that drives my pursuit of God. Acts 6:4 is quickly becoming my new yearning and calling.

No matter where you are in your walk with God, He invites you to deepen your communion and intimacy with Him. Prayer is not about prayer, it is about God. It is about deepening your personal relationship with Him. I encourage you to daily remove your distractions and get alone with God.

Pray Then In This Way: Matthew 6:9-13

“9) Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 10) Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. 11) Give us this day our daily bread. 12) And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13) And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]”

We now encounter an interesting paradox. Jesus just warned His disciples not to reduce prayer to meaningless repetitions, then two verses later He teaches them a repetitious prayer.

Is this a contradiction or was Jesus doing something much deeper?

I believe He was not so much teaching them a prayer as He was giving them an outline to guide their praying. A close look at the Lord's Prayer becomes a beautiful prescription for praying. I sometimes use it as a model to guide both personal and corporate prayer.

It can be divided into the following categories:

- Praise and Adoration of the Father
- Alignment with God's Will
- Trusting God as Provider
- Confession and Repentance
- Need for Discretion and Protection
- Declaration of Submission and Dependency

Jesus was teaching His disciples that effective praying includes a broad range of subjects. Sincerely praying through these six categories aligns the petitioner with God.

As the praying continues, the presence of the Holy Spirit often accompanies and anoints the prayer time. These six basic categories can branch out in many directions as the Spirit leads and gives unction.

For example, praising and worshiping the Father can be accompanied with praise music and worship songs. Praying for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven is an open door into petition for manifold urgent and current events. Asking for provision of daily bread can include a

wide range of needs. Confession and repentance can lead to a precious time of inviting the Holy Spirit to search and reveal personal sin. It can open the door to contrition, reconciliation, and revival. Asking for God's protection from temptation can spill into a time of praying for spouse, family, friends, church, and community to live and walk in the full will of God.

Closing a prayer time with an acknowledgment of God's kingdom, power, and glory is inviting Him to show up in your life with signs and wonders. It is equivalent to the way the disciples closed their prayer in Acts 4:29-31. Don't be surprised if the ground is shaken as you are filled afresh with the Holy Spirit and given boldness!

As you can see, these five verses and six categories are very broad. They can guide prayer for minutes, hours or even several days during a personal time set aside for fasting and seeking God. Learn to focus and press in on God in each category.

I believe Jesus was both teaching His disciples a prayer as well as how to pray. "Pray then in this way..."

Forgiveness and Effective Praying: Matthew 6:14-15

"14) For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15) But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

Jesus now touches on the most important condition for effective prayer. The condition of the heart is important. Anger, bitterness, strife, hatred, and a temperament of vengeance grieves the Holy Spirit. Paul elaborated on this in Ephesians 4:30-32. God is not moved by bitterness, He is moved by love and a forgiving heart.

Part of praying is aligning with the grace, mercy, compassion, and love of God. The back of the prayer room has a cardiac surgery table where the Spirit of God works on the heart of the petitioner. I will elaborate in a moment.

I cannot overstate the danger of anger and bitterness. It interrupts fellowship with God and opens a door for Satan's schemes. (See 2 Corinthians 2:10-11) These have defiled and ruined many Christians and destroyed countless relationships and churches. (See Hebrews 12:14-15)

In our text for today, Jesus laid down the principle that forgiveness is the primary condition for effective praying. Forgiveness is one of the doorkeepers that guards access to the presence of God and a crucial condition for answered prayer.

Thankfully, there are prayers I have uttered over the years that were met with deaf ears from God. They were prayers motivated by anger, bitterness, vengeance, greed, or lust. Instead of answering my prayers, the Spirit of God performed emergency heart surgery on me. Through anger and bitterness my heart had become hard and calloused.

Healing usually starts with forgiveness. I have witnessed many otherwise sickly people become healthy through a baptism of forgiveness. Love, mercy, and grace flood the void left when anger, bitterness, and vengeance are expelled from the human heart. Forgiveness is crucial in this process.

Let me invite you on an abbreviated tour of a prayer room in the spiritual realm. To the back is a surgery table where the Great Physician works on the heart of the petitioner. This location is devoted to confession and repentance. (1 John 1:8-10) To one side is a fellowship lounge where the petitioner can enjoy prolonged communion with Jesus in the Spirit. This is where we are invited to bask in the presence of God. (1 John 1:3-7) The opposite side is arranged like a command center in a war room from which the Spirit of God issues urgent petitions and requests. This is where we align our prayers with the mind of Christ. (Romans 8:26-28) The front of the prayer room is occupied by the Throne of Grace. Here the saints are invited to come boldly and make petition. (Hebrews 4:14-16, Philippians 4:4-7)

Forgive my feeble description of a prayer room, but this captures the notion that effective praying has more than one component. As your prayer life deepens, you will frequent each location in the prayer room. Sometimes I briefly visit each location when I pray. Other times the Spirit of God prompts me to abide in just one location. I spend much of my time in the fellowship lounge basking in the presence of God.

Now let me emphasize what Jesus was saying in Matthew 6:14-15. If your heart is full of anger and bitterness, you need to run quickly to the surgery table. Access to the other three areas of the prayer room will be denied until you get your heart in order. You need to start with a baptism of forgiveness.

The Manifold Benefits of Fasting: Matthew 6:16-18

““16) And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17) But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face 18) so that you will not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”

Jesus now moves the discussion to the practice of fasting. He did not say “if” you fast, but rather “when” you fast. It seems that fasting was expected. Jesus Himself began His ministry with an extended fast.

Isaiah 58:5-12 is the foundational text on fasting in the Bible. Both the physical and spiritual benefits of fasting are manifold in this text. Take time to study this amazing text. Make a list of the benefits of fasting recorded in this text. I guarantee it will get your attention.

Modern medicine has discovered the many health benefits of fasting. Studies have shown that around 72 hours into a prolonged fast, the body starts producing new stem cells dedicated to

physical healing. The health benefits of fasting have been well documented and can be profound.

But Jesus was more focused on the spiritual benefits of fasting. According to Isaiah, fasting not only helps pull down sinful strongholds, but it also greatly enhances communion with God and the effectiveness of prayer and intercession. It is a way to invite God's presence, guidance and favor into your life.

But Jesus stated in Matthew 6:16-18 that people could forfeit the spiritual benefits of fasting because of wrong motives. Those who fast to impress people do not impress God. To the contrary, they have their reward in full.

Living for the praise of people in any spiritual discipline cancels any benefit from God. Some who were fasting turned it into a public drama. They neglected their appearance, moaned openly and announced in public that they were fasting. Instead of humbling themselves before God, they were lobbying to be noticed by people. They were stroking their own pride.

Proper fasting in secret with humility gains the attention of God. It punctuates that our prayers are important and urgent. We are saying that meeting with God is more important than food, and in some cases more important than sleep. (Matthew 26:36-46)

I encourage every child of God to embark on a serious study of prayer and fasting in the Bible. Then build these spiritual dynamics into your life. Make the pursuit of God your top priority.

Investments that Set Your Heart on fire for God! Matthew 6:19-21

“19) Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20) But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21) for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Your heart follows your investments, treasures, and possessions. If you want your heart blazing for God, then invest in kingdom work. If you want a dull heart toward God, direct your money and investments after worldly things. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Earthly treasures and possessions are so fleeting. Moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. They do not give long term satisfaction. They are the source of worry, stress, and strife.

The story is told of a wealthy man in California who made arrangements to be buried in a brand new Cadillac when he died. At his funeral as a crane was lowering the Cadillac into a custom-made vault, a bystander was heard saying, “Now that’s living!”

You have doubtlessly heard, “You cannot take it with you!” That is not true. You certainly can. But it’s not by the futility mentioned in the previous paragraph. The secret is converting earthly treasures into a heavenly monetary system. Invest in kingdom causes that far out-live your life.

Invest in building churches, Christian schools, orphanages, pastor training centers, or medical centers that God can use for years to come. Help support missionaries, sponsor orphans, or a pastor and family from a less affluent country. Give toward the spread of the gospel through programs that feed the poor, house the homeless, or help those recovering from disasters. Jesus talked about these things in Matthew 25:31-46.

These things open the door for the gospel. God uses them to punctuate His love for people. The Holy Spirit works in profound ways when the gospel is shared on the front lines of meeting pressing needs.

When we started GoServ Global devoted to the above efforts, some criticized us that we were being distracted from verbally sharing the gospel. We now look back at hundreds of conversions to Christ and many raised up to carry the gospel to even more unreached people. This was the example Jesus set.

GoServ Global is a vehicle through which people can store up treasure in heaven. Stop by our web page and look at the many ways you can participate in the spread of the gospel.

If you want your heart to blaze with a new passion for God, start storing up treasures in heaven! Outlive your life! Direct some of your treasures and resources toward people and projects that will help spread the gospel years after you are dead and gone.

(Of course I agree with Terry, but I’d like to add another thought: When Jesus said to store up treasures in heaven, of course we can’t take our money, our houses, or our brand-new Cadillacs to heaven with us. But, I believe we will know and recognize others when we get to heaven. I believe the relationships we create on this earth are the true wealth that will be transferred with us to heaven. So, when you do as Terry recommends and get involved with using the blessings God has given you here on this earth to bless others, you can’t help but start expanding and multiplying wonderful, glorious, godly relationships. I have lost count of the number of people, pastors, missionaries, and ministries that have been added to those I pray for since I started saying “Yes!” to God. I now have wealth beyond what I ever imagined before Jesus changed my life forever! HALLELUJAH!) –dj

Train Your Eyes: Matthew 6:22-23

“22) The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. 23) But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”

Train your eyes. They are the lamp of your body. Liberating was the day I learned that I could control my eyes. Let me share my story.

When I was a young man and given to lust, I attended a conference led by a seasoned and godly man. He said, "Train your eyes. From now on when you see a woman look only at her face, do not scan her figure. Training your eyes is the best way of controlling your heart."

I confess, it was a radical and new concept for me. At first I mocked his counsel. Then I was determined to test his advice. Sure enough, I soon discovered that with conscious effort, I could control my eyes. I also discovered that this applies to many things in life.

Two people can look at the same scene and see very different things. One can see good and the other evil. One can see potential while the other sees only futility. One sees the positive and another the negative. One can read the countenance of the opposite gender while another can burn with lusts. One can see needs to serve where another sees potential for exploitation. One can be moved to give while another can be influenced by greed.

Train your eyes for good and not evil. See through the spirit and not the flesh. Look through the lens of the kingdom of light and not the kingdom of darkness. If the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.

Serving Two Masters: Matthew 6:24

“(24) No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.” (ESV)

Jesus now addresses the dangers of money. It can displace God. It can become the true god that you worship and serve. Jesus warned that you cannot serve two masters. One will obscure the other. Chasing after money will take control of your time, energy, emotions, and attention. It can twist your morals, dampen your heavenly perspective, and deaden your soul.

Paul warned young Timothy of the same danger. He drove home the point that “godliness with contentment is great gain.” He then observed that we came into this world with nothing and we will depart with nothing. Food and covering accompanied with the abiding glory and presence of God is more than enough for contentment. (1 Timothy 6:6-8) Not one person will tow a U-Haul behind them when they depart this life.

Paul then added this warning; “9) But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10) For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” 1 Timothy 6:9-10 (ESV)

I believe Paul was speaking from personal experience. Prior to meeting Jesus, he had chased after wealth, fame, and power. It left him empty and deceived. It was like a cancer in his soul.

Philippians 3:7-11 tells the story of the surpassing value he found in a personal relationship with Christ Jesus. He found true wealth and considered all else as sewage by comparison. He was willing to work side jobs and live modestly when needed. He also knew how to live in prosperity at times. But his meaning and value came from his deep personal relationship with Jesus. (See Philippians 4:11-13).

Wealth, fame, and power never became his God. Jesus ruled as Sovereign Lord in His heart. Paradoxically, his legacy even to this day is overflowing with all three. Apart from Jesus Christ Himself, the Apostle Paul might be the most influential figure in Christianity. He did not seek it! His single focus was seeking and serving Jesus Christ. He had only one Master.

You need to settle this issue in your life. To the degree that you are consumed by wealth, fame, and power you are impoverished in your relationship with God. Like the Christians in Laodicea, you might say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.” (Revelation 3:17) Your current dual loyalty may condemn you to be lukewarm in your walk with God. Are you spiritually bi-polar? Are you trying to serve two masters?

The Cause of Worry, Stress and Anxiety: Matthew 6:25-34

“(25) For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26) Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? 27) And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? 28) And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, 29) yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 30) But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! 31) Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ 32) For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33) But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” 34) So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

Jesus now addresses the root cause of worry, stress, and anxiety. Different translations use the words worry and anxiety interchangeably. There are five basic fears that drive people. They are food, clothing, shelter, personal health, and sexuality.

In the context, He makes it clear that we have a choice. We can either do our best and trust God as provider, or we can ignore God and live for self and things. Jesus is not implying that people

should be lazy and not work, He is merely saying that people should not be consumed with the accumulation of things. Many who ignore God spend all their time, energy and resources hoarding these things and in the process they end up losing everything.

Jesus then cites the example of birds, flowers, and plants. Does not God provide for them? They have no concept of worry, stress, or anxiety. They merely focus on being birds, flowers, and plants while God takes care of the rest. He gloriously cares for them and adorns them.

Why? What purpose do beautiful birds and flowers fulfill? Why isn't the world merely black and white? Why all the brilliant colors? Why the breathtaking beauty of flowers and many birds? Even Solomon couldn't adorn himself to compare with the magnificence of flowers and exotic birds. It seems that God delights in order, design, and beauty. He is glorified by what He has made!

But this begs the question, if God created flowers and exotic birds to glorify Himself, what was His purpose in creating mankind? The biblical answer is for fellowship and relationship with Himself. He wants this to be our primary focus.

1 Corinthians 6:13 is profound. In summary it says that even though we are sexual beings, God did not create us for immorality, He created us for Himself. He created us in His image to enjoy a relationship with Himself. According to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, we were created to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. But what happens to most people?

The Law of the Sower: Matthew 7:1-2; Galatians 6:7-8

“1) Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2) For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.”

Just as the laws of physics govern the physical universe, so there are spiritual laws that govern the spiritual realm. I personally believe spiritual laws are higher than physical laws. When God intervenes we call it a miracle. It is actually an expression of the preeminence of the spiritual realm over the physical realm.

One of these spiritual laws the Bible calls “The Law of the Sower.” It is summarized in Galatians 6:7-8 by principle that “what you sow you reap.” If you sow to the flesh you reap corruption, if you sow to the Spirit you reap life.

Jesus was elaborating on this spiritual law in Matthew 7:1-2. “If you judge you will be judged.” “As you measure it will be measured to you.” If you are negative and critical you will reap negativity and criticism. If you are forgiving, gracious and loving you will reap the same favor in your life. If you are stingy and cheat other people, you will have the same come back to you.

This spiritual law is the basis of the golden rule; "Treat others as you want them to treat you." Be kind to others and they will be kind to you. If you are critical and judgmental, then others will be critical of you.

So let me lead you in a giant step forward in your thinking. If you want your present life circumstances to change and get better, then you must first change. Why? Because your present life circumstances are the direct reflection of who you are as a person! If you want things to change, start sowing different attitudes and actions. You and I cannot escape this principle, we reap what we sow in life. There is no pass on the Law of the Sower.

Exposing the Critic's Den: Matthew 7:3-5

"3) And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4) Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? 4) You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Jesus now exposes the critics' den. There are two sides to this conversation. We can be either the critic or the criticized. Neither are good. I will briefly touch on both.

Jesus pointed out that we are guilty of hypocrisy when we judge others for what we ignore or excuse in ourselves. Hypocrisy means "two-faced." This happens when we judge others for what we are guilty of ourselves. A critical spirit is always self-blinding.

Two truths help me be patient with others. First, I sincerely believe there is good in everyone. I try to focus on the positive and not the negative in others. My motivational gift is most likely mercy. It is easier for me to overlook a transgression than trip over the trivial in others.

Second, because I've struggled with so many things in my own life, it's usually easy for me to be patient with others and cut them slack.

I often fall into the opposite trap. I am much harder on myself than I am with others. It's taken me years to develop a biblically healthy self-image to the point of loving and accepting myself. This has been a long journey.

I've had to depend on the Holy Spirit to sort out many log jams in my own life. Exposing deception and replacing it with truth has been a continual process for me.

If you struggle with a critical and judgmental spirit, you most likely need a grace encounter in your own life. It is so much better to build bridges of grace than walls of judgment with others. This is a key to healthy relationships.

This leads to the discussion on how to deal with people who position themselves as critics against you. There was a time in my life when I felt like Daniel in the critics den. I allowed the

negative comments and opinions of others to eat me for lunch. It threatened to consume me. But by God's grace, these fierce lions are being tamed.

It happened when I discovered 1 Corinthians 4:3-5. (Please pause and read!) Paul wrestled with this same issue of harsh critics. He was able to reduce it to a small thing by sincerely examining his own heart, living with a clear conscience and focusing on what God thought about him.

Critics are always eager to throw stones. Paul's approach can reduce stones to pebbles. We have little control over what others think or say about us, but we can control how we respond.

Paul's response in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 helped him avoid spending time in the critics' den. Instead, he focused on a relentless pursuit of God and His calling on his life. He was able to "press on" for the glory of God without being weighed down by the negativity of others.

I've also discovered the value of a good sense of humor seasoned with personal humility. Like good ointment, these can take the sting out of criticism.

Reaching the Lost: Matthew 7:6

“(7) Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”

There are numerous doctrines, convictions, and values in the Christian faith that the world spurns and despises. Some of these relate to sanctification and include things like the call to sexual purity, the sanctity of marriage, the sanctity of life, the concept of absolute truth, male-female gender identity at birth and separation unto a holy life.

Others are more related to foundational biblical truth. They include things like a literal view of Creation, the inspiration of Scripture, the concept of a born-again experience, the exclusive nature of the gospel and Jesus Christ being the only way to God, coming future judgment, and the reality of an eternal destiny in a literal heaven or hell.

The world mocks these things. It views them as restrictive, narrow minded, foolish, judgmental and bigoted. It is like abandoning holy sacrificial meat from the altar in a place where wild dogs could find it. The thought of feeding the holy sacrificial meat to dogs was an appalling thought to the Jewish mindset. The dogs would quickly devour it with no reverence of its origin. This is why holy sacrificial meat was either eaten or reduced to ashes.

Or it is like trying to ward off wild and hungry swine by bribing them with costly pearls. They will quickly trample your treasure under foot and attack you. Why? They do not share your value system! Your pearls mean nothing to them.

There is only one way to reach the lost and change an unregenerate heart and value system. That is through the gospel of Jesus Christ. People will never embrace precious Christian morals and values until they first embrace Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The order of the Great Commission is to continually present the gospel to secular culture and then teach those who embrace Jesus Christ the biblical values of the Christian life. Jesus was stressing this two step process in this verse.

When we flip the order around we invite the attack of wild dogs and hungry swine. The morals of the world will not change until the Holy Spirit first changes the heart of people through genuine conversion.

When people are reactive and defensive against my morals or values, I quickly steer the conversation back to the gospel. Conversion must proceed disciple-making or our efforts will be in vain.

The gospel message is wrapped in love for lost and hurting people. By contrast, forcing Christian values on unregenerate people is perceived as rude, judgmental and legalistic. This approach will provoke a fight!

In this amazing verse, Jesus was teaching His followers to lead with the gospel message and then unpack their treasures for those who respond. The indwelling Holy Spirit will bring acceptance and application in the heart of a true believer. This is the meaning of the word "conversion." It is a waste of time trying to turn unregenerate people into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

God-Dependent Living: Matthew 7:7-8

“(7) Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8) For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Be active and not passive in your pursuit of God. Faith in the Sovereignty of God is not an excuse to be lazy or passive.

When Jesus said in Matthew 6:33 that we should “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you,” He was calling us to make the pursuit of God our top priority.

Christians who seldom read their Bible or pray only in crisis mode are not seeking God, they are most likely running from God or at the very least holding Him at arm's length. They are not dwelling in the shelter of the Most High nor abiding in the shadow of the Almighty. (Psalm 91:1)

In Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus invites us to ask, seek, and knock. Why? He doesn't want us to marginalize Him and thereby slip into self-dependency and self-sufficiency.

According to Matthew 6:25-34, this is a recipe for worry, stress, and anxiety. We say we believe in God, but we live as if He does not exist or is irrelevant for daily living.

If you want to walk in the Spirit, switch to God-dependency living. Learn to ask, seek, and knock about everything. No need is too small or too big for God. He wants to be included in every detail of our lives. He wants to show Himself mighty and strong on behalf of those who seek Him. He wants to be both subconsciously and consciously present in our lives.

Jesus said; "8) For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened." Don't be passive about seeking God! "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness!" Make the pursuit of God your top priority and number one passion.

We have not because we ask not. We ask and receive not because we ask with wrong motives. God is distant because we shun the invitation to draw near to Him. We are not actively seeking Him. Doors remain closed because we are not knocking in the power of the Holy Spirit out of a relationship of intimacy with God.

Matthew 7:7-11 was a preview of things to come. This was a glimpse of what the Father promised for those who are born-again and filled with the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 1:4-5)

I sincerely believe Jesus invites us into a radically different kind of relationship with God. He doesn't want us to be religious, He wants us to surf on the wake of the supernatural in our daily walk with Him. He wants to be present in our lives in mighty and powerful ways. He wants us to dwell in His presence as He overflows into every area of our lives.

When you move down the path of Spirit-filled living, Matthew 7:7-8 becomes normal. It will blossom into your new mode of operation. Asking, seeking, and knocking will roll together into constant communion with Christ. Instead of holding God at arms length as you operate in flesh or soul mode, you will move into spirit mode. Your personal journal will start reading more and more like the book of Acts.

Deepening Your Prayer Life: Matthew 7:9-11

"9) Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? 10) Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? 11) If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"

Our view of God affects the way we pray. The opposite is also true, the way we pray reveals our true view of God. Jesus implied that many people have a higher view of their earthly father than they do their Heavenly Father.

If your son was hungry and asked for a loaf of bread, you would not mock him and give him a stone, would you? Or if he asked for a fish, would you give him a snake?

If people weighed down with an evil sin nature meet pressing needs when asked, will not your Heavenly Father treat you even better than them? We need to approach God in light of His love, goodness, and unwavering nature. A more effective prayer life grows out from a deepening understanding of God.

Luke 11:13 adds a significant detail to this teaching of Jesus. It says; “13) If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?”

God is not a deceiver. He wants to give us His promise. (See Acts 1:4-5) If you ask for the Holy Spirit, He will give Him to you. He is not going to pull a switch and give you an evil spirit. It intrigues me that Jesus said we need to seek God about this matter.

According to Romans 8:26-27, one of the vital ministries of the Holy Spirit is to enhance our prayer life. He “helps our weakness” when it comes to our praying.

When Matthew and Luke are pulled together, they give an amazing picture of this teaching of Jesus on the subject of prayer. God invites us to ask, seek and knock about every detail of our life. He wants us to learn persistence and trust. Prayer is where He wants to build deep trust, communion and relationship with us.

(The way I read Luke 11:13, Jesus is encouraging us to ask the Father for the Holy Spirit every day of our lives!) -dj.

The Law and the Prophets: Matthew 7:12

“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

The genuineness of our relationship with God shows up in the way we treat people. We are to treat others as we want to be treated by them. Notice, Jesus expects Christians to initiate. We don't wait to be loved to return love. We prime the pump because the fruit of the Spirit flows through us.

Then He said, “for this is the Law and the prophets.” What does that mean? It seems that God holds us to a higher standard in our ethics in dealing with people no matter who they are or what

the circumstances. God expects us to be loving, truthful, and honest no matter how others act or treat us. He expects us to treat others with love, respect, and dignity.

This verse goes way beyond being a principle for good interpersonal relationships. It is more like a Christian Code of Conduct. It is the standard of how we are to treat people. Stay with me, we are going to take a deeper dive into the meaning of the law and the prophets.

In Romans 13:8-10, Paul says all the commandments are summed up in the statement, “9)... You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 10) Love does no wrong to a neighbor, love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.” The qualifier in this verse is “agape” love. This is the God kind of love.

Jesus implied that we should treat people the way He treats people. 1 John 4:8 & 16 both say that “God is love.” This may sound awkward, but Jesus expects us to “agape” all people we come in contact with because He is our source. Agape love is the sap that flows through the vine of Christ from which every true Christian produces fruit. (See John 15:1-16)

We can now conclude that “lawlessness” boils down to interpersonal relationships without agape love. There is no situation, circumstance, or occasion that our dealings with people should not be rooted in agape love. We lead with agape love, we maintain agape love, and we conclude with agape love.

Here is an important observation, There was to be no wavering on ethics in the Law. The statutes were to be maintained without bias. They were to be applied equally to family, friends, countrymen, and foreigners living among them. This was the intent of both the law and the warnings from the prophets.

When you boil all the commandments in the law and the teachings of the prophets down, they scream “agape love.” In John 13:34-35, Jesus said agape love both distinguishes and defines His people. It is what they become in their relationships with others.

Jesus was actually saying something very revolutionary in Matthew 7:12. He was calling them to treat all people with love, respect, and dignity. He was telling them to be godly in all their relationships with other people no matter who was at the other end of the encounter. They were to set the standard for wholesome and loving interpersonal relationships.

Now for the big insight. The word “lawlessness” is used later in the context. It is shocking how Jesus applies it. In Matthew 7:23 He says; “23) And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you: depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Emphasis added.)

If our definition of lawlessness from this study is correct, we can conclude that “lawlessness boils down to interpersonal relationships without agape love.” We now have an understanding of the basic problem with the people Jesus rejected. They were religious, but they were not filled

with agape love. The fruit of the Spirit was not in them. Agape love was missing in their character and conduct. They were not connected to the true vine!

Just as a side note, in Matthew 24 Jesus described signs that will accompany the end times. Verse 12 says, "And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold." Again we see that Jesus connects lawlessness to an absence of agape love. I see an alarming trend among many who call themselves Christians today. Their love is growing cold. This should be a huge wake-up call!

The Narrow Gate: Matthew 7:13-14

“13) Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. 14) For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Over the years I've heard it many time; "All roads lead to God." After years of studying the Bible, I am compelled to concede this point. However, I need to qualify my answer. The broad way leads before Him as eternal judge. The narrow way leads before Him as Saviour and Lord. The broad gate leads to eternal destruction, the narrow gate leads to eternal life.

When I fly internationally, this point is often illustrated for me when I clear immigrations or customs. There are often signs that form very distinct but different lines. One area says "Citizens Only." The other signs read "non-citizens" or "all others."

In this text, Jesus is painting a very similar picture. When people pass through the doors of death there will be two very different lines that form. A small line will form in front of a very small gate. Above that gate the sign will read; "Born-again Christians." It will lead into a reception hall. The second line will be very broad and packed with masses of people. Above that gate the sign will read; "all others." It will lead into a judgment hall.

In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus was warning people to enter through the narrow gate. It leads to eternal life. Acts 4:12 says it this way, "12) And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."

In John 14:6; Jesus answered Thomas and said; "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, but through me." Jesus Christ is the only Savior of mankind.

Compare this with other important Scriptures. Take a moment and read John 3:1-21. Then turn and study 1 Timothy 2:1-7. If you doubt Jesus is the only gateway into heaven, study the book of Romans and the book of Hebrews. For that matter, set aside a few months and read through the entire New Testament.

Do diligence with your study. Jesus warned people to enter through the narrow gate. The Gate of Jesus Christ might be narrow, but it is not obscure.

False Prophets and Teachers: Matthew 7:15-20

“15) Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16) You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17) So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18) A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.”

Jesus now warns about false prophets or teachers. False prophets dress up like sheep, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. The whole of Scripture suggests they are motivated by greed, sensual passion, and a craving for power. (See texts like 2 Thessalonians 2, 2 Timothy 3, 2 Peter 2 and the book of Jude)

They twist Scripture and mislead people. They are self-centered and self-promoting. They give lip service to God only to disguise their true identity and devious purpose. They aim to control, exploit, and manipulate people.

Six times in these five verses Jesus talked about fruit. He said you will know them by their fruit. The fact that grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles shows that these people are fakes. They are not part of the true vine.

Jesus warned that good trees cannot produce bad fruit, nor can bad trees produce good fruit. The tree is distinguished by its fruit. If the fruit of the Spirit is not present (Galatians 5:22-23), and Jesus is not being glorified, run far and run fast! The tree is headed for destruction!

A Bold Claim To Deity: Matthew 7:21-23

“21) Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22) Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ 23) And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

Something absolutely profound happened in these three verses that is often missed. Jesus makes a bold claim of being Deity. Look carefully; “Many will say to me on that ‘Lord, Lord.’” Did you see what just happened? Jesus claimed to be both Lord and eternal Judge.” He is the One we will all kneel before some day. (Philippians 2:9-11) Jesus just claimed to be the gatekeeper to heaven!

This is often obscured by people who use this text to support the claim that a genuine Christian can lose their salvation. But Jesus said the opposite. Let me state the obvious; “You cannot lose

what you never had!” Jesus said, “... I never knew you.” He did not say; “You once belonged to me, but I lost you.” He said; “... I never knew you!

That, my friend, is a very sobering thought because these people thought they were Christians. They assumed that their religion, their church, their religious ceremonies, and deeds of benevolence had saved them. They were tragically wrong! They were deceived.

Keep in mind, the context is talking about those who come through the wide gate, the broad way, false prophets, ravenous wolves, bad trees, and bad fruit. (Read from Matthew 7:13-23) If you include Matthew 7:24-27, these are the ones who built their house on the sand. They were religious but lost.

But wait, another amazing thing happens in this text. Verse 22 says that these people prophesied, cast out demons and even performed miracles in the name of Jesus. How do you explain that? Well, it seems that the name of Jesus is authoritative and powerful no matter who evokes it! The name of Jesus Christ is recognized as preeminent in the spiritual realm.

For example, in Acts 16:13-16 some Jewish exorcists evoked the name of Jesus when attempting to cast out a demon. The demon recognized and acknowledged Jesus, but did not obey them.

I have no problem imagining that demons might cooperate and seem to leave in order to prop up a false prophet to deceive people. For that matter, false prophets can duplicate all kinds of false signs and wonders.

Look at what Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12. The apostasy perpetrated by the man of lawlessness is going to come with many false signs and wonders to the point that he will display himself as being God. Paul refers to this as “the mystery of lawlessness.” Isn’t that coincidental with what Jesus said in Matthew 7:23? We again see the word “lawlessness.” The end goal is deception and eternal destruction. Many will be deceived.

Many people are religious but lost! The broad gate and the broad way will be full of religious people. Saul was religious but lost before he met Jesus Christ. In his zeal for God... he killed Christians. The chief priests and religious leaders who had Jesus crucified were religious but lost. According to the Bible, many devout followers of various world religions are religious but lost. Many who call themselves Christians are religious but lost. Jesus will say to them on that day; “ I never knew you: DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS!”

In John 3:1-21, Jesus had a very important conversation with a religious but lost man named Nicodemus. In verse 3, Jesus told him; “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” In verses 5-6, he added that a person needs to be born of the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God.

The conversation builds to a climax in John 3:16-18. With these verses we discover that personal faith in Jesus Christ is the basis of salvation. These are the people who through personal faith invite Jesus Christ into their lives.

According to John 1:12, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." We have just come full circle back to His name.

It is a very different thing to give religious lip service to His name than it is to personally believe in Him, place saving faith in Him, invite Him into your life and become a child of God through faith in His name. Those who are born again in this way are known by Him. They are sealed and filled with the Holy Spirit and transformed into new people. This is what it means to be born again.

It behooves every person to study what it means to be born again from the Bible. Are you on the wide path or the narrow path? Are you trying to enter heaven through the wide gate or the narrow gate? Are you a child of God through personal faith in Jesus Christ or will He say to you; "I never knew you: DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS"?

The Story of Two Houses: Matthew 7:24-27

"(24) Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25) And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. 26) Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27) The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall."

Jesus closed the Sermon on the Mountain with the story of two houses. In the story, two people built themselves a house with totally different outcomes. It appears that they lived in the same area, because they both experienced the same storm, but one stood fast and the other was destroyed.

The spiritual side of the illustration is that they attended the same church, heard the same sermons, maybe had the same version of the Bible, and even knew many of the same people. But their outcomes were totally different.

Have you noticed all the comparisons of two things in the last part of Matthew chapter seven? Two gates, two roads, two trees, two kinds of fruit, and now two houses. Jesus is warning that two very similar people will face two radically different destinations.

Note, in the story of the two houses, the storm hit hard. The rain descended, the floods came and the winds blew. This was a severe trial. The rain tests your roof, the winds test your walls, and the floods test your foundation.

Trials are going to come in life. 1 Peter 1:6-9 tells us that trials come to test our faith. They are intended to refine us like gold in fire. The outcome of genuine faith is the salvation of our souls.

It amazes me how often people go through very similar life circumstances but it affects them radically differently. One person seems to get stronger while another falls apart. Why? Trials expose us! They reveal our core make up.

In the story, one man built his house on the rock, the other built his house on the sand. One stood fast through the storms of life, while the other collapsed. What was the difference?

Jesus said it came down to how they responded to His words. They both heard His gospel. One acted upon it and the other did not. One received Him by faith and the other did not. One embraced Him and the other held Him at arm's length. One was wondrously saved, the other was tragically lost!

The irony in the story is that the man who built on the sand was religious. He listened to the same gospel about Jesus, but did not act upon it. He built his house on worldly sand. He was religious but lost! He acknowledged Jesus, but chose his own way in life.

This describes so many people today. What about you? Are you building on solid rock or on sinking sand? Have you accepted Jesus Christ by faith and building your life on His Word, or are you merely religious... but lost?

Jesus Starts to Display His Authority. Matthew 7:28-29

“(28) When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; 29) for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

Jesus was very different from the scribes. He never shunned away from any subject, and He tackled them all with authority.

The scribes and many people pleasing pastors today avoid controversial issues. They want approval from people. They are willing to bend God's Word and even condone sinful living so as not to offend people.

Jesus did just the opposite. He forced people to deal with truth and left them with the realization that they were sinful, lost, and in need of a Savior. The Sermon on the Mountain set the tone for His whole ministry.

Jesus spoke the truth in love. He exposed sin and pointed the way to salvation. He came to seek and save the lost. Because of His identity, His teaching was the Word of God. Isaiah 66:1-2 punctuates this thought. It ends by saying; “2)... But to this one will I look, to him who is humble and contrite, and who trembles at my word.”

God’s Word is the standard of truth. It is the foundation of good and bad, right and wrong. It is not politically correct, it is theologically correct! It points to the narrow gate and the narrow road. It leaves all people as sinful and lost and in need of a Savior.

But let’s not lose sight of the significance of these two verses. The people were amazed with Jesus Himself and not merely His teaching. He displayed absolute authority in His teaching, but in the next two chapters, His authority is going to extend to many areas that mere mortals have no control or authority over.

Stay tuned, this is about to get very interesting. We are about to wrestle with the true identity of Jesus Christ.

Authority Over Leprosy: Matthew 8:1-4

“1) When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. 2) And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” 3) Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. 4) And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed Him. Suddenly, the parade was interrupted by a man with leprosy.

According to Leviticus 13:45-46, a person with leprosy became a social outcast. He lived alone with his dwelling outside the camp. When in public, his clothes were torn and the hairs of his head were uncovered. As he walked about, he would cover his mustache with his hands and cry out; “Unclean, Unclean!” People would shun and avoid him like a plague.

As the crowd accompanied Jesus, a leper stood in the path blocking their way. Instead of crying out “Unclean, Unclean”, he bowed down before Jesus saying, “Lord, if you are willing, You can make me clean.” His well practiced staccato voice from crying out “Unclean, Unclean” was most likely heard by the whole crowd.

The crowd stood back and watched in astonishment as the scene unfolded. If Jesus physically touched the leper, he would become unclean. But if He was indeed God, He had the authority to heal the leper.

Initially, Jesus said nothing. Instead, He stretched out His hand and touched Him. That touch healed much more than His leprosy. Jesus was the first and only hand that had physically touched him from the day he had been pronounced a leper.

The inner healing was monumental. Jesus was ministering to his fractured inner core. He could have healed his leprosy without touching him. But with that touch Jesus sent a message. It said; “You have value!” “You are not an untouchable!” “I accept you!”

I believe Jesus wants to touch you as well. He wants to heal your inner core. He wants to impart value, acceptance, healing and love into your life. Maybe it’s time for you to bow before and cry out; “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Then Jesus spoke; “I am willing; be cleansed.” Those words would mean nothing coming from anyone other than Jesus. Only He had the power and authority to heal leprosy. He also has the authority and power to heal whatever is broken within you and me.

As the crowd watched, the skin on the leper changed. The open sores and deformed skin were restored to normal. He was healed both inwardly and outwardly. He was a new man!

He then told him to go and be examined by the priest to confirm his healing. This involved a trip to the temple in Jerusalem. Then he was to offer the sacrifice that the Law prescribed for the healing of a leper. He was to do this as a witness to the priests. I can only imagine the conversation about Jesus that unfolded between the healed leper and the priest. God wants all of us to be a witness of what Jesus does in our lives.

But one mystery remains. Who was this leprous man? The text does not say, but Mark 14:3 says something very intriguing that often goes unnoticed. As the fateful Passover was approaching during which Jesus was crucified, He started His journey to Jerusalem. Look at what the text says; “3) And while He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper and reclining at table ...”. Could this be the same man Jesus had healed three years earlier as He launched His public ministry? It is only speculation, but the circumstances seem to line up.

But there is a more important observation to glean from the text. This leper was no longer a social outcast. He had become a friend in the inner circle of Jesus and His disciples. This former leper hosted them and they dined with him.

Jesus wants to dine with you and me as well. Revelation 3:20 says; “20) Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.” This was literally true for “Simon the leper.” It can be true for us as well. Jesus wants to be part of our inner circle.

Authority Over Time and Space: Matthew 8:5-13

“5) And when Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, imploring Him, 6) and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented.” 7) Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.” 8) But the centurion said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9) For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” 10) Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. 11) I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; 12) but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” 13) And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very moment.”

A Roman centurion now approaches Jesus with an urgent request. He had a servant back home that was paralyzed and suffering great pain. When Jesus offered to go and heal the servant, the centurion objected and then embarked on an insightful dialogue about authority.

Because he himself was a centurion, he pointed out that he was both a man under authority and in authority. He obeyed orders from his superiors and those under his command obeyed his orders.

Because he understood that Jesus was the highest authority, he said in verse 8, “Just say the word, and my servant will be healed.” This was a profound insight. In fact, Jesus said He had not found greater faith with anyone in Israel.

Did you connect the dots? Faith is understanding authority and how it works. He recognized that if Jesus gave the order or issued the decree, his servant would be healed because Jesus was a superior authority to paralysis.

This now sets up a profound analogy for the Christian life. Can you think of a situation in the military when a captain would be obligated to obey an order from a low ranking private? I can! If the private is a courier carrying a command from a higher ranking officer, then the captain would be obligated to obey! Why? The order came from a higher authority.

As Christians, we are couriers for Jesus Christ. In Matthew 28:18-20, He gave us authority in His Name. Nothing happens based on our own authority, but if He says the word, miraculous things can happen.

The early Christians were careful to give Jesus the credit when healings or miracles took place. This explains the dialogue in Acts 4:5-12 between Peter and John and the Jewish religious leaders. They pointed out that the lame beggar was healed through the Name, power, and authority of Jesus Christ.

I will leave you to wrestle with this concept. This principle was behind the response of Jesus in Matthew 8:10-12 to the Jewish people in the crowd. Most of them were putting their faith in a religious system, but the centurion put His faith directly in Jesus Christ! Beware lest you make the same mistake! Your church or denomination cannot save you, only Jesus has that authority!

But there still remains the greatest insight from this text. In the previous story, Jesus physically touched the leper to heal him, but the centurion understood that Jesus had authority over geography. Please understand this truth, time and space are both subservient to Jesus Christ. The physical touch was not necessary if Jesus willed the healing to take place. What was the outcome? 13) "... And the servant was healed that very hour."

This now begs a few more questions. What is the purpose of prayer and intercession? How does the story of the centurion illustrate effective prayer? Finally, what is faith? When you squeeze this story with those three questions, the Holy Spirit will give you vital illumination for your Christian life.

Authority Over All Human Oppression: Matthew 8:14-17

"14) When Jesus came into Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. 15) He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she got up and waited on Him. 16) When evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill. 17) This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: "He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.'"

As Matthew chapter eight unfolds, the momentum builds in illustrating the authority of Jesus. Let's review what we have discovered so far:

*First, chapter seven closed with Him having authority in His Teaching.

*Second, He had authority over leprosy.

*Third, He had authority over time and space.

Now as Jesus enters Peter's home, we are met with a monumental disclosure – Jesus had authority over a mother-in-law! (Sorry, I have a sense of humor and couldn't resist!)

Actually, he not only healed her fever, but also ministered to the crowd that soon gathered at their door. He set free all who were demon possessed and healed all who were ill.

I can only imagine the marvel of His disciples. Matthew was so moved that he connected what he witnessed with the prophecy of Isaiah; "He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases." He connected what he was seeing to Isaiah 53:4.

But wait, Jesus had authority over all human oppression, but what about the rest of what Isaiah said in His prophecy? Was Jesus going to suffer and be pierced through to pay for all human sin and iniquity? Was there any case too severe for Him?

This is what amazes me most about Matthew 8:16. It is also what utterly astounded Matthew and the other disciples; “He healed all who were ill!”

I don’t know how long the line was that evening or how many different human ailments came before Him, but He healed them all! For that matter, I’ve studied the four gospels over and over again and cannot find one case where His power fell short of setting the captives free or healing the sick, injured, or broken.

It would have only taken one failure for the growing suspicion of Matthew to be invalidated! The same observation was made in Matthew 4:23-24. Though the ailments varied greatly, “He healed them all.”

The question that was foremost on Matthew’s mind, “Is Jesus the Messiah?” The stage was being set for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross! One healing failure would have negated His claim of Deity!

Authority Over Himself: Matthew 8:18-22

“18) Now when Jesus saw a crowd around Him, He gave orders to depart to the other side of the sea. 19) Then a scribe came and said to Him, “Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.” 20) Jesus said to him, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” 21) Another of the disciples said to Him, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.” 22) But Jesus said to him, “Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead.””

This is an amusing text, and at first glance it seems to be more informative than instructive. But Jesus wasted no words, therefore we must assume that the Holy Spirit had reason for including these two stories in the inspired text. Let’s avoid the tendency to skip over these verses. Instead, let’s try to dig for some gold in these verses. There are at least two gold nuggets buried in this text.

First, if we stay the course with our theme that Matthew was presenting examples of areas where Jesus displayed authority, an interesting insight emerges from these two encounters. It seems that the Son of Man had authority over Himself! Let me explain.

It is natural for people in this world to make a priority of pursuing material security and family approval. These two longings can become huge distractions for those trying to become disciples of Christ. But God wants us to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” while trusting Him to provide these things that worldly values count as “essentials.” A fixation on these two longings can become costly distractions for men and women seeking to follow and serve Christ.

The Son of Man had conquered both of these in His own life. You ask, “in what ways?” First, though he was the carpenter’s son and had built homes for many others, He Himself had no place to lay His own head. He did not even compare well with foxes which had dens or birds which had nests. Was He a failure or had He conquered this innate longing?

Second, as the son of Mary in the absence of His step father, it was expected that Jesus would expend His life caring for His widowed mother and step brothers and sisters. It seems that He did this up until age thirty when He entered His public ministry. At that point he endured much family scorn and public ridicule to focus on His calling. He remained single-minded and fixed His focus on the cross that awaited Him. It appears that the Son of Man had authority over Himself.

This is what eventually won the devotion of His step brothers James and Jude. The Holy Spirit later used each of them to write a book of the New Testament. When we put God first in seeking His Kingdom, He writes the chapters for our lives and abundantly takes care of the very things that cause worry, stress, and anxiety.

The way Jesus replied to the two men who wanted to follow Him was neither cruel nor insensitive. He was merely saying that they would be their own worst enemy in seeking to follow and serve the Son of Man. Those who want to serve God need to die to themselves. The Son of man was no exception to this principle. He had come to the place of having authority over Himself.

But there is more gold in this text. Jesus knew the battle within each man that approached Him. He understood their struggles. He spoke to their weakness. He personalized His response to each of them. This was not rejection, it was zeroing in on their inner war.

I believe every man and woman who sincerely seeks to follow Christ will fight inner wars. It has been true in my life. I have often been my own worst enemy. Dying to self has not been easy for me. From this text, I understand that Jesus knows my inner battles and He tailors His grace and counsel to my needs. He has a personal interest in each of us!

Through the years, He has faithfully addressed my “current” inner battles and struggles through each stage and chapter of life. Though I have let Him down, He has never let me down. Do not let anyone or anything undermine the truth that Jesus is for you and not against you!

Authority Over The Weather: Matthew 8:23-27

“23) And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. 24) And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. 25) And they went and woke him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing.” 26) And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. 27) And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?””

They now got in a boat to cross over the Sea of Galilee. This was most likely a boat from the fleet of the sons of Zebedee. Four of the disciples were former fishermen. Peter, Andrew, James, and John had spent their lives in boats on the Sea of Galilee. They were now on their own turf. They were home. They were in control. It was time for Jesus to relax and take a nap.

Do you ever feel that way? You are so confident and in control that you don't need God? You've got this one covered without Him!

Then the unexpected happened. That's usually when the big storm hits. The winds began to rage, the boat was being smashed by the waves. They were close to sinking. They were out of control. They were filled with fear.

But where was Jesus? This amazes me – He was sound asleep! He was peacefully sleeping right through the raging storm.

Then they awoke Him saying, "Save us, Lord, we are perishing!" They saw no need to appeal to Him until things were totally out of control. That's usually the point at which most people turn to prayer. Most people turn to God as their last resort.

Then the most amazing thing happened. "He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm." His actions sucked the raging energy right out of the waves. The sea instantly became as flat as glass. The outward storm suddenly aligned with His inward calm.

Most people need to ponder this for a while to appreciate the magnitude of this miracle. The waves were most likely several feet high and smashing against the boat. These waves were going to rage all across the Sea of Galilee until they hit the rocks on shore.

The waves had momentum and were loaded with energy. But at His rebuke, the wave about to smash against the boat suddenly flattened out and became perfectly calm. But it wasn't just the next wave about to hit the boat; all the waves on the entire sea suddenly flattened out and became perfectly calm.

According to the laws of physics, that's impossible – except under one condition. "An object in motion stays in motion until it is met by an equal or greater force in the opposite direction." Conclusion: the words and authority of Jesus were a greater force than strong winds and raging waves.

Let me put this in perspective and illustrate the laws of physics at play in this story. Let's assume we have an intersection where a street crosses a railway track. From one direction comes a small subcompact car down the road at 50 MPH. But on the rail tracks a mile long train is also coming at 50 MPH with the momentum of thousands of tons of energy stored in all of those moving train cars. What's going to happen when the car and train collide at the intersection? Because the car is not a force big enough to counter the force of the train, it will be utterly

destroyed as it immediately changes course to match the direction and momentum of the energy of the train.

Now back to our story. The energy in all of those waves raging in motion on the sea of Galilee far surpasses the energy stored in the mile long train mentioned above. What about the energy in the little boat? It was already at the mercy of the waves. It was being tossed about like a piece of driftwood.

We can now appreciate this story. Jesus suddenly stood up in the little boat and rebuked the winds and the sea. Result: The winds and waves were suddenly met by a greater force! They became perfectly calm. Let me emphasize; the laws of physics would conclude that the waves and winds were countered by a force equal to or greater than themselves. (This gives me goosebumps!)

I know the disciples were not physicists, but look at their response to what they witnessed; “27) ... What kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” Raging seas take hours to calm down, but Jesus did it instantly! This miracle made a greater impression on them than all the healings they had previously witnessed. Why? It was monumental!

This miracle is in the category of God dividing the Red Sea under Moses or stopping up the Jordan River under Joshua. It begs the question; “Who is this man, that even the winds and the sea obey Him.” I must add that air and water in motion play by slightly different rules than a solid in motion. This adds to the miracle in this story.

You cannot read this story and conclude that Jesus was just an ordinary man. Let's add together the evidence presented by Matthew: He had authority in His Teaching, He had authority over leprosy, He had authority over time and space, He had authority over Himself, and now He had authority over the weather... and Matthew is not done with his report about Jesus yet!

We can now understand the growing suspicion of the disciples about the identity of Jesus Christ. “What kind of man is this?” They were beginning to suspect that the Son of man was indeed the Son of God.

(The Sea of Galilee is eight miles wide, thirteen miles long, and 150 feet deep. It sits in a rift valley, meaning the earth has split apart and created the mountainous valley and the lake inside it. Storms come up suddenly and, because of the size of the lake and the mountains around it, they can be severe.

In 1986, there was a drought in Israel and some local fisherman discovered a sunken boat in the northwest corner of the lake. It turned out to be from approximately the same time as Jesus. Great care was used to remove it from the lake, preserve it, and move it to a museum in Ginosar, on the western side of the lake.

While no one claims this is the same boat mentioned in the Bible, it does tell us a lot about what the boat in this passage would have been like. The “Ancient Galilee Boat,” as it is called, is 27 feet long, 7 ½ feet wide, and about four feet deep. This is not a small boat.

While it is built primarily from cedar, experts found many types of wood were used to repair it while it was in use –probably over the course of about 100 years. It was probably passed down from generation to generation.

What that means for us as we read this passage is that the four disciples who were fishermen almost certainly came from many generations of fishermen of that same lake. When verse 24 says the boat was being “swamped” that means the water inside the boat was approaching four feet deep. When the disciples cried out that they were all going to die, those cries were not the hysterics of scared little girls. These were seasoned, experienced, fishermen of this very lake. They were absolutely qualified to assess the situation as life-threatening. So, when Jesus rebuked the wind and waves and everything went flat and calm – and they weren’t going to die like they thought was inevitable just seconds before – it’s absolutely understandable that the disciples were astounded and amazed.) – dj

Authority Over the Demonic Realm: Matthew 8:28-34

“28) When He came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs. They were so extremely violent that no one could pass by that way. 29) And they cried out, saying, “What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” 30) Now there was a herd of many swine feeding at a distance from them. 31) The demons began to entreat Him, saying, “If You are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” 32) And He said to them, “Go!” And they came out and went into the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. 33) The herdsmen ran away, and went to the city and reported everything, including what had happened to the demoniacs. 34) And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw Him, they implored Him to leave their region.”

We now have an account of Jesus going into the land of the Gadarenes. Immediately, he was met by two demon-possessed men who were exceedingly violent. Mark 5:1-20 tells the same story with many additional details. In the Mark account there was one man that Jesus focused on. I assume he was the primary spokesman.

Mark focuses more on the tragic physical, mental, and emotional torment being inflicted by the demons. Apart from saying they were violent, Matthew focuses on the exchange between Jesus and the demoniacs. Let me share a few brief observations from this text.

First, from verse 29 we discover that the demons recognized Jesus. They called Him the Son of God. We can conclude that the realm of angels and demons know the identity of Jesus.

Second, they asked if He had “come to torment us before the time?” What an irony. They were tormenting people, but they understood the dynamics would one day change. They faced a future of judgment and torment.

Third, they made reference to “before the time?” Satan as the god of this world and his kingdom of darkness has limited time. These demons understood that the Messiah was about to step on the head of the serpent. At some point God was going to hold them accountable and they would face eternal judgment. (See Revelation 19-20)

Fourth, it seems that this gave them some “wiggle room” to negotiate with Jesus. They entreated Him to send them into the swine. They understood both the Sovereignty of Jesus and that the kingdom of darkness still had time to be active in the world.

I often ponder why God allows the kingdom of darkness any degree of time and jurisdiction in this present world. The primary answer I keep coming back to is that “God is not done with them yet!” Like in the book of Job, God sets the parameters, but trials and testing are part of this present world. 1 Peter 1:6-9 concludes that trials refine the faith of believers like gold. What Satan means for evil, God turns to good.

Finally, from Matthew 8:28-34 we discover that Jesus had absolute authority over the demonic realm. Keep in mind, this episode unfolded before His death, burial, and resurrection. If He had authority over the realm of darkness back then, it has now been multiplied many times over since His resurrection, glorification, and ascension.

I personally believe God has granted Satan and His kingdom of darkness more time in this age as a training ground for His church. God wants every Christian to grow in faith and discover our authority “in Christ.” A brief survey of the book of Ephesians defends this theory. (Ephesians 1:3, 1:19-21; 3:10; 6:10-20) The balance of the New Testament adds clarity to this purpose for the church age.

The clock is ticking. Satan’s time is running out. God is not done with him yet, nor has the church fully embraced its authority and power “in Christ.” The early disciples were treated to front row seats in discovering the broad range of the authority of Jesus Christ. From this encounter they discovered that it included authority over the kingdom of darkness and the demonic realm.

Authority to Forgive Sins: Matthew 9:1-8

“1) And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. 2) And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” 3) And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” 4) But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5) For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? 6) But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” 7) And he rose and went home. 8) When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” (ESV)

This story unfolds with a unique twist. Rather than the focus being on the power of Jesus to heal a paralytic, it shifts to the authority of Jesus to forgive sins. This is a huge change in the conversation.

Some Old Testament prophets healed people and even raised the dead, but the forgiving of sin was left to God alone. The scribes were correct, by His statement to the paralytic; "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven", Jesus was making a claim of being God!

A casual reading of this story might miss the significance of what happened. The scribes' reaction and opposition to His statement actually underlined His claim. Critics are sometimes worth their weight in gold.

These scribes focused the story back on Jesus. Without the critics we might conclude that the main subject was the faith of the paralytic and his friends. Granted, this was a noteworthy miracle, but in this story Jesus served up something far greater than a miracle. He presented Himself as the Saviour with the authority to forgive sins.

I've had conversations with people from many different world religions and even different Christian denominations. At some point I throw in the key question; "How does your religion remove your sins?" Another way of asking the question; "How do you know your sins are forgiven?"

Usually they ask; "What do you mean by sins?" I then say; "The wrong or bad things you have done in your life! Those things you feel guilty over." It doesn't take long to acknowledge personal sinfulness, but they always draw a blank when it comes to assurance of forgiveness.

The conversation usually boils down to an attempt to do good deeds to offset their sins. I then ask, "At what point do you know you've done enough good to cover your bad and who is the judge?" They finally admit, "I just hope I'm good enough."

At that point they are ready for my next question; "Do you mind if I share with you how I know God has forgiven my sins?" The answer is usually, "Yes, please tell me!" I then share the gospel and why Jesus alone has the authority to forgive sins.

That's what makes this story in Matthew 8:1-8 so significant. It begs the question; "Who is Jesus Christ, and what gives Him the authority to forgive sins and change the eternal destiny of those who believe in Him?" This story is an open door for the gospel.

The Matthew Principle: Matthew 9:9-13

"9) As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him. 10) Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. 11) When the Pharisees saw this, they said

to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” 12) But when Jesus heard this, He said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. 12) But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.””

We now have the call of Matthew. He was sitting in a tax office and as Jesus passed by He said to Him, “Follow Me.” With that simple invitation he rose up and followed Jesus.

The next verse paints the picture that Matthew invited Jesus into His home to meet his family, friends and acquaintances. Many tax-gathers and sinners were invited to a meal with Jesus and His disciples hosted by Matthew.

Herein we discover one of the ministry principles of Jesus. ***He viewed every person reached as an open door to an entire new group of people.*** Instead of cutting Matthew off from his family and friends, Jesus welcomed the opportunity to meet and minister to his family and friends.

This concept was extremely dynamic. It opened the door to reach hundreds and thousands of new people. This helps explain the rapid spread of the gospel by the early church. They followed the example of Jesus and formed many home groups to minister to friends, relatives and acquaintances of those open to the gospel. (See Acts 2:46-47; 10:23-24)

Rapidly growing churches embrace this dynamic concept. They follow “the Matthew Principle” and grow by intensional multiplication. They design opportunities for new people to reach their family, friends, and work associates.

Stagnant churches do just the opposite. They practice division and subtraction. When someone comes to Jesus they isolate and separate them from their family, friends, and associates. The result could be called turtle growth. Instead of extending outward, they retreat inward into their shell.

When the Pharisees saw what was happening, they became jealous and critical of Jesus. They were the ultimate turtle society. They were a small and exclusive group of self-righteous critics. It amazes me how many churches become turtle gatherings.

Jesus sent the Pharisees a strong rebuke. “11) ... He said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. 12) But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.””

In other words, Jesus was doing exactly what He intended on doing. He was launching “the Matthew Principle.” He was walking through many open doors for the glory of God. He was going to sinful, lost, and hurting people with mercy and compassion and offering hope, forgiveness, and a new life. He then did everything possible to make every new convert contagious! He started a movement that changed the course of human history.

New Wine and Old Wine Skins: Matthew 9:14-17

“14) Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” 15) And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. 16) But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. 17) Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.””

The disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus with a question about ceremonial fasting. Both they and the Pharisees were keeping the tradition of fasting according to the prescription of the Old Testament. (See Zechariah 8:19)

Fasting had become a religious custom in Judaism even though the Law itself did not prescribe it. Over time, religious traditions can take on the weight of spirituality and lose their original meaning and significance. Soon they are done simply because “we’ve always done it that way and woe to anyone who questions the tradition!”

Jesus was in no way minimizing fasting. He began His own ministry with an extended fast. Isaiah 58 extols the benefits of fasting for the right reasons. Fasting with the right motives is extremely powerful. Jesus was merely exposing the futility of turning fasting into an empty religious tradition.

He then used two illustrations of how many Old Testament traditions based on the Law would not translate into New Testament living based on grace and the walk in the Spirit. They are very different. Look at this simple comparison.

- The old is based on works while the new is based on grace.
- The old is based on the Law while the new is based on the Spirit.
- The old is external while the new is internal.
- The old is dependent on the flesh while the new is dependent on the spirit.
- The old emphasizes religious traditions and ceremonies while the new is focused on walking in the Spirit.
- The old brings condemnation while the new imparts life.

Jesus said that trying to blend the two is like putting a new patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment or pouring new wine into old wineskins that have already been stretched. Both will lead to disappointing outcomes.

I often say that I am not very religious even though I have a very deep and precious relationship with Jesus Christ. My walk with God is not based on religious customs, ceremonies, traditions or a liturgy. It is based on a personal faith relationship with Jesus Christ, the study of the Word of God, very dynamic and inspirational worship and walking in the Spirit. My prayer life is spontaneous and not scripted. I am dependent on the anointing, unction, conviction, promptings and leading of the Holy Spirit.

I do not try to pour the new wine of the Spirit into the old wine skins of religious rituals or ceremonies. I see the church as a living organism and not a mechanical or static organization. I believe God is active, alive, central, and dynamic in His church and not passive or distant. By contrast, I believe that mere religion is often an end in itself and seldom connects with God. Being born-again is very different from merely being religious.

Jesus was warning in this text that it is possible to be religious but lost. In their devotion to religious ceremony, both the Pharisees and disciples of John missed the Messiah. They were speaking to the Bride Groom and failed to recognize or celebrate Him... but they *were* devoutly religious. In fact, both groups were bent on trying to convert and force Jesus into their religious box. They were trying to save the Saviour!

Authority Over Death: Matthew 9:18-26

“18) While He was saying these things to them, a synagogue official came and bowed down before Him, and said, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.” 19) Jesus got up and began to follow him, and so did His disciples. 23) When Jesus came into the official’s house, and saw the flute-players and the crowd in noisy disorder, 24) He said, “Leave; for the girl has not died, but is asleep.” And they began laughing at Him. 25) But when the crowd had been sent out, He entered and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. 26) This news spread throughout all that land.”

We now have the story of a synagogue official whose daughter had just died. He came and bowed down to Jesus and begged Him to come and lay His hand on his daughter that she might live.

Five things stand out. First, the synagogue official did not send for a priest or rabbi. He knew they had no power over death.

Second, he had heard the stories about Jesus and concluded that His touch would bring life. He believed Jesus had authority over death.

Third, Jesus didn’t hesitate to follow him. He never encountered a challenge too big for Him. He was always ready and willing to help.

Fourth, Jesus had critics. When He came to the house to heal the girl, people laughed and mocked. This did not hinder Jesus from performing a miracle.

Finally, after He raised the girl from the dead, the news spread through the whole land. Jesus had become headline news. His popularity soon caught the attention of the religious leaders.

I don't know what you're facing, but I encourage you to turn to Jesus. He is more than willing to walk into your life.

Touching Jesus: Matthew 9:20-22

"20) And a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; 21) for she was saying to herself, 'If I only touch His garment, I will get well.' 22) But Jesus turning and seeing her said, 'Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.' At once the woman was made well."

We now have the story of the woman who was suffering from a hemorrhage touching Jesus and being healed. Mark 5:24-34 adds significant details to this story. Let me highlight a few.

Great multitudes were now following Jesus and pressing in on Him. The woman had been suffering from her condition for twelve years. She had spent all of her money on many physicians and not been helped. They had evidently tried extreme treatments on her, some of which actually added to her suffering. Her goal was to touch Jesus but remain unnoticed. This story impressed Mark as much as Jesus raising the synagogue official's daughter. Let's look at some key points in this story.

First, some people are desperate to get help. She had tried everything and depleted all of her money. Good health is worth more than great riches. Study good nutrition and physical fitness. Once your health is jeopardized it may be very difficult to recover.

Second, there are many medical treatments for bad health issues. Some may be helpful and others harmful. Take time to study your own condition and seek a second opinion. I will restrain myself from saying more about this matter.

Third, the medical community focused on treatment while Jesus specialized in healing. She had been seeking treatment for 12 years – but Jesus healed her instantly. It might be prudent to seek healing first and not as a last resort. (See James 5:13-16)

Fourth, this may sound trivial but I think it is significant. Most people asked Jesus to touch them but she reached out and touched Jesus. She viewed herself as insignificant. She didn't want to bother Jesus or become a spectacle. She was very humble.

Fifth, Jesus felt power go out from Him but didn't know who had touched Him with healing faith. When He questioned the crowd, she came forward and fell before Him and told the whole truth.

This was most likely where Mark learned the details of her tragic story. The disciples recognized that many people brushed against Jesus, but only this woman was healed.

Finally, Jesus said to her; "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." At once the woman was made well." Jesus will never reprimand anyone for seeking Him. Her methods were unconventional, but her heart was sincere. Jesus honored her faith.

I love this story. You might not feel like Jesus notices you or is actively seeking you. Don't let that stop you from seeking Him! This story illustrates that the path to Jesus goes both ways. "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you!" (Matthew 7:7) Take positive initiative in seeking God! Actively reach out and touch Jesus!

Do You Believe? Matthew 9:27-31

"27) As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" 28) When He entered the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." 29) Then He touched their eyes, saying, "It shall be done to you according to your faith." 30) And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them: "See that no one knows about this!" 31) But they went out and spread the news about Him throughout all that land."

As Jesus passed on, two blind followed Him crying out "Have mercy on us, "Son of David!" It intrigues me that Jesus did not immediately stop and heal them. He allowed them to do some research into His identity. They asked Him for mercy as they called Him the "Son of David!" This was a Jewish reference to the Messiah.

It seems that He initially ignored them as He passed on and settled into the house. Why? Was Jesus insensitive to them? Not at all! I believe Jesus was allowing them to wrestle through the evidence.

It is often our trials that motivate us to seek God. Faith should not be easy. Jesus wants us to seek Him! After a lapse of some time, they showed up at the house where Jesus was staying. It is not easy for blind people to find their way around, but they persisted until they stood in His presence.

This is the point at which Jesus gave them His attention. I am not an advocate of "easy believing" or "convenient faith!" Their actions in seeking Jesus proved their faith.

Notice the question Jesus asked them; "Do you believe I am able to do this." They had undoubtedly heard the story of Him raising the daughter of the synagogue official from the dead and healing the woman that suffered from a hemorrhage. They may have heard other stories about Him as well. They concluded that He was the Messiah and therefore could heal blindness as well.

He then touched their eyes, saying, "Be it done to you according to your faith." I often hear people conclude that healing is based on the amount of our faith. But Jesus was not measuring the amount of their faith, He was assessing their true view of His identity. Did they really believe He was the Messiah?

Though they were physically blind, they could see spiritually. They pondered the stories and concluded that Jesus was indeed the Son of David. They did not have faith in faith, they had faith in the true identity of Jesus Christ. That is where the healing came from.

It intrigues me that Jesus warned them not to tell anyone, but they did just the opposite. They openly shared their story. Were they being disobedient?

Maybe, but there may be a deeper meaning to the warning of Jesus. He may have been saying, "You can share the story of your healing, but don't spread the news of my true identity." People need to do their own research and wrestle through to their own conclusions about the true identity of Jesus Christ!

According to Matthew 8:27, the disciples were wrestling with the question of the true identity of Jesus. After witnessing Jesus calm the storm they expose their thinking process; "(27) And the men marveled, saying, 'What kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?'"

By the time we get to Matthew 9:27, the evidence was piling up exponentially. We can now ask, "What kind of man is this that has authority over leprosy, time and space, the weather, demons, paralysis, a chronic hemorrhage, the dead, and physical blindness?"

The same is true for each of us today. We need to wrestle with the evidence and arrive at our own conclusion about the true identity of Jesus Christ. Then each of us has a decision to make. We must either accept Him as our own Savior and Lord or reject Him.

No one can make that decision for you. You cannot surf on other people's faith. It has to become personal.

Lessons From A Mute Man: Matthew 9:32-34

"(32) And as they were going out, a mute, demon-possessed man was brought to Him. (33) After the demon was cast out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed, and were saying, 'Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.' (34) But the Pharisees were saying, 'He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.'"

This story illustrates potential side effects of demonic possession. Demonic activity can manifest itself as some form of physical impairment. In this case the man could not speak.

No details are given in the story how long this condition plagued the man. It may have been from childhood or for several years as if caused by some form of trauma.

This story in no way suggests that all speech problems have a demonic connection. The opposite is actually true. It merely points out that demonic activity may result in physical impairment for no other apparent reason. This leads me to believe that the condition of being mute may have been a sudden development at some point in his life.

The wording that he was both mute and demon-possessed indicates that he had other symptoms beyond an inability to speak. They often included things like mental anguish, emotional torment, episodes of violence, self destructive tendencies, abnormal social behaviors or seizures like manifestations. It appears that the people who brought him to Jesus had a strong suspicion of demonic possession.

After Jesus cast out the demon, the dumb man suddenly started speaking normally. We can only wonder what he had to say. This indicates that the impairment was connected to the demon and not the man.

A detailed study of every case of demon possession mentioned in the Bible is very enlightening. They were often accompanied by some form of physical condition. Jesus healed many people with illnesses, diseases, and physical injuries. Most of them had no connection to the demonic realm. Yet there were occasions when casting out a demonic spirit immediately healed a corresponding physical condition.

I disagree strongly with those who believe there is a demonic spirit behind all physical disease or sickness. They give way too much credit to Satan. On the other hand, when nagging physical conditions persist for no apparent reason and they do not respond to standard medical treatment, it may be wise to test for a spirit. I also believe in praying for healing according to James 5:13-18.

Matthew 9:33-34 gives two radically different reactions to this story. The multitudes recognized the miraculous significance of what Jesus did for this man. It definitely increased their view of Jesus. It put Him in a class far above the religious leaders in Israel.

By contrast, the Pharisees were mocking Jesus and accusing Him of channeling demonic powers. This controversy eventually comes to a head in Matthew 12:22-32. In that context, Jesus strongly rebuked them and issued a challenge. We will examine that discussion in a few weeks when we get to that context.

The take away from Matthew 9:32-34 is that Jesus Christ has total dominion over the spiritual realm. Throughout the four gospels, every demon He encountered was subject to Him. Why?

The gospel of John correctly presents Him as Creator from the beginning. (See John 1:1-5) He was not a man who became a god. He was God who became a man to accomplish human redemption. (See John 1:14-18) Conclusion: The demons were subject to Him... because He is God!

The Way of the Cross: Matthew 9:35-38

“35) Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. 36) Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. 37) Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. 38) Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.””

Jesus spent His time in the trenches with the hurts and needs of humanity. He came to redeem people from their sin. He focused on ministering to the painful consequences of fall.

He went from cities to villages teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. No broken condition of the human heart was too big for Him and none were too small.

As He surveyed the multitudes, He was moved to compassion because they were broken. They were distressed. This could be translated as “harassed.” They were down-cast. This could be translated as “thrown down.” They were like sheep wandering about having no shepherd to care for them. They were easy prey for Satan who roamed about as a hungry roaring lion seeking someone to devour.

Here is the sad part: Lost and hurting people were everywhere. They were being ravaged by the consequences of sin and the fall. He saw the potential harvest for the gospel being exceedingly ripe and plentiful.

But keep in mind, He surveyed the lost and broken condition only among the nation of Israel. He went only to His own people who had every advantage of the Law, the priesthood, the temple, and the Old Covenant. He did not venture into Gentile countries, but what He saw and encountered broke His heart.

He then instructed His disciples to beseech or beg the lord of the harvest to send out more workers into His harvest. At this point, He was still focused on the gospel of the kingdom, but that was beginning to change. This prayer request exposes the wrestling taking place within Him.

This begs the question, “How does the gospel of the kingdom differ from the gospel of salvation? Jesus came as Messiah offering the coming promised kingdom to Israel, but according to John 1:10-13, they rejected Him as Messiah.

They needed more than a King to rule over them, they needed a Savior to redeem them from the consequences of sin and change the human heart. This could not be accomplished apart from His death on the cross to pay for the sins of humanity.

The more time He spent in the trenches with people the more He embraced the necessity of the cross. John 3:16 concludes that His focus embraced more than the nation of Israel, He loved the whole world. If His own people with every advantage of the Old Covenant were this distressed, harassed, and cast down, the rest of humanity was predictably being ravished far worse.

This exposes a subtle twist in this call to urgent prayer. The gospel of the kingdom focused on the Messiah as the primary laborer in the harvest of Israel. The gospel of salvation would unleash the whole redeemed body of Christ to go as laborers into the harvest fields of the whole world.

The cross stood between the two gospels. Jesus was asking them to pray that He might have the courage to delay the throne as Messiah over Israel and go to the cross for all of humanity. In a very real sense, His love and compassion that He needed to go to the cross for sinful humanity was nurtured in the trenches while rubbing shoulders with broken people.

Let me be clear: It wasn't the rejection of His people that sentenced Him to the cross, it was His deepening love and compassion for sinful and broken people. He was seeing clearly that the Law forcefully imposed from a throne could never change the broken human condition. He was asking them as the Lord of the Harvest to pray for the love, strength, and grace to choose between an immediate throne or a painful cross. The choice was His!

Two paths stood before Him. The gospel of the Kingdom would immediately crown Him as Messiah King ruling over Israel and the world with an iron fist. The gospel of salvation would send Him to the cross to die for sinful humanity. It would usher in the age of grace, the mystery of the church, the ministry of the Holy Spirit and hope for all humanity. It would delay His earthly reign as Messiah, but send millions of laborers into the harvest fields of humanity.

From our vantage point in history, we know the path He chose. Ironically, we are now at the threshold of His second return and the establishment of His millennial kingdom. (See Revelation 20)

I believe Matthew 9:35-38 was the pivot point for Jesus. His deepening love for sinful and broken people set the compass of His heart on the cross. The power of sin could only be broken by the cross. He voluntarily chose the way of the cross because of His love for broken people.

Preparing the Church: Matthew 10:1

"1) And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness."

Many times chapter divisions interrupt the flow and continuity of a text. This is definitely the case between Matthew 9 and 10. To illustrate this point, let's compare Matthew 9:35 and Matthew 10:1.

"35) Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness."

"1) Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness."

What Jesus alone had the authority to do He suddenly bestowed on His Disciples. He gave them the authority to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness as He alone was previously doing. The serious Bible student should ask the question; "What happened between these two verses to create this radical shift?" The answer has three parts:

1. Jesus was deeply moved by the universal suffering and brokenness of humanity. (Matthew 9:36-37)
2. Jesus beseeched the disciples to entreat the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers. (Matthew 9:38)
3. Jesus took action and bestowed His authority on twelve of His disciples to do as He was doing. (Matthew 10:1)

You may need to read the previous post, but I believe a major paradigm shift took place within Jesus. His focus shifted from sitting as King on the throne of a restored kingdom to going to the cross as the Savior of mankind. Instead of establishing an immediate kingdom on earth (Revelation 20), He decided to start building His church. (Matthew 16:18-19)

According to Ephesians 3:4-9, the church age was a mystery totally hidden from the saints throughout the Old Testament. The Jewish biblical mindset was expecting the Messiah to set up and rule over an earthly kingdom. This was the expectation of the disciples after the resurrection of Jesus.

Look at their question to Jesus in Acts 1:6; "And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?'" He answered their question in the next verse by saying; "7) ... it is not for you to know the times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority." He did not deny that the kingdom was coming, He merely pushed it to a future time. Then He focused on the promise of the Father related to the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Three phases are used interchangeably for the time or epoch that Jesus ushered in. It could be called "The Age of the Indwelling Holy Spirit," or "The Age of Grace," or "The Church Age."

When Christians talk about “the end times” it technically refers to “the end of this present age!” So you ask; “What comes next?” The answer according to Revelation 20:1-10 is “The Millennial Kingdom.” Jesus is going to rule on earth for 1,000 years. Messiah as King is going to sit on His throne and rule the world from Israel.

This present age will end with a period of tribulation for both Israel and the church. But let’s not get further distracted by our text in Matthew 9:35 -10:1.

I may be reading too much into the text, but it appears to me that this is where Jesus shifted His focus from setting up the immediate Kingdom to building His Church. What in the text feeds my suspicion? The answer is the contrast between Matthew 9:35 and Matthew 10:1. Instead of consolidating His authority, Jesus starts handing it out to His followers.

The progression goes from the twelve in Matthew 10, to the seventy in Luke 10, to all of His followers in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. Beginning with Matthew 10:1, Jesus intentionally began preparing His Church to empower and unleash them all into the world.

Twelve Apostles of the Lamb: Matthew 10:2-5; Acts 1:15-26

“2) Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; 3) Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4) Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Him.” Jesus now calls His twelve Apostles by name. They represent a very important and select group. Revelation 21:14 identifies these as “the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” Their office is perpetual with no succession plan. Let’s look at a few points about them.

First, they were directly called and appointed by Jesus. Second, they were eyewitnesses of the public ministry of Jesus, including His death and resurrection. (See Acts 1:21-22) Third, they were part of the foundation of Christendom in laying down the doctrines of the church. (Ephesians 2:21) Fourth, they were the official source of the ministry and commandments given by Jesus Christ during His Public ministry. (2 Peter 3:2) Fifth, they were all placed in office prior to the day of Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:1-4; 15-26) Finally, this is the group Luke as an historian most likely spent time interviewing to compile the Gospel of Luke. (Luke 1:1-4)

This group of twelve are not to be confused with the spiritual gift of apostle given to some church leaders after the day of Pentecost. (Ephesians 4:11-12) The word “apostle” means “sent out.” Acts 13:1-5 records the sending out of Paul and Barnabas by the church at Antioch. Notice, the text specifically says they were “... sent out by the Holy Spirit.” Acts 14:4 and 14:14 call them “apostles.”

The calling and gift of the Holy Spirit sending out apostles could be better understood as “the gift of a missionary.” They were set apart and sent out to carry the gospel to new regions and

establish churches. The ten plus men named as apostles in the New Testament beyond the twelve apostles of the Lamb could be looked at as missionaries.

I find it intriguing that the modern church commissions and sends out many missionaries but the word is not found in the New Testament. However, the “sent out” ones are found in the New Testament and included in the list of leadership gifts given to the church, but they are simply called “apostles.” (Ephesians 4:11-12)

This has caused confusion in church history and in the modern church. For example, the Catholic Church believes in apostolic succession and looks at the Pope as being the successor to the Apostle Peter. That concept is nowhere taught in the Bible. The Mormon Church places the same mantle on its highest office. I underline again that Revelation 12:14 makes it clear that there are only twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The danger with Apostolic succession is that these churches give this position the authority to change church doctrine and practice. That is the exact opposite of what was intended for the twelve apostles of the Lamb. They laid down and confirmed the unchangeable doctrinal foundation of the Christian church. The tragic drift into heresy by churches that practice apostolic succession has long been documented. They have abandoned the authority of Scripture.

I have no problem with other modern churches that acknowledge and practice the five-fold spiritual gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-12. I am an advocate of multiple pastoral staff over a church as pictured in the church of Antioch in Acts 13:1-5.

However, I get a bit nervous with some groups that exalt what they consider an “apostle” to the status of Peter. I highly prefer a check and balance approach between gifted equals as pictured in Antioch. The easy fix is to simply understand this gift of the Holy Spirit as the “missionary gift.”

The Birth of Short-Term Ministry Trips: Matthew 10:5-7

“5) These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; 6) but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7) And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

Jesus set an interesting pattern with the twelve. He called them, modeled ministry for them, gave them some basic training, and then sent them out to preach. He wanted them to learn ministry by doing ministry.

In the next section we will look at His instruction to them, but for now I want to emphasize the principle of learning ministry by doing ministry. God wants to put His people on the front lines.

In this context, He sent them on a short-term ministry trip. What a novel idea. I strongly believe in His approach.

I often hear the critics say; “wouldn’t it be cheaper to just stay home and send money?” Maybe, but in Matthew 9:37-38 Jesus didn’t entreat the disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send money, He asked them to pray for workers. It’s not about the money, it’s about people touching people. It’s about experiencing God and learning ministry skills.

This is why GoServ Global sends people on short-term ministry trips. They are transformed in the process and a fire within them is ignited. They experience God working through them and often discover gifts and abilities they never imagined they had. The Christian life doesn’t work in a vacuum; it flourishes on the front lines.

(Absolutely agree with Terry. When short-term mission trips are done correctly, “normal” Christians are sent out and missionaries on fire with the Holy Spirit return –and we can use all the missionaries we can get in this country.) – dj.

Preach saying, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand”: Matthew 10:5-15

“5) These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; 6) but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7) And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ 8) Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. 9) Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, 10) or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. 11) And whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it, and stay at his house until you leave that city. 12) As you enter the house, give it your greeting. 13) If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace. 14) Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet. 15) Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.”

In this text, Jesus sent His twelve out to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom. Though He had fixed His sights on the cross, Israel had not yet rejected Him as Messiah. In these verses He warned His disciples not to take this message to the Gentiles or the Samaritans. He was still offering the kingdom exclusively to the nation of Israel.

People were transformed from life in a fallen world that is full of sickness, pain, suffering, and demonic oppression into a foretaste of what things will be like when the Messiah sets up His kingdom on earth. The twelve were given His authority to heal people and set free them from everything that afflicted them.

John 1:10-13 presents the saddest story in the Bible. “10) He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11) He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12) But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he

gave the right to become children of God, 13) who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” (ESV)

I certainly believe Jesus can and does heal today, but what was happening during His public ministry was different. This was a foretaste of the kingdom for Israel and they rejected Him. This kind of universal healing, health, and longevity will happen when the Messiah comes back and rules on earth.

However, there is a difference between Matthew 10:5-15 and today. Those healings were based on His role as Messiah offering the Kingdom to Israel. Healing today is based on faith in His finished work on the cross. Universal healing during His public ministry was a foretaste of the kingdom for Israel. He came to His own and they rejected Him.

This helps explain the dialogue recorded in Acts 1:4-8 between Jesus and His disciples about Him restoring the kingdom to Israel. Because Israel rejected Him and He went to the cross, another system was put in place. Jesus summarized this as the age of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Take time to understand the significance of Acts 1:3-11 and how it shifted the dynamics of the gospel of the kingdom that Jesus as the Messiah was offering Israel and the age of the indwelling Holy Spirit that has now come by default.

The Gospel of salvation and regeneration through the indwelling Holy Spirit is different from the gospel of the kingdom with the rule of the Messiah present on earth. The promises of the restored kingdom to Israel in Old Testament texts like Isaiah 11:1-10 do not apply to today. They are still future tense.

Confusion comes when sincere believers try to force the universal healings of the gospel of the kingdom on today and the system we are under with the indwelling Holy Spirit. There is some overlap, but they are not the same.

Granted, healing is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit for this present age, but starting with the book of Acts things changed. Healings were frequent but not universal in the book of Acts and the Epistles. They served the purpose of opening the door for the gospel as seen in Acts 3-4 and the healing of the lame beggar. Peter and John didn't use the miracle to start a healing service, they used it as an open door for an evangelistic crusade which is notable, as there was only one healing!

So how does this harmonize with John 14:12 where Jesus promised that believers will do greater works than Him because He goes to the Father? Shouldn't we see more healings than Jesus and the twelve performed in the gospels? That's an awesome question. Let me give the short version.

Well, to start with, Matthew 4:24 says; “He healed them.” The wording implies He healed them all. That's 100%. We can't improve on that, so it must relate to other areas beyond healing. Let me suggest a few areas He may have been talking about.

First, the gospel of the kingdom was rejected. That part of His mission failed. Instead of staying to set up the kingdom, Jesus went to His Father! Second, He came only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel and we are sent to the entire world. That is far, far, far greater. Third, His going to the Father instead of setting up an immediate kingdom brought the promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit on every believer. That was not part of the kingdom promise. Finally, His work on the cross because of His rejection as Messiah by Israel paved the way for eternal salvation for every believer. This is a far greater work.

I praise God for the healing power of the Holy Spirit in the Name of Jesus Christ for today, but I do not expect it to be universal. We are not in the kingdom age. That is still in the future for when Jesus comes back and sets up His Kingdom. When He rules on earth there will be no more sickness or oppression.

Here is the bottom line: Not everyone is going to be healed in this present age, but everyone who calls on the Name of Jesus will be saved! This present age is still governed by 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. People age, the body wears out, and they die. No one is going to beat aging and death in this present age.

But God does call us to pray for healing and He often validates the gospel and His power by healing people for His glory. The purpose for healing at this present time is to advance the gospel. I believe in miracles and the power of God, but my faith does not waver when God gives grace to endure suffering instead of healing. Both are essential and glorious. I am fully content letting God be God and depending on Him for both sides of the coin of healing and suffering with grace and power. Paul did both and taught both.

Roses and Thorns: Matthew 10:16-22

“16) Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. 17) But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues; 18) and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19) But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. 20) For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”

The training now extends for the long haul past His work on the cross. How do we know that? Matthew 10:8 restricted the target audience to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but Matthew 10:18 suddenly includes the Gentiles. That extension to the mission was added in Matthew 28:18-20.

But notice also, Matthew 10:20 includes the inner ministry of the Holy Spirit. He suddenly embraced post Pentecost dynamics. “20) For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” Jesus emphasized the Father's Promise of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:4-5 just prior to His ascension.

The training Jesus was giving His disciples extended into the church age. Everything transferred over with a few exceptions. First, the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection colored in the gospel of salvation, and second, He hinted at extending the invitation to the Gentiles. Paul devoted Romans chapter eleven to argue the phenomenon of the rejection of the Messiah by Israel and how it opened the gospel to the whole world.

Jesus was preparing these men for the long haul. Everything in this teaching also applied post-Pentecost with the addition of the gospel going to all nations and the coming indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

At the point of Matthew 10, Jesus had not yet revealed the mystery of His coming death and resurrection, nor any mention of the church. That happens in Matthew 16:13-28. Peter reacted to that revelation with such denial that He took Jesus aside and rebuked Him. (Matthew 16:22)

It is important to observe that Jesus was preparing His disciples for hard times, rejection, and persecution. Yes, they would experience miracles, but some would also suffer martyrdom. Some of them would be brought before governors and kings as a testimony. They were being sent out as sheep among wolves.

Jesus was balancing the healings, miracles, and supernatural provisions that would accompany the spread of the gospel with the doctrine of suffering. He talked about both sides of the coin equally.

Many Christians focus on Matthew 10:7-10 but ignore Matthew 10:16-23. They like the appeal of healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons, but they are blind to being sheep among wolves, hated by the world, and delivered up to death by family members for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.

Jesus prepared His disciples for both sides of what awaited them. Following Jesus is not all roses, there are also thorns. He Himself experienced both sides.

The Unseen Enemy of Good: Matthew 10:21-23

““21) Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. 22) You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved. 23) “But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.”

Some scholars herein see Jesus predicting the severe persecution that was going to come to the early Jewish Christians. Notice that the wording here is specifically focused on Israel; “23)... you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes.”

If you study the early Jewish church up until the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, this describes exactly the conditions they endured. The early Jewish believers lost everything and many fled from village to village trying to escape the persecution.

Ok, I struggle with some wording in the text, such as the end of verse 23 where it says “until the Son of Man comes.” That sounds like the second coming of Christ. So how can we understand this verse?

Many times prophetic words have double application in the Bible. The description can apply to the immediate recipients of the word, but also apply to a future time. Such may be the case with this context.

The destruction of the Temple in 70 AD caused many Orthodox Jews to abandon the temple system of worship. Why? The temple was gone. Many of the persecutors of Messianic Jews suddenly had their eyes opened about “the Son of Man” and embraced Jesus. This sudden and catastrophic event caused many to become Christians.

But I believe there is also a future fulfillment in this text. The end times will again be focused on Jerusalem and intense persecution of both Jews and Christians. The atrocity perpetrated by the antiChrist will be ended by the return of the Son of Man. This scene is laid out in the book of Revelation.

This parallel between the early church and the end times was so dramatic that the early Christians believed the book of Revelation literally applied to them. They thought they were living in the end times.

No matter your understanding of these verses, Jesus paints a stunning contrast in this chapter that defies understanding. It applied to both Himself and to His followers. Let me elaborate for a moment.

Despite the fact that Jesus performed many miracles and manifested the power of God over and over again, He was rejected, persecuted, and ultimately crucified. Why would anyone reject such amazing love, miracles and ... “good!” It defies explanation.

I always lock up on this point when reading the life and ministry of Jesus as recorded in the four gospels. There seems to be an unseen and irrational enemy of good. Yet, He made it clear that the same would happen to His followers.

Look at the comparison. Matthew 10:5-15 lays out the authority of Christ and miraculous powers given to the followers of Jesus and the church. They would perform great signs and wonders in His name. But then Matthew 10:16-23 flips the coin and reveals the persecution and even martyrdom that Christians will endure because of their faith in Christ. The same puzzling paradox exists.

I confess, my natural mind cannot comprehend how such great love and power focused on amazing good can be so viciously hated and rejected by the world. But, the kingdom of darkness has always vehemently opposed the kingdom of light.

In a sense, this chapter lays out a contrast between love and hate, good and evil, hope and despair and ultimately God and Satan. This battle has always existed. The Bible consistently paints this picture on the canvas of reality. Let me say it again, there seems to be an unseen and irrational enemy of good in this world.

The atheist who has a view of reality based on naturalism has no answer for this phenomenon. They believe mankind is the highest evolved creature and has the propensity to create a perfect world apart from "God."

But their hope of an earthly utopia has always been smashed. It was crushed by WWI and WWII. Their belief in the innate goodness of man apart from any notion of the existence of God constantly escapes them. For some reason, evil always shows up to stomp on their agenda.

I believe the biblical view of this tension between good and evil, light and darkness, God and Satan is self-evident in the world. From our vantage point in history, the god of this world has only a short time to deceive and hurt humanity before the Son of Man returns.

Though we are commissioned to minister the gospel with great love, authority and power... persecution will come. We will be treated exactly as Jesus was treated. Embrace this truth: this present world is not our home, we are just passing through. (See Philippians 3:20-21)

More Like Jesus! Matthew 10:24-25

“(24) A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. 25) It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign the members of his household!”
Matthew

Jesus now touches on the goal of discipleship; “(25) It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master...” Years ago I wrote a note in the margin of my Bible next to this verse, it simply says, “My goal is to become more like Jesus!” I have not reached that goal, but the Holy Spirit has helped me make measurable progress. I am no longer the man I used to be! Every Christian should have that testimony.

By God’s grace, we become more like Jesus both in character and conduct. If you claim to be a Christian and there is no change in your life, your claim is empty. It is false. Something is tragically wrong!

How can I say that? 2 Corinthians 5:17 says; “Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” If that is not your testimony, there has been no conversion in your life!

We also become like Jesus in terms of the way the world treats us. This is a two-way street. The transformed believer no longer accepts the morals and values of the world either. This often brings scorn, ridicule, and rejection.

This often paves the way for an amazing mystery. Non-Christians might openly scorn believers while inwardly craving the light, fruit of the Spirit, and hope within them. Over the years many of my harsh critics have embraced the gospel.

At some point, the ways of the world leave people empty and broken. Sin is a harsh taskmaster. Eventually, many come to the point of not being able to live with the person they have become!

Suddenly, they begin to search for forgiveness, agape love, inner joy and peace. Only Jesus Christ and the gospel can forgive the sin, heal the inner brokenness and restore them to the newness of life.

At the point of salvation when the Holy Spirit comes in, things begin to change. Soon they hunger and thirst to be more like Jesus. It will be a journey, but this quest will not be disappointing.

The Enemy of Faith: Matthew 10:26-31

““26) Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27) What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. 28) Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. 29) Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30) But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31) So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.”

Jesus now identifies the greatest enemy of faith. Many turn away from Jesus and the gospel because of fear. They fear ridicule, persecution, physical harm, and death.

This is the number one reason people decide not to go on mission trips. I constantly get the question; “Is it safe!” I think the safest place to be is in the center of God’s will! They respond with all kinds of irrational comments. “What if the airplane crashes, or there is political upheaval, or a mob attacks us?”

My response, “these things happen in everyday life apart from serving God.” The last I looked there were riots in our cities, violence, irrational mass shootings, car accidents, cancer, sickness

and death. Why do you think serving God exposes you to more danger than daily life in a fallen world?

Three times in this context Jesus said, "Do not fear!" I purposed years ago to live by faith and not fear. I recognize God is good and sovereign and cares for His own. All of us will one day face our own morality. I would rather die serving Jesus than live serving self and the world.

Apart from God's power to protect us, according to Hebrews 1:14, God also assigns angels to watch over us. I have had many experiences of Divine protection and intervention. I believe we are more than safe "in Christ" until He calls us home! If you doubt me, read what Paul said about this subject in Romans 8:31-39.

Our hope and focus should be on eternal life beyond here and now. That's why Jesus said; "28) Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

We are to have a holy reverence for God that overcomes our fear of the enemy. Fear actually defines our true view of God. Any area in our life where fear is on the throne, God is not!

If God counts the hairs on our head, He must have an extreme interest in the details of our life. He loves and cares for us more than the sparrows.

Confessing Jesus: Matthew 10:32-33

“(32) Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. 33) But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus now makes confessing Him before others a basis of salvation. The context is dealing with persecution. This helps us zero in on the meaning. If you openly stand for Jesus even when it might carry negative consequences, Jesus promises to confess you before His Father in heaven.

Romans 10:9-11 says something similar. “9) that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10) for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11) For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.””

Open and verbal confession is an expression of your heart. It is a testimony of your belief system. Confession is an affirmation of your belief system.

Denial is also an affirmation of non-belief. In the previous several verses, Jesus set the stage by repeatedly saying; “do not fear.” Some people are moved by fear of the physical and therefore

deny Christ. In the process they incur eternal harm. Do not barter away eternity based on momentary pleasure here and now.

The Great Divide: Matthew 10:34-36

“34) Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35) For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; 35) and a man's enemies will be the members of his household.”

Jesus did not come to bring peace on earth, because many reject Him and refuse to submit to Him. In some cases the hatred is so severe they will kill family members who claim to be Christians. This is true in communism, Islam, some branches of Hinduism, and extreme secular humanism. In many places, a decision to follow Jesus Christ is a death sentence.

This point has always baffled me. Why would faith in someone so loving and good be met with such hostility and violence? The only answer is the god of this world is active, evil, and deadly. Those who are in the darkness hate the light.

It takes huge love, faith, and courage to show compassion and share the gospel in some places. Few people are opposed to humanitarian efforts until Jesus and the gospel are added. In many places, those are fighting words. Darkness hates the light. The gospel can either heal or divide.

No More Shallow Relationships: Matthew 10:37-39

“37) He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38) And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39) He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.”

Many read this in a negative light. It almost creates a tension and competition between loving God or your family. I view it in a slightly different light. I believe He is saying that our relationship with Christ can become the most valuable and precious relationship in this life. It can surpass all other relationships. In fact, we can come to the point of loving Christ more than life itself.

Paul touched on this surpassing value in Philippians 3:7-11. His relationship with Jesus eclipsed the meaning and value of everything else in this life.

The important thing to understand is that this is not reckless devotion to a cause you were programmed into like a mercenary. The relationship with Jesus is saturated with agape love.

Early in my Christian life these verses troubled me. I had virtually no relationship in my life based on unconditional love. I was wounded. Over time, my growing love relationship with Jesus brought healing and soon became the source of love that started overflowing to others.

The text now comes alive with a profound observation. The word Jesus used for family love is “phileo.” But the love we can share with Jesus is “agape.” It’s a much higher form of love.

Here is the point: if you merely have “phileo” love toward Jesus your relationship is shallow. It cannot go deeper than any human relationship. But when someone is born-again, the Holy Spirit begins to pour out agape love within them. (Romans 5:5)

Watch carefully, from that point forward “agape” love becomes our new fuel for relationships. It’s not a competition between family and God. It’s the opportunity to move all relationships deeper into agape love. Jesus becomes the endless source of agape love.

Take Up Your Cross: Matthew 10:38-39

“38) And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39) He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.”

We now have a picture of the scope of devotion Jesus expects from His followers. Being a Christian is not a matter of ease or convenience. To the contrary, being a Christian has cost many people their lives.

The picture Jesus painted was for all who follow Him to make the conscious decision to take a spot on a Roman cross and be willing to die out of love. Such was the fate of anyone guilty of insurrection against Rome. Such was the fate that soon awaited Jesus Himself.

But these verses also carry another application. Following Jesus leads into a whole new way of life. It involves forsaking self and sinful dreams, goals and ambitions. It brings about new behaviors, actions, attitudes, and character. Following Jesus involves forsaking your ways and embracing God’s ways.

Jesus may have had Isaiah 55:6-12 in mind as He uttered Matthew 10:38-39. When we come to Jesus we exchange our ways for His ways. We give up our small plans to embrace His enormous plans for our life.

The trade-off is not even close. Isaiah 55:9 says; “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

We can now stand back and see the full scope of Matthew 10:39. If you selfishly cling to your life here and now, you lose everything – but if you let go of your ways and seek Jesus, you find true life!

I consciously wrestled with this early in my Christian life. I was double-minded. I wanted Jesus but also had dreams and ambitions of my own. I wanted to go to trade school and pursue a career in the building trades. I loved architecture and drafting. But the Holy Spirit was nudging me toward Bible College and world missions.

This was not a salvation calling, it was a calling to dedicate my life to serving God. One path was predictable, paid well, and offered comfort and worldly security. The other path was uncertain, meant living by faith, and was full of self-sacrifice.

As I laid it out before the Lord, He spoke to me much like He did to Simon, Andrew, James, and John in Matthew 4:18-22. He simply whispered "Follow Me."

I emptied out my small savings account and headed off to Bible College. That was in the fall of 1976. Apart from a few stretches of pastoring churches that included guaranteed housing and salary, we pursued a path of world missions and trusting God to raise up monthly supporters or provide in other miraculous ways.

He has opened amazing doors both here in the United States and around the world. GoServ Global is a significant part of that story, but it is much broader.

I shudder to see how different my world would be had I picked the door marked "self-ambition." But there is more.

I have discovered it is a daily decision to pick up my cross and die to self. It is only too easy to be serving God while focused on self.

No matter the career path God leads you down, there is a cross waiting every day. Sin, selfishness, bondages, bad attitudes, twisted character, and hidden agendas all need to be nailed to the cross. Walking with Jesus changes everything about you.

Being a Channel of Blessing: Matthew 10:40-42

“40) He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. 41) He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. 42) And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.”

Jesus now changes His tone on the theme of the fate of His disciples. Though there will be hardships in this world, there will also be blessings and divine provision for the consecrated followers of Jesus.

He will supernaturally move people to care for His own. Sometimes the promptings are so strong they cannot be ignored. We have witnessed God work in many extraordinary ways over the years.

But this text includes a unique promise. God will reward those who become the supply chain for His faithful workers. Jesus says in these verses that it is just as if they are ministering directly to Him. What we do for His own we are doing for Him!

Over the years we've been privileged to be on both sides of these principles. We've both been the recipient of God's provisions and we've been the supply. Often we become the conduit in between. Many times God merely wants us to pass on blessings to others with urgent needs.

This involves listening to the Holy Spirit and a very non-Western view of stewardship. It includes debt-free living, frugal spending, and viewing all money as belonging to the King.

This is also when the miracles start happening. When God finds trustworthy and frugal people and organizations to help deliver the supply to the needs, He opens the storehouse in heaven.

This is one of the founding values of GoServ Global. We exist to deliver Hope. We deliver people and resources to the point of need and share the gospel in the process.

What God is doing is *supernatural*. We are merely the conduit. Go to our web page and scan the many stories. Thank you for being part of the growing story.

The Dynamic Balance: Matthew 11:1

"When Jesus had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples, He departed from there to teach and preach in their cities."

Studying the Bible is like digging for gold, if you move too quickly you can miss some amazing nuggets. Such is the case with this verse. Two important insights are gained from this verse.

First, Jesus balanced two activities in His ministry. He divided His time between teaching His followers and reaching new people.

Churches stagnate and become introverted when they hide behind their walls and focus only on their own small group. Jesus practiced both "inreach" and "outreach." He worked constantly on both fronts. Balancing these two activities is the key to a dynamic ministry.

Do not brush over the significance of this point. Herein is a key component to the success and failure of many ministries. Camp out on this verse until you build this balance into your life and ministry.

But second, notice how the verse ends: “He departed from there to preach and teach in their cities.” I may be reading a bit into this, but it seems the wording “in their cities” may be significant. Jesus followed the momentum. He went to spots people came from. They represented open doors and warm contacts.

By this point, He was getting numerous invitations to go and preach. He was sowing the seeds of the gospel very broadly. He was saturating broad regions with His message. He was the headline story. He was in every conversation. Something unusual and profound was happening.

So why does Matthew 11:1 intrigue me? I have been a lifelong student of the phenomenon we sometimes call revival and awakening. Though some elements like prayer are missing in this narrow verse, we do see definite signs that the winds of revival were beginning to blow.

How far were they blowing? Well, the next verse says that John in prison heard of the works of Christ! If I have my geography correct, Jesus was still ministering in Galilee and Decapolis, but John was in prison in Jerusalem. Word of mouth was quickly traveling over 100 miles.

When God does something fresh and powerful, news begins to spread. Jesus was quickly ascending to the pinnacle of His public ministry. The seeds He was sowing were about to change the course of human history.

Contrast of Two Ministries: Matthew 11:2-6

“2) Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3) and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” 4) Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5) the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6) And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.””

We now come to an intriguing text. It appears that Jesus was falling short of the expectations of John the Baptist. John was in prison and was disappointed about the reports filtering back to Him about the message and ministry of Jesus.

Notice what Jesus said to the disciples of John; “4) ... Go report to John what you hear and see;” The ministry of Jesus included more than preaching, it was also accompanied with deeds of compassion and miracles. He cared deeply for people.

This was a stark contrast to the style of John the Baptist as recorded in Matthew 3:1-12. He came preaching a message of repentance with little regard for the needs of the people. It was the ultimate “turn or burn” approach. It appears that he never performed a miracle but preached the Law without compromise and called people to repentance. The only emotion he displayed

may have bordered on anger, but God used him greatly. Like Elijah, he was gifted at preaching the Law.

So why the stark contrast between John the Baptist and Jesus? I believe John 1:17 gives us a huge clue; “(17) For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” The contrast between the approach of John the Baptist and Jesus was a demonstration of the difference between the Law and grace. Both pointed people to God but had radically different ways of presenting Him.

A change was taking place. The Old Covenant based on the Law and the New Covenant looking forward to the promised ministry of the Holy Spirit were laid out in perfect contrast in the two ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus from Nazareth.

John pointed to the wrath of God, Jesus was the expression of the love of God. John was applying the Law to judge sin, Jesus fulfilled the Law to establish a way for God to forgive sin.

Read carefully John 3:17; “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.” Jesus was about to take the sins of the world upon Himself and be judged in the place of humanity.

John preached a gospel of repentance based on the Law. Jesus preached a gospel of forgiveness based on His coming work as the Lamb of God. The irony is that John was the one who introduced Jesus to Israel as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. (See John 1:29-34)

Understandably, John was very calcified in his style and approach to ministry. He was the ultimate example of a preacher of the Law. He preached in the spirit and power of Elijah.

But please note that he and that ministry approach both died as the Lamb of God was preparing to go to the cross! The ministry of condemnation based on the Law was coming to an end. The ministry of the Spirit of life was about to begin. (Please study 2 Corinthians 3:1-18) Notice that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Jesus fully appreciated the ministry of John the Baptist, but He did not adopt his approach. It was the perfect conclusion to the end of the era of the Law. It was time for the age of grace and the indwelling Holy Spirit to begin. One thing stood between these two administrations of God – the Lamb of God needed to go to the cross.

John’s public ministry ended in prison. The ministry of Jesus endured the cross, passed through the grave and left behind an empty tomb. He is the resurrection and the life! (John 11:25) What an apt summary of the ministry of death and the ministry of life.

We could spend much more time on the contrast between these two ministries. They speak volumes on the difference between the Old and the New, the Law and the Spirit, and works

versus faith. Sufficient to say the focus of the New Testament is on the ministry and Message of Jesus Christ.

Tribute to John the Baptist: Matthew 11:7-24

“7) As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8) But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces! 9) But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10) This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way before You.’”

Jesus now pays an extended tribute to John the Baptist. Just as John introduced the Lamb of God to Israel, Jesus was bidding farewell to the last of the great Old Testament Prophets. The baton was being passed on and something new was about to come.

Few things more graphically portray the transitional significance between the Old and New Covenants like the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus the Lamb of God. The four Gospels are the bridge between the two.

John thundered from the Law; Jesus pointed to grace and truth. John was tough and rugged; Jesus was meek and ordinary. John pointed to works; Jesus pointed to faith. The contrast between the two could go on and on.

But one fact stands out, the two were never in conflict. John came to prepare the way for the Messiah. He was willing to decrease and allow Jesus to increase. He fulfilled his mission.

Converts to the ministry of John the Baptist persisted well into the book of Acts as illustrated by the conversion of some of his final followers in Acts 19:1-7. His influence was felt all the way to Ephesus.

In Matthew 11:11-24, Jesus used the overlap of their two ministries to pronounce strong judgment on the unrepentant from that generation. Those who remained unmoved by the combined message and ministry of both John the Baptist and the Messiah were without excuse. They were more deserving of Judgment than Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom. They were the recipients of much truth and light, yet they stiffened their hearts and turned a dull ear.

One can only guess the judgment deserving of later generations who had the benefit of the full death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What about the generation that received the completion of the New Testament? But wait, what about the generations that received multiplied translations of the Bible into thousands of languages? But wait, what about our generation with modern media that offers the Bible for free electronic download, plus countless devotionals and sermons, don’t we stand without excuse before God?

Our generation has been the recipient of more truth and light than any previous generation and I haven't even mentioned Christian radio or television. I dare extend the words of Jesus and say that we are without excuse and deserving of judgment!

We must now wrestle for a moment with Matthew 11:12; "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." What does that mean?

I dare not claim full understanding, but the god of this world has always hurled his frontal attack against Israel and the church. (Study 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 & Revelation 12:17) The times of the end will see this confusion, deception, and apostasy intensify. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-17; 2 Timothy 3:1-4:8) Be prepared for much opposition to the truth in our days as false teachers increase and a call to biblical holiness decreases. The god of this world is trying to hijack Christianity as a vehicle to export his devious and debase morals in modern society. Do not be deceived!

(Jesus admonishes the crowd, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" –and He asks them more than once. That question carries some heavy weight if you consider Bethany Beyond the Jordan where John the Baptist was preaching. Scripture says *all* of Jerusalem and Judea came out to hear him. (Mark 1:5) That would have involved a walk of about 25 miles through the hot and inhospitable desert wilderness ending about five miles north of the Dead Sea. This was not a Sunday afternoon picnic. It would have taken several days and involved camping out in the desert.

So why would so many people endure so much hardship and inconvenience to come out and hear a crazy, bug-eating, fire-and-brimstone preacher dressed in weird clothes?

It was because he was announcing that the Messiah, that same Mashiach they had been asking God to send for hundreds of years, was finally here! It was time to clean your spiritual house! The Jewish people had been reciting a prayer three times a day for generation after generation asking that the Messiah would come: *"I believe with complete faith in the coming of Mashiach. Though he tarry, nonetheless I await him every day, that he will come."*

Jesus was reminding the crowd of that message and that He was the Messiah they had been waiting on for hundreds of years.) –dj

The Revelation of God: Matthew 11:25-27

"25) At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. 26) Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. 27) All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

Have you ever wondered why otherwise intelligent and brilliant people can be so ignorant and foolish when it comes to the existence of God and His marvelous ways? The answer is found in these verses.

Knowing God is not a function of the mind, it is a function of the spirit. Some people have sharp minds but are dead in spirit. (See Ephesians 2:1-3). God is content to let them wander in their own spiritual ignorance.

This is one reason why I have never been moved by atheists like Richard Dawkins. In and of himself he has no capacity to discover God. He is worse than spiritually blind, he is spiritually dead.

What a terrible guide for the truth about anything. His conclusions are biased and skewed from the beginning. Proverbs 1:7 says; "The fear of God is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." Why would anyone want a fool to be their guide for truth?

Paul actually made a lengthy argument about the foolishness of listening to the masters of secular knowledge in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. It is well worth your time to study. He stated in verse 25 that the "foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." Never has this discussion been more timely than today.

Jesus made it clear in the above verses that no one "... knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." If you are a born-again Christian, it is because Jesus Christ is at work in your life revealing the Father to you!

Never take this for granted. Don't be passive with it either. Make it your pursuit to grow in your knowledge of God through the study of the Word. Your potential for truth and knowledge is unlimited.

According to John 14:26 and 1 John 3:27, the Holy Spirit wants to become your inner teacher. If you yearn to know the mysteries of the universe, learn from the Creator of the universe.

In Ephesians 1:17, Paul prayed that Christians would be given a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. This is one of the greatest gifts from God!

A New Master: Matthew 11:28-30

""28) Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29) 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. 30) For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.""

We now see another side of the ministry of Jesus that stands in stark contrast to that of John the Baptist. Jesus was compassionate to the hurts and brokenness of people.

Many times the brokenness is the consequences of sinful living or at the very least the results of living in a fallen world. Whereas John was condemning and unmoved, and would possibly say; "You're getting what you deserve!" Jesus was loving and compassionate toward broken people. He said; "(28) Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." He offered acceptance, forgiveness, and healing. He extended hope!

I believe that freedom from sin, bondage, and brokenness starts with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He is both the bondage-breaker and the healer. He is in the business of healing and building up and not wounding or tearing down.

Jesus is also approachable. Notice His invitation, "Come unto me." He invites us to come with our sin, shame, and brokenness. He can forgive, cleanse, and change anyone.

But He also qualifies by saying, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." We need to be willing to turn from our sinful ways and adopt His morals and values. The last thing He said to the woman caught in adultery was: "From now on sin no more." (John 8:11)

There is a beautiful word picture in this phrase of "take my yoke upon you." When an oxen was sold, it put off the yoke of its previous owner and put on the yoke of its new owner. From that point forward, it had a new master.

Salvation includes repentance and making Jesus Lord of our lives. We forsake our sinful ways and embrace His ways. It is foolish to ask Jesus to heal the consequences of our sin with no intention of turning from our sinful ways.

But He promised that His yoke would be easy and His load light. How could that be? Living by the Law was burdensome. 2 Corinthians 3:6 went so far as to say "the letter kills."

But Jesus offered a different approach. Paul summarized this in the broader context of 2 Corinthians 3:1-18 as walking in the Spirit. Verse 17 says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Jesus was promising to change people from the inside. He was going to fill them with His Spirit and start them down the path of inner transformation.

Those who answer the invitation to come to Jesus are not only forgiven, they are changed into new people. At the moment of salvation, we step off the throne of our lives and Jesus steps on. We totally surrender to Him and His ways.

At the moment of salvation we have a new Master in our lives. It is no longer "self" and "sin" on the throne. From that point forward, we step down and Jesus steps up! He becomes our new Master and Lord.

You Shall Find Rest For Your Soul: Matthew 11:28-30

“29) ... and you shall find rest for your souls.”

This is one of the great benefits of coming to Jesus. Mankind was created with three parts. We are body, soul, and spirit. Many scholars see the soul as the seat of the intellect, the emotions, and the will.

When the soul is fed a constant diet of negativity it is where fear, worry, stress, anxiety, anger, and gloom are generated. But when the soul is managed and fed properly, it can become the location of positive emotions like happiness, love, joy, peace, and a positive outlook.

Notice that Jesus invited those who are weary and heavy-laden to come to Him. The storms of life have a way of dragging down the human soul. The three years of Covid and lockdowns brought unprecedented depression to people around the world. I never witnessed a time of more global weariness and discouragement.

It is during times like these that this promise of Jesus shines like light in darkness; “... and you shall find rest for your souls.”

I can affirm that intentional and consistent focus on Him, His Word, the inner Holy Spirit, and praise changes the temperament of the soul. It brings more than just rest, it totally transforms a person's attitudes and outlook.

Philippians 4:4-9 is a powerful commentary on these words of Jesus. This context clarifies that this is not merely a passive trust in Jesus. He was talking about active and intentional prayer, praise, and worship. This is a conscious act of “coming to Him” with our requests. It involves seeking Him and having a two-way meeting with Him. It includes casting our cares and anxiety upon Him. (1 Peter 5:7)

When we come to Him for salvation and ongoing relationship, we are engrafted into Him as our vine. (John 15:1-17) The human spirit comes alive and is filled with His Spirit. This opens the way for the fruit of the Spirit to flood into the human soul. (See Galatians 5:22-24)

But these fruits are not forced upon the believer. They are available, but can be ignored or resisted. They are the by-product of consciously and continually seeking Him.

I know many gloom and doom Christians today. They have no love, joy, peace, or happiness in their lives. They're inner well has totally dried up. They are some of the most complaining, negative, and depressed people I know.

I feel like grabbing them and saying; “Look at me!” Once I have their attention I would say; “Shut off your television, stop filling your soul with Hollywood smut, turn off the news networks,

detach from the gloom vine and have a long overdue meeting with Jesus!" I would basically point them to Matthew 11:28-30 and say "Seek Him; it will change your life!"

It works! I know many on fire, victorious, fruitful, and overflowing Christians today. I meet them all around the world. I am one of them! What is the secret?

Are you ready to listen? We all seek Jesus intentionally every day and sincerely try to walk in the Spirit. Sure we have struggles, problems, and trials, but we face them with Jesus at our side. We run to Him and not from Him. We have laid aside the weights and sins that so easily entangle and instead have fixed our eyes on Jesus. (See Hebrews 12:1-2) In the process of building a daily walk with God, we have found rest for our souls!

This is not bragging, it is merely a sincere testimony that what Jesus promised He delivers for those who seek Him! You can find rest for your soul. You can also have rivers of living water flowing from your innermost being. (John 7:37-39) Jesus came that we might have life, and might have it abundantly. (John 10:10b) It takes time to reap the benefits of a daily walk with God, but it is a value that has no comparison in this life.

If you have gotten off track, He is eager to get you back in the race. If you have never invited Jesus Christ into your life, do it right now! Matthew 11:28-30 is your invitation.

Truth or Tradition: Matthew 12:1-2

"1) At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. 2) But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.""

Jesus was now starting down the road of which is greater, "the Law or the One Who gave the Law?" Or, which is greater, "the Sabbath or the Lord of the Sabbath?" He was about to expose religious hypocrisy.

Now be careful in your thinking, Jesus was not playing the corruption game. He was not claiming to be above the Law. By no means! He had to be 100% sinless and innocent in order to make atonement for human sin. He was by no means living by a different standard. He Himself was measured by the Law and found innocent.

He was instead challenging the way the Pharisees were interpreting and applying the Law. Over time they had come up with their own rules and regulations based on the Law that were full of loopholes they could use to condemn, control, and manipulate people. Jesus was exposing their hypocrisy.

Be careful not to let religious traditions or theological bias cloud your understanding of the Word of God. I constantly have to go back to the Word of God and measure my foundations.

This often happens in areas of world missions. I continually ask myself; “Am I exporting biblical principles or western Christianity?” This is a huge problem in world missions. Let me elaborate.

A few examples relate to Christian marriage. I have been invited to numerous Christian wedding ceremonies in various countries and cultures around the world. They are very different from traditional western ceremonies. Initially, I was a bit critical and judgmental until I realized that the Bible gives zero guidance on what a Christian wedding ceremony looks like. In fact, the Bible doesn't even provide a wedding vow. Does that surprise you?

Another example relates to courtship and engagement. Christians in India practice arranged marriages. Our approach in the west offers almost no guidance in finding a spouse. Grooms in Africa pay insane dowries to the bride's family. Which system is biblically correct?

Well, technically, the biblical principles are simply 1) no fornication, 2) fidelity in marriage, 3) binding wedding vows until death, 4) and marry only a Christian. There's a lot of room for flexibility in Scripture. One might argue that the modern western system is terribly flawed.

The problem with the Pharisees now comes into focus. They were replacing the Law with their traditions. This brought them into direct conflict with Jesus and became the basis of His eventual condemnation.

Let me leave you with a question: “Are you living out the Word of God, or are you being driven by religious traditions or theological bias?” The two are very different.

It takes a long time and humility to unlearn convictions based in religious tradition or theological bias rather than biblical truth. It is a field full of landmines that every Christian must cross on their way to biblical maturity. Many never venture into this field and end up tragically wasting a lot of time arguing and divided over tradition!

Lord of the Sabbath: Matthew 12:3-8

“3) But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, 4) how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? 5) Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? 6) But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. 7) But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.” 8) For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

As the accusations from the Pharisees fly, Jesus points out two examples from the Old Testament to establish His case and defend His innocence. First, he sighted David in 1 Samuel 21:6 eating the consecrated bread. The future King of Israel in the lineage of the Messiah was fleeing the jealous wrath of King Saul. A miracle of divine provision and protection was

unfolding. It involved extraordinary measures. Had David died the lineage of the Messiah would have been cut off!

Second Jesus pointed to the fact that the priests break the Sabbath when performing their temple duties. Though not mentioned, He could have also pointed to Joshua marching around the city of Jericho seven times on the seventh day and then taking the city. (Joshua 6:15-16) He did it in keeping with God's special command.

So what's the point? There are holy exceptions recorded in the Bible to a strict interpretation of the Law. In each case God granted special exemption. The point Jesus was making was that God is greater than the Law He gave. He has authority over the Law. He has the authority to grant exceptions and there are records of Him doing that in the Old Testament, though they were rare occasions.

When you think about it, a miracle is God superseding the natural laws of physics. Because He is God, He has the authority to overcome the Laws that He Himself created. In Matthew 8-9 Jesus accumulated numerous stories of His authority over natural Laws. These stories pointed to His true identity.

So also, Jesus used this occasion in Matthew 12:8 to make a bold claim; "8) For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." In this context, He claimed to be greater than both the Temple and the Sabbath. Tragically, the Pharisees totally missed the significance of this whole dialogue.

Had the Pharisees connected the dots correctly, they would have discovered a profound claim to deity. Instead, they ran down the path of condemning the innocent. Their box was too small. Their thinking was too narrow. They arrived at conclusions without weighing all of the evidence. They totally missed the significance of who was standing in front of them.

Let me make a point, our traditions and theological bias often puts us in their sandals. We can become so critical or judgmental that we miss the beauty of what God is doing. Instead of listening to the message, we are offended because the speaker has long hair, is dressed in blue jeans, and has a tattoo. Because we are so distracted by the outward, we miss the glorious story of the transforming power of the gospel! We are blind to the miracle.

A Good Deed or a Capital Offense? Matthew 12:8-14

"8) For the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath. 9) Departing from there, He went into their synagogue. 10) And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse Him. 11) And He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? 12) How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." 13) Then He *said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. 14) But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him."

Do not minimize the significance of these verses. With this story, a trap was being set against Jesus. An obscure story in Numbers 15:32-36 became the basis of the Pharisees strategy to destroy Jesus.

It related to a man caught breaking the Sabbath by gathering wood. He was put in custody until his fate was decided for intentionally breaking the Sabbath. It was decided that he had committed a capital crime. He was led outside the camp and stoned by the congregation.

So what does that have to do with this story in Matthew 12:8-14? If the Pharisees could make the case that intentional healing on the Sabbath was equivalent to gathering wood, they could convict Jesus of a capital crime.

Like the men who conspired to destroy Daniel, the Pharisees realized they needed a charge against Jesus related to His service of God. They settled on making the case that healing on the Sabbath was a capital offense.

They used this occasion in the synagogue to set what they viewed as the perfect trap. It was the Sabbath. There was a man present with a withered hand. They knew Jesus was full of compassion and had the power to heal. With every eye focused and every ear listening, they asked Jesus the crucial question; "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" They were looking for the basis of accusing Him of a capital crime.

Jesus uses the occasion to turn their own rules and regulations against them. Over time, the elders of Israel had developed certain exceptions to actions on the Sabbath that were deemed as needed intervention... so not in violation of the *spirit* of the Sabbath.

One related to the rescue of a sheep that fell into a pit (most likely a well) on the Sabbath. Without immediate intervention, it would quickly drown. This "exception" was not mentioned in the Law, but became accepted as a justifiable action of compassion on a Sabbath.

Jesus affirmed it was okay to do good on the Sabbath, but He raised the stakes in the argument. He asked, "Which is more valuable, a man or a sheep?" Jesus was making the case that the legalism of the Pharisees was heartless and filled with hypocrisy! Jesus viewed people as having innate value.

But there was another issue at stake. In Matthew 12:8, Jesus proclaimed; "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." What Jesus did by healing on the Sabbath punctuated His claim of deity. He was operating out of His office as the Great Physician. This was Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah. He would heal His people.

If they pursued their case, they were officially rejecting Jesus as Messiah. Was Jesus setting a counter trap? Peter laid this charge against the leaders of Israel during his first sermon on the

day of Pentecost. (See Acts 2:22-24). Peter made it clear that the leaders had no excuse for missing the signs and wonders performed by Jesus.

Back to the story: So how did the people respond to this debate between Jesus and the Pharisees? Luke 13:17 records a similar encounter. The writer concludes that the reasoning of Jesus humiliated His opponents. Jesus made the Pharisees look foolish. But while the people were connecting the dots, the Pharisees were turning the dots into stones of condemnation.

His opponents were now blind to the signs and wonders He was performing. They had already decided His fate – and they were bent on destroying Him.

Tragically, Jesus was about to face a similar fate to the man condemned for gathering wood. Jesus was about to be led outside of the city to be crucified.

The argument was weak, but the trap was closing around Him. Make no mistake, this charge became the best case the religious leaders could level against Jesus, and it was backed up by an Old Testament precedent of capital punishment. As you can now see, this story had monumental significance in the Pharisees plot to destroy Jesus.

Battered Reeds and Smoldering Wicks: Matthew 12:15-21

“15) But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. Many followed Him, and He healed them all, 16) and warned them not to tell who He was. 17) This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: “18) Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon Him, 19) And He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel, nor cry out; Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. 20) A battered reed He will not break off, And a smoldering wick He will not put out, 21) Until He leads justice to victory. And in His name the Gentiles will hope.””

The more the Pharisees tried to discredit and destroy Him, the more the people flocked to Him. He cared for them. He had answers for them. He healed them. He treated them with honor, respect and dignity.

By contrast, the religious leaders treated the people with scorn and disdain. They used and controlled them. Like in the story of the Good Samaritan, the priests and Levites daily walked past people in need. They viewed themselves as part of an upper class that deserved the respect, honor, and unquestioned obedience of the people.

Matthew here quotes from Isaiah 42:1-4. The text is often applied to the demeanor of the coming Messiah. God's Spirit would be upon Him. He would focus on bringing forth justice. But more important, He would not be loud, forceful, controlling, or demanding. He would be kind, meek, and gentle. He would be full of genuine compassion for the hurts and needs of people.

Isaiah used two illustrations about Him that resonated with broken and hurting people. First, a battered reed He would not break off. Reeds were used in making everything from baskets to scrolls. Weather beaten reeds were often broken or bent over. People often discarded them as having no value. They were thrown away.

This is a picture of many people. The storms of life leave them bruised and battered. Many give up on them and view them as worthless. But not Jesus. He sees value in them and makes something special from them.

The second picture is that of a smoldering wick. In the days of oil lamps, some wicks would smolder and not give off good light. Many would discard and replace smoldering wicks. But some people would take the extra time to carefully trim and adjust them. They realized that a smoldering wick had the potential to shine brightly if they were trimmed properly. This eventually led to the idiom of “trimming your lamp.” Many times a smoldering wick did not need to be discarded, it needed to be adjusted or tuned in better. The picture is that Jesus takes the time to help smoldering wicks shine brightly.

You might feel like a bruised reed or smoldering wick. Everyone has given up on you. Well, Jesus is different. According to Matthew 11:28-30, He invites those who are weary and heavy laden to come to Him. He sees value in bruised reeds and smoldering wicks.

Many times bruised reeds and smoldering wicks have been victims of crimes associated with violence, sexual or verbal abuse, poverty, or discrimination. They have been unjustly exploited and beaten down. They are innocent victims that have been deeply wounded. Notice the word “justice” appears twice in this context. Jesus came to lead justice to victory. He is on the side of the hurt, wounded, and victimized.

He Himself became the recipient of jealousy, rejection, hatred and violence. He was innocent but condemned to be crucified. In His stripes there is healing. He is the hope for the broken. He turns smoldering wicks into brightly shining lights.

Blind Men: Matthew 12:22-24

“22) Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw. 23) All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” 24) But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.””

In this context, a demon-possessed man who was both blind and mute was brought to Jesus. If you connect his situation to the previous verses, this man definitely qualifies as being a bruised reed or a smoldering wick. The Pharisees offered neither compassion nor help for him. To them, this man qualified as a “throw-away.”

The text says that Jesus “healed him.” In this case the physical symptoms were connected to his spiritual condition. When you study the whole of the New Testament, you discover that demonic activity can cause physical ailments.

But be careful, this is not always the case. There are germs, bacteria, parasites, viruses, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and a host of other potential causes. The good news is that Jesus was able to heal all conditions no matter the cause.

In this case, it was obvious to the crowd that the root problem was demon-possession. When Jesus cast out the demon, the man was instantly healed. He could both speak and see.

According to verse 23, the crowds were amazed and began to associate Jesus with the Son of David. They may have been connecting Him to Isaiah 53. There were numerous Old Testament prophecies of the healing and restoring work of the coming Messiah.

The response of the crowd infuriated the Pharisees. They were bent on destroying Jesus. They were grasping for any explanation for His miraculous signs and wonders. They landed on the strategy of associating His works with Satanic power. In verse 24 they said; “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of demons.”

At least they recognized the existence of the spiritual realm. They were a big step closer than the atheist, agnostic or naturalist, but they missed the target by 180 degrees.

Jealousy and theological bias can be very blinding. Their condition was far worse than the blind and mute man. Jesus had a cure for him, but the Pharisees were hopelessly stuck in their blind and hard hearted condition. They were the real blind men in the story. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 diagnoses the true origin of their problem.

Freedom Quest: Matthew 12:22-29; 43-45

“25) And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. 26) If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? 27) If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? For this reason they will be your judges. 28) But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29) Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house.”

Jesus now begins to elaborate on the subject of demon possession and deliverance ministry. He returns to the subject briefly in Matthew 12:43-45. Let’s make a few observations.

First, demon possession is real. It is the result of a demonic spirit entering the human spirit and thereby taking possession of the whole person. The demon is in control of the body, soul, and

spirit of the human host. The Bible lays out five different levels of demonic activity in the world. Demon possession is the fourth level, and can only happen to a non-Christian.

Second, the concept of “Divide and Conquer” is one of Satan’s schemes. His kingdom is not divided, but he excels at dividing people. He works to divide marriages, families, churches, friendships, and nations. He leaves behind a path of broken people and many trapped in chains of shameful bondage.

Third, Jesus taught that His kingdom and His Spirit has the power to cast out demons. Any child of God fully equipped and standing in the authority of Jesus Christ, can be effective in helping others come to freedom from the activity of the kingdom of darkness. Equipping others for this ministry has become a growing part of my calling.

Finally, Jesus observed that the only way to enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods is to first bind the strong man. (Vs 29) This seems to be a reference to evangelism and reaching non-Christians with the gospel.

They are held captive in Satan’s house. It is essential that Christians become equipped at resisting, renouncing, binding, and rebuking the enemy and his activity in the world. This is an essential part of intercessory prayer. This may be why the early Apostles did a reset in Acts 6:4 to devote themselves to “prayer and the ministry of the word.” Prayerless ministry is powerless ministry.

There are two extremes associated with the subject of spiritual warfare in the body of Christ today. The first is ignorance and denial. Satan exploits this to his advantage. The second is sensationalism and extremism. These people are misguided and often cause more damage than good.

But there are biblically founded and effective approaches to equip believers to recognize and stand firm against all the schemes of the enemy. Sadly, I graduated from Bible College without any equipping in this area, but Jesus spent considerable time training His disciples to be effective in this phase of ministry. This paradox has always baffled me!

The Freedom Quest Material that I’ve compiled over the years are the result of detailed biblical study and helping hundreds of people come to freedom “in Christ.” I am indebted to the works of men like Niel Anderson and others that have helped equip me for this aspect of ministry. It is crucial that every Christian has a biblical foundation for spiritual warfare in these last days.

The live workshop that I teach provides a biblically-grounded and systematic approach for intervention ministry. This is basically the materials I have used to equip pastors, missionaries, and Christian workers around the world to be effective in the area of spiritual warfare.

Blasphemy Against The Holy Spirit: Matthew 12:30-32

“30) He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. 31) “Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. 32) Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”

Jesus now introduces the subject of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is an issue that has intrigued people for years. “What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?” Jesus said this is an unpardonable sin. Let’s see if we can discover some insight from this context.

First, in the previous several verses, the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebub. They were accusing Jesus of being part of Satan’s kingdom. When religion rejects the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is a very serious offense. Judaism was about to reject the Messiah and accuse Him of being a deceiver. They were rejecting God’s only plan of salvation. Those who die in a state of rejection of Jesus Christ and the gospel have no basis of salvation. This is unpardonable!

Second, notice verse 30 says; “He who does not gather with me scatters.” This might be a reference to false teachers and deceitful workers who distort the gospel to exploit people. Jude 1:8-16 would certainly put this group in the category of blasphemy. Many other New Testament texts issue the same stern warning to false workers.

Third, we now come to an often overlooked phrase in verse 32; “... either in this age, or in the age to come.” What was Jesus talking about? I would argue that Jesus was at the end of the Old Testament era. The age of the Law was about to end and the age of the gospel of grace was about to be ushered in.

Now put on your thinking cap. The age of the gospel of grace has a few other descriptive names. It is also called “the church age” and “the age of the indwelling Holy Spirit.” I believe it is more than coincidental that Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit and a new age to come.

What happened on the day of Pentecost brought manifold changes. It inaugurated the indwelling and filling of the Holy Spirit for every born-again believer. It also started the operation of spiritual gifts within the Body of Christ. Notice in Acts 2:13 that there were mockers in the crowd on the day of Pentecost.

Though we are called to test the spirit, we are also warned not to grieve or quench the Holy Spirit. I consider myself “Spirit-filled”, but I wear biblical seat belts. I believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but I don’t embrace the emotional hype and foolishness promoted in some circles.

There may be two ways to blaspheme the Holy Spirit in this regard. The first would be to reject the genuine and call it demonic. The second would be to fake the gifts for the sake of deceiving and exploiting people. I have sadly witnessed both extremes. I distance myself from both camps.

Having made the above observations, I want to say that the only ultimate unpardonable sin is dying in a state of rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's look at another profound text related to this subject.

In 1 Timothy 1:12-17 Paul shared his personal testimony. In verse 13 he says he was formerly a "blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor, and yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief." He was saved and transformed by the grace of God even though he had been a blasphemer!

His story reminds us that there is hope for anyone in this life. Only death seals eternal destiny. Those who die apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ will never be forgiven. I am with Paul and persuade all people to be reconciled to God through personal faith in Jesus Christ! I do not write people off until they are dead and gone.

Careless Words: Matthew 12:33-37

“(33) Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. 34) You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. 35) The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. 36) But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. 37) For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Just as trees are known by the fruit they produce, so people are known by the words they speak. Bad trees produce bad fruit and good trees produce good fruit. So bad people spill out bad and destructive words, but good people speak truthful, edifying, and empowering words.

There are many kinds of bad words. Vulgarity and cursing are only one example of bad words. Being constantly negative, critical, or judgmental also exposes a broken character. At some point they can amount to verbal abuse.

There is also the problem of careless words that come from gossip or hearsay. They have no basis in fact or reality, but they can malign or ruin the reputation of others. This can amount to character assassination.

There are also deceptive, faithless, and discouraging words. Some of these destroy trust and faith and shape our view of reality. Many of these influence our view of God and are careless and destructive. To make a child who believes in God stumble is a serious offense.

For example, to say “God does not do miracles today”, or that “evolution and not Creation explains origins” are both examples of false and damaging words and teaching. It is important to both think and speak the truth. Some theologians and doctrines can actually undermine faith and trust in God. They are full of naturalism and humanism. The end result is that they twist and distort biblical reality.

Words are powerful. They not only expose the true condition of your heart, they also set the compass of your life. Words express your true belief system and your belief system will direct your life.

In the context, Jesus was reacting to the Pharisees accusing Him of casting out demons by Beelzebul. (Vs 24) Jealousy is a poor gatekeeper of truth. They were condemning themselves and others. They were blind guides of the blind.

The Sign Was Given: Matthew 12:38-42

“38) Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” 39) But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; 40) for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41) The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 42) The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.”

The scribes and Pharisees now ask Jesus for a sign. This request escapes me. Up to this point His whole ministry had been filled with signs and wonders. At what point are the skeptics satisfied? At what point are people accountable to respond to the truth about Jesus Christ they already have.

Jesus responds that the sign of Jonah was coming. The Son of man was about to be crucified and spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The simple story of the gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to atone for the sins of mankind is sufficient truth for salvation.

Jesus then pointed to both Nineveh and the Queen of the South. In both cases truth was preached but no signs were given. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.

Jesus by no means played into the hands of the atheists or agnostics. Jesus never allowed the skeptic or the critic to control His message. What signs did they offer to validate their unbelief and justify their sinful ways? Their request was equivalent to the three demands of the devil who tempted Jesus in the wilderness. They were playing the devil's advocate.

The preaching of the gospel is sufficient basis for the salvation of mankind. 1 Peter 1:6-12 drives this point home. These wicked scribes and Pharisees were privileged to both see and hear Jesus. They saw the whole spectrum of His signs and wonders. Blessed are later generations who have never seen Him, but still believed.

Jesus issues a strong warning in this text. Don't sit in the judgment seat and make demands of Jesus. He is not the One being judged. He does not need human affirmation from you or anyone else. He is the one coming on the judgment seat!

Evidence is everywhere of human depravity. Sin and Satan have left deep footprints. Jesus Christ offers forgiveness, hope and a new way of life. His love needs no greater proof than His death on the cross to pay for the sins of mankind. The resurrection satisfied His claim of Deity.

Other world religions had prophets and teachers, but they all now occupy a grave. Only Christianity has a Saviour Who left behind an empty grave. The sign was given. The enemy was defeated. The evidence is sufficient for a verdict. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved!"

A Supernatural View of Reality: Matthew 12:43-45

“43) Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. 44) Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. 45) Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.”

Jesus now abruptly returns to the subject of spiritual warfare. These verses are familiar to many people. Let's see if we can unpack some insights from this text.

First, there seems to be "different kinds" of unclean spirits. Some need a moist body to occupy. Notice in verse 43 the mention Jesus made of unclean spirits "passing through waterless places seeking rest." That should catch your attention. Many times the host can be a human body. In Mark 5:9-13, the legion went into a herd of swine. By contrast, in Ephesians 2:2 Paul refers to "the prince of the power of the air." Some apparently roam about freely. In Matthew 17:21 Jesus referenced "this kind" as if to differentiate between different kinds of unclean spirits. This is a mystery to me. I merely point out the contrast.

Second, multiple unclean spirits can occupy the same human host. In this text, Jesus referenced one unclean spirit returning with seven other more wicked spirits. Notice they are called "unclean" or "wicked" spirits. They are not nice! In the case of the Gerasene demoniac referenced in Mark 5:1-14, there was an entire legion present. No wonder the man was so severely tormented.

Third, referring back to Matthew 12:24 & 28, both the Pharisees and Jesus referred to “casting out” demons or unclean spirits.

There is hope for demon-possessed people. Jesus can set them free.

Fourth, in Matthew 12:44-45, Jesus warned of the plight that can befall a person who does not fill the void left from an unclean spirit. It is essential for people to turn to Jesus Christ for salvation and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Do not let your inner house or temple be unoccupied. Do not be passive about salvation. You cannot remain neutral and be king of your own life. The last state of a person can become far worse and tragic.

Fifth, I must warn from John 10:10 that the thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. People may begin channeling a spirit thinking they are gaining an advantage, but at some point the enemy turns on them. They will reach a tipping point where tragic abuse and torment will ensue. Many are trapped and cannot free themselves. The ultimate goal of unclean spirits is the death and eternal damnation of their human host.

Finally, Jesus closed this context in verse 45 by talking about “this evil generation.” He seemed to be saying that human civilization can slide from being moral and good to becoming immoral and evil very quickly. It can move from a climate of light to darkness in one generation. The opposite can also happen when God visits a region or society with revival and awakening.

The key is that individuals must turn to Jesus Christ for personal salvation. Freedom can be lost for both the individual and also for a nation. Woe to any generation or nation that turns its back on God. Satan is ready and eager to fill the void.

The bottom line is that the spiritual realm is real. The Bible is written against the backdrop of supernaturalism. A naturalistic worldview does not explain reality. Many people are blind, deceived, and living in tragic sinful bondage. To hold God at arms length yields to the kingdom of darkness by default. Jesus Christ is the only Savior for sinful and lost humanity. He is the Bondage Breaker.

The Family of God: Matthew 12:46-50

“46) While He was still speaking to the crowds, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. 47) Someone said to Him, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You.” 48) But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” 49) And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers! 50) For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.””

Some use this story to assign disrespect to Jesus. I see it very differently. Remember, it was His mother who pushed Him into His first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. (John 2:1-12) His response at that time to His mother and family was, “4) ... Woman, what do I have to do with

you? My hour has not yet come.” He put them on notice that He was not to use His identity and power for selfish pursuits.

Things have now changed. In Matthew 12:46-50, I see Him sending a different message to mother and family. He was now saying, “My hour has come.” He was focused on His mission as the Lamb of God. He was preparing them for His coming work on the cross and His subsequent absence from the family.

His role had changed from His duties to His earthly family as the oldest son and provider in the absence of Joseph, to His duties to the family of God as the Saviour of the world. He had fulfilled His duty to His earthly family. He had now taken up a greater duty bestowed on Him by His Heavenly Father. No distraction was going to prevent Him from fully embracing His role as Messiah and His pending death on the cross for the sins of humanity.

We further discover from John 7:3-9 that His family was struggling with His transition into His new role. Verse 5 says; “For not even His brothers were believing in Him.” It was most likely after His death and resurrection that they were converted. His half brothers James and Jude both became dedicated followers and leaders in the early church.

But in Matthew 12:49-50, Jesus was also sending a message to His many followers. He was declaring His affinity to the household of faith. The family of God was beginning to form. He deeply loved His disciples. He was embracing and affirming those whom the Father had given Him. (See John 17:13-26)

I fully embrace and cherish the doctrine of the “Family of God!” Because of the Spirit within me, I cry out “Abba Father.” (See Galatians 4:6) Jesus has welcomed me into His family and He deals with me from the dynamics of Sonship.

This is true of every believer. For the many who come from dysfunctional earthly families, I affirm that the family of God can fill every void and Jesus can heal every hurt. Ask God to surround you with mature, godly and healing believers and friends. As the old chorus says; “I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God.” People might let you down, but Jesus never will. I praise God for my many brothers and sisters in Christ.

Compounding Dividends: Matthew 13:1-2

“1) That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. 2) And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.”

As we transition into chapter 13, Jesus had every reason to be overcome by fear and anxiety. The adversarial relationship with the Pharisees and religious leaders was beginning to intensify. They were bent on destroying Him. It seems from the previous paragraph that His family did not understand or support Him. There was growing family tension.

Yet the above two verses paint a picture of inner calm and tranquility. Jesus knew well that the cross awaited Him, yet He went out of the house and was sitting by the sea.

We can assume the breeze was blowing in His face, the sun was warming Him, the smell of the water was like a soothing aroma and sea gulls were likely landing around Him. He was soaking in the beauty of the world He created. His five human senses were ministering to Him. He was taking time to smell the roses.

Soon a large crowd began to gather. He loved people. They were the crown of His creation. They were seeking Him. The text paints a peaceful picture of Jesus stepping into a boat, sitting down, and teaching the multitude standing on the beach.

They were drawn to Him not merely because of His signs and wonders. His words imparted life and hope. They were there to soak in His teachings. This time He was teaching in parables. He was telling stories with significant life application.

Before we launch into His parables, there is something very precious to glean from these two verses. It is important to set the tone for each day by seeking Jesus and His Word. Carve out time to seek Him. Make it a priority. Set your cares aside and seek Jesus.

People pay insane prices for choice seats at a concert or sports event. It has no appeal to me. I cherish and value my daily time in sweet fellowship and communion with Jesus. I love to bask in His presence. He offers each of us a front row seat. Nothing in this life compares or equals the compounding dividends of spending time daily with Jesus.

The Law of the Sower: Matthew 13:3-9

“3) And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, “Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4) and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5) Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6) But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7) Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8) And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9) He who has ears, let him hear.””

As Jesus begins to teach in parables, He tells the popular story of the sower. He comes back in Matthew 13:18-23 with an expanded explanation of the parable. At this point, let's restrict our discussion to the first part of the story and make some observations about the ancient farmer.

First, we discover that the farmer was planting seeds. The first mention of seeds in the Bible is way back in Genesis 1:11-12 on the third day of creation. God created plants with seed in them after their kind. The Creator made the laws of genetics.

All lifeforms on planet earth from plants to animals are based on DNA. This is what separates “the kinds.” According to John 1:1-4, the Bible claims that Jesus was there from the beginning and was the Creator. He created both physical matter and the various kinds of life.

Make no mistake, Jesus was the one who created the seed the sower was planting. He also created the birds, rocks, sun, and thorns in the story. Hmm... ponder that for a moment! This story is deeply embedded in Genesis Chapter One and the handiwork of the Creator. There is so much to learn from this story!

Second, notice that the farmer was planting seed with an eye to the harvest. The law of the sower is taught repeatedly in the Bible. For example, Galatians 6:7-9 says “whatever a man sows, that he will reap.” It goes on to warn that the one who sows to the flesh reaps corruption, but the one who sows to the spirit reaps eternal life. The conclusion is: “Don’t lose heart in doing good. Keep on sowing good seed!”

Third, Jesus taught there are different kinds of soil in life. He talked about hard packed soil on the well-traveled roads, soil full of rocks, soil full of thorns, and good soil. Three of the soil conditions consumed the farmers' precious seed with no harvest. But the story says the sower was very wise, because he kept right on sowing. Don’t give up on sowing good seed in this life.

Fourth, notice the good soil far made up for his losses. It yielded 30 times, 60 times, and some even 100 times what was sown!. Agriculture and numbers seem to go together. Even today, farm land is managed, bought and sold because of the yield numbers. Good farmers are experts at improving soil conditions and increasing numbers.

Finally, Jesus closed this section of the parable by saying; “He who has ears, let him hear.” Many things in life can be traced back to the Law of the Sower. If you want to thrive in this life, you better go back to Genesis chapter one and get to know the Creator and the principles He set down to govern life in this world.

Unpacking the Mysteries: Matthew 13:10-13

“10) And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” 11) Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12) For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13) Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

After sharing the parable of the sower, Jesus stepped out of the boat for a short huddle with His disciples. He was not done speaking to the crowd, but the disciples gathered around Him with a question, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

As the explanation unfolds, Jesus gave a two-part answer. Because of time and space, we shall look at each of them separately. Let's focus on verses 10-13.

In these verses, Jesus implies that those who believe in Him have been granted the capacity to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but others have not. The natural man remains blind and deaf to the gospel and biblical truth and reality. They embrace the world's wisdom.

This theme is developed at length in the Epistles. This was the theme of the first three chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. I highly encourage you to study 1 Corinthians 1:18-3:23 with the question of spiritual blindness in mind.

In the text, Paul compares the blindness of the unregenerate to the Spirit-directed illumination of believers. In Chapter One he argues that the world through its philosophy and secular wisdom will never arrive at the truth of the gospel. Then in Chapter Two he presents the case that the Holy Spirit guides the spiritual man and woman into deep revelation about the mysteries of God which the natural man can neither know or perceive. Finally in Chapter Three, he warns of the blinding effect of carnality on those who claim to know Jesus Christ but still live as captives to sin.

The Apostle John also speaks on this theme in 1 John 2:25-29. In these verses he talks of the anointing that abides on the children of God and how it teaches them all things. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would assume this teaching role in the life of believers. (See John 14:26-27)

So how does this relate to why Jesus taught in parables? It was His way of laying out truth for the Holy Spirit to apply to the heart and mind of believers, but at the same time the unregenerate would remain deaf and blind to the mysteries of the kingdom.

I have heard it said that the Bible is God's love letter to His Children, but it makes no sense to strangers. Why? They are not in tune with precious family values and communications. It makes no sense to them. If you want to understand the Bible, you must first become part of the family of God!

In John chapter 10, Jesus pictured Himself as the good shepherd. He knows His own and they know Him. In verses 25-30 Jesus explained that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him. By contrast, those who are not His sheep neither know nor understand His voice. Because of the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, His sheep know and understand His voice and His ways.

Every true believer will hunger and thirst for the Word of God. As they seek Jesus and study His Word, the Holy Spirit steps into His active role as teacher. They will pant after God's Word as the deer pants for the water brook.

If God's Word is closed and a mystery to you, it is because you are not in a right relationship with God. You can be religious and still be blind and deaf. You need to be born-again and filled with the Spirit of God! Settle the issue of salvation before you attempt to understand the Bible.

If you are a born-again Christian, grab your Bible and carve out significant time to spend with God in the reading and study of His Word. Invite the Holy Spirit to teach and guide you. Spend time daily in His presence with your Bible open and your spirit tuned into Jesus.

Don't measure the time, rather seek a deep encounter with God through His Word. Be patient and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ through His Word. If you yearn for more to be given to you, invest more time at the feet of Jesus in the study of His Word.

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables? Part Two: Matthew 13:14-17

"14) In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; 15) For the heart of this people has become dull, With their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes, Otherwise they would see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return, And I would heal them.' 16) But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17) For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

Jesus now gives a second answer as to why He was speaking to the people in parables. The short version might read; "I speak in parables to fulfill prophecy." Though He did not mention Psalm 78:2, it has a direct bearing on the question of the disciples. It says; "2) I will open my mouth in a parable, I will utter dark sayings of old." The rest of Psalm 78 lines up with His quotation from Isaiah 6:9-12 sighted by Jesus in the text above. I include Psalm 78:2, because it clearly foretold that the Messiah would teach in parables.

Now let's turn our attention to Matthew 13:14-15. This is nearly an exact quote from Isaiah 6:9-10. It comes from the commission of Isaiah to go and preach to Israel. God told him that though he would preach to the people, they would not listen because they were blind and deaf. Their hearts were closed.

Jesus faced the same response from the religious leaders. The Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and priests were mostly deaf and blind. Though many of the common people were connecting the dots of His words and works to the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, the religious leaders were deaf and blind with calloused hearts. Jesus concluded His public ministry by teaching in parables to keep the dull and blinded in darkness, rebellion, and rejection.

Paul eventually argued in Romans 11 that the rejection of Israel led to the gospel going to the Gentiles. But he also noted that there has always been a remnant in Israel and that God would keep His promises to His Old Testament chosen people.

Jesus was teaching in parables to fulfill prophecy and bring about salvation for all mankind. The rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders paved the way for God's greater plan for humanity.

Peter included this mystery in the powerful message he preached on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:22-24 shows that God was active in the background setting the stage for the crucifixion and resurrection. In other words, Jesus preached in parables to ensure that the gospel would be fulfilled.

But the greater question is; "When is the veil taken away?" "At what point do people hear with understanding?" That question is answered in 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:4; "When people turn to the Lord the veil is removed."

The Holy Spirit opens people to the gospel and the meaning of Scripture. He is the teacher. Salvation unlocks the door of understanding the parables taught by Jesus and to all of Scripture.

Born-again believers who are filled with the Holy Spirit have a blessing and treasure that many in the Old Testament sought. Believers can read God's Word with Spirit-anointed understanding. Their ears and eyes are open. Their spirit is alive. The wall of separation between them and God is removed. The lights are turned on. They can enjoy indescribable fellowship with God through His Spirit and in His Word.

Explanation of the Sower: Mathew 13:18-23

18) "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19) When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20) The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21) yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. 22) And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23 And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."

Jesus now explains the parable of the sower. It appears that the sower is anyone who shares the Word of God. It certainly includes the gospel, but could be any portion of Scripture or theme in the Bible. Jesus stressed three common enemies the Word faces before it can bear fruit or reach maturity.

The first enemy is the evil one. (Mathew 13:19) This is like seed by the wayside. Whenever God's Word is preached without understanding, Satan is quick to steal it away from people. This is why prayer must always accompany the sharing of the Gospel. According to 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, the god of this world seeks to blind people to the gospel. He wants to steal the seed.

The second enemy relates to other people. (Matthew 13:20-21) This is like seed sown in rocky places. These people receive the Word with joy, but when the heat of trials or persecution comes they fall away. They give way to ridicule or the desire to please others. If you desire to

walk with God, expect critics. Discouragers are everywhere! They are eager to throw cold water on your walk with God!

The third enemy is self. (Matthew 13:22) This is pictured by seed among thorns. The Word of God will be choked out by the worries of the world, the pursuit of wealth, or the desire for other things. It often relates to the lure of fun and pleasure. Of the three enemies, this is often the most difficult to overcome. Many times I have been my own worst enemy.

But those who persevere past these three enemies discover an unimaginable yield in this life. This is pictured by good soil. (Matthew 13:23) The fruitfulness is thirty, sixty, or a hundred-fold. The person who walks with God and builds their life on Scripture becomes very fruitful in this life. What God can do through one man or woman who is fully consecrated to Him defies explanation. They indeed enter and live in the Promise Land!

Jesus calls each of us into a daily walk with Him by building His Word into our lives. There will be trials, opposition, and distractions but nothing the world offers compares to walking with God. The yield compounds. The walk in the Spirit is a life of abundance far beyond worldly wealth. It includes becoming the man or woman God intended when He created people and invited them into fellowship with Himself.

The Wheat and the Tares: Matthew 13:24-30; 13:36-43

“24) Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25) But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. 26) But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. 27) The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ 28) And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ 29) But he said, ‘No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30) Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.” ’”

The parable of the tares among the wheat is the second parable that Jesus explained to His disciples. Matthew 13:36-43 is devoted to the explanation. As He left the multitudes and went into the house, His disciples came to Him and requested an explanation. Please stop and read the explanation at this time.

This parable more than any other provides a picture of a biblical worldview. Let me highlight a few points from this parable of how the Bible pictures reality.

First, the physical realm and the spiritual realm both exist. They intersect in daily life. Naturalism that denies the existence of the spiritual realm is an inadequate view of reality. It is a perversion of biblical truth.

Second, the spiritual realm consists of a battle between good and evil, right and wrong, God and the devil. Both kingdoms have invisible agents that are active in the world. God has holy angels and the devil has evil spirits. Jesus strongly punctuated this truth in this parable.

Third, there are two kinds of people in the world. The text talks about the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one. (Matthew 13:38) There are wicked and evil people in the world who are bent on spreading pain, misery, and suffering. Leave room in your view of reality for human depravity. There are some very evil, violent, and sadistic people in the world. They are demonically deceived and driven.

Yet, be careful not to write anyone off. Jesus came to save lost people. The gospel can save people held captive by the evil one and transform them. People can be born-again. The Holy Spirit can change people.

Fourth, human history is rushing toward a climax. The end of this age is quickly approaching. It will feature a harvest that will separate the sons of the kingdom from the sons of the evil one. Revelation 14:14-20 also sheds light on this harvest. In both texts, the Son of Man sends out His angels to gather the wicked for judgment.

Fifth, the eternal destiny of sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one will be radically different. Both heaven and hell are real places. Read Matthew 13:42-43 very carefully. I encourage you to compare it to Revelation 19-22. This colors in the details. The lake of fire prepared for the devil and his followers is very different from the New Jerusalem God is preparing for the sons of His kingdom. Read and take heed!

Finally, the Bible consistently teaches that the way you respond to Jesus Christ and the gospel seals your eternal destiny. Jesus did not come to judge the world, but to provide the way to bring salvation to lost people. (John 3:16-21)

According to Colossians 1:13-14, when a person puts saving faith in Jesus Christ, they are transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son. John 3:16 teaches that God gave His Son that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life.

I urge you to turn from your sin and put your faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus taught, "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of God." (See John 3:3-8). The simple gospel message is the hope for lost humanity. Receiving Jesus Christ through faith in the gospel is the only way to salvation.

The Story of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven: Matthew 13:31-33

"31) He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; 32) and this is smaller than all other seeds, but

when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” 33) He spoke another parable to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.””

These two parables are similar. The mustard seed illustrates that the gospel planted in a human soul might seem small but it grows to become huge. The potential of salvation and a walk with God can transform a barren field into a flourishing ecosystem where life can thrive.

So also, a little bit of leaven can cause a small amount of dough to grow and expand so as to feed many. The gospel is not passive or dormant. It is dynamic and full of life, transformational power, and hope.

When the world seems dark, painful, lost, and hopeless, the kingdom of heaven stands in stark contrast to the kingdom of darkness. It may seem like a small thing to cry out to Jesus Christ for salvation, but it will ignite something huge within you. The Holy Spirit will enter your innermost being and spark new life.

As salvation takes root and faith and love begin to grow, old things will pass away and new things will come. Soon the truth of God's Word will begin to set you free from bondage and despair. An inner well will spring up in your spirit and quench the thirst of your formerly barren soul.

As you change, you will become contagious for the glory of God. Your life will soon produce seeds that can spread to others. So is the explosive power of the kingdom of heaven. What starts with one can spread and encompass many.

This is why the evil god of this world works to hinder the gospel. (See Matthew 13:19 & 2 Corinthians 4:3-4) The potential of one seed that takes root can start a mighty awakening. Purpose to be that seed! Become dynamic seed and leaven for the kingdom of heaven! Invite God to work through you to change your world!

Hidden Treasure: Matthew 13:44

“44) The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

Jesus now presents a parable about the value of entering into a personal relationship with God. It is like a man who discovers a treasure hidden in a field. For joy over it, he suddenly goes and sells everything he has and buys that field. He has found a value that exceeds everything else in this life.

So it is for everyone who moves from man-made religion into a born-again and Spirit-filled relationship with God. Paul shared his testimony about this matter in Philippians 3:1-11. When

he found a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, he found a surpassing value. Suddenly, all of his previous religious merits were like sewage compared to personally knowing Jesus Christ.

There are millions of people stuck in fruitless and dead religions. They go through the motions of rituals and ceremonies that feel good but they are empty.

Suddenly the Spirit of God awakens them to salvation and saving faith in Jesus Christ. They drink of the inner spring of the Holy Spirit for the first time. They have found a treasure that dims all worldly wealth and pursuits.

Out of overwhelming joy, they sell everything in their previous life and redirect all of their time, energy, and resources to that precious value. Friends and family might think they are crazy, but they have found something words cannot describe and wealth cannot displace.

My friend, I pray that you find this treasure. I pray that you become born-again and Spirit-filled through personal faith in Jesus Christ. I pray your eyes are opened and rivers of true life begin flowing from your inner being. I pray that God opens your eyes to the treasure of the kingdom of heaven.

Pearl of Great Price: Matthew 13:45-46

“45) Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, 46) and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Nothing compares to the kingdom of heaven and the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls. Suddenly, he stumbles upon one of great value. What does he do? He goes and sells all that he has to purchase that one pearl.

I have been privileged to travel broadly and work with people from many countries, religions, and philosophies. I have also studied comparative religion at Bible college and two secular universities. Let me share my spin on this short parable.

I confess bias, but in Jesus Christ I have found a pearl of incomparable value. Jesus is both my Savior and Lord and knowing Him is the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven. (See Acts 4:11-12). My relationship with Jesus Christ is by far my most precious value in this life.

If you are on a journey for truth, I encourage you to read and study the four gospels. Pay special attention to John 3:1-21. As the Holy Spirit reveals the simple gospel to you, you will discover this pearl of incomparable value. Nothing compares. I cannot take your journey for you, but I can place a map in your hand.

I constantly hear new stories of the spread of the gospel around the world. People are turning to Jesus Christ in unprecedented numbers from other religions and under repressive government regimes. In some places, people are coming to Jesus from dreams and visions. In other places, entire villages are turning to Him in response to the preaching of the gospel.

The mission force is quickly changing from the typical western missionary, to thousands of national church planters carrying the gospel to remote and unreached places. They are no longer carrying dysfunctional western Christianity. The stories remind me of the early church in the book of Acts.

It is such a joy filling a small role of equipping these amazing men and women who forsake all to carry the gospel into very difficult places. Why do they do it? In Jesus Christ they have found a pearl of surpassing value!

The Dragnet: Matthew 13:47-50

“47) Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; 48) and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49) So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50) and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This parable now pictures the end of the age. Jesus was using a parable about fishing. When the nets are drawn in, the workers sit down and sort fish. The good fish were put in containers, the bad fish were thrown away.

What an appropriate illustration to conclude his teaching in parables at the seashore in a fishing village along the Sea of Galilee. This scene unfolded daily. The people could relate. When the nets are drawn in there is always a sorting.

Years ago, I spent time in the commercial fishing industry in Alaska. When the nets were pulled in it was time to sort fish. I have also watched this ritual in fishing villages in India, along the shores of Lake Victoria in Uganda, on the Amazon River in Peru, South America, and even with the DNR in Iowa as they sample various lakes. When the nets are drawn in, it triggers a time of sorting.

The end of the age is coming when the nets will be drawn in and a different kind of sorting will take place. This time it will involve people. Notice that angels will do the sorting. The wicked will be separated from the righteous and they will be sent to judgment.

The picture of judgment for the wicked is consistent throughout the New Testament. According to this text in Matthew 13:50; the wicked “will be cast into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus returned to this theme in Matthew 25:41, but simply calls it “the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.” Revelation 19:20 and 20:10 refers to this as “the lake of fire.” According to the Bible, all who reject Jesus Christ and the gospel face eternity in hell.

Some place emphasis on Matthew 13:49 that says the angels shall “take out the wicked from among the righteous.” They see the next age being the millennial kingdom where according to Revelation 20:1-6 Jesus will reign on earth for a thousand years. In their view, the righteous will be left to repopulate the earth during this one thousand year reign of Christ. At the beginning of this age, the wicked will be taken away from among the righteous.

Though I agree with the teaching of a millennial kingdom, I think they are reading too much into this parable. Good Bible interpretation pulls meaning from a text and does not force outside meaning into a text. I believe Jesus was simply emphasizing that two very different eternal destinies await the righteous and the unrighteous. This warning is stressed throughout the New Testament.

The New Testament consistently uses the warning of judgment to point people to the gospel. 2 Corinthians 5:10-21 is a good example. We will all one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Because of this truth, Paul spent his life preaching the gospel. He urged people to be reconciled to God through personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Don’t take this warning lightly. Hebrews 9:27 warns that “... it is appointed to man to die once and after that comes judgment.” Every day people die around the world. Some are young and some are old, but for them the nets are drawn in and the sorting begins. Are you ready? I entreat you to turn to Jesus Christ and put your faith in the gospel. Believe in Him and His death, burial and resurrection.

The Transforming Journey of a Scribe Turned Disciple: Matthew 13:51-52

““51) Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes.” 52) And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old.””

As Jesus concludes this series of parables, He asks His disciples if they understood His teachings. It was a good question. They had asked Him previous questions that led to an expanded explanation of the parable of the sower and the tares among the wheat. (See Matthew 13:36)

Like a good teacher, Jesus now gives them time to inquire about the other parables about the kingdom of heaven. They responded that they had it nailed.

I have discovered that knowledge is usually accompanied by a test in life. Though the parable of the hidden treasure and the costly pearl emphasized the surpassing value of the kingdom of heaven, each of the disciples were soon going to be tested. During His darkest hour of trial and crucifixion, most of them were going to flee or deny Him. One of them even betrayed Him for thirty pieces of silver. At this point in life, they all failed the value test!

I maintain there is a huge difference between head knowledge and embracing truth with our heart. We do not really understand any biblical truth until it is integrated into our lives. There is a process of discovery, learning, and application of new revelation into our lives. It takes time for a new concept to become a personal conviction.

This may have been the meaning behind Paul's prayer for believers as recorded in Ephesians 1:15-23. Growth and maturity in the life of a believer is a continual process of truth encounter and inner transformation.

The scribes were apt examples of the learning and growth process that awaits every new Christian. They were masters of the Old Testament Law. It both helped and hindered them in their Christian life. Walking in the Spirit by faith, agape love, and grace would be a giant leap forward from their former legalism, self righteousness, and condescension. At the same time, every principle in the New Testament is anchored in the Old Testament. They had an amazing foundation to build on. So how does this relate to you and me?

Each of us brings past experiences, values, life philosophies, religious traditions, and worldly wisdom into our Christian life. These things are "inscribed" deeply within us. Spiritual growth is a continual process of putting off the old, being renewed in the spirit of your mind, and then putting on the new self based on truth. (See Ephesians 4:20-24)

I can picture the smile on Jesus as He finished His teaching and asked His disciples; "Have you understood all these things?" When they replied "Yes!," He alone understood the long road before them. It would be a long journey for their head knowledge to be forged into heart wisdom. Every Christian is on that journey, but how wonderful it is when we embrace the process!

Exposing Unbelief: Matthew 13:53-58

"53) When Jesus had finished these parables, He departed from there. 54)° He came to His hometown and began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? 55) Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56) And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" 57) And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." 58) And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief."

Home sweet home! Well, not always. Jesus now returns to His hometown of Nazareth for a brief visit. As was His custom, He went into the synagogue and began to teach. This may have been His home synagogue where He grew up.

Rather than celebrating His homecoming, the people took offense at Him. They questioned both His teachings and His miraculous powers. He had grown and stepped into His office of Messiah. They wanted to force Him back into His former role as the carpenter's son.

The reference to His mother Mary and His step brothers of James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas and His sisters is very telling. His stepfather, Joseph, had kept Mary a virgin until after Jesus was born. (See Matthew 1:24-25) Then they started their own family.

This text in Matthew 13:53-58 is both ignored and scorned by the Catholic Church. They maintain that His mother is still "the blessed Virgin Mary." But the biblical text says otherwise.

The teaching of His extended family appears throughout the four gospels and the New Testament. Compare these verses with Matthew 12:46-50, John 7:3-10 and Jude 1:1. Church history teaches that the author or the book of James and Jude were indeed half brothers of Jesus who became leaders in the early church.

So why the backlash in Nazareth? It appears that they wanted to force Him back into His previous role as family provider in the absence of His stepfather Joseph. As the eldest son, the duty fell on Him to support His family until His siblings were raised and then to care for His widowed mother throughout her senior years. He inherited the family business and was expected to run the carpenters shop.

This text hints heavily that the people of Nazareth were pressuring Him to drop His ridiculous itinerant travels and become a responsible elder son. They wanted Him to reopen the carpenters shop and resume His traditional family duty. Their image of Him was "The Carpenters Son" and not "The Lamb of God" or "The Messiah." They were trying to force Him back into His former life.

Every new Christian faces this same pressure from former friends and family. Initially they reject the change Jesus produces in you. They want you back at the parties and former festivities.

Some pull anchor and give way to this pressure. They "backslide" into their former life. Those who hold fast to their new life "in Christ" often face scorn. Notice verse 57 says, "They took offense at Him." The pressure is real and it can be overwhelming for some new believers.

How did Jesus respond? He simply noted that "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, and his own household." Friends and family are often the most difficult to reach. Be patient with them, but by all means forge ahead in your walk with God.

On an encouraging note, His mother Mary and His brothers all participated in the prayer meeting recorded in Acts 1:14 that ushered in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Jesus won them over! He built bridges and not walls with His family.

But the text in Matthew 13 does not end with His family. Verse 58 says; “He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.” There is a mystery in the Gospels and the New Testament that is difficult to grasp. There seems to be a direct connection between miracles and sincere faith or unbelief.

Jesus often made sincere faith the condition of His miraculous works. See Mark 9:20-24. Jesus made it clear that “all things are possible to Him who believes.”

I confess, I am the byproduct of the agnostic Western Church. After nearly fifty years of walking with Jesus, my prayer is often like the father of the helpless son; “I do believe, help my unbelief.” (Vs 24)

Many people ask why we seldom see miracles in the western church today. I am persuaded that we are like the people of Nazareth. We suffer from a condition of unbelief. Western theology as a whole has been watered down with the philosophy of naturalism. We have been taught that “God does not do miracles today”... and we sincerely believe it!

Instead of praying in faith for healing, we pray for God to comfort the afflicted. The western church has far more faith in doctors than in the Great Physician. We pray as a last resort as we plan the funeral for our loved ones.

Honestly, we have a crisis of unbelief when it comes to the power of God. We strongly believe in the existence of God and the power of the gospel to save people, but we are agnostics when it comes to believing that God does miracles today. Verse 53 clearly explains the problem with Western Christianity; “53) And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.”

This is precisely where the Holy Spirit is wrestling in my life in recent years. He is confronting me with my crisis of unbelief when it comes to the power of God in my everyday life. I am starting to confess and repent of my theologically conditioned unbelief. I am asking God for the grace to pray with unwavering faith!

The Tragic Demise of John the Baptist: Matthew 14:1-12

“1) At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, 2) and said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” 3) For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. 4) For John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” 5) Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet.”

We now come to the story of the death of John the Baptist. He was arrested because of His courage and unbending stand for truth. He had repeatedly confronted Herod about his sin of cohabiting with the wife of his brother Philip. Her name was Herodias.

The story suggests that she was the one behind his arrest, imprisonment, and shackles. Rather than repent and amend her ways, she persecuted the messenger who stood on God's truth. Her conscience was seared. She embraced sin and hated righteousness.

Mark 6:19-20 adds a unique commentary about the tension between Herod and Herodias over John the Baptist, and why Herod was protecting John. Let's briefly look at these verses.

"19) Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so; 20) for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him." It appears that John was making headway with Herod.

Sadly, Herod was eventually trapped by his own presumption, pride, and foolishness. He threw a birthday party for himself with many prestigious guests in attendance. At one point, most likely after much wine and indulgence, the daughter of Herodias entertained the crowd with dancing. Herod was so pleased with her, he made a public oath to give her whatever she asked. Mark 6:23 says he was willing to give her up to half of his kingdom.

Then it happened. After a brief consultation with her vindictive mother, his step daughter came back and asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Though Herod was grieved, he refused to be humiliated before his dinner guests. He gave the command and John was promptly executed.

Let me make a stunning observation; John the Baptist died because of his defense of the sanctity of marriage. He preached against sin and immorality. Herodias loved pleasure more than God. She rejected biblical morality. She also had no regard for the sanctity of life. Her pleasure was more important than John's life.

The same battles are deeply dividing western society and the church today. Sadly, many Christians would side with Herodias today and condemn John the Baptist for being critical and judgmental. Moral boundaries are blurred and those who stand for truth are charged with hate crimes.

I admire the backbone and courage of John the Baptist. His life and death were not wasted. He was indeed a righteous and holy man and served as a forerunner for Jesus in the spirit and power of Elijah. He fulfilled God's calling and purpose for his life. Eternity will celebrate him as a hero of faith.

There is much to learn from the life, ministry, and tragic demise of John the Baptist. By all standards he was young. He was only six months older than Jesus. Never despise the potential

influence and impact of young godly men. Both John and Jesus died around 33 years of age. This point deeply grips me!

His disciples took away his body and gave him a dignified burial. Then they went and reported to Jesus. Little did they know, the storm clouds were quickly gathering for another tragic death that would change the course of human history.

There's Room For You: Matthew 14:13-14

“13) Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. 14) When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick.”

This text shows the affinity Jesus had for John the Baptist. It highlights the human side of Jesus. Jesus sought a place of solitude by Himself most likely to mourn the death of His friend.

It sounds like He got into a boat alone and pushed off into the water. The text is not clear if He had a destination in mind or if the time in the boat was His solitude.

It didn't matter. When the crowd saw Him, they began to follow Him along the shore. When the boat landed, a great multitude was waiting for Him. It was nearly impossible for Him to escape notice.

At this moment the true character of Jesus began to shine. He was never self-focused nor was He annoyed by the needy people. The text says, “He felt compassion for them, and healed their sick.”

Let's pause for a moment and learn an important lesson from these two verses. Let me say this loud and clear: “You are never an annoyance or inconvenience to Jesus.” He loves you. He wants to meet you at the point of your need.

There's an old hymn that captures this lesson. It's called; “Room at the Cross.” The chorus says:

There's room at the cross for you
There's room at the cross for you
Though millions have come
There's still room for one
Yes there's room at the cross for you.

It took me years to understand that hymn. I used to avoid taking my needs to Jesus in prayer because I didn't feel that I mattered. Satan had convinced me that Jesus didn't care and that my needs were not important. “Who was I to bother God?” Do you ever feel that way?

This text screams that Jesus always has compassion and time for those who are seeking Him. “Though millions have come, there’s still room for one, there’s room at the cross for you.” He invites us to come to Him.

Don’t End The Service Prematurely: Matthew 14:15-21

“15) When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, “This place is desolate and the hour is already late; so send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” 16) But Jesus said to them, “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!””

Evidently, Jesus had been ministering to the people for a long time. Because it had been a spontaneous gathering, there were no provisions made in advance for food.

The disciples came to Jesus with an obvious solution, “Ok, let’s wrap this thing up and send these people home so they can buy themselves some food.” From their perspective, Jesus had already served up plenty of healings and miracles for one day.

But Jesus wasn’t done yet. He wasn’t about to end the service prematurely. Just when they were ready to sing the doxology and give the benediction, Jesus looked at His disciples and said; “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

They looked at Him and said; “That’s impossible, we’ve already taken inventory and we only have five loaves and two fish.” Do you ever restrict God to the resources in hand? Your budget can either be a box to limit God or down payment for a larger miracle.

Jesus said, “Bring them to me.” He was the Provider. He had fed over a million people in the wilderness for forty years under Moses. What was a single meal for 5,000 men plus their families? It depends on your perspective. For the disciples this was uncharted waters.

Do you see the school of faith Jesus had His disciples enrolled in? By this point they had passed kindergarten. They had great faith in Him as Savior. They knew He could save people.

They had just graduated from elementary school. They were gaining confidence in Him as the Great Physician. They knew He could heal people. I confess, I’m still in elementary school. It still stretches me to pray for healings – but I’m doing it more often.

But Jesus was about to promote them to middle school. It was time to meet Him as “The Provider.” This was a huge leap forward in their faith. They were ready to end the service prematurely because things had come to the end of their “faith comfort zone”, but Jesus was ready for the next level of faith.

When it comes to gaining faith in Jesus as Provider, it's often a huge stretch. It launches us into the realm of what we would consider "the impossible." It defies reason, goes beyond solid accounting principles and is often on par with moving mountains with five shovels and two picks. Ok, the text says five loaves and two fish, but you get the idea.

When Jesus said, "Bring them to me"; I could just imagine the disciples looking at each other and asking, "Who is this guy? Does He think He can walk on water or what?" Ok, let's not get ahead of ourselves... walking on water was the next lesson. They had to pass middle school faith before they were ready for high school faith. (For those of you who read ahead, you already know that's a teaser for the next paragraph in the story.)

After the disciples had the people recline, Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed the meal and started breaking the loaves. I cannot explain it, but in Provider faith, division somehow becomes multiplication. Everyone ate and was satisfied and they collected twelve baskets of leftovers. They had more left over than what they started with!

I've seen it happen many times that the ending balance after a huge venture of faith far exceeds the initial "start up" capital. How can I explain that? The Provider stepped in!

I've been involved in numerous projects for the kingdom where a few hundred dollars of startup seed money turns into thousands and eventually grows into millions. Some of the Provider stories are so miraculous I need to screen the audience I share them with so people don't think I have secret supplies of wealth.

The truth is our family still lives on a modest budget, drives old cars, shops at thrift stores, loves the clearance department at Walmart, and trusts our Provider for our daily needs. Yes, like the disciples we are blessed by leftovers.

But my faith in Jesus as the Provider is growing. When I first stepped into ministry, a few thousand dollar evangelistic endeavor or a hundred thousand dollar annual church budget was extreme faith. Today, individual ministry project budgets of a million dollars or more are becoming more common... but they do still stretch me. What has changed? My view of the Provider is growing.

There are two amazing lessons we have learned from living by faith in our Provider the past thirty years. First, He seldom does it the way we expect! And Second, He usually shows up right at the end of the fourth quarter. Don't end the service prematurely. The Provider usually steps up when we step down and turn things over to Him.

Where are you at in the School of Faith? Have you passed Savior Faith? Have you invited Jesus Christ into your life? It is the prerequisite for all other classes. Have you grappled with Great Physician Faith? Jesus is both the Healer and the Comforter. Have you ventured out into Provider Faith? Are you joining Jesus in any God Sized ventures of faith? Are you ready to

have your small boxes shattered? Are you ready to step out of your comfort zone? Stay tuned! Jesus was about to drag His disciples into high school and graduate school faith!

High School of Faith: Matthew 14:22-33

“22) Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. 23) After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. 24) But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25) And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. 26) When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27) But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” 28) Peter said to Him, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” And He said, “Come!” 29) And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30) But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31) Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and *said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32) When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33) And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!””

The School of Faith continued for the disciples. In the previous post we saw how Kindergarten was believing in Jesus as Savior. Elementary School was believing in Jesus as the Great Physician for healing and freedom from demonic oppression. Middle School was believing in Him as the Provider in the face of seemingly impossible situations.

We now come to High School in the school of faith. This is when we experientially discover Jesus as Sovereign Lord! It only happens by meeting Him through the storms of life. It is the unwavering faith that He is in absolute control though the storms are raging. Let’s unpack the text.

In the story, Jesus commanded the disciples to get into the boat and go ahead of Him while He sent the crowd away. As they were many stadia away, they were caught in a life-threatening storm. It was the fourth watch of the night, they were exhausted and it seemed that Jesus had abandoned them.

Do you ever feel that way? It is a certainty that storms will come in life. Becoming a Christian does not come with a guarantee that we will never have storms, trials or opposition in life. To the contrary, we live in a fallen world and our faith will be tested.

This level of faith prevents us from slipping into panic mode. No matter how severe the outer storms, when we embrace Jesus as Sovereign Lord it enables us to live in the fruit of the Spirit. This is equivalent to Psalm 91:1 and David dwelling in the shelter of the Most High and abiding in the shadow of the Almighty.

Ok, let's learn a few important lessons from this story. First, let me ask a question; "Where was Jesus while His disciples were fighting the storm? According to Matthew 14:23, He was in the mountain praying for them! Don't miss this vital detail!

Romans 8:28-39 gives us the same promise. Jesus is constantly interceding for us. He is actively turning our trials into good. Much necessary growth comes through the storms of life, but God's Word promises that nothing can separate us from His love.

Second, notice that Jesus used the waves of the storm as stepping stones to walk into their lives in a much deeper way. In the middle of the storm He came to them walking on the water. It was there, in the middle of the storm, that they met Jesus as "Sovereign Lord" and discovered that He was in control. This lesson is not learned outside of the storms in life.

Third, sometimes in the middle of the storm our faith falls short. Peter sincerely tried to walk on water until fear engulfed him and he began to sink. I commend Peter. When He stepped out of the boat into God's Sovereignty he left his comfort zone behind.

But let me provide a little side note. Jesus does not share His glory with any man. Had Peter succeeded, the other disciples may have been confused about who to worship. Far too many Christian leaders promote themselves to the obscurity of Jesus. True faith is making sure the spotlight is always shining on Jesus.

Fourth, trusting Jesus as Sovereign Lord motivates us to attempt great things for God! It assures us that He is there to save us when we start sinking. If you have never cried out with Peter; "Lord, save me" it is because you have never stepped beyond your comfort zone.

Finally, notice when Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the wind stopped. Because Jesus is the Sovereign Lord, we have the assurance that the storm will pass... and it often happens when we invite Him into our boat.

As I look back at my life, I see clearly that God used every storm in my life for a purpose. The window of understanding became clear when I embraced Jesus. Never, never, never let Satan deceive you into holding Jesus at arms length because of a storm in your past.

Until you embrace Jesus as Sovereign Lord you will be tossed around in life and never experience abiding peace and joy. The storms "without" will forever feed the storm "within."

This is especially true today as the storm clouds of the end times gather. It is a huge step of faith to resolve the issue of God's Sovereignty and control in your life. You will never conquer worry, stress and anxiety if you remain an agnostic related to the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God. Many Christian's fail to pass this high school course!

So you wonder; “Where does the School of Faith Lead next?” “What does Graduate School look like?” That’s a valid question and it deserves a post all of its own. We can stretch an analogy too far, but I believe Jesus wants every Christian to enroll in the Graduate School of Faith.

(It’s common to teach this part of the Bible and point out how Peter lost faith and sank into the waves but, as Terry points out, Peter was the only one who dared to step out of the boat. The other eleven disciples were still in the boat! And, while Jesus did have to rescue impulsive Peter when he got distracted, note that verse 32 says, “When they got into the boat...” It doesn’t say Jesus carried Peter back to the boat, it says *they* got into the boat. I’m convinced Peter walked back to that boat!) -dj

Graduate Level School of Faith: Acts 1:3-8

“4) Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; 5) for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”” Acts 1:4-5; Matthew 3:11-12; John 15-16

In finishing our theme from the past two posts, we must ask the question; “What was the content of the final curriculum Jesus taught His Disciples?” In other words, “What is The Graduate Level School of Faith?”

To answer that question, we need to step back and take a broader look at His ministry. It might be helpful to ask; “What did Jesus focus on in His final class before going to the cross and what was His final focus before His ascension?” Providentially, they encompass the same subject. That is not coincidental!

Are you ready for this: “The Graduate School of Faith relates to the baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit.” This was the Promise of the Father. (Acts 1:4-5; Joel 2:28-29) This was the Prophecy of John the Baptist. (Matthew 3:11-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16; John 1:32-34) This was the Provision Jesus offered His disciples. (John 14:16-18, 26-27; 15:26-27; 16:5-15)

This subject is so important that it changed the times and epoch from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This is the new wine and the new wines skins for this present age of grace. Learning how to walk in the Spirit is, “The Graduate School of Faith.” (See Galatians 3:1-5; 5:16-26) Every fruitful believer will be enrolled in this course for the rest of their life.

But tragically, few Christians understand and embrace the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Yet this is the source of power for Christian living and witness. No wonder Satan works overtime to bring confusion and ignorance to this vital doctrine. He will do anything to enslave believers in fleshly bondage and keep them from God’s Promised land of power and anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Let me conclude this post by giving a brief A-Z overview of the ministry of the Holy Spirit Jesus offers to every born-again believer.

SO WHO IS HE?

- A. He is the author of Scripture. 2 Peter 1:20-21, 2 Timothy 3:16-17
- B. He is the promise of the Father. Acts 1:2-5, Acts 2:33, 38-39
- C. He is the gift Jesus offers. Acts 2:38-39, John 14:16
- D. He is the power of the witnesses. Acts 1:8; 4:30-31
- E. He is the conviction of the sinner. John 16:8-11
- F. He is the seal of the saved. Ephesians 1:13-14
- G. He is the regenerator of the believer. Titus 3:5-7

DO YOU WANT TO HEAR MORE?

- H. He is the One who indwells true believers. 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19-20
- I. He is the distributor of spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7; 11
- J. He is the abiding anointing that teaches. 1 John 2:20, 27; John 16:13
- K. He is the source of the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23
- L. He is the basis for Christian unity. Ephesians 4:3-4
- M. He is our access to the Father. Ephesians 2:18
- N. He is the guide to church leaders. Acts 13:1-4

WELL, HAVE YOU EMBRACED HIM?

- O. The stiff-necked can resist Him. Acts 7:51
- P. The sinful believer can grieve Him. Ephesians 4:30-31
- Q. The insensitive Christian can quench Him. 1 Thessalonians 5:19

SO DO YOU REALLY NEED HIM?

- R. He is the “Daddy Cry” of the adopted. Galatians 4:6, Romans 8:15
- S. He is the means of true worship. John 4:23-24
- T. He is the inspiration of the singer. 1 Corinthians 14:15, Eph 5:18-21
- U. He is the unction of the intercessor. Ephesians 6:18-20
- V. He is the overflow of God’s love. Romans 5:5
- W. He is the possession of true believers. Romans 8:5-9

SO, CAN YOU LIVE WITHOUT HIM?

- X. He is our helper when we are weak. Romans 8:26a, John 16:7
- Y. He is our intercessor when we are discouraged. Romans 8:26
- Z. He is our assurance when we have doubts (Romans 8:16) and He is our inner strength and power when we are empty. Ephesians 3:16

CONCLUSION: Oh, what more can I say – even though the alphabet is over we have just scratched the surface. Let's indulge a bit more: He is the member of the Godhead that perfected creation (Genesis 1:2), He came upon some Old Testament saints (Psalms 51:10-11), He filled many key figures in the narrative story (Luke 1:41, 2:25-26), He overshadowed Mary at the conception of Jesus to make the incarnation possible (Luke 1:35), and He descended as a dove upon Jesus at His baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). He is also the One currently at work building and fitting together all the believers into a holy and awesome dwelling for God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

The important question is not “how much of the Holy Spirit do you have, but rather how much of you does the Holy Spirit have?” There is only one baptism of the Holy Spirit placing believers into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), but there are many fillings of the Holy Spirit empowering us for life and service. (Ephesians 5:18)

The question is not are you a fundamentalist, evangelical, charismatic, or Pentecostal, the question is: "Are you born-again through faith in Jesus Christ and walking in the filling and power of the Holy Spirit?" (Acts 1:8, Galatians 5:16-24)

Resist the temptation to change your understanding of the Holy Spirit to match your experience, background, or theology. Instead, invite the Holy Spirit to change you to match your calling in Christ Jesus as explained in the Bible. (Romans 8:1-39; Titus 3:4-7)

Friends, this is as simple as I can make it, but it will take you a lifetime to understand and apply it. Just don't let anyone or anything hinder your enrollment in this school. You now have the introduction notes to Day One, Class One of "The Graduate School of Faith!"

The Influence of One Changed Man: Matthew 14:34-36

"34) When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. 35) And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent word into all that surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick; 36) and they implored Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were cured." Matthew 14:34-36

When you tie the record of Matthew and Mark together, an amazing story emerges. It appears that the Gerasene demonic that Jesus had set free as recorded in Matthew 8:28-34 and Mark 5:1-20 became an amazing witness for Jesus. In fact, God used him to spark a regional awakening. Let's piece the story together.

When the herd of swine rushed down the bank and perished in the sea, those who heard explained what Jesus has done in setting the man free from Legion. The result was that the whole city came out and begged Jesus to depart from their region. (See Matthew 8:34 & Mark 5:17) They rejected Jesus.

Immediately, the newly freed man wanted to join Jesus and His disciples. (See Mark 8:18-19) But Jesus did not let him. Instead He said; "19)... Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you." So, what does this have to do with our text in Matthew 14:34-36?

Jesus had now come back to Gennesaret, which is in Decapolis and experienced an overwhelming welcome. What had changed? According to Mark 5:20, the man who was set free from Legion obeyed Jesus; "20) And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone marveled."

The witness of this one man was so impactful, it changed the spiritual climate in the region. The district was transformed from rejection to reception. In fact, the response was so huge, this is where Jesus ended up feeding the four thousand. (See Mark 7:31-8:10) I would call that "fruitfulness."

According to Matthew 14:35, when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent into all the surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick. They went from entreating Jesus to

leave their region in Matthew 8:34, to entreating Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak in Matthew 14:36. That's amazing!

Never underestimate the impact you can have for Jesus. If He has changed you, just tell your story. As family, neighbors and friends hear and see the change in you, they will begin to seek Jesus. These three verses scream of the amazing things God can do through the witness of one man or woman.

The Corrupting Power of Apostasy: Matthew 15:1-9

“1) Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2) “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” 3) And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4) For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ 5) But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” 6) he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7) You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 8) ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 9) But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ ””

Matthew now relates a story of an encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees and scribes that exposes the hypocrisy and corruption of man-made religion. Pay very close attention to this story, because it exposes the apostasy that Paul warned would accompany the end times. (See 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 2 Timothy 3:1-4:8)

But wait a minute; “What is apostasy?” You might not even be familiar with the term. It is basically a drift away from truth into deception. It is the concept of churches and religious institutions replacing biblical standards with worldly values and then condoning them in the name of “God.” Let’s see how this text exposes the drift of apostasy.

As the story opens, we discover some snoopy religious police were trying to dig up fault in Jesus and His disciples. They were seeking evidence to accuse and discredit Him. Beware of the self-appointed religious critics!

Shortly, they brought an accusation against Jesus related to His disciples not ceremonially washing their hands before a meal according to the tradition of the religious elders. I sincerely doubt a group of former fisherman, tax gatherers, and sinners cared diddly-squat about traditional legalistic hand washing. But the Pharisees and scribes were now measuring Jesus and His disciples by the “man-made” traditions of the religious elite.

Jesus used this accusation to expose their own hypocrisy. He asks them the question; “3) ... And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” What was Jesus talking about?

The religious elders adopted a tradition that excused those who claimed to be dedicated to God from caring for their aging parents. They were somehow “off the hook” and above the commandments of God.

But their tradition was not taught in the Bible. It was not only extra-biblical, it was contrary to the clear teaching of the Word of God as expressed in the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:12 says, “Honor your father and mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.”

Now think with me: How can religious leaders arrive at conclusions totally opposite and contrary to the clear teaching of the Bible? Could it happen today? Let’s continue with the story.

Jesus summarized the severity of their hypocrisy in verse 6 when He said; “And thus you invalidate the word of God for the sake of your tradition.” They had become pious religious hypocrites with traditions 180 degrees opposite of the clear teaching of the word of God, and yet they presented themselves as the religious authorities and the guardians of truth.

How does this happen? How can church practices, values, teachings and traditions end up totally contrary to Scripture? Worse yet, how can supposed “spiritual leaders” use heretical positions to condemn the righteous? Beware! This is happening with alarming frequency today!

Jesus then quoted from Isaiah to drive home His argument; “8) This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 9) But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ ”” It is possible for worship to be invalidated by replacing godliness with wickedness and embracing immorality in the name of “God!”

This encounter becomes a warning of the corrupting power of apostasy. Don’t be fooled by the outer cloak of “religion.” If the morals, values, and traditions of any spiritual leader, church, or denomination do not square with the clear teaching of Scripture, it is rooted in the spirit of antiChrist.

Truth and Human Emotions: Matthew 15:10-14

“10) After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, “Hear and understand. 11) It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” 12) Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” 13) But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. 14) Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.””

This story affords us the opportunity to discuss the relationship between truth and human emotions. Put on your thinking cap because this is a very important subject.

In order to understand these verses, we need to review the context. This came about because the Pharisees and scribes maliciously accused Jesus of transgression because He was allowing His disciples to eat bread without ceremonial washing and Jesus turned the tables on them. (Matthew 15:1-9)

It appears that the Pharisees were offended when Jesus exposed their hypocrisy. Truth can be offensive, but exposing sin and error is an act of love. Notice that Jesus did not back down.

These religious leaders were wrong for two reasons. First, they ignored the Word of God and instead built erroneous traditions. Second, they become blind guides to otherwise sincere people. Their path was leading to destruction, and those who followed them faced the same doom. That's very serious.

In the next paragraph, the disciples asked Jesus to explain Himself. He was more than willing to expound on the erroneous ways of the Pharisees. We will save that for the next post, but for now it is important to understand that Jesus did not water down the truth because it offended others.

God's Word is the standard of truth, not opinion polls, hurt feelings, or offended people. Hypocrisy is a master at hurting and offending others while making their own emotions the guide to truth. I always cringe when someone responds or opposes solid Biblical teaching with the words; "I feel that...!"

I'm sorry, but human emotions are not the guardian of truth. The Bible teaches that the heart of man is dark, deceived, and wicked. The Holy Spirit offends people in the process of bringing conviction. The Word of God is living and active like a two-edged sword. (Hebrews 4:12) It can cut deeply.

It appears that the Pharisees were laying a heavy guilt trip on the disciples because Jesus offended them. Here is the bottom line: The truth can hurt, but truth is the only pathway to freedom, forgiveness, salvation, and healing. (See John 8:31-36)

Love and truth need each other. They were in perfect balance in Jesus. Yet, He never allowed love to obscure or silence the truth. On the contrary, He understood that truth is the only way for people who are about to fall into a pit to reconsider their path and change their destination.

You will dance with this subject many times in your relations to other people. At times you will be the one offended by the truth. Don't pout, instead deal with what the Holy Spirit is exposing in your life. Amend your ways based on truth. It's the best way to avoid tragic pits in your life!

Other times you will need to take a stand on truth that might offend someone close to you. Do it in a loving way, but don't water down the truth so as not to offend others. That makes you an enabler. You will be holding their hand as they fall headlong into a tragic pit.

At first glance this text seems mundane, but it serves up a significant discussion. I encourage you to take a second look at these verses. They are deeper than first impressions reveal.

Holiness Comes From Within: Matthew 15:15-20

“16) Jesus said, “Are you still lacking in understanding also? 17) Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? 18) But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. 19) For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. 20) These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.””

The problem with religion is that it thinks God is only concerned about the outside. But those who are born-again know that God owns both the inside and the outside. It is not things like foods that go into the mouth that defile a person, but things that come from the heart.

The Pharisees were great at dressing up the outside, but inwardly were full of evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, theft, lying, and slander. In fact, as they stood in the presence of Jesus, they were plotting His death. They were jealous, angry, bitter, and vengeful. They were the true defiled ones.

These inward things reveal the heart of people. When a person becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit comes in and begins to clean up the inside. Holiness is from the inside to the outside.

Feasting From A Different Table: Matthew 15:21-28

“21) Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22) And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.” 23) But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, “Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.” 24) But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25) But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” 26) And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” 27) But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” 28) Then Jesus said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once.”

This story is also told in Mark 7:24-30. The repetition proves that it was significant and impacted the disciples greatly. There is far more to this story than a casual reading uncovers.

The broader context reveals that much had been happening the previous week. Jesus never really had time to process the death of John the Baptist, for the crowds were constantly shadowing Him. Every attempt at solitude proved vain.

The text hints that this trip to the region of Tyre may have been an attempt to “get away” for rest and relaxation. When Matthew 15:21 and Mark 7:24 are combined, we discover that Jesus “withdrew” and “entered a house and wanted no one to know of it.” It was at this time that a gentile woman of Syrophenician descent approached the house.

She was a Canaanite. These people were so openly immoral that their behavior was reminiscent of a pack of dogs. Hence their Jewish neighbors referred to them as “dogs.” Historically, they were to be cleansed from the land during the conquest, but the Jewish people failed to carry out the cleansing and northern tribes failed to drive them out.

It was not only their morals which were despicable, but also their pagan religious practices. They practiced many forms of idolatry, spiritism, and sorceries which included human sacrifice. Deuteronomy 18:9-15 provides the historical context. Satan used these people to defile Israel throughout Old Testament history.

After the rebuilding of Herod's Temple and the return of the Jewish people to God and the temple system of worship prior to the birth of Christ, strict lines of separation again formed between the Jewish people and their many immoral gentile neighbors.

Unfortunately, the previous text of Matthew 15:15-20 shows that the Jewish legalism was only skin deep. Inwardly their hearts were filled with the same lusts and sinfulness as their Gentile neighbors. Jesus was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel to bring them back to God.

At first glance, it seems that Jesus was discriminating against this woman. But there are deeper dynamics at play in this story. Let's put on our thinking caps and analyze this story in light of the historical context mentioned above.

First, her daughter's condition of being demon possessed was most likely the direct result of her religion. As noted above from Deuteronomy 18, the Canaanite religion was based on spiritism. Her daughter most likely had a pagan ceremony performed over her at birth with the intention of inviting a guardian spirit.

Second, the woman herself likely dressed and was adorned with overtones of Phoenician culture, values, and morals. This included hairstyle, jewelry, tattoos, and perfumes that expressed lewdness. Many of these women were openly adulterous, sensual, and destitute as a result. They were loud and boisterous. Her initial behavior in the text of “shouting” portrayed these women well.

Third, the problem in the text was a degree of hypocrisy. Initially, she was not repenting from her lifestyle or sinfulness; rather was asking Jesus to help her with a crisis that had spun out of control. The demon had turned on her daughter and was cruelly abusing her. She was desperate to the point of shouting at Jesus. She wanted Jesus to merely change the consequences of her life choices rather than address the root causes. This is why Jesus initially ignored her.

Fourth, the conversation Jesus had with her started to focus on her sinfulness and not her daughter's crisis. His reference to "dogs" exposed her sinful morals. It was equivalent to Jesus telling the Samaritan woman to "go call your husband." (John 4:16-18) She had previously had five husbands and was now living with a man. Jesus wants us to deal with our root sinful condition.

Fifth, in verse 27 the woman not only acknowledged her sinful condition, but she also started identifying Jesus as her new master. She humbled herself to being content with crumbs if they were coming from His table.

I agree with her. I would rather have crumbs from the table of Jesus than any banquet Satan offers. She had spent her life eating from Satan's table and it proved to be poisonous and deadly. In my previous life, I spent time at Satan's table as well. It is deceptive food.

Finally, Jesus responded to her faith and her daughter was healed. Faith is always the basis of salvation. I find that wording of "healed" intriguing. In this case, being delivered from demon possession was equated with being "healed." Evidently, a host of physical, emotional, and mental problems were resolved for the girl. She was made whole. In the four Gospels, many physical and mental problems had demonic causes. The same is true today.

Salvation is far more than asking Jesus to change your crisis. It involves inviting Jesus to change your heart and become your new Master. Putting your faith in Him is the beginning of a new life. It means you begin feeding from a new table.

The Mount of Healing: Matthew 15:29-31

"29) Departing from there, Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up on the mountain, He was sitting there. 30) And large crowds came to Him, bringing with them those who were lame, crippled, blind, mute, and many others, and they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them. 31) So the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel."

There are a number of mountain experiences that mark key points in the ministry of Jesus. For example, there was the sermon on the mountain. (Matthew 5-7) There was the time of intercession on the mountain. (Matthew 14:23) Here we see healings on the mountain. (Matthew 15:29-31) Soon would come His transfiguration on the mountain. (Matthew 17:1-13) I am sure you can add more to this list.

What makes these healings on the mountain unique was that it was exceptionally difficult for the kinds of people he healed to get to Him. Many of them were lame, crippled, and blind.

The text indicates that the crowd brought them. They had to put extra effort into their faith to reach him. He did not make it easy for them. It was not a convenient location. Many of them had to be carried. How far are you willing to carry someone so they can meet Jesus?

Another thing that stands out is that these were not healings that could be faked. These were not merely people with aches and pains. The healings were substantial and verifiable. “30) ... they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them.”

The response of the crowd is noteworthy. 31) So the crowd marveled as they saw the mute speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.” They marveled and they glorified the God of Israel.

That last phrase is significant. Mark 7:31-8:10 hints that these miracles may have happened in the region of Decapolis. This was an area of ethnic blend. The lost sheep of Israel were mingling openly with the many gentiles in this area and religious practices were most likely a patchwork reflecting both Judaism and paganism.

Look at the result of the healings Jesus performed. The God of Israel got all of the attention and glory. This was monumental. Jesus was not only outshining the religious leaders of Israel, He was also obscuring the pagan gods of the gentiles.

We now learn an important lesson about biblical healings. Their primary purpose is to glorify God and advance the Gospel. It is self-evident from these verses that the stories from the healings on the mountain that day spread far and wide. Jesus was headline news!

I cannot read these verses without thinking about Hebrews 2:1-4. God was confirming the message and ministry of Jesus with signs, wonders, and miracles. Jesus was in a category all of His own!

Have you taken time to study the evidence supporting the person and works of Jesus Christ? As you weigh them all, you will begin to marvel. At some point, you must move beyond your doubt about the true identity of Jesus Christ.

Lord of Compassion: Matthew 15:32-39

“32) And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, “I feel compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” 33) The disciples said to Him, “Where would we get so many loaves in this desolate place to satisfy such a large crowd?” 34) And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” 35) And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; 36) and He took the seven loaves and the fish; and giving thanks, He broke them and started giving them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 37) And they all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full. 38) And those who

ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39) And sending away the crowds, Jesus got into the boat and came to the region of Magadan.”

In this story, Jesus again steps into the role of the Provider. According to verse 32, He had been ministering to them for three days. He was most likely both teaching and healing. That was a long open-air crusade.

The only reason given for this miracle was that Jesus felt compassion for the multitude and did not want them to leave hungry. Feeding the hungry and taking care of the basic needs of people is often referred to as “compassion ministry.” It is rooted in the character of Jesus.

In the story, everything was present for the miracle. There was a genuine need. There were four thousand hungry people. There was a small supply of food. Altogether there were seven loaves and a few small fish. The supply was woefully inadequate for the need.

But there was one more factor to the formula; Jesus was present. The Provider was among them. According to Matthew 16:8-10, trusting Jesus as Provider takes faith. It is just like trusting Him as Healer.

Israel had to learn this lesson in the wilderness under Moses. God fed nearly a million people manna for forty years. They had to get up early, go out and collect it, and then process and cook it, but God provided daily.

This is also included in the Lord’s Prayer. Matthew 6:11 says; “Give us this day our daily bread.” God wants us to look to Him as our Provider. Jesus promises to take care of His people.

Let me use this story of Jesus feeding the four thousand to share a heart-breaking message. A harsh reality accompanying the prophecy of the end times is that the supply chain will be interrupted or cut off by corruption. Relief organizations are woefully inadequate for the growing need and many times cannot deliver supplies because of local politics. Few things are more painful.

Days are here when God's people locally need to both care for one another and rediscover God as Provider. Like Joseph in Egypt, it will be important to prepare during times of plenty for times of famine. In the Bible there are cycles where times of plenty are followed by famine. Prophecy teaches it will happen on a world-wide scale in the end times.

Faith will be tested. Jesus allowed the crowd to fast for three days before He provided. During that time, they most likely used up their own supply. Their backpacks were empty. That’s when Jesus stepped up as the Provider.

His provision was a miracle that defied natural laws. In the story, He multiplied the food supply many times over. In the context, miracles of healings were followed by the miracle of

supernaturally providing food for the multitude. What message was Jesus sending? He took care of both their health needs and their hunger needs.

I have read the four Gospels hundreds of times. I can now see that Jesus was sending a message over and over again. He wants us to trust Him as both Healer and Provider. That message stretches my western theology box.

Listen carefully; in the end times the antiChrist health care system and food supply will be leveraged against people in an attempt to force them to abandon their faith. Both will be used against Christians. God's people will have no choice but to look to Jesus as both Healer and Provider during this time.

Take time to ponder the above paragraph. It might be wise to start a transition in your thinking and build your faith in Jesus. The storm clouds are gathering on the horizon.

Signs of the Times: Matthew 16:1-4

“1) The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. 2) But He replied to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ 3) And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? 4) An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them and went away.”

The Pharisees and Sadducees come again to test Jesus by asking Him to perform a sign from heaven. One wonders where they were the previous 2 1/2 years. He had performed many signs and wonders.

No matter, they were in good company. The last one who demanded signs from Jesus to prove His deity was the devil himself. He challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread and to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus side-stepped both demands. (See Matthew 4:1-7)

Maybe they were asking Him to perform the sign of Elijah and call fire down from heaven. (1 Kings 18:20-40) Instead, He offered the sign of Jonah. He was prophesying His coming death and resurrection.

Jesus instead challenged them to read the signs of the times. There were over 300 Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. Jesus had already fulfilled many of them. It was time for a positive verdict. They claimed to be religious leaders but they were blind to God's Word.

Beware of any self-proclaimed religious critic who is ignorant of the Bible. It intrigues me that neither the office of Pharisee or Sadducee is anywhere prescribed in the Old Testament. They were self-appointed critics.

This same proposition will accompany the end times. Many loud mouths will try to discredit Jesus by asking for ridiculous signs.

I once had a secular professor brag that he had the perfect test to prove the non-existence of God. He held up a piece of chalk and challenged any Christian to come forward and pray that when he dropped it to the ground, if God existed, He would prevent the chalk from breaking. He then lamented that not one Christian dared take his challenge though he had proposed his simple test for many years.

I quickly raised my hand and offered to accept his challenge. He was thrilled until I raised the stakes. I said; "I will accept your challenge on this condition; I will also include in my prayer that God would prove He exists by striking you dead prior to the start of class tomorrow." I then added, "If you survive for twenty four hours, you can then proceed with your part of the challenge and drop the chalk. Do you agree to these terms?"

Suddenly, the atheist professor must have converted to an agnostic. This time he was the one who declined the simple test. Evidently, he didn't want to put any skin in the game, especially his own!

Rather than succumb to a foolish challenge, Jesus pointed to the signs of the times. Two lines of prophecy fill the bulk of prophetic Scripture. Both point to the Messiah. The first related to His birth, public ministry and eventual crucifixion and resurrection. The second relates to the end times and His return to set up His kingdom.

I encourage you to study the Word of God and become familiar with biblical signs of the end times. Also study the person and works of Christ during His public ministry. Read the four Gospels and the book of Acts continually. My wife and I include a chapter a day from these books in our personal reading schedule.

Religious Blindness: Matthew 16:5-12

"5) And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. 6) And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 7) They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, "He said that because we did not bring any bread." 8) But Jesus, aware of this, said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? 9) Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? 10) Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? 11) How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 12) Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

This story illustrates how quickly we can become blind to truth. Because they entered the boat without taking bread, they thought Jesus was scolding them by saying, "Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Evidently, packing a little bread for the journey was becoming a religious tradition for the disciples. I'm amazed how quickly traditions can form and how controlling they can become.

Jesus quickly called them out for having so little faith. The Provider was right in the boat with them. He had multiplied bread to feed 5,000 and then 4,000 with many baskets in excess. He could easily take care of the physical needs of His twelve disciples. So what were they missing?

The teaching and traditions of the Pharisees and Sadducees were far more dangerous than physical hunger. Because of their religious traditions, they rejected Jesus as Messiah. Worse yet, they denied the realm of the supernatural altogether. The Sadducees even denied a resurrection and the afterlife. They reduced "God" to the small box of "religious traditions."

Legalism can render faith and reliance on God void. It can hypnotize people to the point of self-reliance. Soon they start living as if faith in God doesn't matter in everyday life. It results in a spiritual naturalism where self and not God is the center of the universe. Religious traditions and ceremonies can quickly become king.

I have watched many sincere Christians embrace man-made traditions and doctrines to the point of displacing Scripture. They are so loyal to a denomination they miss the Savior. The Pharisees and Sadducees embraced their traditions to the point that they used them to nail Jesus to the cross.

This was the leaven Jesus was warning against. Beware lest you become so devout to a certain religious sect that you become blind to biblical truth! Institutional religion at some point displaces God and becomes its own standard of truth.

I can point to a long list of false world religions that have descended into this pit. Sadly, many Christian denominations have also displaced Jesus as Lord and replaced the Bible with traditions. Listen carefully: There is no blindness like religious blindness.

Beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees! Religious traditions and ceremony are an empty substitute for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the walk in the Spirit. It is a pit so easy to fall into that in this text Jesus issued a special warning to His disciples; "Beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees!"

Sixteen Inches Off: Matthew 16:13-16

"13) Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14) And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15) He said to them, "But

who do you say that I am?" 16) Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus now retreats about forty miles north of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi. They most likely followed the headwaters up toward Mt Hermon. It was a region full of paganism. Mark and Luke also record this story and the conversation.

According to Mark 8:27, Jesus had this conversation with the disciples while they were "on the way." As a good teacher, Jesus took advantage of the travels to question His disciples. Everyday life was His classroom.

His first question was general; "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" In other words; "What are the opinion polls saying?"

People definitely held Him in high esteem. Some were saying John the Baptist. Others guessed Him to be Elijah. Others compared Him to Jeremiah. Still others just placed Him among the prophets.

Maybe they saw in Him the authority of John, the power of Elijah, the passion of Jeremiah, and the message of a prophet. Everyone had an opinion. Jesus was the topic of most conversations.

But then Jesus became personal. It doesn't matter what others think, the important question was the essay answered by His disciples. Vs 15, "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"

Without a moment of hesitation, Peter answered; "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." He nailed it! The phrase; "Thou art the Christ", identified Jesus as the Messiah. The phrase; "the living God", distinguished the God of Israel from the non-living idols in this pagan region. Peter rightly identified Jesus as the Son of God.

Before we venture into the second part of this conversation, I have a question for you; "What is your opinion of Jesus?" "Who do you say that He is?" This is one of the most important questions you will ever answer. It is crucial for salvation.

Many world religions and false cults view Jesus as a prophet. That is true of Hinduism, Islam, and even the Jehovah Witnesses. In other words, he was a devoutly religious man. He may have even pointed people toward God, but He was not the Son of God, nor was He a deity.

Peter's answer to this question was important, but in John 21:15-17; Jesus quizzed Peter even deeper. This time He asked Peter three times; "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was exposed. He had the right head knowledge, but Jesus did not have first place in his heart. There is a huge difference.

It has been said that many people miss heaven by sixteen inches. That is basically the distance from your head to your heart. You can have right theology but no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He is neither your Savior nor your Lord. You remain lord of your own life.

You must settle this issue. You must repent of your sinful ways and invite Jesus into your life. Stop holding Him at arm's length. There is a huge difference between having religious beliefs and being a born-again Christian. It is not only the difference between the heart and the head, it is also the difference between heaven and hell.

His Church: Matthew 16:16-20

“16) And Simon Peter answered and said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17) And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18) I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19) I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” 20) Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.”

The Catholic Church holds that in this text Jesus was making Peter the first Pope. There are two problems with that viewpoint. First, the word “Pope” is not used in the text, nor anywhere in the Bible. Second, there is no clue of succession that Peter could pass on his position or authority to any successor after him. The whole notion is preposterous.

So what was Jesus saying? It seems that Jesus was referencing the answer that Peter gave: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus made it clear that it was His Father in heaven Who revealed this truth to Peter. It is the Father who draws every true believer to salvation. (John 6:44)

It was upon “this rock” that Jesus was going to build His Church. There is no need for succession because Jesus still holds His office over His church. He alone is head of His Church. (Colossians 1:18)

This brings up an important point; Jesus promised to build “His Church”, not “your” church, “my” church or any “denominational” church. Churches get in trouble when we take ownership. If Jesus is not head of the church, He does not obligate Himself to build it.

This is why so many “man-made” and “man-owned” churches are pitiful, powerless, and plunged into shameful ruin. They are putrid and pathetic. Many become the antithesis of “His Church” and stand in opposition to Him and His clear teachings.

Jesus only bestows His glory and power on His church. He gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven to “His Church.” The fingerprints of “His Church” are clear to discern. “His Church” preaches the gospel, obeys His Word, moves in the power of the Holy Spirit, worships Him

alone, and assaults the gates of hell. His Church is made up of His sheep and is alive, powerful, and victorious.

Dead, defeated, and lifeless churches are everywhere. They display all kinds of names on the sign out front. How can you tell if it is a “man-made” or a “man-controlled church” rather than “His church?” The following are telling signs:

If people are not coming to Jesus with dynamic conversions and being set free from sin and bondage, it is not “His church.” If people are not displaying the fruits of the Spirit or being empowered by the Holy Spirit, it is not “His church.” If worship is cold and mechanical, it is not “His church.” If Jesus Christ is not being lifted up and glorified, it is not “His church.” If the Bible is not being held up as the final authority, it is not “His church.” If the Holy Spirit is quenched and suppressed, it is not “His church.” If unbiblical lifestyles and sinful living are being condoned or promoted, it is not “His church.” If there is no burden for the lost or passion for world missions, it is not “His church.” If prayer and worship are ignored or marginalized, it is not “His church.” The list goes on and on, but I think you are getting the idea.

Stop fooling yourself. If Jesus Christ is not Lord of the church, it is either dead and in need of revival and awakening... or... it is not “His church.” It is time to turn the reins of the church back over to Jesus before it’s too late! As Jesus wrote to the churches in the book of Revelation, it’s time to repent and start seeking Jesus again! (Revelation 2-3) “His church” of necessity reflects Him and Him alone.

Keys to the Kingdom: Matthew 16:19

“19) I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.””

There are two topics mentioned in this verse that we must wrestle with. First, what are the keys to the kingdom of God? Second, what does it mean to bind and loosen?

I view the keys to the kingdom of heaven being Peter’s illumination into the full identity of Jesus Christ from verse 17. He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. According to a host of verses like John 3:16; Acts 4:11-12, and Romans 10:8-10, it is faith in Jesus Christ that brings salvation.

It was Peter who preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost that opened the door of salvation to the Jewish nation. It was also Peter in Acts 10 who first brought the gospel to Cornelius and the Gentiles. It comes as no surprise that Paul went to Peter, James, and John in Galatians 2:1-10 to affirm the gospel message that he preached. Many believe this was a reference to the Jerusalem Council as recorded in Acts 15.

Peter played an important role in defining and defending the Gospel message. The Gospel and personal faith in Jesus Christ are the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus alone is the door through which every believer must enter to get into the kingdom of heaven. (John 10:7-9)

The second part of this verse is more difficult to grasp. What is the meaning of binding and loosening? It is hard by the context of this verse to give a definitive answer. Jesus briefly mentions it and then quickly closes the conversation.

Some view it as a part of intercessory prayer and the authority “in Christ” to bind the work of Satan in people’s lives and loose them to understand the gospel. Matthew 12:29; Matthew 18:18-20; Mark 3:27, and 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 seem to support this view.

Another thought includes the power of forgiveness to loose people into the grace of God that might lead them to salvation. This view points to Jesus on the cross forgiving those who crucified him. (See Luke 23:34) It is no coincidence that Stephen did the same thing to the mob that stoned him. (Acts 7:60) The very next verse says that Saul was in the crowd and in hearty agreement to put him to death. Did Stephen through forgiveness loose the the crowd into God’s grace? 2 Corinthians 2:6-11 points out that forgiveness interrupts Satan’s schemes.

Both of the above concepts may be involved in binding and loosening. Unfortunately, the rest of Scripture only provides small clues on this subject. It remains clouded in mystery.

I do believe we have the authority “in Christ” to pull down strongholds and see captives set free. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6) Isaiah 58:5-12 also provides amazing insight into the power of prayer and fasting to set captives free. Much of the mystery evaporates in the prayer room. God wants His church to discover their authority “in Christ.”

I encourage you to venture deeper into intercessory prayer. This is where the Spirit of God opens the eyes of our understanding into many mysteries. (See Ephesians 1:15-23) I put the concept of binding and loosening into that category. I confess, I have much to learn about this subject.

The Foolish Rebuke: Matthew 16:20-23

“20) Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. 21) From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. 22) Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” 23) But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.””

Something subtle but significant happens in verse 21. This is the first time in the book of Matthew that the two proper titles of “Jesus” and “Christ” come together. “21) From that time

Jesus Christ began to tell His disciples..." For the first time the disciples understood the full identity of Jesus Christ. He was the Messiah! He was the Son of God.

Though He had told them before, another significant truth was starting to register. Jesus again forewarns them of His coming death in Jerusalem. He says that "He must" go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, be killed and raised on the third day. Note the word "must." It was not optional.

John the Baptist had introduced Him as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (See John 1:29-37) They should have put it together, but God was preparing the Lamb of God for the Passover sacrifice. The clock was ticking. The Passover was approaching quickly.

It was at this point that Peter allowed his emotions to cloud his judgment. Verse 22 says; "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." A few minutes earlier he had declared; "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God"; and now he was rebuking Jesus.

Lest we get too judgmental with Peter, we must reflect on the times in "prayer" we have told God how to conduct business. But I must admit, rebuking Jesus was stepping over the line. What was happening inside of Peter? Let me pose a possible scenario.

Remember how the Temptations of Christ in the wilderness ended. Luke 4:13 says; "And when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time." This was one of those "opportune times." Satan was using Peter to manipulate the emotions of Jesus. Later he was going to use Judas to betray Him. Satan often drives wedges between people by using emotions to create conflict.

Some of the worst counsel can come from people closest to us. They are often more concerned about our safety than our obeying God. Their emotions can cloud their judgment.

Jesus did not fall for this subtle attack. He recognized the presence of Satan and resisted him. He told him to get behind Him. In a sense, Jesus stepped between Peter and Satan. Sometimes we need to intervene for people as well.

It is at this point that Jesus gives a bit of profound advice to His disciples. He warned them about setting their interests on self motives rather than God's interests. Self agendas seldom serve the will of God. This is the point at which many Christians derail their callings. They fix their eyes on self instead of God. It can be such a subtle drift.

In this broader context, Peter moved from Divine illumination to self-delusion in the span of a few minutes. It amazes me how quickly godly discernment can descend into fleshly motives. When it happens, do what Jesus did; address it quickly!

The Cost: Matthew 16:24-28

“24) Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25) For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26) For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 27) For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds. 28) Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

Jesus responded to the rebuke of Peter with this pointed teaching on the cost of following Him. Just as Jesus was facing a cross, every Christian must be willing to lay his or her life down for Jesus Christ.

Professing to be a Christian defines you. Your new identity is no longer self, it becomes Jesus Christ. The irony is that whoever wishes to save his life loses it, but whoever loses his life for the sake of Jesus gains it. How can that be?

No matter what life pursuit you set your mind on, it ends up consuming you. The pursuit of wealth can consume you. The pursuit of fame can consume you. The pursuit of pleasure can consume you. The pursuit of power and influence can consume you. The pursuit of living as a hermit off the grid can consume you. You tithe your life to it. In the end, it costs you everything.

Here is the problem, when your life is over, all of those pursuits crumble and amount to nothing. Every worldly hero ends up forgotten by successive generations. You can chase those things and forfeit your soul. No earthly pleasure is worth eternal regret.

The difference in following Jesus is that every day makes a deposit in heaven for eternity. In this text, He promises to come back with His angels and His recompense is with Him. He will reward the righteous and judge non-believers.

But you ask; “How do you know it’s true?” “How do you know Jesus Christ is the right way?” Ok, I concede, those are fair questions. My answer is; “I’ve studied the evidence!”

Go back and review this whole context from Matthew 16:13. It all hinges on the person, works, true identity, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If He is indeed “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” then His promises are faithful and true.

Your search is truly that simple! It doesn’t hinge on sincerity, devotion to a religion or trying to earn acceptance by being good or doing good. You can never know in a works-based religion how much good is good enough. The redemption of the human soul is very costly. There has to be a better way.

According to the Bible, salvation comes down to Jesus Christ being Who He claimed to be. The Bible teaches that His death and resurrection validated His claim of deity. (See Romans 1:4 & 1 Corinthians 15) Paul told his critics that Christianity stands or falls on the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

By the way, I've noticed the grave of every great human philosopher and religious leader is occupied, but the tomb of Jesus Christ is empty. His resurrection sets Him apart from the pack – exactly as He promised in this context. (Matthew 16:21) That is significant! He repeatedly foretold of His death and resurrection before the fact.

But there's more: His death and resurrection fulfilled every prophecy, ceremony, type, shadow, and analogy in the entire Old Testament about the promised Redeemer Messiah. The evidence completely fulfills the words of John the Baptist, "Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

My challenge to you is to study the evidence and then determine where you are going to invest your life. The way I see it, you have about four alternatives.

First, you can live for self. But I must warn you that you have no power to determine your eternal destiny. Look in the mirror, You are a mere mortal! Second, you can live for the world. May I observe that it is bent 180 degrees in the wrong direction. Its GPS is programmed toward hell. Third, you can choose any other world religion or philosophy. I've already noted that their founders are decaying in a grave. They can only offer what they found! Finally, you can put your faith in Jesus Christ and live for Him. The evidence of His birth, life, works, teachings, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension are amazing.

But there's a catch: Following Jesus Christ means He becomes Lord and Master of your life. It changes everything about you. But there's also a promise: You become a child of God through faith and an heir of all the blessings in heavenly places. You are "In Christ" for all eternity.

My Story: I put faith in Jesus Christ at age 16. I am now over 65 and the clock is still ticking. He is still conforming and changing me to His likeness. What I gave up to follow Him is rubbish compared to what I've gained in knowing Him. I cannot describe the riches of the glory I have gained in Christ that totally dims any suffering I have endured for His sake.

The ball is now in your court. You must determine who and what you will live for and what you will die for when your final breath determines your eternal destiny. I strongly urge you to consider Jesus Christ! Life is short, but eternity is a very long time. Jesus followers chose to live with eternity in mind!

The Glorified King: Matthew 16:28-17:8

“(28) Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” 1) Six days later Jesus took with Him

Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2) And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3) And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.”

Matthew 16:28 has tripped up many people. They see Jesus saying; “I am going to return before this generation dies off.” It’s now been nearly 2,000 years and Jesus hasn’t returned. I admit, we need to roll up our sleeves and take a deeper look at this passage.

What Jesus said in verse 28 was indeed fulfilled at the beginning of chapter 17. On the Mount of transfiguration, Jesus was transfigured into His Kingdom Glory. For a short period of time, Jesus stepped into His full glory.

In Revelation Chapter One, John again “sees” Jesus in this same glory. Revelation 1:17 says that when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet as a dead man.

We are now confronted with a challenge in our thinking. We naturally think of Jesus in terms of His earthly identity as revealed in the four Gospels. But for the past 2,000 years, He has been in His glorified state. Jesus stepped permanently into His glorified state right after His ascension.

In Matthew 17:1-3, Peter, James, and John “saw” a preview of His glorified state. In Acts 7:54-60 as Stephen was being martyred, he “saw” Jesus in His glory. I could argue according to 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 that Paul “saw” Jesus in His glory. Again, in Revelation 1:12-20 John “saw” Jesus in His glory.

But wait, Matthew 16:28 says, “... until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” Wasn’t Jesus talking about His second return to set up His Millennium Kingdom as talked about in Revelation 20:1-10? Yes! Let’s dive a bit deeper.

Read what John says in the next verse in Revelation 20: “11) And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them.” Let me emphasize again, just in case you missed it, “And I saw...”

John “saw” Jesus at least four times coming in His full kingdom glory. He saw Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, then he saw again in Revelation 1:12-20; then again he saw in Revelation 19:11-16, and finally, he saw Him in Revelation 20:11-15. The same basic word “see” that Jesus used in Matthew 16:28 is used in the final three references.

Don’t miss the big picture of what Jesus was saying in Matthew 16:28-17:8. Jesus was about to step into His new glorified state. It might be helpful to review the full chain of progressive revelation of the identity of Christ in Matthew 16-17.

Let’s start with Peter answering the question of Jesus in Matthew 16:16 by saying; “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Watch how the text builds on that statement.

Jesus next talked about building His Church and giving His followers the keys to the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 16:18-19) In these verses, He foretold the church age.

Jesus then backs up and foretells immediate coming events in Jerusalem. He said He was going to; “21) ...suffer many things...be killed... and be raised up on the third day.” He ends this verse with the resurrection. Then Matthew 16:28 takes it to the next level. He now refers to the glorified Christ coming with His Kingdom. That’s a huge step beyond a resurrection. He now has a kingdom.

Then, in Matthew 17:1-3 Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain and is transfigured before them into His glory. Wow! He is now pictured in His glorified state. Then finally, just to punctuate His true identity, in Matthew 17:5 the Father spoke and said; “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!”

So let’s pull this all together. Are you ready for this? This context is not about the kingdom, it is about the King! Jesus is now the glorified King over His Kingdom. A few eyes saw it back then, but soon many eyes will see Him coming in His Kingdom!