

MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE

VOLUME 1

**A Devotional Look at the Birth
and Early Ministry of the Lord Jesus**

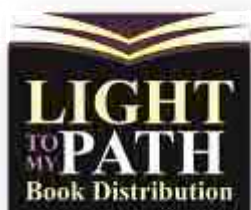


F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

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Volume 1

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Ministry of the Lord Jesus



F. Wayne Mac Leod

Light To My Path Book Distribution
Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, CANADA

Matthew, Mark and Luke

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Special thanks to the proof readers and reviewers without whom this book would be much harder to read:
Diane Mac Leod, Lillian Mac Neil

FOREWORD

Matthew, Mark and Luke recount the story of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ from his birth to his resurrection and ascension. There is a lot of repetition in the accounts of these three writers. They tell the same story. In the interest of not repeating myself, I have decided to examine the accounts together. The stories Matthew, Mark and Luke recount not only complement each other but, when examined together, give us a better picture of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus.

I have faced several problems doing this harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Probably the biggest problem had to do with the order of events. The gospel writers do not always recount the events of the life of Christ in the same order. This is to be expected as each author has a different purpose. This commentary is not an authority on the order of events recorded in these Gospels.

Another problem I encountered is really more of a problem for the reader. Because I am commenting on three gospels at the same time, the reader is forced to jump from one passage to another. I apologize for this and realize that this makes it difficult to find a specific passage. To simplify this I have provided an index of passages and the chapter

where the reader can find the commentary. Consult the index if you are looking for a particular passage.

The large quantity of material covered in these three Gospels presented yet another challenge. I have decided to cover the material in three volumes. In this first volume we will examine the birth and early years of Jesus ministry. See the index for a more detailed list of passages covered in this first volume.

I pray that this commentary will reveal Jesus to you in a greater way. May it point you to His grace, mercy, love and justice. May it challenge you to follow His example and open your heart to Him and His work on your behalf.

This commentary, as with all the others in this series, is designed to be devotional in nature. My desire is that it not only impart knowledge but also life. It is my desire that each reader understand the passage and be changed by its truth. I trust that you will be a different person for working through these important Bible books. May God bless you richly as you embark on this study.

F. Wayne MacLeod

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1

GENEALOGIES

Read Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38

We begin our study of the life of Jesus Christ by examining the genealogies recorded for us in both Matthew and Luke. Before examining these, however, it is important to understand something about the authors.

Matthew was a Jewish tax collector. The record of how he came to know the Lord is found in Matthew 9:9. The Lord Jesus invited him to leave his occupation as a tax collector to follow Him. Matthew did just that. It is believed that Luke, on the other hand, was a Gentile. He was likely a doctor by profession and followed Paul in his missionary journeys. Their different backgrounds will be reflected in their books.

We will begin with some brief comments about the genealogy of Matthew. Matthew began his genealogy by emphasising the fact that Jesus was the son of David and the son of Abraham. These were two key individuals in the Jewish mind. Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation. From a prophetic point of view, the Messiah was to come

as a descendant of David, the son of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1). Matthew's genealogy begins with Abraham to emphasise Christ's Jewish roots. It moves through David to emphasise His kingly line and His fulfilment of the prophecy of a Messiah who would come through the line of David.

There is another important detail we need to mention in this context. We have noted that Matthew was a tax collector. As a tax collector, he was disliked by the Jewish community and considered to be an outcast. These tax collectors gathered taxes for the hated Roman authorities. They also made their money off the backs of their Jewish brothers and sisters.

What is significant for us to note here is that Matthew's genealogy mentions four women from verses three to six. Two of these women were Gentiles (Rahab and Ruth). Of the four women mentioned in this genealogy three of them have a blot on their name. Tamar bore a child by posing as a prostitute and deceiving her father-in law. Rahab also was a prostitute during the days of Joshua. Uriah's wife Bath-Sheba became pregnant because of an adulterous affair with David. Matthew, as a tax collector, could identify with outcasts. He knew what it was like to experience the community's rejection. These names were not essential to the genealogy (which was traced through the husband and not the wife) but they are clearly mentioned. Could it be that Matthew found great comfort in the fact that these women were in the genealogy of Christ? Jesus was a friend of sinners and outcasts. It is significant that Matthew mentions these women in his genealogy.

Matthew's genealogy is divided into three sections with fourteen generations recorded in each section. These sections are divided by significant historical events. The first list goes from Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, to

King David (verses 1-6). The second division is from King David to the exile (verses 7-11). The final division is from the exile to the coming of Jesus Christ (verses 12-16). It is important to note that in order to maintain his list of three groups of fourteen generations, Matthew is forced to omit certain individuals from his list. It was not uncommon to omit names from this sort of genealogical record. The purpose here is not to give all the details but to trace the roots of Christ back to Abraham through David.

There is one other important element to note in the genealogy of Matthew. Matthew 1:17 tells us that there are fourteen generations in each historical division. The problem is that there appears to be one name missing. In total there are only forty-one names in this list leaving the last division with only thirteen names instead of fourteen. This problem may be solved, however, by examining what Matthew tells us in verse 17. He tells us that from Abraham to David there were fourteen generations. From David to the exile he also has fourteen names. In other words, David must be included twice in this list.

Luke's genealogy in Luke 3:23-38 is slightly different from Matthew's. Matthew begins with Abraham and works up to Christ. Luke begins with Jesus and works back to Adam. Again it is important to note that not all the generations are included in this list.

While Matthew wants to trace the genealogy of Jesus to Abraham the father of the Jewish nation, Luke, as a Gentile, traced him back to Adam the father of all nations.

Another important detail to note about Luke's genealogy is that it seems to be radically different from Matthew's. A quick look at the names in these genealogies would cause us to wonder if we are looking at the same person. There is some debate over these two genealogies. Luke traces

Mary's descendants and not Joseph's as was customary. The reason for this may be that in Luke's mind Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. Mary was his biological mother. Again as a doctor Luke would have been particularly interested in being precise about His true parents. In emphasising Mary rather than Joseph, Luke underscores the virgin birth of Christ.

Luke 3:23 tells us that Joseph's father was Heli. Matthew 1:16, on the other hand, says that his father was Jacob. Because the custom was to trace the ancestry through the male, Luke begins with Joseph as Mary's representative. Heli was in reality the father-in-law of Joseph.

Luke also traces the genealogy of Jesus through David. Luke wanted to show his readers that Jesus was the fulfilment of prophecy and the Messiah from the root of Jesse, the father of David.

We see here that Matthew and Luke each have a different focus. They present the Lord Jesus and the events of his life in slightly different ways. It is helpful for us to see these various accounts of the life of our Lord. Both of these accounts show us that the Lord Jesus, as the Son of God, came to this earth and identified with us. His genealogy can be traced through human lines though He had no earthly father. The genealogies are important as they show us that Jesus became one with us in His humanity.

For Consideration:

- What do these genealogies teach us about what was important to Matthew and Luke about the life of Christ?
- What does Matthew's inclusion of Rahab, Tamar, Ruth and Bath-Sheba teach us about the Lord Jesus and his concern for the outcast and sinner?
- Take a moment to consider what it must have meant for the Lord Jesus to take on human flesh and become a man. What is your response to this reality?
- Why is it important that we see that Jesus had a human line?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He can identify with us as humans because He became human.
- Thank the Lord that He has a concern for the sinner and the outcast.
- Thank the Lord for the way this genealogy shows us that Jesus was the perfect fulfilment of prophecy.
- Thank the Lord for His willingness to take on human flesh to reach out to us.

2

INTRODUCTIONS

Read Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1-4

As we continue to examine the gospels and their account of the life of our Lord it is important for us to take a moment to examine the introductory statements of both Mark and Luke.

Mark begins his account with a very simple statement in verse 1: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Before commenting on this verse it may be helpful for us to consider the identity of Mark. There are generally two traditions concerning the identity of Mark. Some commentators see him as the John Mark whose life is recorded for us in the book of Acts. He was a co-worker with Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys. The second tradition states that he is the person spoken of in 1 Peter 5:13:

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.

If this second individual is the Mark who wrote this gospel, he would very likely have been a convert of the apostle Peter. Whoever the author was, it is quite clear that he was known by the apostles, worked with them and had their support and validation in what he wrote about our Lord.

Mark's introduction is very simple, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ the Son of God." He says two things here. First, Jesus was the Christ. The word Christ means anointed one and is associated with the Messiah who would come to save His people from their sin. Second, Jesus was the Son of God. The term "Son of God" shows us that Jesus was God. There is no question here in Mark's mind that Jesus was God and the Messiah who was to come.

Mark immediately jumps from this brief introduction to the baptism of our Lord by John the Baptist. There is no account of his birth or childhood. His focus is on the ministry of Jesus. We have to depend on the other Gospel writers for the details of the birth and childhood of Christ.

Luke's introduction to his Gospel is quite different. He begins by explaining to his readers how he came to write his gospel. Luke told his readers that there were many accounts circulating about the events of Jesus' life. As you can imagine, among those stories would be many events that could not be confirmed. Luke felt it necessary to write his book in order to have an accurate record of the confirmed miracles and events of the life of our Lord. He recorded the events that were handed down to him by eyewitnesses and servants of the Lord who witnessed His life and miracles (verse 2). What Luke records for us here is proven fact. His report of the life of Christ comes from people who had first-hand experience and knowledge of the events. As a doctor, Luke is keen on preserving the

clear and confirmed facts about the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. Notice that he makes it clear in verse 3 that he has "carefully investigated everything from the beginning." Luke reassures us that the events he records are true and without question. Luke's intent was to provide readers with an account they could trust.

Luke addressed his gospel to the "most excellent Theophilus." The identity of Theophilus is uncertain. It is significant that Theophilus is addressed as "most excellent." This phrase was often used in Luke's day to address royalty or nobility. We see this phrase, for example, in the book of Acts which was also written by Luke.

Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. (Acts 24:3, NIV)

I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. (Acts 26:25, NIV)

In both cases mentioned above the term "most excellent" is used to refer to governors. This has led some commentators to assume that Luke was writing this gospel in an official way for a particular individual of noble rank in society.

The name "Theophilus" comes from two Greek words which mean "lovers of God." This has led other commentators to assume that Luke is writing to all "lovers of God."

What is clear in this preface of Luke is that we have the guarantee of Luke himself that what he recorded for us is certain. Luke made this very clear in verse 4 when he told

his readers that he had written these things “so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke’s book is intended to remove all doubt in the minds of God’s people concerning the events of the life of our Lord.

For Consideration:

- What does the introduction to the gospel of Mark tell us about what Mark believed concerning the Lord Jesus?
- How does Luke assure his readers of the truth of the events he has recorded for them in his preface?
- How important is it that all the gospel writers either knew Jesus or the apostles personally? Does this add validity to what they said?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that he put it on the hearts of these particular individuals to carefully write out the details of his life.
- Thank the Lord for the way He has preserved the details of His life for all ages so that you and I can read about them today.
- Thank the Lord for the assurance we have that the record of His life is absolutely trustworthy.

3

THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO ZECHARIAH

Read Luke 1:5-25

In Luke 1:5-25 we meet a priest by the name of Zechariah. He belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. 1 Chronicles 24:1 tells us that Aaron's descendants were divided into twenty-four divisions and given various responsibilities in the temple. Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, was also from a priestly line. She was a descendant of Aaron. From verse 6 we understand that not only were Zechariah and Elizabeth from a priestly line but they both feared the Lord God and observed His commandments and regulations blamelessly.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, though they lived for the Lord, had not been able to have children. This would have been well known in the community. It would also have been a very difficult thing for them to deal with in their lives as a couple. Children, in this culture, were a sign of blessing from the Lord. It obviously grieved this couple that there would be no descendant to carry on their family name.

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were getting older and at a point where all hope of having a child was lost (verse 7).

Zechariah was performing his duties one day at the temple. It was his turn to burn incense before the Lord (verse 9). He was in the Holy Place of the temple performing his duties. Worshipers had gathered outside in the courtyard to pray. As Zechariah burnt the incense, an angel appeared to him. Luke tells us that the angel stood on the right side of the altar (verse 11). The right is often used in Scripture to indicate favour and blessing. Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven (Matthew 26:64). A father or priest would place his right hand on the head of the person he wished to bless (see Genesis 48:17-20). Could it be that the angel wanted to communicate that the favour of God was on Zechariah?

When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and gripped with fear (verse 12). Being in the Holy Place he was separated from the rest of the people in the temple. He and the angel were alone. The angel saw Zechariah's fear and reassured him (verse 13).

Notice in verse 13 that the angel told Zechariah that their prayer for a child had been heard. We understand from this that they had been praying that the Lord would give them a child. This confirms to us that the matter had been a burden on their hearts. For a long time they had been praying without seeing the answer to their prayer. The time for an answer had come. The angel informed Zechariah that the Lord was going to give them a son. They were to call him John. The name in Hebrew means, "God's gracious gift."

The angel further informed Zechariah that this child would not be an ordinary child. He would be born for a particular purpose. His birth would bring his parents great joy and

delight. They would be comforted in their sorrow and encouraged that God had compassion on them in their need.

There are times when we wonder if the Lord is hearing our prayer. This passage tells us that the Lord is not deaf to our cries. His timing is not the same as ours. He came to Zechariah and Elizabeth in His time. This child would be a very special child. He would accomplish more than his parents could ever imagine. His name would go down in history because of the purpose God had for his life. God does not delay His answer to your prayer without reason. Here He delayed His answer so that He could give to Elizabeth and Zechariah a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah. As a devout priestly couple, they looked with great eagerness for the coming of the promised Messiah. It would have been difficult for them to imagine having a child of their own in their old age but to imagine that the child they bore would prepare the way for the Messiah would have been beyond their wildest dreams. Was it worth the wait? For Elizabeth and Zechariah you can be sure it was. God knew what He was doing. I do not know why the Lord has delayed in answering your request but be assured that there is a reason. Trust him and wait. He will not disappoint.

The angel told Zechariah that the child that would be born to them would be great in the sight of the Lord. God had a particular role for him to play. This child was never to drink wine or fermented drink. Some see here a reference to a Nazirite vow. Those who were under such a vow would not shave their hair or drink strong drink. They did this because they were set apart by the Lord for a particular purpose (see Numbers 6:2-12).

The angel explained to Zechariah that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. The Holy Spirit

would keep him and protect him so that he could accomplish the work God had called him to do.

God had called John to bring back the people of Israel to their Lord (verse 16). Israel had wandered from the path-way. John would point them to the Saviour. He would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. He would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. Homes would be restored. He would also turn the disobedient to the wisdom of God and to righteousness. As we look at the ministry of John the Baptist we see that the Lord's special anointing was indeed on his life. People came from all over to hear John preach. He challenged people to make things right with God and repent of their sins. Many were touched by his ministry.

We can only wonder what the impact of these words had on Zechariah. This was incredible news. He found it hard to believe that what he was hearing could be true. In verse 18 he asked the angel to confirm what he was saying by giving him a sign. He reminded the angel that he was now well advanced in years and so was his wife. There is an element of doubt in Zechariah's heart. Though he was priest and loved the Lord very much, Zechariah still had a hard time believing what the angel was telling him.

The angel who spoke to Zechariah introduced himself as the angel Gabriel who stood in the presence of God. The appearance of an angel should have been enough to remove all doubt from Zechariah's heart but he still doubted. Because of his unbelief, the angel told him that he would not be able to speak until the day the child was born. This inability to speak would be the sign he had asked from the angel. This was not the sign Zechariah was looking for but it was obviously very effective.

Verse 20 makes it clear that the reason Zechariah would not be able to speak was because he did not believe what the angel told him. For nine months he would bear the shame of his unbelief. He would watch his wife during her pregnancy and be reminded of how he had not believed what the angel had told him.

As Zechariah spoke with the angel, the people waited outside. Traditionally, the priest would come out to bless the people who had gathered and offer a benediction to conclude their worship. The people began to wonder what had happened to him because he was not coming out of the Holy Place. When he finally did come out he could not speak to bless them. All he could do was make signs to them. Obviously this would have been confusing to the people and an embarrassment to Zechariah.

The Lord opened the womb of Elizabeth as he had promised. Notice that for five months, Elizabeth remained in seclusion. It is uncertain why she would remain in seclusion. We can be sure that this time alone was a time of praise and thanksgiving to God for His wonderful answer to prayer. Elizabeth rejoiced in the fact that God had taken away her disgrace by giving her a child.

In this chapter we see the hand of a sovereign God working out His purposes. We see that God's ways are not always our ways. He answers prayers in His time. The child born to this elderly couple would be powerfully used of God to restore families and relationships with God. Through him, He would prepare His people for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about how God answers prayer? Does God always answer prayers when and how we want?
- What does this passage teach us about the type of person God uses?
- How important is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives and ministries?
- What does this section teach us about the consequences of unbelief?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He does answer prayers in His time and in His way which is better than our way and time.
- Thank the Lord that He uses us even when we fail in our faith and don't fully believe His promises.
- Thank the Lord that He has given us His Holy Spirit to be our guide and protector. Ask God to fill you more with His Holy Spirit.

4

THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO MARY

Read Luke 1:26-38

In the last chapter we saw how the angel of the Lord spoke to Zechariah and told him that he was going to have a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Here in this next section we see how this same angel spoke to Mary, the mother of Jesus. The angel Gabriel came to visit Mary six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy. At this time Mary was living in the town of Nazareth in Galilee.

It is important to note that Mary was still a virgin but she was engaged to be married to a man by the name of Joseph. Luke finds it important to mention that Joseph was a descendant of David. This is significant because the Messiah was to be a descendant of David, the son of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10). While Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, he would be called to raise Him as his son. According to the law of the day, Joseph was His legal father.

The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and called her a "favoured woman" (see verse 28). It should be understood here that she was favoured not because she was better than anyone else (although she obviously did love and serve the Lord). She was favoured because the Lord God had chosen her for a very particular mission. The presence of God was with her in a very special way. She was protected and kept by God for the task of being the mother of the Lord Jesus.

Mary was not sure how to take what she was hearing. Like Zechariah before her, she too was afraid of the angel. From verse 29 we understand that Mary was confused about what she heard the angel say.

Seeing her fear and confusion, Gabriel comforted her. He told her not to be afraid. He reminded her that she had found special favour with God. Gabriel went on to tell her that she would become pregnant and give birth to a son. She was to name Him Jesus.

As he did for Zechariah, Gabriel told Mary something about this child she would bear. This child would be called the Son of the Most High. In other words, his true father would be God himself. He would also be given the throne of His father David. He would be the fulfillment of the prophecy of a Messiah who would come as a descendant of David. As a descendant of David, he would reign as king over His people (though admittedly not as His people expected). His kingdom would have no end. This kingdom was not an earthly kingdom. It was a spiritual kingdom. Those who belonged to this kingdom would bow their knee to the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus would conquer the hearts and soul of His people. This kingdom would come with power over evil and dominion over Satan and his angels. The kingdom of the Lord Jesus is still alive today. The

Lord Jesus is conquering hearts and lives. Each day men, women and children are joining that kingdom and bowing the knee in surrender to their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This kingdom spread from Israel to the far corners of the earth. The Lord is building His church and nothing can stop it.

Mary was confused as she listened to what the angel Gabriel was telling her. She was still a virgin. Had the angel come to her when she was married to Joseph she would have understood but this was quite different.

Seeing her confusion, Gabriel explained to her that the Holy Spirit would come on her and the power of the Most High God would overshadow her. God would envelop her and touch her with his mighty power. The One who created life would miraculously place a child in her womb. This child would not be the result of any sexual relationship. This child would have no earthly biological father but would grow in Mary's womb as her own child. Gabriel told her in verse 35 that this child would be holy. He would be called the Son of God.

This whole process would be a miracle. It would not be easy for Mary to deal with this situation. The community would not understand her. She risked her reputation as an honourable woman. What would she tell Joseph? Would he understand what had happened? She would certainly need the presence of God to go through this time. The direction of the Lord will not always make sense to those around us. People may have falsely accused Mary of wrongdoing. What would you have believed had you been Mary's friend at this time?

It may be important for us to take a moment here to note the theological significance of the fact that Joseph was not

the earthly father of the Lord Jesus. What we understand theologically is that every person born into this world of human descent is a sinner. When Adam sinned he passed on that sinful nature to every descendant that followed. The Psalmist David recognized this fact when he said in Psalm 51:5:

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

Every descendant of Adam and Eve was born with a sinful nature. The Lord Jesus did not come as a descendant of Adam. He was placed into the womb of Mary in a very different way. Because he was not a descendant of Adam, He was not born with that sinful nature. He was free from the sin that was passed on from generation to generation. He alone could be the sacrifice for our sin as a perfect Lamb without blemish.

As Mary pondered what the angel was telling her, Gabriel told her that Elizabeth, her relative, was also going to have a child in her old age. Mary understood that Elizabeth had been barren. This news was a sign from the Lord. If God had given Elizabeth a child in her old age, He could also work in her to accomplish His purposes.

In sharing with Mary about Elizabeth, the angel Gabriel gave her an understanding friend to support her in her time of trouble. How important it would have been for Mary at this time in her life to have a female friend with whom she could speak, who understood and accepted what had happened to her. Elizabeth, too, would have benefited from being able to speak with Mary and share about her miraculous pregnancy. Gabriel reminded Mary that with God nothing was impossible (verse 37).

Mary's response to all of this is seen in verse 38. "I am the Lord's servant," she said, "may it be to me as you have said." She is a willing servant of the Lord. She willingly offered herself to be used of God for His purpose. She does not understand all the details nor does she know what the response of the community would be but she is willing to entrust this matter in the hands of the Lord. How we need to see more people willing to step out in obedience like Mary.

For Consideration:

- What lesson do we learn from the willingness of Mary to be used of God whatever the cost?
- What does this section teach us about the importance of friends? How would Mary and Elizabeth be able to support each other?
- Why is it so important that the Lord Jesus be born of a virgin?
- Compare the response of Mary to the response of Zechariah in the first part of this chapter. What is the difference? What would have been your response to the angel's announcement?
- Are you willing to offer yourself completely to the Lord for His use?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to make you more willing to surrender to Him and His purposes for your life?
- Thank the Lord that He reaches out to us in favour. Thank Him for the favour He has shown you in your life.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be obedient no matter what others might think.

5

MARY AND ELIZABETH

Read Luke 1:39-56

In the last meditation we saw how the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary about the child she would bear. He told her about her relative Elizabeth who also was pregnant. Mary went to see Elizabeth. In the last section, Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was in her sixth month. Verse 56 tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. Seeing that the normal length of pregnancy is nine months, this would imply that that Mary went immediately to see Elizabeth.

The time these women spent together would have been very special. Though very different in age, Mary and Elizabeth shared something in common. There would have been many conversations about what was happening to them. They would minister to each other. I am convinced that both women would look back on those three months as being a very special time in their lives. Knowing that they were not alone would have given them strength and encouragement. It was not without reason that Gabriel told Mary about Elizabeth. God gave these women a special friendship in this time of their lives.

Luke tells us that when Mary first arrived at the home of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt within her and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke, as a doctor, seems to be very interested in this. He recognized that there was a connection between the voice of Mary and the leaping of the child in Elizabeth's womb. This event would have confirmed several important facts. It confirmed what the angel said to Zechariah about his child being filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). Elizabeth would also be confirmed in her understanding that God did have a special purpose for the child she would bear. The fact that the unborn child in Elizabeth's womb recognized the presence of Mary's child was a solid confirmation to her that her child, too, was very special.

When Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit she prophesied. It should be understood here that there is no evidence that Mary had ever spoken to Elizabeth about being pregnant. Elizabeth speaks the words the Spirit of God gave to her. These words confirmed to Mary everything the angel Gabriel had told her. Elizabeth could not have known these things were it not for the Holy Spirit revealing them to her.

Elizabeth told Mary that she was blessed among woman and that the child she would bear would also be blessed. Elizabeth told her that she considered herself blessed that the mother of her Lord would come to her. She knew Mary was pregnant. She knew also that the child she carried was the Messiah.

Elizabeth went on to tell Mary that as soon as she heard the sound of her voice, the child within her leapt for joy. The unborn child, John, in the womb of his mother, had some conscious awareness of what was happening

around him. This is an important verse in relation to the question of abortion. Even this unborn child was being touched and used by the Holy Spirit. He was aware, in his own way that he was in the presence of the mother of his Lord. He had feelings and awareness even before he was born.

In verse 45 Elizabeth told Mary that she was blessed because she believed what the Lord had told her. Again there is no way that Elizabeth could have known this apart from the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

God was pleased with Mary's belief even when what she was told made no sense. We can only wonder where Zechariah was when this conversation was taking place. Zechariah could not speak because he did not believe the angel Gabriel when he told him that he would have a son. Mary's presence and her trust in the Lord would have been a rebuke to him in his unbelief as a spiritual leader and priest. Mary's presence would not only have been an encouragement to Elizabeth but also a real challenge to Zechariah in his faith.

As Mary listened to Elizabeth, her heart began to explode with praise and thanksgiving. She realized that God had chosen her for a very special task. Her spirit was lifted up and she rejoiced in her God. Notice the reason for her rejoicing in the verses to follow.

The Lord Is Mindful Of His Humble Servants

Mary is amazed that the Lord God would reach down to her personally. Who was she that she should receive His attention? Who was she that all the generations to come would call her blessed? God delights in taking the humble and lifting them up. None of us deserve that He should

pour Himself so powerfully through us but what a joy and blessing it is to see Him do so. Mary rejoiced because the Lord had done great things for her. She praised His name because He was a holy God who reached down to her (verse 49).

His Mercy Extends To All Who Fear Him

Mary understood that this tremendous grace and mercy of God extended not only to her but also to all who feared His name (verse 50). His mercy is extended to you and me today. As a God of mercy and compassion He delights to extend His hand. Because this mercy extends to all generations, it is available to us and to our children as well.

He Scatters the Proud

Verse 51 tells us that He performed mighty deeds and scattered the proud in their inmost thoughts. Notice that the pride spoken of here is a pride in the inmost thoughts. Maybe no one else saw this pride. It was buried deep down inside in the deepest thoughts but never exposed to others. God sees this pride and rejects it. James 4:6 tells us that, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." God openly resists those who are proud but sees the humble and delights in raising them up.

There is no one too big for God to bring down. Mary tells us that God brings down even great leaders who lift themselves up in pride. While God pulls down the proud, verse 53 tells us that He fills the hungry with good thing but sends the rich away empty handed.

Mary knew that the Lord had reached down not only to her but to all her people. She saw the child in her womb to be

the fulfillment of the promise that God had made to Abraham to make of him a blessing to all the nations of the earth. God was giving Mary a clearer sense of how what is happening to her fitted into His purposes for her nation and the entire world. Mary's time with Elizabeth would undoubtedly be used of God to encourage her and strengthen her in her faith and confidence in His purpose for her life.

For Consideration:

- How do you think God used Mary's time with Elizabeth to encourage and prepare her for the rest of her pregnancy? Has God ever sent people to you in your time of need?
- What do we learn here about the sin of pride? Why is pride so terrible in the eyes of God?
- What encouragement do you receive from the fact that the Lord is merciful to the humble?
- Notice how Mary is a very humble person but also one who is powerfully used of God. What is the difference between false humility which does not feel worthy to be used and true humility which offers itself completely to the Lord for Him to use as He sees fit?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal to you any pride that may stand between you and Him.
- Ask the Lord to teach you to be humble.
- Thank the Lord that He reaches down to us even when we are not worthy of His attention.
- Thank the Lord that when He calls us to minister, He will also provide all that we need to accomplish the task to which He has called us.

6

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Read Luke 1:57-80

As promised, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Notice in verse 58 that the birth of this child was seen by the neighbours as the Lord showing mercy to Elizabeth. This is a reflection of the mentality of the day. Child bearing was a sign of the Lord's blessing on a woman. With the birth of this son, Elizabeth's disgrace was removed. There was great joy in the neighbourhood and even greater joy in the family.

When the child was eight days old, as was the custom, he was brought to the temple to be circumcised. Zechariah, the child's father, had not spoken for nine months because of his unbelief. The family decided that this new son would bear the name of his father. This would have been a great honour for Zechariah. We need to remember, however, that the angel told Zechariah to name the child John (Luke 1:13).

When Elizabeth told everyone that they wanted to call the child John, the relatives were surprised as there was no one in the family with that name. They made signs to Zechariah asking him what name he wanted to give to the young child (verse 62). Some commentators find significance in the fact that the relatives made signs to Zechariah. Some believe that he may also have been deaf. This may be because of his age.

Zechariah asked for a writing tablet. He wrote "His name is John" on the tablet and showed it to them. As soon as he wrote these words on the tablet his tongue was loosed and he began to speak. There is a connection between the naming of the child and the healing of Zechariah. In some ways, the naming of John was a test for Zechariah. His obedience to the Lord was what set his tongue free. The angel had clearly told him that the child was to be named John. Zechariah sacrificed the honour of having a son bear his name to be obedient to God. We are left wondering what would have happened if Zechariah had chosen to allow his relatives to name the child after him.

There is a valuable lesson here we cannot miss. Zechariah's healing was the result of a simple act of obedience. I am struck by the power of this simple act of obedience. Could it be that there are people who continue to live in defeat because they are not willing to renounce their sin and obey the Lord in some simple matter in their lives? Could a simple act of obedience unleash God's blessing and end years of struggle and curses?

The neighbours were astonished at what they saw. Maybe they had given up all hope of ever hearing Zechariah speak again. News of this event spread throughout the whole countryside. People all over that region spoke about Zechariah's healing. They wondered what this young child

would become when such a great thing had happened to his father. Listen to the response of the people in verse 66:

Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

God prepared the people by the miraculous healing of Zechariah for the ministry of John the Baptist. While the silence of Zechariah was initially because of his unbelief, God also used it to accomplish his greater glory. Maybe you are going through something as a result of disobedience and unbelief in your life. Maybe you, too, are under the discipline of the Lord. This passage tells us that God can turn your discipline to good.

When Zechariah's tongue was released, he spoke out in praise of the name of God and prophesied to those present. Let's take a look at the prophecy of Zechariah.

Zechariah began by praising the Lord because he had come and redeemed His people (verse 68). While that redemption was not to be found in his son John, it had already come in the form of the child that was in the womb of Mary. God's purpose for the forgiveness of sin and the redemption of His people (buying them back from the enemy) was about to be fulfilled. In verse 69 Zechariah told those present that the Lord had raised a horn of salvation for His people. The horn is a symbol of power and strength. It is what an animal uses to defend itself from its enemies. Already God had given them the Saviour to bring the salvation promised through the prophets (verse 70).

Zechariah's prophecy also reminded the people that the day was coming when they would be saved from their enemies and from the hand of those who hated them. The

Jews understood by this that the Lord would deliver them politically. The Messiah, however, came to bring spiritual deliverance. Jesus came to offer victory over Satan, sin and the grave. He came to set them free from the condemnation of God on sinners. He came to show mercy on them and to remember His covenant with their fathers. Through the Messiah, they would become a great people. They would serve the Lord without fear of their enemies in holiness and righteousness all their days.

I believe that the day is coming when we will see the hand of God working with the Jewish nation in a very special way. What is clear here, however, is that hope and salvation would come from Israel to the entire world. The truth about the Messiah and the salvation He came to offer continues to spread throughout the world. Each day men and women are coming to know Him. They are being set free from their spiritual enemies and given hope of eternity in the presence of God where no enemies can touch them. Zechariah told His people that this Messiah, who had already come to the earth, would radically change their hearts and lives and offer them hope of salvation and victory.

Having spoken about Jesus the Messiah, Zechariah looked then to his own child and prophesied that he would be called a prophet of the Most High God. He would go before the Messiah and prepare the way for Him. He would do this by pointing people to the salvation and forgiveness that Jesus the Messiah offered. John would announce the coming of the Lord in tender mercy to his people. He would announce that the sun of God's blessing and mercy would rise on them. That sun would shine on those who were in total darkness. It would guide them in the pathway of peace.

This is exactly what the Lord Jesus wants to do for us today. He wants to show us the tender mercy of the Father. He wants to shine the light of the father on us and take us out of darkness. He wants to guide us into peace, joy and forgiveness. This was the incredible message John would preach. He would point people to the Lord Jesus who came, not as a political leader, but as a sacrifice to pay for sins so that the blessing of God could again be showered on all who received Him.

We learn from verse 80 that John grew up and became strong in spirit. While the Holy Spirit was on him from his birth, he still needed to grow in the Spirit. He needed to learn how to be obedient and to listen to the direction of the Spirit. John grew spiritually as a child. Eventually the call of God was so great on his life that he went into the desert. There in the desert, without distraction, John would be prepared more fully for his ministry. God set him apart for a particular role. He knew that calling early in life and surrendered completely to it.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here in this section about the connection between obedience and the release of God's blessing in our lives?
- Zechariah speaks in this section about the blessings that would come through the Lord Jesus. What blessings have you experienced since you came to know Him as your Saviour?

- How did the Lord use Zechariah's inability to speak for His glory in the end? Has God ever used what appeared to be tragic in your life for good?
- What does this passage teach us about the devotion of John to his calling? What challenge does that bring to you personally? What is your calling from God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He can use our pain and struggle for His glory as He did in the life of Zechariah.
- Ask the Lord to reveal to you any area of disobedience in your life. Ask Him to help you to be obedient to Him no matter the cost.
- Ask the Lord to give you something of the dedication and conviction that John had in His calling.
- Ask the Lord to make His call on your life very clear.

7

THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO JOSEPH

Read Matthew 1:18-25

We come now to the announcement of Christ's birth to Joseph. Joseph would also have his unique struggles with this work of God in the life of his fiancée. It was very important that he understand what God was doing in Mary. In this section God sent His angel to speak to Joseph about His purposes for his wife-to-be.

We are told in verse 18 that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. It is helpful to understand a few things about the culture of that day. When a woman was pledged to be married to a man, this relationship was a legal and binding one. The "betrothal" or engagement would take place usually about one year before the marriage. When the woman was betrothed or engaged to a man, it was expected that she keep herself for him. While they did not live together at this time, they were legally bound to each other. During this time of engagement the couple would be busy preparing for their lives together. A home would be

prepared and made ready for the day when they would live together as husband and wife.

In reality this is that picture of our relationship to the Lord Jesus. We have been pledged to the Lord Jesus. Even now He is preparing a place for us as His bride. We are expected to keep ourselves for Him and Him alone. We eagerly wait for the day when we shall see Him face to face and live in His presence forever.

It was during this time of engagement that the angel came to Mary to announce that she was going to have a child. It is important to note here that verse 18 makes it very clear that this conception took place before Mary and Joseph came together. This child was the work of the Holy Spirit in her life and not a result of any sexual union between Mary and Joseph.

The fact that Mary was pregnant before they had come together would obviously be a real problem for Joseph, Mary and the whole community. Mary was in a very difficult place. It would certainly be very difficult for anyone to understand that she had become pregnant as an act of God without ever being unfaithful to Joseph. The evidence was against her. In a case like this the Law of Moses stated that Joseph was free to divorce Mary. We read in Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies,

then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

It is important to note here that because an engagement was legally binding, to break the engagement required a divorce even if the couple were not married.

When the news of Mary's pregnancy reached Joseph he was very troubled. Being a righteous man, he did not want to expose her to public disgrace and so he decided that he would divorce her quietly. He would do this in the presence of a few witnesses without making the matter public. Doing it this way, Mary would be protected, as much as possible from public disgrace and shame.

After Joseph had made up his mind to divorce Mary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The Lord let Joseph wrestle for some time with this issue before speaking to him. Joseph did what he felt was right. He showed as much compassion to Mary as he could but was not sure that he could go ahead with the marriage. God sent His angel before Joseph could carry through his plans. God watches over us and our decisions. If we are open to His leading, He is able to stop us when we are going in the wrong direction.

The angel came to Joseph in verse 20 and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because she had not been unfaithful to him. The child Mary carried in her womb was from the Holy Spirit. This would have been very important for Joseph to understand. By sending the angel, God confirmed to Joseph what Mary had been telling him.

The angel reminded Joseph of the importance of the child that would be born to them. They were to call Him Jesus because He would save His people from their sin. The name Jesus is the Greek form of the name Joshua. The name means "the Lord saves." This child would bring the salvation of God to the world.

The angel reminded Joseph that what was taking place was a fulfillment of the prophecy that a virgin would be with child and give birth to a son whose name would be "Immanuel" meaning God with us (see Isaiah 7:14). What an encouragement and confirmation it would have been for Joseph to see that what was happening was a direct fulfillment of the prophecy of the great prophet Isaiah. What a tremendous sense of honour and privilege Joseph must have felt that day.

The encounter with the angel changed everything between Mary and Joseph. Having heard from the angel, Joseph decided to take Mary as his wife. The context of verse 24 could possibly lead us to understand that Joseph responded immediately. Verse 24 says that "when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded." What an encouragement this must have been for Mary. In taking Mary to be his wife it may have removed some of the misunderstandings of the community and made things easier to accept. It would have been very difficult for Mary to be a single pregnant woman.

Matthew is very careful to mention here that Joseph did not have any sexual relations with Mary until after she gave birth to her son. Mary would remain a virgin until after the Lord Jesus was born. This would be in fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament which said that a virgin would conceive. It would also remove any doubt that this birth was a miracle. Had Joseph had sexual relations with

Mary during this time it would have been easy for people to say that the child was his. This is not the case. When the child was born Mary and Joseph named Him Jesus as the angel had commanded.

For Consideration:

- How does the Lord stop Joseph from making a wrong decision? Will God do the same for us if we are seeking Him? What encouragement does this give you?
- Joseph's dealings with Mary were very gentle and compassionate. What should we learn from this about how to deal with people of our day who have fallen into sin or who would be considered outcasts in our society?
- What does the New Testament practice of engagement or betrothal teach us about our own relationship with the Lord?
- Why is it important that Matthew be clear here that while Mary and Joseph lived together they did not have any sexual relations until after Jesus was born?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you the gentleness that Joseph demonstrates in this passage toward those who are outcasts in our society or those who have fallen?
- Thank the Lord that we have been pledged or engaged to Him and that He is now preparing a home for us where we can live with Him forever.
- Thank the Lord that he is so willing to use us as simple and humble individuals to be His servants. Ask Him to help you to know His heart and will for your life. Ask Him to give you grace to be faithful to His call on your life.

8

BETHLEHEM

Read Luke 2:1-21

Luke gives us the very first account of the Lord Jesus and His birth. The story begins in the days of Caesar Augustus. As emperor of Rome, he decreed that there should be a census taken of the entire Roman world. Israel had been conquered by Rome and as such was subject to this census. Many scholars believe that this census had to do with taxation.

Verse 2 tells us that this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone was to return to his or her hometown to register for this census. This would have been a very large undertaking. In obedience to this decree, Joseph left Nazareth and returned to Bethlehem where he was to register. He took Mary with him.

While they were in Bethlehem, Mary's time to give birth to her son arrived. It is interesting to note that the prophets had predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Augustus had no idea that his decree would lead to

the fulfillment of prophecy. Sometimes God uses very strange means to accomplish His purposes.

Because of the census, all the inns in Bethlehem were filled. All Joseph could find was a stable for shelter. We can only imagine how Joseph must have felt taking Mary to this stable. Mary was about to give birth to the Messiah. This was the best accommodations Joseph could provide for her at the time. He knew the significance of the child in Mary's womb. He knew that this child was the Son of God. He deserved the very best inn in Bethlehem but despite all his efforts he could not find a place for this child to be born. We can only imagine what the couple felt as they settled down in the stable with the animals that night.

It was here in this stable that the Lord Jesus was born. Mary and Joseph did not have a proper crib for him so they took one of the mangers used to feed the animals and placed the Son of God in it. It was the best they had.

Jesus' birth, like his life, was very simple. He came to be rejected and ridiculed. There was no room for him in the inn and there would be no room for Him in the hearts of His people either.

As the events unfolded in the stable, the angels of heaven were busy. Verse 8 tells us that, in the fields nearby, shepherds were watching their sheep. It was night. As they watched their sheep, an angel appeared to them. We are told in verse 9 that the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds as the angel spoke. God was manifesting His presence to them in a very special way. The shepherds were terrified when they saw this glory. Sensing their fear, the angel told them not to be afraid because he had good news to announce to them. This news would bring great joy to all people. As they listened, the angel told them that

in the town of David (Bethlehem), a Saviour had been born. He was Christ the Lord. There are several things we need to notice in this statement of the angels.

Notice how the angel told the shepherds that this Saviour had been born “to them” or for them. Of all people, the shepherds were the first to hear this news. The angels did not go to the priests or the government officials. He came to lowly shepherds. The angels told them that this Saviour was for them.

Notice second that this child was the Christ. The term “Christ” means “anointed one.” This would have been understood in that day. This child was anointed by God to bring the salvation of God to His people. We can only imagine what these shepherds were thinking as they listened to this incredible news of the birth of the Messiah in their midst.

As if to confirm what he had said to them, the angel told the shepherds that the sign and proof of what he was saying would be the fact that they would find the child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. This was strange indeed. What mother would put their newborn baby in an animal’s feeding trough? When they saw it with their own eyes however, they knew that what the angel said was true.

As they reflected on these things the shepherds saw a great host of angels appear in the heavens above them. They were praising God for the birth of this new child. We need to see the heart of the angels in this. They are rejoicing over the plan of God for the salvation of His people. They are rejoicing because God was going to reach out to save His people from their sin and rebellion. These angels have God’s heart when it comes to our salvation. We read in Luke 15:10:

In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

The angels gave glory to God for the birth of this baby. He would bring peace to all those on whom His favour rested. The favour of God would touch the lives and hearts of God's people, bringing forgiveness and restoration of their relationship with God. Notice that this peace would only be for those upon whom the favour of the Lord rested. Not everyone would know this peace with God. Christ would not find room in every heart. Some would reject Him.

After the angels left, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem to see for themselves what the angel had told them (verse 15). Verse 16 tells us that they hurried to find the child. They found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger as the angel had said. There could be no doubt in their minds that this child was indeed very special.

Verse 17 tells us that these simple shepherds became the very first evangelists. They spread the word about the Jesus, the Messiah. They told people who would listen to them what they had seen and what the angels had told them about this special child. In the community of Bethlehem, we can imagine that this would have been very special news indeed. All who heard the shepherd's story were amazed at what they heard (verse 18).

We are told in verse 19 that Mary treasured these things and kept them in her heart. The fact that she treasured these matters shows us how much of an encouragement these events must have been for her. Once again, God had confirmed to her that this child was a very special child. The events that surrounded His birth were miraculous. She reflected on these things and marvelled at the

wonderful plan of God and how He had used her to be part of that plan.

As for the shepherds, they returned to their fields to care for their sheep but they would never be the same. They returned with hearts that glorified and praised the Lord for the incredible things they had seen and heard. No doubt they would continue to share this story with all who would listen to them for years to come. Ultimately, this is what it means to be a witness. A witness simply tells what he or she has seen and heard. You cannot be a witness if you have not seen or heard. What have you seen of the Lord and His work in your life? What has He communicated to you? If you have nothing to share maybe you need to seek Him afresh. Sometimes the reason we are not good witnesses for the Lord is because we really have not experienced Him as we should. There was nothing more natural for the shepherds than to share the wonderful things they had seen and heard. May this be the case for us as well.

According to the custom of the day, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple to have Him circumcised and to give Him His name. They named Him "Jesus" meaning "God saves" just as the angel had told them.

For Consideration:

- Here in this passage the Lord used a decree by an unbelieving emperor to bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. What does this teach us about the means God uses to accomplish His purposes?

- What does the humble nature of Christ's birth teach us about the kind of ministry He would ultimately have?
- What does this passage teach us about the concern of the angels in heaven for us and our salvation?
- What do the shepherds teach us about witnessing? What have you seen and heard? Do you have an excitement in your heart to share what the Lord has shown and taught you?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He uses simple people like the shepherds to communicate the truth.
- If you know the Lord Jesus today, take a moment to thank Him for the fact that you have received His favour.
- Ask the Lord to give you a heart like these shepherds to share the good news you have heard with others.
- Thank the Lord that He can use even a Roman Caesar to accomplish the fulfillment of His promises. Thank Him that He is a sovereign Lord over all.

9

THE PRESENTATION AT THE TEMPLE

Read Luke 2:22-38

The Law of Moses declared that a woman who gave birth needed to go through a period of purification before normal life could be resumed. Leviticus 12:2-4 explains this more fully:

Say to the Israelites: A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over.

In the case of Mary, she would have waited a total of forty days before the days of her purification could be accomplished. At the end of her purification a woman was to bring an offering to the Lord. The law stated that she should

bring a year old lamb and a dove or pigeon as a sin offering to the Lord. There was, however, a provision made for those who could not afford a lamb. Leviticus 12:8 tells us:

If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.

It should be noted here in verse 24 that Mary came either with two doves or two pigeons. This indicates that Joseph and Mary were quite poor.

There is something else we need to understand in this passage. Jesus was a firstborn male child. There was a specific law in the Old Testament related to the birth of a firstborn male child. In the days of Moses, God killed the firstborn of every Egyptian family but saved the firstborn male of every Israelite family that painted the blood of a lamb on their door posts (see Exodus 12). From that time onward, the Lord claimed the firstborn males of Israel as well as the firstborn of their flock for Himself. They were to be consecrated to Him. We read in Exodus 13:2:

Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.

Because the firstborn belonged to the Lord, they had to be bought back or redeemed from Him. Numbers 18:15-16 tells us:

The first offspring of every womb, both man and animal that is offered to the LORD is yours. But you

must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs.

The parents of a firstborn male child were required by law to take their child to the temple where they would present him to the Lord in recognition that he belonged to Him. After presenting him to the Lord they could then buy him back from the Lord for the price of five shekels of silver. It was for this reason that Mary and Joseph went to the temple.

Notice in verse 25 that when they were in the temple they met a man by the name of Simeon. This man was a righteous man who longed for the "consolation" of Israel. The consolation of Israel was her Messiah. Simeon was a man who was broken by the sin of his people and longed for the day when the Messiah would come and deliver them. We are told that the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ (or Anointed One). He lived each day in anticipation of when he would see the one God had promised.

Even before Mary and Joseph arrived at the temple court, the Holy Spirit had been working in Simeon. On that particular day he was in the temple courts when Mary and Joseph came in with the baby Jesus. When they entered, the Lord revealed to Simeon that this child was the promised child. Simeon took Jesus from his parents and held Him in his arms.

As he held the baby Jesus in his arms, Simeon's heart was filled with praise and thanksgiving (verse 28). He praised the Lord that He had been faithful to His promise of

revealing the Messiah to him. Now that he had seen this child he was ready to die. He could depart from this world in peace because he had seen the salvation of the Lord in the person of this young infant in his arms. Simeon had no doubt about the Lord Jesus and the work He would accomplish.

Simeon prophesied that this child would be for all people. That is to say, He would not be the Saviour of the Jewish people only but also of the Gentiles. He would bring light to the Gentile world that was now living in ignorance of the salvation of God (verse 32).

As can be imagined, Mary and Joseph were amazed at what they heard that day. How could Simeon have known these things if it had not been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit? Simeon's words confirmed what the angel had told them many months ago. They were humbled that this special child had been given to them.

Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph. Speaking particularly to Mary, he told her several things about her child. We need to examine each of these prophecies individually.

First, Simeon told Mary that her child was destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel (verse 34). That is to say, not everyone would accept Him and His ministry. Some would reject Him and the salvation He offered. They would fall and never rise again. On the other hand, others would receive Him and experience the deliverance He came to offer. His ministry would cause division in the nation.

Second, this child would be a sign that would be spoken against (verse 34). Many would reject Jesus as the sign of God's favour. Though He was the Son of God and

Messiah, He would be rejected by many. They would mock Him and speak harshly against Him, blaspheming His name and denying His ministry.

Third, through this child the thoughts of many would be revealed (verse 35). Jesus would expose the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. He would not be deceived by the display of religious piety. The ministry of Jesus would expose the sinfulness of the human heart. He would reveal to humanity their need of a Saviour.

Finally, Simeon told Mary that the day was coming when a sword would pierce her soul (verse 35). In other words, a day was coming when she would experience a deep grief concerning her child. We understand this to refer to the crucifixion of Jesus. Mary's heart would be broken by the crucifixion of her son.

While these things would not have been easy for Mary to accept, it was important that she prepare herself for them. Simeon's words revealed that this young child was the Messiah. As Messiah, however, He would be rejected by many and killed. These things were revealed to Simeon prophetically many years before they happened. While Mary did not understand how all this would work itself out in the life of her child, Simeon's words would have prepared her for what was going to happen.

There was another person in the temple that day. Anna was an elderly prophetess. She had been married but her husband had died. She spent her time in the temple worshipping day and night. She fasted and prayed, seeking the Lord. She, too, approached Mary and Joseph in the temple. When she saw them, she gave thanks to God. She too recognised that her child was the Messiah.

After seeing the baby Jesus, Anna gave thanks to God and spoke about Him to all who came into the temple. She pointed them to the young child Jesus, declaring Him to be the hope of Israel.

We can only imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to go to the temple that day. There could be no doubt in their minds that this child was very special. Over and over again God was confirming to them that their child was the Son of God.

For Consideration:

- Mary and Joseph had to redeem their firstborn child from the Lord. Doesn't all we have belong to the Lord today? What do we have that is truly ours?
- Simeon prophesied that the people of Jesus day would reject Him. Why did they reject Him? Why do they reject Him today?
- Notice the sensitivity of Anna and Simeon to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Are you at a place in your spiritual life where the Holy Spirit could lead you as He led them?
- What do you think Mary and Joseph felt at the end of that day in the temple? Why do you think God confirmed to them over and over again that Jesus was a very special child? Do you have times when you need to be confirmed in your calling? How has God confirmed your calling to you?

For Prayer:

- Notice the heart of Simeon and Anna and their devotion to the Lord and His kingdom. Ask the Lord to give you this sort of devotion to Him.
- Ask the Lord to increase your sensitivity to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life so that you can be clearly led by Him as Anna and Simeon.
- Thank the Lord that He reveals Himself to the poor and humble even as He did to Mary and Joseph.
- Thank the Lord that He understands our need of confirmation and will minister to us in this regard when we need it.

10

THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN

Read Matthew 2:1-12

We have seen how God's call on Mary and Joseph was confirmed by many different people. They had angelic visits and prophecies given to them by Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna. A visit from the shepherds also confirmed to them that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. In this section we read about a visit from some Magi from the east.

It was during the reign of Herod that Magi from the east came to Jerusalem searching for the Messiah. These Magi were very likely astrologers who studied the stars. Commentators believe that they came from the region of Persia or Babylon to the east of Israel. They had seen a very special star in the sky. It is uncertain how they knew what that star represented but God had revealed some very clear details to them through it. They understood that a special king had been born. This king was worthy of worship and praise. They determined to make the long trip to see Him and offer Him their gifts (verse 2).

While these Magi knew that this king had been born, they did not have any specific details regarding where He was born or what He would accomplish. There were gaps in their understanding. What is important for us to note here is that God can use any means to reach His people and communicate the truth. While the Magi had enough understanding to travel to Jerusalem, they did not have the whole picture. There are many people like this in our day. The Holy Spirit has been drawing them but they need to be discipled and taught the truth of the Word of God to have a more complete understanding.

What is surprising here in this passage is that Herod had never heard about the birth of Jesus. The news of the Magi announcing the birth of a king disturbed him. Notice that all of Jerusalem was disturbed at this news. Herod would have wondered about this from a political point of view. The Jews did not appreciate Roman rule. They would not need much convincing to stand behind a Jewish leader who would lead them into victory over the Romans. Herod knew he had to follow up on this.

Herod called all the chief priests and teachers of the law together to gather information from them. He understood that the Jews were looking for a Messiah. The priests and teachers of the law would be able to give him more information about this. He asked them where this Christ was to be born according to the prophecies of their Scripture.

It is important to note that while the shepherds had announced the birth of Christ to the people of Bethlehem it was the Magi who were to announce it to the political and religious leaders in the city of Jerusalem. Again it is quite astonishing to see that the instruments of God to bring this announcement were foreign astrologers. We can never limit God. We may not have chosen to bring such an

important announcement to Jerusalem through foreign astrologers but God's ways are different from ours. God uses strange means and strange people to communicate His truth. This ought to both humble us and encourage us at the same time.

The Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem told Herod that the Scriptures foretold that a Messiah would be born in Bethlehem in Judea. In verse 6 they quoted from Micah 5:2:

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

Having learned that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, Herod called the magi aside and spoke to them privately. He asked them about the exact time the star appeared. Having learned all he could from the magi, Herod sent them to Bethlehem telling them to search for the child and report back to him. He told them that he, too, wanted to worship this new born king. The reality of the matter, however, was that Herod saw Jesus as a threat and wanted get rid of Him.

The wise men left for Bethlehem. It is interesting to note that the star they had seen in the east led them directly to the place where the Lord Jesus was staying. Why did the Lord not lead them directly to Bethlehem in the beginning, avoiding Jerusalem and King Herod? It appears that they needed to go to Jerusalem to speak to the leaders there and announce the arrival of the Messiah.

God leads us step by step. He does not always give us the whole picture at once. We need to be obedient in the first

step before the second step is opened up to us. Could it be that the reason you do not see the direction that God wants you to take is because it is not the right time? Could it be that there is still something the Lord requires of you right where you are? One thing is certain; when you have obediently accomplished what the Lord has called you to do, He will make the rest of the way clear.

There was another reason why the magi needed to go to Jerusalem. It was here that they were instructed in the prophecies of the Old Testament regarding the Messiah. The gaps in their knowledge had to be filled.

The star led them directly to the place where Jesus was staying. It confirmed to the wise men that they had found the child they had set out to see. They were overjoyed in this. God spoke to these magi in a way they could understand. He spoke to them through the stars. Again we are struck by the means God used to communicate the truth.

Notice in verse 11 that the magi found Mary and Joseph in a house. It appears that by the time the wise men arrived, Mary and Joseph were no longer in the stable. When the crowd who had come for the census left, Joseph likely made it a priority to give his wife a proper home in Bethlehem.

When they entered the house, the magi bowed down before the child and worshipped Him. After worshipping Him they presented Him with gifts. They offered Him gold, incense and myrrh. There are several things we need to mention about these offerings.

Some versions speak here of frankincense. Frankincense was used in the sacrificial offerings of the temple. We read for example in Leviticus 2:16:

The priest shall burn the memorial portion of the crushed grain and the oil, together with all the incense, as an offering made to the LORD by fire.

The day was coming when the Lord Jesus would become a sacrifice for our sin. Could it be that this incense symbolised the sacrifice that He would make for the forgiveness of our sin?

Myrrh was added to anointing oil used in the celebrations of the temple (see Exodus 30:23-24). It was also used in preparing the body of a dead person for burial. We see in John 19:39 that Nicodemus used myrrh to prepare the body of Jesus for the grave.

It is also interesting to note that it was the custom of the day to give a condemned criminal a mixture of wine and myrrh to ease his suffering. This mixture was offered to the Lord when He was on the cross. Mark 15:22-23 tells us:

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

Commentators see gold to be a gift symbolising royalty. While we do not want to read too much into this, these gifts do appear to be significant. They seem to indicate that as king He would one day have to offer His life as a sacrifice for our sin. It is uncertain how much these magi understood the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus but their actions are prophetic.

After their time in Bethlehem was finished, God told the wise men that they were not to return to Herod but to go

back to their own country by another route. By this means, God protected the young child Jesus from the hands of Herod who sought His life.

For Consideration:

- The magi were led to Jesus by a star but also by means of the clear prophetic teaching shared with them by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. What does this teach us about the importance of the Word of God?
- God led the magi by means of the stars. What does this teach us about how we need to reach the people in our community? Are we communicating to the unbelieving world in a way they can understand? How can we better communicate to the unbeliever today?
- Why do you suppose God lead the wise men to Jerusalem instead of directly to Bethlehem?
- What do the gifts the wise men brought to Jesus teach us about His ministry?
- What do we learn about the type of people the Lord uses?
- How would the visit of the wise men show Mary and Joseph the importance of their child?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He leads us step by step. Ask Him to enable you to be obedient in what He has called you to today.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be a student of the Word so that there are no gaps in your understanding of His purposes and plan.
- Thank the Lord for the fact that He was born to be a sacrifice for your sin.
- Ask the Lord to teach you to be sensitive to His leading in your life just as the magi in this passage.
- Thank the Lord that He communicates to us in ways we can understand.

11

ESCAPE TO EGYPT

Read Matthew 2:13-23; Luke 2:39-40

The wise men (magi) had visited the Lord Jesus and were warned by God not to return to Jerusalem. Herod had encouraged them to go to Bethlehem and find the young child whose star they had seen. He commanded them to report to him when they had found the child. The wise men chose to obey God rather than Herod and returned to their country.

After the wise men left, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. He told Joseph to take the young child Jesus and His mother and escape to Egypt. The angel informed Joseph that Herod was going to search for the child to kill Him.

This would not have been easy news for Joseph and Mary to hear. They had been rejoicing in this child. They had seen so many confirmations that He was the Messiah. In the midst of all this rejoicing and wonder, the news came that the life of this very precious child was in danger. The mood changed. Mary and Joseph realised that not

everyone would appreciate the ministry and importance of their child.

Matthew 2:14 tells us that Joseph got up that night, took Jesus and His mother Mary and left for Egypt. There was urgency to the angel's message. They escaped unnoticed. If questioned by Herod's soldiers the neighbours would have no answer to give.

Matthew makes it clear that what took place that night was in direct fulfilment of prophecy. Hosea 11:1 says: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." This passage is in reference to the people of God who came out of the land of Egypt. There seems to be a connection in Matthew's mind, however, between the Lord Jesus going into Egypt and the story of the people of God in slavery there. Egypt was a symbol of bondage for the people of God. The Lord Jesus Himself went to that very place of bondage for us. He identified with His people. There is a spiritual significance to the fact that the Lord Jesus went to Egypt as a young child.

As the angel had predicted, Herod, realising that he had been outwitted by the wise men, became very angry. He ordered that all male children in Bethlehem aged two and under were to be killed. Herod made this decision based on the information the magi had given him about when they had seen the star. From this we can assume that Jesus was obviously no more than two years old at the time He was taken to Egypt.

It should be noted that this massacre of Jewish boys was prophesied by the prophet Jeremiah. In verse 18 Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15:

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.

Rachel was the mother of Joseph in the Old Testament. Scripture tells us that she was buried in the region of Bethlehem (see Genesis 35:19). She is pictured here grieving in her grave because of the terrible massacre in Bethlehem. Her children (or descendants) are being killed by Herod. She refuses to be comforted because of this evil.

We are not told how many children perished in those days but we do know that Herod was not successful in killing the Lord Jesus. The hand of His heavenly Father was watching out for Him and He was safely hidden from Herod.

When Herod died, an angel came to Joseph in another dream and told him that he could take Jesus and His mother back to Israel (Matthew 2:19-20). Commentators tell us that Herod died a very tragic and horrible death. He did not go unpunished for his terrible deeds.

When Joseph heard that Herod's son Archelaus was reigning in Judea, he was afraid to go there. God confirmed Joseph's concern through another dream. In this dream, God warned him not to go to the region of Judea. Joseph decided, therefore, to settle in Galilee. He chose a small and seemingly insignificant town called Nazareth. Matthew again reminds his readers that even this matter was prophesied in the Scriptures (verse 23).

Luke does not say anything about this part of the life of Christ. He moves from Jesus' presentation in the temple to His return to Nazareth (Luke 2:38-39). Luke tells us, however, that Jesus grew and became strong (Luke 2:40).

Even as a child in Nazareth, He was filled with wisdom. There was evidence of the grace of God on His life.

For Consideration:

- What encouragement do you find in the fact that the details of this difficult time in the life of Christ were prophesied by the prophets long before they happened? Who is in control here?
- Notice how the angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph in this passage warning him of the dangers to come. Does God still warn us and protect us today?
- What role does Joseph play at this time in the life of Jesus? Does it strike you Joseph is used by God to protect his son? Why does Jesus need protection if He was the Son of God?
- The hand of God was on the Lord Jesus from His childhood protecting Him from enemies. Is God's hand of protection on our children as well? Does He also have a purpose for their lives?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He leads us and keeps us in times of danger.
- Ask the Lord to show you His purpose for your life. Thank Him that He will keep you for that purpose and protect you in it.

- Thank the Lord that He is in control of the events of history. Nothing takes Him by surprise.
- Take a moment to ask God to surround your family and protect them from harm.

12

YOUNG JESUS AT THE TEMPLE

Read Luke 2:41-52

Twelve years have passed in the life of the Lord Jesus. It was the custom, at this age, for a young Jewish male to go to the temple services and learn a trade. He was passing from childhood into adulthood. As was their custom, Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem each year to celebrate the Passover. The Feast of the Passover was a remembrance celebration. It commemorated the day when the angel of death passed over Israel and killed the firstborn sons of Egypt and Israel's freedom from the bondage of Egypt.

After the celebration, the family left Jerusalem to return home. Unknown to Joseph and Mary, Jesus stayed behind in the city (verse 43). Verse 44 tells us that Joseph and Mary thought that Jesus was with one of their relatives who were also travelling back to Nazareth. After a day of not seeing Him, they looked for Him among their relatives and friends. When they could not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem.

After three days they found Jesus. When they found Him, He was sitting in the temple courts with the teachers listening to their teaching and asking questions. His hunger to learn was intense. Those present that day listened to His questions and were amazed at His understanding. Even Mary and Joseph were astonished when they found Him.

It is important to note that the Lord needed to learn like any one of us. It is true that He had a very intimate connection with the Father but He still had to learn by listening to the teachers of His day.

Speaking out of deep concern, Mary asked, "Why have you treated us like this?" For three days they had been looking for their son. Any parent knows how difficult this would be. Mary reminded Jesus of how anxious they had been over the last three days.

Jesus' answer is important. He expressed surprise that His parents did not know where He was. "Why were you searching for me?" He asked. "Didn't you know that I had to be in My Father's house" (verse 49)? Was Jesus, at this time, aware of His calling in life? God's call on His life was so powerful that Jesus felt His parents should have understood His attraction to this place of worship and learning. While His parents did not understand the intensity of His calling at this age, verse 51 tells us that Mary in particular treasured these words in her heart. This incident gave her a glimpse into the person of her son and God's purpose for His life.

After these events Jesus left with His parents and returned to Nazareth. Luke tells his readers that Jesus was obedient to his parents. This is an important statement from Luke. This incident might lead the reader to assume that

Jesus was disobedient. Luke wants his readers to understand that Jesus submitted to His parents and was obedient to them in all things. Over the course of the next years Jesus continued to learn and grow physically and in His relationship with God and with those around him.

Before the Lord Jesus could be released into ministry He needed to grow in knowledge. He needed to be grounded in the truth of the Word of God. This could only come by study of the Scriptures. Even the Lord Jesus needed to spend time in the Word of His Father to understand it and grow in it. He had to learn it just like we do.

Jesus also needed to grow in favour with God. It is vital that we understand this. Before He could be released into ministry the Lord Jesus needed to grow in His relationship with His Father. We sometimes have the impression that these things were automatic in the life of the Lord Jesus. The reality of the matter, however, was that Jesus had to learn to walk with His Father and listen to Him just like we do. If we are to minister as God wants us to minister, we need not only to grow in our understanding of the Word but also in our relationship with the Father. It is possible to have a grasp of the Word and still not be in a good relationship with the Father. Jesus grew in both these areas.

The third area where Jesus needed to grow was in favour with people. This does not mean doing everything to please people but we do need to love those to whom we minister. If you do not love those you serve, you will fail in your ministry. Jesus had to grow in His ability to handle relationships and to love those around Him with the love of the Father. All too many pastors and Christian workers fail in their ministry because they do not know how to deal with people in compassion and love.

If you are going to become all that God wants you to become, you will need to mature in these same areas. You cannot minister effectively if you do not have a firm grasp of the Word of God. You cannot minister effectively if you do not have a close walk with God. Nor can you minister effectively if you do not have an understanding of how to work with people in love and tenderness.

Again it is important for us to see that Jesus had to learn just like we do. These early years were years of preparation. At the age of twelve, the Lord Jesus sensed a very intense calling to ministry but it was not His time. Over the course of the next eighteen years He would continue to grow, learn and prepare for ministry. It would not be until He was about thirty years of age that He would be released into this ministry. Perhaps you have been waiting for the Lord to release you into your calling. The Lord Jesus knows what it is like to wait. May we, like Jesus use this time to learn and grow so that when we are released, we will be ready.

For Consideration:

- How important is it for us to be prepared for ministry? In what areas did Jesus need to grow? Have you grown in these areas? Where is your weakness? How does this affect your ministry?
- Have you ever found yourself waiting for God to release you? Why is it not easy to wait for the timing of the Lord? What is God accomplishing in you in this time of waiting?

- The Lord Jesus needed to grow in knowledge and favour with God and favour with people. How is your relationship with God? How are your relationships with people?
- How important is the knowledge of the Word? How does Jesus demonstrate a hunger for the Word of His father? Do you have a similar hunger for the Word of God?
- What is the call of God on your life? Have you been obedient to that call?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to mature you in the areas of your life where you need work (knowledge of the Word, favour with God and favour with people).
- Thank the Lord that He willingly left all to become a young boy who had to learn obedience, knowledge and favour.
- Thank the Lord that He can identify with you in your struggle because He faced those struggles Himself.
- Ask the Lord to give you patience as you wait on Him in your ministry and life problems.

13

JOHN BEGINS HIS MINISTRY

Read Matthew 3:1-6; Mark 1:2-6; Luke 3:1-6

Many years have passed since the twelve year old Jesus spoke with the leaders in the temple. The scene shifts to John the Baptist. For some time John had been living in the desert where he was being prepared for the day when he would introduce the Lord Jesus to the world. We are not told what the Lord Jesus did from the age of twelve to the age of thirty. It would appear that he lived and worked as any normal adult in those days. His preparation for ministry was among people and in an occupation. John, however, was prepared in isolation in the desert. God has a way of training and equipping each of us for the tasks He calls us to do.

Luke 3:1-2 gives us a date for John's coming out of the desert. We are told that the word of the Lord came to John in the desert during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. At this time, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was in Galilee, Philip, the brother of Herod was in the region of

Iturea and Traconitus. Lysanias was in Abilene. Luke also tells us that at this time both Annas and Caiaphas were serving as High Priests. It was at this precise moment in history that the word of the Lord came to John in the desert calling him to preach. There are several important details about the ministry of John that the Gospel writers want us to understand.

John's Ministry in Prophecy

All three Gospel writers want us to understand that the ministry of John the Baptist was prophesied long before he came out of the desert. They remind us that Isaiah prophesied that God would send a messenger ahead of the Messiah to prepare the way for Him (see Isaiah 40:3-5). This messenger was seen as a voice calling in the desert (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). Even the fact that John was living in the desert was prophesied long before it happened. This important voice did not come from the temple or the religious centres of Jerusalem. The voice would come out of a barren desert.

Prophecy also stated that the messenger would prepare the way for the Messiah and make His path straight (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). When we lived in Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, anytime a foreign dignitary would come to visit, a police escort would be arranged. These policemen would travel ahead of the dignitary and make sure that there was nothing that would obstruct his or her path. Cars were halted to let the dignitary go through unhindered. This, in a sense, was what John was called to do. John was sent ahead of the Messiah to prepare the hearts and minds of those who would meet Him. People needed to repent of their sins and be ready to receive Him. All spiritual obstacles needed to be broken down.

John's ministry was foretold by the prophets. He came exactly as they had predicted. This in itself confirms that the Lord Jesus was truly the Messiah.

The Person John Announced

Luke 3:5-6 reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy that when the Messiah came valleys would be filled and mountains made low. The crooked roads would be straightened and the rough places smoothed. Isn't this what the Lord Jesus came to do? He came to fill in those empty valleys of our life with His wonderful peace. He came to humble the pride that is high as mountains in our lives. Those crooked paths of sin He wants to straighten out. He smooths the rough spots in our lives making us more like Him. The Lord Jesus came to reveal His salvation to the ends of the earth (Luke 3:6). While it would be some time before the Jews would accept this, Luke understood that the plan of God was not just for the Jews but for the entire world. The Messiah who came in the person of the Lord Jesus would be the Saviour of all His people, regardless of race or nationality.

John's Message

What was John's message? His was a message of repentance. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near," he said (Matthew 3:2). The kingdom of God was coming in the person of the Lord Jesus. He was the king of a new spiritual kingdom. His people needed to prepare their hearts to receive Him as their Saviour and King. They needed to turn from their sin because God had sent His Son into their midst. Sin is the number one barrier between God and people. The great movements or visitations of God in history have often been introduced by a move of God's Spirit calling people to repentance and prayer. As sin is dealt with, God moves in great power. In preparation for the Lord

Jesus' public ministry, John called his people to repent of their sins.

John not only preached this message of repentance but he called people to demonstrate that repentance. His preaching demanded a response. John expected that those who heard his message would make a decision to follow his Lord. To demonstrate their commitment to that decision, John asked that they be baptised.

John's Appearance

Both Matthew and Mark find it important to mention something about John's physical appearance. His clothes were made of camel's hair and he wore a leather belt around his waist. It is significant that Elijah also wore this type of clothing. We read for example in 2 Kings 1:8:

They replied, 'He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist.' The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite.

Notice also that Matthew and Mark tell us that John ate locusts and wild honey. John was not a rich man. He had very little in life and contented himself with what he had. His focus was not on the things of this life but on the kingdom of God.

John's Success

The ministry of John was wonderfully blessed of God. The power and anointing of the Holy Spirit was clearly on John and his ministry. People came from Jerusalem, Judea and the region of the Jordan to hear him preach (Matthew 3:5; Mark 1:5). The power of the Holy Spirit on him was such

that people began to confess their sin and were baptised. In reality, what we are seeing here is a revival. The power of God was moving among the people. People heard about the work of God being done through John and come to hear him preach. When they came they were gripped by the power of God and broken because of their sin.

John's ministry was the fulfilment of the words of the Old Testament prophets. His message was simple. It called his people to repent and demanded that their repentance be demonstrated in real life. John was not a flashy person. He lived a simple life. His ministry, however, was powerfully anointed by God and many responded to the power of God in his life.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage tell us about sin? How is it an obstacle in our relationship with God? How important is it that we repent of our sin. Has this message of repentance been weak in our day? Why?
- John called people to repent and to deal with their sin immediately. What keeps you from making things right with God?
- John demanded a response in his preaching. Do you expect that God will use your preaching and witnessing to accomplish things in the lives of those who hear you?
- John was not caught up in the things of this world. He lived a very simple life but was powerfully used

of God. Are there things that you would find difficult to surrender to the Lord today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal any sin in your life that blocks your relationship with Him.
- Ask the Lord to pour out His blessing on your ministry so that it becomes more fruitful.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from any attachments to this world that would keep you from being fruitful for him.
- Ask God to restore the message of repentance to the church of our day.
- Ask God to forgive us for the times we have minimised the seriousness of sin in church and society.
- Ask God to pour out a spirit of repentance in your church and society.

14

JOHN'S MESSAGE

Read Matthew 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-14

In the last meditation we spoke about the ministry of John the Baptist and the anointing of God on him. In this chapter we will examine the message John the Baptist preached.

Matthew tells us that many people came to hear John preach. On one occasion some Pharisees and Sadducees came out to hear what he had to say. When John saw them coming, he called them a brood of vipers. The viper was a poisonous snake. This is how John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were poisonous snakes biting and infecting others with their poisonous doctrines and practices. Those who fell prey to their teachings were destroyed by them. The teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, though based on the Law of God, were legalistic and distorted. These leaders presented a religious front but they were, in reality, a very proud people. They wanted to be noticed and applauded. They misled many into a religion of works and hypocrisy. John is very straightforward in his condemnation of their ways.

"Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" John asked (Matthew 3:7). The way they lived did not reflect the understanding that they would one day have to answer to God for their actions and words. We can only imagine what the response of the religious leaders would have been to these harsh words of John. John had exposed them as hypocrites. This would not have gone over well.

John challenged those present that day to produce fruit that was in keeping with their repentance. If we have repented of our sins there will be a change in the way we live. If we say we are sorry for our sin but continue to practice those sins, we demonstrate that our repentance was not sincere. True repentance will cause us to turn from our sin. There will be clear evidence of repentance in the way we live. John wanted to see the fruit of true repentance in the lives of those who came to hear him preach. He wanted to see changed lives.

Many who came to John were depending on the fact that they had been born Jews. They felt that because their fathers believed in God then they were guaranteed a relationship with God. There are people like this today. They believe that because they attend a good church or belong to a Christian family they will go to heaven. Nothing could be further from the truth. John reminded his listeners that God could raise up children of Abraham from the rocks and stones all around them. He challenged his listeners to a personal relationship with God. They could not depend on their fathers; they needed to experience a personal relationship with God for themselves. John called each listener to that personal relationship with their God.

John also reminded his listeners that one day they would all have to give an answer to God for their lives. He told them that the judgment of God was falling on them like an

axe falling on the trunk of a fruitless tree. Either they produced proper fruit or they would be chopped down and burned in the fire.

We see here the urgency of producing fruit for the Lord. How long have we lived life without producing fruit? How much longer will He have patience with us? How many people perish while we live in this unfruitful lives?

Luke tells us that people were truly struck by John's message. After hearing him speak they asked: "What shall we do then?" (Luke 3:10). John's message penetrated their hearts. They wanted to know how to live in light of the coming judgment of God.

John answered their question in a very simple and practical manner. If you have two tunics you should share with one who has none. If you have food to share you should share it with those who do not have any, he told them (Luke 3:11). He encouraged them to see the need around them. They were to show compassion and be willing to deny themselves in order to minister to others in their need. We are accountable to God for how we live and use what he has given to us.

When the tax collectors came to John and asked him what they should do he challenged them to collect only what was required. They were not to take advantage of people. Instead they were to be honest in all their dealings.

When the soldiers asked John what they needed to do, John told them that they were not to use their power to extort money. They were to live honestly and not accuse others falsely. He challenged them to be content with their pay. These soldiers had been using their position to enrich

themselves off the backs of those they should have been protecting.

John's message was intensely practical. He spoke out against hypocrisy. He told people that if they had truly repented of their sins then it would be obvious in the way they lived. He challenged them to live in the reality of the judgment of God. He encouraged them to practice godliness, that is, a life that demonstrated compassion and love for those around them. If you truly belong to the Lord, people around you will see evidence of this. John's challenge is a challenge to live out the faith we profess.

For Consideration:

- What fruit have you been producing for the sake of the kingdom?
- Is it urgent that we produce fruit for the Lord? Why?
- What change did you see demonstrated in your life when you repented of your sin and accepted the Lord Jesus? Do you still see evidence of this change in your life?
- What do we learn here about the boldness of John in his preaching? Are you willing to risk your reputation to speak the truth?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you what ministry He has for you. Ask Him to help you to show clear evidence of your faith to those around you.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to make the necessary changes in your life to be in a better relationship with Him.
- Thank the Lord for His wonderful patience with you despite the fact that you have not always demonstrated the fruit of repentance in your life.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be bolder in your witness.

15

JOHN INTRODUCES JESUS

Read Matthew 3:11-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:15-18

John the Baptist had a very powerful ministry. People were coming from the surrounding regions to hear him preach. God's Spirit was working through his preaching. People were broken by the power of the Spirit of God and repented of their sin. John's message was immensely practical. He taught that if people truly repented it would show in the way they lived. This was not all that John preached. The central focus of his ministry was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. He spoke often of the Lord Jesus. He declared Him to be the prophesied Messiah.

We have already seen that part of the ministry of John the Baptist was to baptise those who repent of their sins. It should be noted that this baptism was not the baptism that Christ would institute later in His ministry. John's baptism had, as its objective, to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah and His work. It followed more along the lines of the laws of purification in the Old Testament. Just as a priest would ceremonially purify his people in preparation for a work of God in their midst, so John was preparing his people for the coming of the Messiah.

John reminded those who came to him that he baptised them with water for repentance but there was one who came after him who was much greater than him. He would baptise them with the Holy Spirit and fire. John told his listeners that he was unworthy to carry His sandals (Matthew 3:11) or even to untie the laces of His sandals (Luke 3:16; Mark 1:7). John spoke these words when people wondered if he was the Christ (see Luke 3:15). He wanted everyone to know that he was not the Messiah. He saw himself as very small and insignificant compared to the Lord Jesus. He didn't want people to focus on him.

John told those who came to him to be baptised that the baptism the Lord Jesus would bring was much greater than his baptism. The Lord Jesus would baptise them in fire. His was a baptism of empowerment and refining. The baptism John speaks of here is not water baptism but the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Through His ministry on the cross, the Lord Jesus would pave the way for the Holy Spirit to come to those who believed in Him and repented of their sin. The Holy Spirit would come on them to empower and purify. This baptism and filling with the Holy Spirit would change lives. When the Holy Spirit fell on the church at Pentecost there was a radical change. The disciples were empowered and equipped for the work of ministry. Those baptised by the Holy Spirit would be given power from on high enabling them to live and serve as God required.

John reminded his listeners that the Lord Jesus would come with a fork in His hands to gather the wheat in the barn and to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. John paints a picture of the Lord Jesus coming as a farmer to separate the wheat from the leaves and stocks. He would gather those who belonged to Him but would throw the unbelievers into the fire to burn. Notice in Luke 3:17 this fire

is described as an unquenchable fire – that never goes out. It burns for an eternity as a reminder of the judgment of God on those who reject his offer of salvation.

In light of the coming judgment, John challenged the people to look to the Messiah, who would soon be revealed. They were not to turn their backs on Him. An offer was extended to them. They could come to the Messiah and be empowered and purified by the fiery baptism of His Holy Spirit or they could face the flames of His eternal wrath. John's words are very powerful - surrender to the ministry of his Holy Spirit or be condemned for an eternity.

As John preached these powerful words, the Lord Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to see John. Notice that he came to be baptised by John like all those around Him. Jesus' baptism by John is significant. Notice that though He had not committed sin, Jesus was still baptised like the sinners who came to John that day. The day was coming when the Lord Jesus would be baptised with another baptism. In Luke 12:50 Jesus refers to His death as a baptism. The symbolism cannot be missed here. Jesus was, by His baptism identifying with sinners and committing Himself to die on their behalf.

John did not feel worthy to baptise the Lord Jesus. He felt that Jesus needed to baptise him. Jesus reminded him, however, that it was necessary that He be baptised by John and that in His baptism the purposes of God would be accomplished. John consented and baptised the Lord Jesus.

The result of the Lord's baptism was beyond anything John could have expected. As Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God came on him in a way that was visible to all present that day. We can only

imagine how the opening of the heavens and the visible presence of the Holy Spirit would have impacted those present.

The Spirit of God descended on the Lord Jesus in the form of a dove. Why did the Holy Spirit come in the form of a dove? There may be some significance in the dove itself. The dove had for a long time been seen as a symbol of peace and humility. The Lord Jesus came to bring this peace. He would minister in great humility. It was important for the people present to see the Spirit come down on the Lord Jesus so they would understand the approval of the Father on His life and ministry.

By His baptism Jesus accepted the ministry to which His Father had called Him. He publicly declared, by His baptism, that He would serve His Father by identifying with sinners and taking the punishment for their guilt. God confirmed His acceptance of the Lord Jesus, as His instrument, by anointing Him with the Holy Spirit. To emphasise this, along with the visible presence of the Holy Spirit came the audible words of the Father from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). There could be no doubt that day in the hearts of those present. The opening of the sky, the descent of the Holy Spirit in visible form and the clear voice of God speaking from heaven proved to those who saw and heard that this person was indeed the Messiah. He was the One John had told them would come to baptise them with fire and the Holy Spirit. This was the one who came to judge.

There is one other detail that should be mentioned in this context. It was necessary that the Lord Jesus be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Until this time, the Lord Jesus had lived the life the Father had called Him to live. There is no question that the Spirit of God was already on Him as He

lived these first thirty years of His life. Despite this, however, the Holy Spirit still descended on Him at His baptism in a new and fresh way. The coming of the Holy Spirit here was for empowerment in ministry. From this point on, the Lord Jesus would move in the power of that Spirit in the particular ministry to which He had been called and equipped.

It seems to me that we all need this special anointing and empowering of God in our particular ministries. While the Spirit of God is in every believer equipping them to live and walk with Christ, there is also a special anointing and calling for service. Just as the priests and prophets of the Old Testament were set aside by anointing with oil for their particular ministry, so we must be anointed by God's Spirit for the specific call He has put on our lives. When God calls us to ministry, we can be sure that He will specifically empower us in that ministry. It may be that this empowering and anointing presence will be on you for evangelism or preaching the Word of God in power. He may come to give you gifts of administration or counselling. You will soon become aware that God's hand is on you in this particular area of your life. You will also understand that the work to which He has called you is not done in human strength and wisdom but by His Spirit working and blessing God's call on your life.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever felt the temptation in your ministry to have others focus on you and not on the Lord Jesus? How does John give us an example to follow?

- What did the baptism of John symbolise? What was its purpose?
- What evidence is there in your life of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit? Why is His work so important?
- What proof do we see in the baptism of Jesus that He was exactly who He said He was?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to anoint your ministry by His Holy Spirit. Ask Him to forgive you for trying to exercise that ministry in your own power and strength.
- Thank the Lord that He willingly accepted the call of the Father on His life for our salvation.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to point others to the Lord Jesus like John the Baptist.
- Take a moment to ask the Lord to open your heart to see any sin that hinders your relationship with God.

16

THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

Read Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13

After His baptism, the Lord Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1). Luke tells us that He was filled with the Spirit when He was led into the desert. When we think of being filled and led of the Spirit we do not always think of trials and tribulations. Here we see that the Holy Spirit was leading the Lord into a period of testing and trial. While it is true that Satan was the instrument to do the testing, the Holy Spirit led Jesus to this location and empowered Him to face this difficult time in His life. It was a necessary part of His ministry preparation.

Have you ever resisted the will and purpose of the Holy Spirit by refusing to face the testing of the enemy? There are times when the Lord will lead us to places where we will be tested and tried. This testing is intended to strengthen and equip us in ministry and our walk with the

Lord. God can use the enemy to accomplish His greater purpose in our lives.

It is not clear what form the temptation took those first forty days. Luke does say, however, that during those forty days Jesus was tempted by the devil (Luke 4:2). During that time, Jesus fasted and prayed. He knew where His victory over the enemy would come from. For forty days He prayed and sought God. He ate nothing during that time. Physically, He was weakened but this battle did not depend on His physical strength. The enemy unleashed all he had on Him. Jesus drew from the strength of the Spirit and cried out to His Father.

Some commentators see a connection between the forty years the children of Israel spent in the wilderness and the forty days that the Lord Jesus spends in the wilderness. He succeeded where the children of Israel failed.

The devil came to Jesus after forty days. Jesus was weak and very hungry. Recognising His physical hunger, the devil told Him that if He were the Son of God He should turn the stones into bread so He could have something to eat. At first view, there appears to be wisdom in this statement of the devil. What would be wrong with turning the stones into bread in order to have something to eat? There are several things we need to understand here.

Jesus had been led by the Spirit into the wilderness. It was the purpose of the Spirit of God that He be tempted and tested in this place. When the time was right the Spirit of God would release Him from this temptation and testing. Jesus was not going to take the easy way out before His time. How often have we taken this short cut? None of us want to face the struggle and temptations that come our way. Only by passing through these trials and testing

however, can we truly become all that the Lord intends us to be. By taking the shortcut, we miss the blessings and the lessons God intends for us.

There is a second matter that should be considered. The enemy was asking Jesus to demonstrate His power and prove himself. "If you are the Son of God then turn these stones into bread," Satan told Him. It is true that being filled with the Holy Spirit meant that Jesus had been empowered in a very special way to demonstrate the wonders of God. The enemy challenged Him to use this power, however, in an unauthorised way. Satan wanted Jesus to use this power for Himself and not for the sake of the kingdom. Jesus refused to use the power of God without the clear leading of the Spirit. It is indeed possible to use the gifts God has given us in a way that is not in tune with the direction and leading of the Spirit of God. You can have the power and ability to do something but not be authorised to do so. This passage teaches us that the power and gifts of God are not for us to use as we please. We must seek the clear direction and purpose of God in the use of our gifts.

Jesus reminded Satan that a man was not to live by bread alone but by every word that came from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). In other words, what was important was that He be obedient to the will and purpose of the Father. He would not use His power at the wrong time or in an unauthorised manner. He chose to listen to walk in obedience to the Father and be obedient to Him rather than cater to His own particular need.

The order of the temptations is different in Luke and Matthew's account. The order is not really what is significant here. Matthew tells us that the devil took the Lord to the holy city and brought Him to the highest point of the temple. He told Him that if He was the Son of God He should

jump down and have His angels catch Him. Satan quotes a passage of Scripture here to justify what he was challenging the Lord Jesus to do. Satan took Scripture out of its context and told Jesus to jump from the temple trusting the angels to protect Him. He twisted the Word of God to make it say what he wanted it to say.

Satan will do his utmost to attack, twist and cast doubt on the Word of God. He has been the cause of Scripture being misused by pastors and Christian leaders all around the world. He has often caused men and women to question its truth. He knows that if he can cause us to doubt this Word or use it incorrectly we will be without a compass in the wilderness of sin. If he can get us to throw away the Word or twist it, he can infiltrate the church with anything he wants. How much damage has been caused by those who do not properly interpret the Scriptures or use them to justify their own evil intents?

Jesus does not fall into the trap. He knew that these Scriptures quoted were never intended for the purpose for which Satan had directed them. He reminded Satan that to take Scripture and apply them in this way was to tempt the Lord. It is true that God will keep us in the struggles and difficulties He calls us to face but it is foolish indeed to throw ourselves into danger simply to prove God.

When Jesus resisted this second temptation, the devil took Him to a high mountain and showed Him the kingdoms of the world. He offered these kingdoms to Him if he would bow down and worship him. Satan has bound up whole nations in his lies. These nations were under his power and control. Satan told Jesus that if He would simply give him His heart he would set the world free. It was to set the world free that the Lord Jesus came. He came to die so that we could be released from the power of the enemy.

Satan offered to release his grip on the nations if the Lord would bow down and worship him. He could have the nations if He would sacrifice His integrity. How often has the enemy made this offer to us in our day? He will offer you success if you will sacrifice your integrity.

In response to this temptation, Jesus turned again to the Scripture. He chose to be faithful to the Word of God. He did not give up His integrity. He would not bow to the devil or stoop to his ways. If Jesus had turned His back on the Father at that time, He would not have been able to die for our sins. The Lord Jesus chose to be obedient without compromise. In this is our hope.

For Consideration:

- Does being led and empowered by God's Spirit mean that we will never have to suffer? What does this chapter teach us about this?
- What does this passage teach us about the importance of walking with God in complete integrity?
- Are we exempt from trials as believers? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in these trials?
- How important is the correct interpretation of the Word? How can the enemy use the Word of God to tempt us and lead us astray?
- Have you ever been tempted to compromise your faith? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a heart that is honest and sincere before Him. Ask Him to keep you from compromising your faith.
- Ask the Lord to teach you in the trials you are facing today.
- Thank the Lord that He knows what it is like to be tempted and tested. Thank Him that He can identify with you in your trials.
- Thank the Lord that He did not give in to the temptations of the enemy. Thank Him that because He was faithful to death He is our hope of eternal salvation.

17

JESUS GOES TO GALILEE

Read Matthew 4:12-17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 3:19-20, 4:14-30

The Spirit of God was on John the Baptist protecting him and keeping him for the ministry to which he had been called. After introducing the Lord Jesus to the world, however, it was not long before John ran into trouble. Luke tells us that John rebuked King Herod because of his lifestyle. In particular, he criticised him because of his wife Herodias. Herodias had been the wife of his brother Philip. Herod fell in love with her and Herodias decided to leave her husband Philip to become Herod's wife. We read more about this in Matthew 14:3-4:

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her."

Luke 3:19 tells us that this was not the only evil Herod had done. John also criticised Herod's evil lifestyle, obviously calling him to repent of his sin. The result was that Herod

put John in prison. John would ultimately be beheaded. He would never leave his prison cell. This ended John's public ministry.

There are several things we need to understand in this passage about John. First, we need to be encouraged by his boldness. Not everyone accepted his bold preaching. Ultimately he would be put to death because of his preaching. He did not fear this. The Spirit of God was so powerfully on him that he spoke his message without concern for personal safety.

Notice second that John died as soon as his ministry was completed. He had introduced the Lord Jesus to the world and was then put in prison where he would ultimately die. At first appearance this would seem unfair. This seemed to be a very poor reward for a life lived faithfully for his Lord. It should be understood, however, that this was the purpose for which John was born. His whole life was dedicated to introducing the Lord Jesus to the world. When that task was completed he was taken to be with the Lord God which was far better. Why has God kept you on this earth? What purpose has He for your life? What are the gifts He has given you? It is important for us to understand God's purpose and live it out in the time He gives us.

When Jesus heard that Herod had locked John in prison He returned to Galilee. It appears that Jesus went initially to the town of Nazareth where He had grown up.

News about Jesus spread through the region. His fame went before Him as people heard about His ministry and the words He was speaking. Jesus taught in the synagogues of Galilee (Luke 4:15). The people who heard Him were impressed with the words they heard. His words were filled with power and authority.

Luke tells us of an incident when the Lord Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth. There in the synagogue Jesus stood up to read from the prophet Isaiah. Taking the scroll in His hands He read from Isaiah 61:1-2. The words are recorded for us in Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

When He finished reading this passage He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down to teach as was the custom. With every eye focused on Him, Jesus told them that the passage He had read was fulfilled for them that very day. This passage had been understood by the scholars of the day to refer to the Messiah. In telling them that this passage was fulfilled that day, Jesus was saying that He was the Messiah of which this passage spoke.

Before examining the response of the people, we need to examine the passage Jesus read that day. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be anointed by the Spirit of God to accomplish a five-fold ministry.

Preach Good News to the Poor

The good news spoken of here was the message of salvation that the Lord Jesus came to offer through His death on the cross. Notice that this was preached to the poor. We should not see this to be poor in material things only. The poor Jesus spoke about here were those who recognised that they had nothing to offer a holy and awesome

God. They were destitute of spiritual goodness and were lost without the intervention of a Saviour. They realised that they could not enter the kingdom of heaven in their own strength and wisdom. They needed a Saviour. For those who understood this need, the Lord Jesus came to announce the good news that He could pay their debt and bring them the salvation they needed.

Proclaim Freedom for the Prisoner

When the Lord Jesus came to this earth He came to set the captives free. Our sin had bound us and we were in the grip of Satan. We were destined for an eternity without God and without hope. Jesus came to break the power of sin. He came to offer pardon and forgiveness to those who were held in the prison of sin. He paid the price for our freedom.

Recovery of Sight to the Blind

Not only were we held in prison cells of sin but we were also blinded to the things of God. We could not understand God's ways. How often did you hear the preaching of the Word of God and it did not make any sense? It was foolishness. No one could convince you to become a Christian because nothing they said to you made any sense. You just couldn't see it. Then one day the Holy Spirit gave you sight. You listened to what the preacher said and it made perfect sense. You saw it for the first time. You look back now and wonder how you could ever have been so blind. Jesus came so that, through the forgiveness of sins, we could receive the Holy Spirit who would give us eyes to see the reality of God's ways. Jesus came to heal spiritual blindness and give light.

Release for the Oppressed

There were many who were oppressed by evil spirits and diseases. The Lord Jesus came to release them from this grip of the enemy. Countless individuals have been set free from the strongholds of the enemy in their lives through the Lord Jesus. The New Testament is filled with illustrations of people being released in the name of the Lord Jesus from demonic and physical strongholds. Greater still is the release from the oppression and condemnation of sin.

Proclaim the Year of the Lord's Favour

This was the day the prophets longed to see. This was a day of victory, deliverance and salvation. Jesus came to bring in that year of favour. God's richest blessings would be poured out on the earth through the ministry of His Son.

There were mixed reactions to what Jesus said that day in Nazareth. There were those who spoke well of Him and were amazed at what He said. This does not mean that they accepted the Lord Jesus; they were simply amazed at what he said. Others were more resistant. They could not get past the fact that the Lord Jesus was the son of Joseph. As the son of Joseph, He could not possibly have been the Messiah. They knew Him and they knew his family. How could He tell them He was the Son of God?

Understanding what they were saying, Jesus quoted a familiar proverb of the day: "Physician, heal yourself." The idea here is that the physician was so busy healing others that he did not take care of himself. What the people of Nazareth were saying was that Jesus was so busy doing wonders elsewhere but he did not do them at home. They wanted Jesus to prove His words by showing them some

miracles in Nazareth. In reality, this request was the same request the devil brought Jesus during His time of temptation. If you really are the son of God than prove it by doing some powerful miracle. Use your power so we can believe you. This was the reaction of the people of His hometown. Jesus told them that no prophet was accepted in his hometown. He reminded them how in Elijah's day it did not rain for three and a half years and there was a severe famine yet Elijah was not sent to anyone in his own town but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. He also reminded them that while there were many lepers in Israel, Elisha was not sent to any of them. Instead, he was sent to a man by the name of Naaman who was a Syrian.

The people of His hometown could not believe He was the Messiah. Their disbelief and lack of faith kept Jesus from ministering in their midst.

The words of Jesus made the people in the synagogue angry. Jesus accused them of unbelief and lack of faith. The people were not going to accept these words from the son of Joseph. They drove Him out of the town. They were so angry with Him that they took Him to the brow of a hill with the intention of throwing Him down the cliff to His death. Again this reminds us of his time of temptation where the enemy took him to a high point in the temple and told Him to call on the angels to minister to Him when He cast Himself down. What would have happened if they had cast Him off the cliff and the angels appeared to Him to protect Him? Would this not have been an excellent time to do that miracle? Jesus did not fall for the temptation of the enemy when He was in the wilderness nor would he fall for it here. Instead, He simply walked through the crowd and escaped quietly. We are not sure how this took place. What is clear is that the hand of the Father was on

Him to protect Him. Jesus was not interested in using His power to prove Himself to an unbelieving people.

Matthew 4:13 tells us that Jesus left Nazareth and went to Capernaum. This was, according to Matthew in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-2:

Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." (Matthew 4:15-16)

As a result of the disbelief of His own hometown, the people of Zebulun would see the light. We see here how these details unfold exactly as Isaiah predicted. Having been rejected in His hometown, Jesus moved about the region of Capernaum preaching the need for repentance because the kingdom of God was at hand. This was the message John preached. It is important for us to understand that while Herod had placed John in prison he could not stop his message from spreading. When God finishes with one of His servants He raises up another.

For Consideration:

- Consider for a moment the boldness of John in this passage. Do you have this same boldness? What keeps you from being bold?
- Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come to set captives free and give them new sight. How has Jesus done this in your life?

- John had a particular call on his life and was taken away when that call was fulfilled. What call has the Lord put on your life?
- What did Isaiah tell us would be the ministry of the Messiah to come? How does Jesus perfectly fulfil this role?
- Have you ever faced rejection? What encouragement do you find in this passage?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to make your calling clear. Ask Him to help you to be faithful in that calling despite the opposition that may come your way.
- Thank the Lord that He willingly suffered rejection for us.
- Thank the Lord that we are kept until we have accomplished what He has called us to do.
- Thank the Lord that He has opened your eyes and set you free from the power of sin in your life.

18

PETER, ANDREW, JAMES AND JOHN

Read Matthew 4:18-20; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11

Until this time Jesus has been ministering alone. In this section we will see how He meets and calls His first four disciples.

Jesus was ministering in the area of the Sea of Galilee. Luke tells us that a large crowd had gathered to hear Him speak. Jesus saw two boats at the edge of the water left by some fishermen who were washing their nets. These fishermen were very likely finishing their work for the day and preparing for the next day.

Jesus got into one of the boats belonging to a man by the name of Simon Peter. He asked Simon to push out from the shore. When Simon pushed out, Jesus sat down in the boat and taught the crowd. From the lake His voice would have more easily carried to the crowd gathered to hear Him. Being out on the water he would also be more visible to the people on the shore.

From Matthew's account we understand that Andrew was Simon Peter's partner. It could be that both Simon Peter and Andrew were in the boat that day with the Lord. Simon Peter seems, however to be the central focus. Being in the boat, Simon would have had to stay and listen to Jesus teach. This had been a very discouraging day for Simon. Luke 5:5 tells us that he had been fishing all night and had not caught a single fish. Did the Lord Jesus understand this frustration? Had Jesus not asked for the use of his boat would Simon have stayed to listen to Jesus or would he have returned home discouraged after a hard day's work? While we really do not have an answer to this question, Simon was forced to stay and listen to Jesus.

We do not know what Jesus said to the crowd that day but after He finished, Jesus turned to Simon and asked him to push out further into the sea and let down his nets. Simon did not see what good that would be because he had been fishing all day and caught nothing. He obeyed, however, out of respect for Jesus.

Simon pushed out and let down his nets. That evening Simon caught so many large fish that his nets began to break. He had to signal to his partners in the other boat to come and help him bring in the fish. When his partners came to his aid, they filled both boats with fish. Luke told his readers that the boats were so full they began to sink.

Simon Peter was particularly touched by this miracle. He understood from this that Jesus was a holy man. Peter felt his inadequacy before the Lord that day. "Go away from me, Lord," he said, "for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). The scene before us is a picture of the grace and love of the Lord. Peter was a crude fisherman. He sat in the boat that day surrounded by the blessing of God. Jesus had particularly chosen to be with him. The crowd had been quite

large on the beach but Jesus chose to spend time with Peter (of all people). Jesus saw in Peter what Peter did not see in himself. Jesus believed in Peter when Peter did not believe in himself. Peter was overwhelmed by this attention.

Peter's companions James and John were also very astonished at the catch of fish that day. This was nothing short of a miracle. From Luke 5:10 we understand that James and John were, like Peter quite afraid of being in the presence of the Lord Jesus. They too were aware of the awesome power of God being demonstrated that day. Sensing their fear, the Lord Jesus told them not to be afraid because from that point on they would be fishers of men. In saying this, the Lord was calling them to be His disciples. After this incredible experience, these men pulled their boats to the shore and leaving them there they followed Jesus. They did not hesitate to leave everything. Jesus was offering them something far greater.

What is important for us to note here is that the Lord's first disciples were simple fishermen. They were not trained priests or religious leaders. He chose ordinary people to be His disciples. This is encouraging. God can use us just as we are. He is not looking for our education and experience but for our availability and obedience. These men were willing to leave everything to follow the Lord. This would not be an easy life for them. They did not know what the future had in store. They left their net immediately. They would be fishers of men from that day forth.

For Consideration:

- Are you available to the Lord for Him to use? Would you be willing to leave everything to follow Him? What would hold you back from being obedient to His call today?
- What encouragement do you find in the fact that Jesus chose simple fishermen to become His disciples?
- Have you ever felt unworthy of the Lord's attention like Peter? What does this passage teach us about the Lord and His interest in simple and unworthy people like us?
- What would you find difficult to leave for the Lord?
- Have you ever found yourself judging people that you considered unworthy? What does this passage teach us about how we need to be more accepting of other people?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the way He reached out to you like He reached out to Peter, Andrew, James and John.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have allowed things to stand in the way of doing His perfect will.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to accept those around you as He accepts them. Ask Him to forgive

you for judging people as unworthy of the Lord's attention.

- Thank the Lord that He is willing to use us despite our unworthiness.

19

CAPERNAUM

Read Matthew 8:14-17; Mark 1:21-34; Luke 4:31-41

In the last section we saw how Jesus chose four disciples to follow Him in His ministry. Jesus could have ministered by Himself but He chose to work with others. There was a reason for this. First, Jesus knew that the task of building the church would fall on these disciples in His absence. This was the heart of his father. By working with them, He was able to train them in how that work needed to be done. Second, by working with these disciples He showed all who would follow that the task of building His church was a community effort. God has called us to work as a team. He has given us gifts that complement each other. Even Jesus chose to work with others.

Jesus went into the region of Capernaum with his four disciples. On the Sabbath, Jesus took them to the synagogue. There He began to teach. The people were amazed at His teaching. What particularly struck them was the authority with which He taught. While they had often heard the teaching of the law, they had never been taught with such authority. What was this authority? This authority

was the result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in Jesus. When Jesus spoke, God was speaking through Him. The Holy Spirit was using Him as an instrument to communicate the heart of God. How we need this type of teaching in our day. It is possible to speak the truth of God but not do it in the anointing and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. What a difference it would make if those listening to us saw the authority of God in the words we spoke. Jesus spoke as a representative of God. He spoke with Spirit-filled power. To resist what He said was to resist God.

Notice the result of this anointed teaching. There was a man in the synagogue possessed by an evil spirit. We are not told if this man was a regular attendee but he was in the synagogue that day. It is uncertain why such a man would want to be in the synagogue. Perhaps he was crying out for help.

As Jesus spoke, the evil spirit in the man cried out saying:

What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-
the Holy One of God! (Mark 1:24).

The evil spirit was not comfortable in the presence of such authority and power. Its cry would have interrupted the teaching of the Lord. Jesus immediately commanded the evil spirit to be quiet and to come out of the man. Jesus does not debate with this evil spirit. His desire is to silence it and keep it from speaking. Satan and his evil spirits have nothing to say that we want to hear.

The evil spirit had to obey the voice of the Lord Jesus. Even the powers of darkness are under His authority. The man in whom the evil spirit lived began to shake violently. Luke 4:35 tells us that the demon threw the man down. As

the demon came out of the man he did so with an ungodly shriek. While there were obvious manifestations of the evil spirit's presence, the man was unharmed by the event (Luke 4:35).

The worship of the synagogue had been disrupted by this manifestation. This was not what the people had expected to see when they came to that worship service. The people did not know what to think. Some wondered what kind of new teaching this was (Mark 1:27). From this we understand that this was not a common occurrence in their service. While they could not deny what they had seen that day, they were not sure what to believe. The news of what had happened spread throughout the region of Galilee.

We see here the power and authority of the teaching and preaching of the Lord Jesus. His messages were filled with such authority that the evil spirits became uncomfortable. We can only imagine what the response of the disciples would have been to what they saw that day. They would certainly be stretched in their faith as they walked with Him and ministered in that region.

We learn from Mark 1:29 that as soon as they left the synagogue, Jesus and His four disciples went to the home of Andrew and Simon Peter. When they arrived at Peter's house they saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. When Jesus saw Peter's mother-in-law, He reached down to her, touched her hand, rebuked the fever and helped her up (Luke 4:39). The fever left immediately. She got up from her bed and began to wait on them. Her response to this healing was to minister to the Lord and His disciples. This was her way of saying thank you.

People heard that Jesus was in that region. They came to the house where He was staying. There would be little rest

for Jesus and His four disciples that evening. People brought the sick and demon-possessed to Jesus that day. He healed those who came to Him and cast out their evil spirits. Evil spirits came out of the individuals shouting, "You are the Son of God" (Luke 4:41). Jesus rebuked and silenced them.

Luke 4:41 tells us that Jesus silenced the demons because they knew He was the Christ. Often these demons would shout out that Jesus was the Christ. What these demons were saying was the truth. Jesus was the Christ. Why did Jesus not want these demons to speak if they were telling the truth? Some commentators believe that it was because the people were not ready to hear this message. While this may be the case, Jesus did not hide the fact that He was the Son of God and the Christ. The fact that He was performing these miracles was proof to all present that He was Christ the Messiah.

What we need to understand is that Jesus wanted to make a clear separation between Himself and the demons. He refused to listen to these demons. He cut them off and silenced them before they could say anything. They were evil and deceptive. Their tongues could not speak truth for long. You can imagine the fascination there would have been in hearing these demons speak. Many have fallen prey to this fascination with the demonic. Jesus teaches us here that we are not to listen to evil spirits. While this is true particularly for those who are involved in any kind of deliverance ministry it is also true in another sense. These evil spirits speak in our day in many ways. They can speak through our televisions, movies, books and magazines. We must not give them an opportunity to speak and influence our minds and thinking. It only takes them an instant to do their damage. They may speak the truth for a

moment but their hearts and mouths are full of deceit and lies. We must silence them before they do any damage.

This day in Capernaum had been full of miracles. Many were healed and delivered from evil spirits. The power of Jesus was demonstrated in a very wonderful way. Matthew reminded his readers that these events had all been prophesied by Isaiah the prophet when he wrote:

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.' (Matthew 8:17).

There can be no doubt here as to the power and authority of the Lord Jesus over Satan. There in Capernaum the Lord Jesus demonstrated to all present that He was indeed the Son of God.

For Consideration:

- Have you seen evidence of authoritative preaching in your day? Why do we need the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our preaching and teaching? What difference can the Holy Spirit make in our ministries?
- What does this passage teach us about the danger of evil spirits in our day? Why do they need to be silenced?
- How do evil spirits speak in our day? What methods do they use in our age of technology? How have we been guilty of listening to them today?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for His power over evil. Thank Him that He is Lord over Satan and his evil angels.
- Thank the Lord that He came to set us free from the power of evil.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be an instrument of His power to set others free from the enemy in our day.
- Ask the Lord to anoint you in the area of your personal ministry. Thank Him that He is willing to empower you to do that work He has called you to do.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to resist the many voices of Satan speaking today.

THE HEALING OF A LEPER

Read Matthew 4:23-25; 8:2-4; Mark 1:35-45; Luke 4:42-44; 5:12-16

In the last meditation we saw how crowds had gathered at Simon Peter's house where Jesus healed various sicknesses and afflictions. We can be quite sure that Jesus and His disciples were tired after this full day. Despite the obvious fatigue, Mark tells us that early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went to a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35). Jesus often went to a quiet place to pray. His strength came from His relationship with the Father. This time alone was a time for seeking the heart of His Father and drawing on His strength. While Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, He still needed time alone with His Father. He was filled with the power to minister but he needed to know the direction that ministry needed to take. In these times with God, He was given insight into how to use the power He had received. It is very easy for us to quench the Spirit by not taking time to listen to His direction. It is possible to use the power God has given to us for ourselves or in our own wisdom. Jesus spent time in the presence of His Father in order to know

His will and purpose. We would do well to follow His example.

It was not long before the crowds began to gather again. Luke tells us that the crowd came looking for Jesus (Luke 4:42). Recognizing His absence, Simon and the other disciples went to look for Him. When they found Him, they told Him that everyone was waiting for Him. The disciples could not help the crowd. This was beyond their ability. Later they would be involved in a similar type of ministry but, for the moment, they could not imagine doing what Jesus had done the day before.

When the disciples told Jesus that the crowd was looking for Him, He told them that He wanted to go to other villages so that they too could hear the message He had to bring. It was not the intention of the Lord Jesus to remain in this village. Jesus and His disciples left town and traveled throughout the region of Galilee preaching in the synagogues, driving out demons and healing various diseases and sickness. The result, according to Matthew 4:24, was that people from all over brought those who were ill with various diseases. Some were suffering from severe pain, some were demon possessed, others were having problems with seizures and others were paralyzed. Jesus healed people who had all of these problems. Crowds from all over the region followed Jesus because of His power to heal.

On one particular occasion, a leper approached Jesus and knelt before Him. We can only imagine the response of the people to a leper in their midst. This man was unclean. He should have kept his distance from the crowd. He would not have been welcome. This leper knew, however, that his only hope was in the Lord. He had heard that Jesus

was healing all kinds of diseases and believed He could heal him too.

The leper said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" (Matthew 8:2). Jesus had compassion on him. While the crowd would have looked at him with disgust, Jesus looked at him with compassion and mercy. The Lord Jesus reached out and touched the leper. "I am willing," He said, "be clean." Immediately, the man was healed of his leprosy. All three gospel writers mention that the Lord reached out His hand to touch this man. This is not something that anyone else would have done. To touch a leper was to become unclean.

Are there not people like this in our society? Some of these people have been guilty of terrible sin and evil. We don't want to get near them. How we need to thank the Lord that He is very different from us. We need to thank him that He touches us despite our unworthiness. There is any number of ways the Lord could have healed that man. The Lord did not need to touch him to heal him. He touched him, however, to show us something important. He touched him to show everyone that He valued him. He was not afraid of becoming dirty or unclean. If only we could have the same heart.

Having cured him of his leprosy, the Lord told the former leper that he was to tell no one what happened to him. He was, however, to go to the priest and offer the sacrifice necessary for his purification. Mark tells us that Jesus gave him a "strong warning" not to tell anyone what had happened. We are forced to ask the question, why would the Lord have command this man not to tell anyone what had happened to him? The answer can be seen in what happened when the leper disobeyed the Lord's command.

The leper did not listen to what the Lord told him. Instead, he went out and began to tell everyone what the Lord had done for him. He spread the news of his healing everywhere he went. The result was that more and more people came to Jesus to be healed. Jesus could no longer enter a town openly. He had to stay outside to avoid the crowds. Despite these efforts, people still came to Him. The only way Jesus could get a rest was to sneak away to a solitary place to pray (Luke 5:16). This was obviously the reason for the command of Jesus to the leper. The crowd came to Him to get whatever they could from Him. As long as Jesus was meeting their need, they would come after Him. How different things would be when Jesus was going to the cross. Realizing that they were going to get no more from Him, the crowds would quickly turn their back and reject Him.

We see the tremendous compassion of the Lord Jesus as He reached out to the leper. Jesus knew what it was like to be surrounded by people. They crowded around Him to get whatever they could from Him. He did not attempt to minister to everyone that came. He would sometimes walk away from people and their need.

Jesus found His strength in quiet solitude with His Father. The busier things get the more we need this time alone with our heavenly Father. There are so many needs. There are so many people who need to hear. As human beings our resources are limited. We need the wisdom and strength of the Spirit to minister as God would have us minister. This will only come as we spend time with our heavenly Father and draw from His resources. May God give us grace to follow the example of Jesus.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the compassion of the Lord Jesus for those who are unclean and unworthy? How does this encourage you?
- What does this passage teach us about our need for time with the Father? Does your ministry flow out of that time with God?
- Can we minister to everyone who comes to us? What does this passage teach us about our need to walk away from ministry at times?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to delight in your time alone with Him. Ask God to meet you in those times alone so that you are refreshed and given wisdom for ministry.
- Thank the Lord for His wonderful compassion and mercy that reaches out and touches people like you and me in our filthiness and uncleanness.
- Ask the Lord to give you compassion for a person you have a hard time loving today.
- Ask the Lord to direct you particularly in your ministry and service. Ask him to forgive you for times when you have rushed out in your own strength and wisdom.

21

THE PARALYTIC

Read Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26

After healing the leper Jesus got into a boat and crossed over to the region of Capernaum. Commentators tell us that after being driven out of Nazareth, Capernaum became the home base for our Lord. When the people heard that He had come, they gathered at the house where He stayed. So many people gathered that day that there was no more room left in the house. Mark 2:2 tells us that there was not even room outside the door. As the people gathered, Jesus began to preach. Luke 5:17 tells us that some Pharisees and teachers of the law were present that day.

Luke 5:17 is quite interesting. Luke tells us that the power of the Lord was present for Jesus to heal. Was this power not always present with Jesus? What does Luke mean when He says that the power was present that day to heal? Luke obviously was aware of something special happening at that time. He was aware that the power and anointing of God was on Jesus for a particular purpose. The Lord Jesus depended on the anointing of His Father to do His work. While we are clearly told in Luke 4:18-19 that the Spirit of God was already on the Lord to heal and to preach

the good news, Luke speaks here about a more particular type of anointing. There were times when the Lord Jesus knew a very special leading and empowering to accomplish His Father's purpose. This was a day for healing. The Spirit's anointing was more strongly on the Lord Jesus that day. God had a particular purpose in mind.

The reason for the particular anointing becomes evident. As Jesus preached, some men brought a paralytic to the house. Mark tells us that this paralytic was carried by four men (Mark 2:3). The men tried to get the paralytic into the house where Jesus was but, because of the crowd, they were unable to get through.

The men knew that Jesus was the only hope their friend had. They were not going to be frustrated in their efforts. If they could not get him through the crowd in the normal way they were going to get him through some other way. They went up onto the roof and pulled off the tiles to make an opening for their friend to be lowered down to Jesus from above.

How often we get discouraged in our attempts to reach the Lord. There are any number of things that will block our path to the Lord. Sometimes these obstacles seem so big we can't see any way around them. These men teach us to persevere. They refused to give up. They wanted their friend to be healed and they were going to do whatever it took to get him to Jesus. Their perseverance was rewarded. Ultimately the question is how much do you want a breakthrough? How important is an answer to you? If it means enough to you, you will not give up. You will persevere until you find that breakthrough. Your faith will ultimately be rewarded.

When Jesus saw what these men had done it touched His heart. When He saw their faith, Jesus told the man who had been lowered down to Him that his sins were forgiven. It is important for us to note here what Jesus is saying. Jesus is *not* telling us that all sickness is the result of sin in our lives. He is telling us, however, that there was a connection between this particular man's sin and his sickness. There are some sicknesses that are the result of personal sin. What we need to understand is that there was more than the physical healing that took place in that man that day. There was a spiritual matter being dealt with at the same time.

It is important to note that Jesus addressed the sin issue first. More important than the healing of this man's body was the forgiveness of his sin. You can be healed of your physical afflictions and not be right with God. Sometimes our physical afflictions are intended to remind us that we need a much deeper spiritual healing. Could it be that God allowed this sickness to show the paralytic that he needed to deal with the question of sin in his life?

Note the reaction of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. When they heard Jesus tell the man that his sins were forgiven, they accused Him of blasphemy. Only God could forgive sin. By proclaiming the forgiveness of this man's sin, Jesus was assuming the role of God. It is clear from this that these spiritual leaders had their doubts about Jesus and His ministry. They certainly did not see Him as the Messiah.

Jesus knew their thoughts and immediately addressed this issue. "Which is easier to say," Jesus asked, "Your sins are forgiven or to say, Get up and walk" (Matthew 9:5). The Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy because He said that this man's sins were forgiven but they said nothing

about Him telling the man to get up and walk. Both of these required an act of God.

Jesus recognized that there was a very clear connection between this man's sin and his sickness. The only way he could be released from his sickness was to first deal with his sin. This man's sin was holding him in bondage. Only forgiveness could set him free. There are people today who are held in physical and emotional bondage because of sin. There are societies who are suffering economic and social bondage because they are not right with God. If only they would come to Him and seek His face they would know the healing they so desperately need. This was something these teachers of the law did not understand.

Jesus knew that this miracle had a purpose. This miracle was intended to show those present that the Son of Man had authority on earth to forgive sin (Matthew 9:6). To demonstrate this authority, the Lord Jesus told the paralytic to get up, take his mat and go home. There before all those who had gathered, the paralytic rose to his feet, took his mat and went home. This was a very clear sign from God.

All who saw this were amazed and praised the Lord. They had seen a very powerful demonstration of the authority and power of the Lord Jesus over sin. What comfort we need to take from this. The Lord Jesus can set us free not only from our sin but also from the effects of that sin in our lives. He sets us free from eternal condemnation but also from the present physical bondage we feel as a result of that sin. This miracle was intended not only to teach those present about the power of Jesus over sin but also to help us understand the effect of sin in our personal lives and the life of our society.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about the connection between sin and physical, emotional, economic and social bondage in our society?
- What do we learn about perseverance from the men who brought their friend to Jesus?
- Have you ever sensed a anointing of the Lord for a particular ministry? What does this teach us about our need to rely on the Spirit of God and His timing and not on our own ideas and strength?
- How much does sin affect us as a society? What bondage has sin brought with it?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has authority over sin and its effects in our lives.
- Ask the Lord to give you the perseverance of the men who brought their friend to Jesus in this passage.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you and to set you free from any effects of sin in your personal life.

MATTHEW

Read Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32

After the healing of the paralytic, Mark tells us that Jesus was walking by the lake. As He walked, He met a man by the name of Levi. He would become better known as Matthew the writer of the Gospel of Matthew and apostle.

Matthew was a tax collector. Tax collectors were not very well respected or appreciated in this society. There were several reasons for this. First, it was the Romans who collected this tax. Matthew would have been seen as a collaborator with the hated Romans. He took taxes from the Jews and gave them to the Romans. Second, Matthew would have made his money through these taxes. Very often tax collectors collected more than necessary keeping the extra money for themselves. They profited off the backs of their fellow Jew. As a tax collector, Matthew was a symbol of Roman oppression. He was among those who were the most disliked in the society.

As Jesus passed by, Matthew was sitting at his booth. Jesus called out to him to follow Him. There does not seem

to be any discussion here. Matthew got up, left his booth and followed the Lord Jesus. Luke 5:28 makes it quite clear that Matthew left everything to follow Jesus that day.

It is significant that the Lord Jesus would reach out to this particular man. Jesus notices those who are hurt and rejected. He had a special place in His heart for the outcast. Matthew, although very likely a rich man, was still an outcast.

From Luke 5:29 we understand that Matthew decided to have a large banquet for the Lord Jesus. He invited his friends. A large crowd of tax collectors gathered in the presence of Jesus. Also present that day were those who are simply called "sinners." It is uncertain what the nature of their sin really was. Gathered at that banquet were the worst people in the region. They were cheaters, swindlers and immoral in their lifestyle. This would have been quite a gathering.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law noticed who had come to the banquet. They did not feel it was right for the Lord to be in the presence of such a group. They spoke to His disciples and asked them why the Lord would eat with such terrible sinners. Behind this comment was the understanding that, as a religious and moral people, they should have nothing to do with those who did not follow their ways. Pharisees and teachers of the law felt that the individuals present at that banquet were to be avoided and shunned. Any true teacher of the law, would avoid being in their presence.

Jesus heard what the Pharisees and teachers were saying. He reminded them, however, that it was not the healthy that needed a doctor but those who were sick. These people needed someone to point them in the way

of salvation. They were lost in sin and needed the forgiveness of God. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that He had come to call the unrighteous to repentance.

In Matthew's account, Jesus challenged the Pharisees and the teachers of the law to learn what the prophet Hosea meant when he said:

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6).

What was Jesus telling the religious leaders here? Hosea told his people that God desired mercy not sacrifice. These Pharisees and teachers of the law excelled in sacrifice. They were careful to observe the Law of Moses. They regularly brought their offerings to the temple. They were faithful in the observance of all that God commanded but they failed to show mercy and compassion. Instead of reaching out to those who were lost in their sin, they spent their time making more sacrifices. They refused to get themselves dirty by touching the sinner. They were doing their religious duty while the rest of the world went into an eternity without God. They had no mercy or compassion for the lost. Jesus told them that if they truly understood what Hosea was saying they would be more willing to reach out in mercy to those who were in need of a Saviour.

By calling Matthew, Jesus was showing His heart of mercy and compassion for the lost. We ought not to be afraid to reach out to those who need the Saviour. May God give us a compassion and mercy that reaches beyond our present circle to those who truly need the Lord.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the compassion of the Lord for those who are outcasts and lost in their sin?
- Jesus called Matthew who was an outcast to follow Him. What does this teach us about the type of people that Jesus wants to use? What encouragement do you find in this?
- Who are the outcasts in your society? How would God have you reach out to them?
- How easy is it for us to develop the mentality of the Pharisees who focused on religious activity and separation but had no compassion for those in need of the Saviour? Do you know churches like this?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He reached out to you despite your unworthiness.
- Ask the Lord to give you more compassion for those who are lost in your society.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not shown concern and compassion for the lost and outcasts in your society.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from prejudice so that you can be more effective in your outreach.

23

OLD WINESKINS

Read Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39

Jesus did not always do things the way people expected. In the last meditation we saw that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law struggled with the fact that He associated with sinners and tax-collectors. This was something they were quite uncomfortable with as religious leaders. They believed that a spiritual leader should be separate from those who openly lived in sin. Jesus, on the other hand, reached out to these people with the message of the gospel. He was not afraid to be seen with them. Here in this next section another question arises about Jesus' view of fasting. This time the question is brought up by the disciples of John the Baptist. These disciples noticed that the disciples of Jesus did not fast. Both John's disciples and the Pharisees fasted. They did not understand why the disciples of Jesus did not fast like they did. They asked Jesus about this.

To explain His position, Jesus used the illustration of a wedding. The guests of the bridegroom do not mourn when the bridegroom is with them. When the bridegroom

is taken away, however, then they will fast. What did Jesus mean by this?

Jesus seemed to be telling the disciples of John that it was not time for mourning and fasting. The disciples were in the presence of Jesus, who was the fulfillment of prophecy. This was the moment the prophets longed to see. God had answered their prayers. He had given them the answer to their pleas in the person of the Messiah Jesus. Instead of fasting, this was time to rejoice.

There is something very sad about this picture. Here we see the disciples of John and the Pharisees crying out to God in agony seeking His blessing on their lives and the lives of their society. The answer to their prayers was right in front of them but they did not recognize it. There are times when we need to stop praying and fasting and simply open our eyes to the answer God has already given. Could it be that we too are so busy asking that we fail to see the answer before us?

It is important for us to realize that the Lord Jesus is not abolishing the need to fast. He told the disciples of John that His disciples would fast when He was gone. There is a time to fast and pray, seeking the heart and the blessing of the Father. There is also a time to celebrate and live in light of the answer He provides.

Jesus moved beyond this question of fasting to the root issue behind the question. The Pharisees and the disciples of John were living under the law. Their faith consisted of rules and regulations handed down by their fathers. They could never be right with God by observing the law. The sacrifices of the Old Testament never completely dealt with sin. Jesus came to release them into a new way of

life, an acceptance before God outside of the law. To illustrate what He was saying Jesus gave two examples.

First, Jesus shared an illustration of an old garment that needed a patch. No one sews a new patch that has never been shrunk on an old garment. The result would be that the cloth would shrink and pull at the old material ripping the garment and making the tear worse than it was at first.

The second illustration is about wineskins. In that day wine was put in expandable skin containers that would dry out over time. As new wine fermented it would expand the container. A container that had lost its flexibility would rip and the wine would leak out. New wine needed to be put in new expandable wineskins so that the wine would not be lost.

What is Jesus trying to say to the disciples of John the Baptist in these two illustrations? As Jesus looked at those asking the question about fasting, he saw a group who were trying to gain acceptance before God by keeping the Law of Moses. Jesus told these men that there was another way of finding God's favour. He reminded them that the bridegroom had come. Jesus, the bridegroom, would bring a new day for them. Through Him, they could be accepted by God apart from the observance of the Law. The old garment and the old wineskin represented the law of God in the Old Testament. This law could not bring them the salvation they longed for. Like an old garment or an old wineskin it could not be repaired. It needed to be replaced. The disciples of John were still trying to keep the law and gain the favour of God through the law. In reality, they continued to pour their efforts into old wineskins. In the end their wineskins would break all would be lost.

Jesus was proposing something totally new. He was offering them a new garment and new wineskins. He was

proposing a way of being accepted by God apart from the old wineskin of the Law of Moses. He was proposing that they dress in a garment of righteousness that was apart from the old way of Moses. He was offering a righteousness that came completely by faith in what He would do on the cross.

The two ways do not mix. New wine should never be put in old wineskin. New cloth should never be used to fix an old garment. If Christ paid the full price for our salvation then nothing else is required. We have all met individuals who have never come to understand that they are accepted in Christ just as they are. Many of them are hard workers for the sake of the kingdom of God. Their acceptance and security, however, comes out of what they accomplish for the Lord. Take their service from them and they become insecure. They are still wearing the old garment of works. They are not willing to take that old garment off and put on the new garment of faith and complete acceptance. Rather than serving out of acceptance they serve to be accepted.

Jesus does not condemn the practice of fasting or any other such practice here in this passage. He does, however, challenge us to consider our motivation. John's disciples were practicing Law of Moses to try to gain acceptance by God through their human efforts. Jesus offers complete acceptance apart from any effort on our part. Those who know the Lord Jesus do not need to gain his favour by religious practices. They serve not to be accepted but out of devotion and love for the Lord who has fully accepted them already. To seek to gain acceptance when we are already fully accepted would be foolish indeed.

For Consideration:

- Take a look at your prayer requests? Could it be that you are praying to God for something that He has already answered but you have not recognised?
- Are you serving God out of acceptance or are you trying to be accepted by God through what you do? How does this minimise the work of Christ on the cross?
- Does the truth that I am already accepted in Christ mean that I will serve Him less or is it motivation to serve Him more?
- What new motivation does my complete and full acceptance in Christ give me to serve Him?
- Does my acceptance in Christ mean that I no longer have to be careful to obey Him? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that all who have received Him as their Saviour are fully accepted by Him.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times when your service for Him has been through motives other than love for Him.
- Take a moment to pray for someone who has never truly understood that they are accepted through the work of Christ.

THE GRAIN FIELD

Read Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5

The religious leaders of the day were constantly watching Jesus and His disciples. We have already seen how they had asked questions regarding His practice and doctrine. Jesus did not fit into their understanding of how things should be. For many of these individuals, faith could be reduced to a set of rules and regulations. They judged everyone on that basis.

On this occasion, the Lord Jesus was walking through the grain fields on the Sabbath. The disciples were hungry and decided to pick some of the heads of grain to eat. We should not be surprised that the disciples would pick grain in someone else's field. The Law of Moses provided for this. We read in Deuteronomy 23:25:

If you enter your neighbour's grain field, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain.

When the Pharisees saw that the disciples had been picking these heads of grain on the Sabbath, they challenged Jesus with what His disciples were doing. What concerned the Pharisees was not that the disciples were eating grain but that they were picking it on the Sabbath. According to the Pharisees, picking grain was work and thus prohibited by the Law of Moses.

The Law of Moses stated that no work was permitted on the Sabbath. The Pharisees interpreted this to mean that if you were walking through a cornfield on the Sabbath you could not pick a head of corn to eat. For the Pharisees, there was no room for discussion on this matter. They accused the disciples of breaking the law of the Sabbath. In reality they were only breaking the Pharisee's interpretation of that law. There was no particular verse in the Scriptures that said that a person was prohibited from picking corn on the Sabbath when they were hungry. The Pharisees considered their interpretation of the law to be as authoritative as the law itself.

We all have our own way of applying and interpreting the Scripture. How many times has the body of Christ been seriously damaged by those who do not see the difference between their interpretation and the Scriptures themselves? We have all met believers who are convinced that their interpretation is right and push that interpretation on others as if it were the very Word of God.

Jesus listened to the Pharisees and responded with an illustration from the life of David. He brought them back in their own history to the day when David and his men were fleeing from King Saul (1 Samuel 21:1-6). David and his men entered the house of God and were hungry. The priest on duty that day was a man by the name of Abiathar. The only food in the temple was the consecrated bread

that had been set out before the Lord. According to the Law of Moses in Leviticus 24:8-9 only the priests could eat this bread:

This bread is to be set out before the LORD regularly, Sabbath after Sabbath, on behalf of the Israelites, as a lasting covenant. It belongs to Aaron and his sons, who are to eat it in a holy place, because it is a most holy part of their regular share of the offerings made to the LORD by fire.

That day Abiathar had a decision to make. Would he refuse to give bread to those who were in need or would he give them this bread despite what the Law of Moses stated. Abiathar chose to err on the side of mercy and compassion. He took the bread that had been consecrated to the Lord and gave it to David and his men to eat.

In Matthew's account of this incident, Jesus reminded the Pharisees of the work that took place in the temple on the Sabbath day. The priests not only had to prepare all the regular offerings on the Sabbath, but also the special Sabbath offerings as well. The killing, skinning and sacrificing of animals was a lot of work. John 7:22 also reminds us that Jews would circumcise a child on the Sabbath.

This presented a problem for the Pharisees and their legalistic application of the Law. What they were saying was that it was perfectly acceptable to circumcise a child or slaughter and kill an animal on the Sabbath but it was not acceptable to pick a head of corn to feed a hungry person on that day. Jesus showed them how hard and uncaring they were in their legalistic application of the law. They had no compassion or mercy.

In Matthew 12:6 Jesus told the Pharisees that there was something greater than the temple with all its legalistic requirements. Some understand this to mean that the Lord Himself was greater than the temple and its requirements and that His disciples were subject to Him. It may also be that Jesus was telling the Pharisees that there was a greater need before them that day. The need for compassion and mercy outweighed their legalistic interpretation of the Law.

Jesus was telling the Pharisees that they needed to look beyond these petty details to the deeper matters of the Law. He challenged them to consider what the prophet meant when he said in Hosea 6:6 that the Lord required mercy and not sacrifice. What Jesus is telling the Pharisees is that mercy and compassion outweigh the legalistic application of the law. Where there is a conflict between law and mercy it is better to err on the side of mercy and compassion. The moral law of God must always outweigh its ceremonial obligation.

Jesus went on to tell the Pharisees in Mark 2:27 that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. In other words, the Sabbath was intended to minister to people not to weigh them down. It was for their good and blessing. God didn't create people just to have someone to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath was designed to minister to God's people and draw them closer to Him.

Jesus concluded His discussion by telling the Pharisees that the Son of Man was Lord of the Sabbath. In other words, He was greater than the Sabbath and its observance. To know Christ and to walk with Him was more important than observing the Sabbath. The Pharisees were caught up with law and regulations but they were lost

in their sin. They worshipped the law but had no compassion or mercy. Jesus condemned them for this.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the law of God and why it was given?
- Is it possible for us to be so legalistic about the application of the Scripture that we lack compassion and mercy for those around us? Give an example. What does Jesus have to say about this?
- What is the difference between the clear teaching of Scripture and our own personal interpretation and application of that Scripture?
- What does this passage teach us about the importance of mercy and compassion? Does mercy outweigh the legalistic application of the Scripture? Are there times when we need to relax in our application of Scripture to show compassion and mercy to a brother or sister in Christ? What does the example of David's men eating the temple bread teach us about this?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to teach you the importance of compassion and mercy in your relationships with others.

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not applied the Scriptures teaching with compassion and mercy.
- Ask God to give you grace to accept those who do not see things the way you do.

25

A WITHERED HAND HEALED

Read Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11

Jesus spoke with the Pharisees in the last chapter about the Sabbath. The differences between Jesus and the Pharisees over the Sabbath would come up many times in their encounters with each other.

On this occasion Jesus was in the synagogue on the Sabbath. There was a man there with a withered hand. The Pharisees and the religious leaders, seeing this man with the withered hand, saw an opportunity to trap Jesus. Matthew tells us that they approached Him and asked if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:10). The intent of this question was quite obvious. They already knew what they believed about this matter.

Jesus knew their intentions. Matthew tells us that He spoke to them about their practice of rescuing a sheep that had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath. The Pharisees did not have a problem with rescuing a sheep on the Sabbath but they could not accept the healing of a man on that day. Jesus reminded them of their hypocrisy. The life of a

human being was more valuable than a sheep. Legalism is often plagued with such inconsistency.

Jesus taught that mercy was greater than sacrifice. The Pharisees believed that God would look favourably on them because they refused to heal on the Sabbath. By not healing, however, they chose to allow this man to remain in his suffering and pain. They broke the greater law of mercy and compassion. I often compare this to a man driving to the hospital with a dying friend in his car. He knows that every second counts but still persists in obeying the speed limit. As he travels to the hospital with his dying friend he is governed by the law of the land and the speed signs that are in front of him. He is not governed by the law of mercy which would get his friend to the hospital sooner. Even governments recognize the importance of mercy when they allow an ambulance to travel faster than the speed limit in order to save a life. Image the police pulling over an ambulance with a dying man on board to charge them with speeding. The Pharisees were so governed by the law that they could not see mercy and compassion.

Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking. He asked the man with the withered hand to stand in front of everyone. He then asked those present if it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath. No one dared to answer. Luke tells us that Jesus was angry with their silence and stubborn hearts.

Seeing that no one dared to answer His question, Jesus asked the man to stretch out his hand. The man obeyed and, as he stretched his hand, it was made well in front of all present. There is no record of Jesus doing anything. He does not appear to touch the man. He does not anoint him with oil. He does not call out to any demonic force to leave him. Jesus simply told him to stretch out his hand. There

could be no question here. God Himself had healed this man. Anyone with an open mind would have seen that the power of God was present that day.

This was not what the Pharisees expected. How could they accuse Jesus when he did nothing but tell the man to stretch out his hand? The Pharisees were furious that they could not trap Jesus. That day they were exposed for their hypocrisy in believing that a sheep could be released from its affliction but a man could not. When God healed the man on the Sabbath what could the Pharisees say?

Despite the evidence before them, the Pharisees refused to believe. Their minds were made up. They plotted that day to kill Jesus.

We see here the hardness of the hearts of the Pharisees. They were a religious people who were so fixed in their ways that not even God would convince them to change. They worshipped their traditions and doctrines. Their minds were closed. We have all met people like them in our day.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the hardness of the human heart and mind?
- Is it possible to worship our traditions and beliefs? How do we know when we have fallen into this trap?

- In this passage we see how Jesus simply let his Father do the work. Have you ever found yourself being unwilling to step aside because you wanted the glory for yourself?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to admit when you are wrong.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to step aside so that God can receive the glory in your life.
- Ask God to help you to be open to the things He wants to teach you. Ask Him to soften your heart so that you can see when you are not following the right path.
- Ask God to help you to distinguish between His purposes and your own ideas.
- Take a moment to pray for someone who has hardened their heart to the things of God.

26

THE CHOOSING OF THE TWELVE

Read Matthew 12:15-21; Mark 3:7-19; Luke 6:12-16

Jesus healed the man with the withered hand in the temple on the Sabbath. This did not go over well with the Pharisees. Matthew tells us that they plotted to kill Jesus (Matthew 12:14). Despite what they had seen that day in the temple, the Pharisees remained hard and indifferent to the message the Lord Jesus preached. Knowing that they were plotting to kill Him, Jesus left the region. He did not stay where He was rejected.

The crowds followed the Lord when He left and He continued to minister to them. They came with the sick and Jesus healed them. Mark 3:7-9 tells us that those who followed Him came from many different regions (Jerusalem, Judea, Idumea, Tyre, Sidon and the regions across the Jordan). News of what the Lord was doing was spreading. Wonderful things were happening as Jesus ministered. The crowds pushed in on the Lord believing that if they could simply touch Him, they would be healed. Jesus asked the

disciples to get a boat so that they could push out into the water to get some distance from the crowd.

When evil spirits saw the Lord they would cause the person they were oppressing to fall down before Him crying out, "You are the Son of God." Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone who He was (Mark 3:12). He gave this same command to those He healed (Matthew 12:16). Why does Jesus command these people not to tell anyone who He was? People were already crowding Him simply to touch Him. He had no rest from the frantic crowd. Remember that Jesus was human like us. He too needed to rest from the constant demands of the crowd.

Matthew tells us that the reason Jesus told the people not to tell others He was the Christ was to fulfill the word of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 42 the prophet told his readers that the Messiah, in whom the Father delighted, would be filled with the Spirit to proclaim justice to the nations. What particularly seemed to strike Isaiah about the Messiah was how He would exercise His ministry. He prophesied that He would not quarrel or cry out in the streets. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would exercise His ministry in a very quiet and humble way. We have met our share of "noisy" preachers who demand attention. The Lord Jesus ministered in a way that would not draw attention to Himself. He was not someone you would notice on the street. He did not dress up to be noticed. If you saw Him walking by you would not even turn your head or notice Him. He ministered quietly and in humble dependence on the Father.

Isaiah also told His readers that the Messiah would not break a bruised reed nor snuff out a smouldering wick. If you are handling a bruised reed you need to treat it with the utmost care lest it break. The same is true for a

smouldering wick. The least amount of wind can snuff out the light of a smouldering wick. Isaiah prophesied that the Lord Jesus would minister with such gentleness that the bruised reeds He ministered to would not be broken. His compassion and gentleness was such that the smouldering wicks of our lives would not be snuffed out. He had every reason to break us and snuff us out but He chose to show mercy and compassion. He was not harsh and indifferent. He was very compassionate and caring. Unlike the leaders of that day, Jesus ministered in quietness and gentleness. What an example for us to follow.

This quiet and gentle Messiah would lead His people into victory and all the nations would put their hope in Him (Matthew 12:20-21). You do not have to be loud and harsh to be powerful. This was not Jesus' way. Matthew's burden is to show the Jews that Jesus was indeed the Christ prophesied in the Old Testament. Matthew sees Him as a perfect fulfillment of this prophecy of a quiet and gentle Messiah.

When Jesus freed Himself from the people, He went up on a mountainside. Luke 6:12 tells us that He spent the night with His Father. This was something that the enemy would have loved to take from Him. Satan would have been thrilled to keep the Lord so busy that He no longer had time with the Father. Jesus did not fall into this trap. He left the people and their needs to be alone with His Father in prayer. Here in these times He drew strength and wisdom from God His Father.

When morning came Jesus chose twelve men to be His disciples. The need was great. These men would learn from Him and minister with Him. They would go in His name and preach the good news (Mark 3:14). He would give them authority to drive out demons and to build the

kingdom of God. (Mark 3:15). Four of these men had already been with Him. Jesus added eight more. The men chosen were Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas.

This band of twelve disciples was far from perfect. Mark tells us that James and John had been given the name Boangeres or Sons of Thunder. We are not sure why they were given this name. Some commentators believe it had to do with their energy and boldness. We see an example of this when their mother asked Jesus to let them sit one on His right hand and the other on His left hand when Jesus returned to His Father (Matthew 20:20-21). This request was extremely bold. James and John were bold and aggressive men. Sometimes that aggression caused friction among the disciples.

Simon was a Zealot. The Zealots refused to pay taxes to Rome, claiming that God alone was their king. They became known as a radical group in Israel. They could at times be quite lawless and rebellious. This was Simon's background. Also among these disciples was Matthew who was on the opposite end of the spectrum. He was a tax collector. He gathered taxes from the Jews and gave it to the Romans. Many of these tax collectors profited from these taxes and lived off the backs of the Jews. This combination of Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot would have been a real potential for trouble. Also among those men chosen that day was Judas who would betray the Lord and sell Him into the hands of the enemy. These men were very rough. They needed a lot of work. It was to these men, however, that the Lord committed the task of preaching the Good News. They would have to learn how to get along. They would have to put aside their own

agenda and accept the agenda of the Lord Jesus. If the Lord could use these men He can certainly use us as well.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about our need for time with the Lord in our busy schedules? How easy is it for us to become so busy with good things that we fail to have time to seek the Lord?
- Jesus demonstrated the authority of God in quietness and gentleness. Is your ministry characterised by quietness and gentleness?
- Jesus ministered in such a way that He did not seek to draw attention to Himself but to the Father. Do you seek to draw attention to yourself in your ministry?
- How easy is it to judge others? Would you have chosen the men Jesus chose, to work in your church? Explain.
- Jesus chose to work with a team. What does this passage teach us about the importance of working with others?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a quiet and gentle spirit.

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have judged others. Thank Him that He uses all kinds of people to serve Him.
- Ask the Lord to help you to learn how to work with those He has put in your church.
- Ask the Lord to give you quality time alone with Him. Ask Him to remove the distractions that keep you from that time.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 1: THE BEATITUDES

Read Matthew 5:1-12; Luke 6:17-26

The Lord Jesus often withdrew to the mountains to be alone with His father. On this occasion we have a record of the crowds following Him up the mountain. The crowd, according to Luke, came from Jerusalem, Judea, Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear Jesus preach and to have Him heal their sicknesses and diseases. As the crowd gathered, the Lord Jesus taught them. To deal with the teaching of these verses would require a book in itself. We can only touch briefly on Jesus' teaching here.

Poor in Spirit

Jesus began by telling those present that the blessing of God rested on those who were poor in Spirit. What does it mean to be poor in Spirit? We are not speaking here about a physical poverty. The poverty that Jesus speaks about here is spiritual in nature. The reality of the matter is that we are all spiritually poor. None of us could stand before

the Lord in our own goodness or righteousness. We have fallen short of the standard God has set for us. In regards to spiritual riches we are all destitute. Isaiah the prophet puts it this way in Isaiah 64:6-7:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins

While we are all sinners, not everyone recognises his or her condition. The Pharisees believed they were in a right relationship with God because of their good deeds and faithful observance of the Law. Jesus condemned them for their hypocrisy. On the other hand, sinners would come to Jesus recognising their unworthiness and Jesus would accept them. Being poor in Spirit has to do with understanding that we are sinners before a holy and awesome God. We must recognise our need before we can see the answer to that need.

Jesus reminded His listeners that the kingdom of heaven belonged to those who recognised their spiritual poverty before God. If you recognise you are spiritually poor you know that you have nothing to offer the Lord for your salvation. You come as you are and cling to what He has done. All your confidence is in Him and His work on the cross. If you come believing that your good works are sufficient to gain you an entrance into the kingdom of heaven, you will be seriously disappointed. Only those who recognise their spiritual need can be accepted by God.

What we have said here regarding salvation is also true in regards to service for God. There are many people who try to serve the Lord in their own strength and wisdom. We have our plans and believe that we can carry out those plans to the end. God is calling us to trust His wisdom and enabling. What a blessing when we learn how to rely on the Lord and His leading. When we understand that our own strength and wisdom will fail us, we are released to rely on the empowering of the Lord. Those who understand their weakness and spiritual poverty open their hearts to receive what He so richly wants to give.

Those Who Mourn

Jesus told his listeners secondly that those who mourned were blessed because they would be comforted. Luke puts it slightly different when he says that those who weep now will laugh. We should see the connection here between poverty of spirit and this morning. The people Jesus speaks of here mourn over their condition before God. They mourn over the condition of the world. As they live in this sin-cursed earth they see the pain and suffering. They recognise the hardness of their hearts. Paul felt this godly sorrow in His heart for those around Him. He felt sorrow as He wrestled with sin in His own life.

This godly mourning led Paul to commit His life to ministering to those who did not know the Lord and to do battle against the evil he saw in his midst. You cannot truly minister if you do not mourn over the condition of your own heart and that of your society. The Psalmist reminds us, however, that our efforts for the kingdom will not go unrewarded. Writing in Psalm 126:5-6 he says:

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.
He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow,

will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

Jesus was telling the people that there is a godly sorrow that is good. There is a godly sorrow that leads us to repent of our sin and to do something about the sin and evil in our midst. Godly sorrow is a necessary part of the Christian walk. All too many of us never truly grieve over sin and evil. He who has the heart of God can never take sin lightly.

Jesus reminded His listeners that those who experienced godly sorrow would be comforted. The day was coming when sin and evil would be destroyed. We will enter into our rest and enjoy the presence of the Lord. For the moment, however, evil is rampant in our society. Blessed are those who grieve over this evil enough to do something about it.

The Meek

Jesus went on to say that the meek would inherit the earth. What is meekness? The New American Standard Bible translates this verse by using the word "gentle." The term meek has to do with humility. The person who is meek is willing to accept God's purpose for his or her life without grumbling. This person willingly surrenders to the Lordship of Christ and joyfully does His will.

If there is one thing that God hates in the Scripture it is pride. The writer to the Proverbs tells us plainly that pride goes before the fall. "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). Peter, speaking to young men in 1 Peter 5:5 says this:

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

These words are very powerful. God actually opposes those who are proud. Pride lifts itself up and places itself on an equal playing field with God. It challenges God and His purpose. It grumbles and complains and is unable to accept God's will. Meekness on the other hand surrenders joyfully and recognises His purposes as being perfect and complete. It is to the meek that God will give the earth. Would you commit an important task to someone who would not listen to what you said? In the same way, God commits His work to those who surrender to Him and His purpose. It is the meek who will reign with God.

It is important that we see this meekness in light of the mourning we have just spoken about. It would be easy for those who had the mind of God about sin to become proud because they were not guilty of that sin. It would be easy for them to become harsh and critical of those who had fallen into sin. Jesus challenges us here to have a meek and gentle spirit. Those who are acting in accordance with the heart of God will respond in gentleness and meekness towards those who have fallen into sin. They understand that they too could very easily fall into the same sin. The greatest example of meekness and gentleness is seen in how the Lord Jesus dealt with sinners. It is not to the proud and self-confident that the Lord Jesus promised the earth but to those who surrender with meekness to His purposes and plan.

The Hungry and Thirsty

Those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, says Jesus, will be filled. Notice that this hunger and thirst is for righteousness. Righteousness refers to the purposes and plans of God for our lives. Throughout the ages we have seen men and women lay down their lives for the sake of righteousness. These individuals have grieved over their own sinfulness and have cried out to God for His touch to set them free from the strongholds of sin and evil in their own lives and in the life of their society. Their hearts have longed to know Christ and live in obedience to Him.

Those who hunger and thirst, in this way, for righteousness will be filled. We have the promise that if we seek God and His ways we will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13). God will fill you with Himself. He will not let those who truly seek Him and His righteousness be disappointed.

The Merciful

Mercy has to do with showing compassion and pity. The merciful are compassionate and thoughtful toward those who are afflicted or in need. While the other qualities we have seen so far relate to our inner attitudes, this quality relates to how we respond to those around us. Mercy not only grieves for the condition of others it also reaches out to touch those who are in need.

Scripture teaches that if we love God we will demonstrate this by our actions (see James 2:12-15). The person who is merciful puts feet to his or her faith and reaches out to those who are in need. The merciful care for others as they would for themselves. Mercy is much more than an attitude. Mercy is an action. Your heart can be broken over the condition of a brother or sister but it is not until you step

out and respond to their pain that you are being merciful. Jesus taught that those who are merciful will themselves find mercy. God will minister to us even as we have ministered to others.

The Pure in Heart

Notice that the Lord also calls for purity not only on the outside but also from the heart. It is quite easy to do what is right on the outside and have a heart that is impure in motive or thought. Jesus told the people present that day that it is not the one who did good things on the outside that would be blessed but the one who did so with a pure heart. The Pharisees were classic examples of this. They could not be faulted in regards to their outward practice of the law. Jesus condemned them, however, for the evil and harsh attitudes of their heart. Listen to what he told them in Matthew 23:27-28:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

God looks not only to the outer action but also to the motive behind that action. God requires far more than outward obedience. He is looking for people whose hearts are pure. Jesus promised that the pure in heart would see God. He would reveal himself to them. They would see him because they were truly his. The distinction between the religious and those who belong to God is found in the heart. Those who belong to God serve and honour Him from their heart. Jesus was calling for a faith that was much deeper

than outward show and ritual. He was looking for a faith that was genuine.

The Peacemakers

Jesus spoke here not only of the one who loves peace but one who makes peace. Peacemakers will sacrifice their own rights for the sake of their brother or sister. When a problem develops between them and a brother or sister, they give themselves no rest until they restore that relationship. When their relationship with God is suffering because of sin, they will do all they can to restore that relationship. Part of peace making also involves introducing people to the Lord Jesus who gives peace.

These peacemakers will be called sons of God. They are His sons because they share His heart and ministry. When the Lord Jesus came to this earth, the angels announced that because of His ministry there would be "peace on earth and good will to men" (Luke 2:14). Jesus came to offer peace with God and to restore our relationships with each other. Those who were peacemakers join God in this great purpose.

The Persecuted

Jesus understood that those who lived the way He required would face persecution. God is calling out a people to live in this sin-cursed earth as righteous people. They are to stand up for the truth and commit themselves to the cause of His kingdom. Even as this world rejected the Lord Jesus, so it will reject His servants.

Sometimes we confuse suffering in a general way with persecution for the sake of righteousness. Suffering and

sickness are the result of living in this world. Christians and non-Christians alike suffer in this sense. Problems between fellow human beings are also the result of sin in this world and not to be confused with suffering for righteousness. Jesus is not talking about general suffering here when He speaks about persecution. He is speaking about the type of suffering that comes as a result of living for God and His purposes. Men and women over the course of the history have had to lay down their lives for the cause of Christ. Some were afflicted simply because they were believers. Some have been mocked and oppressed because they refused to bow the knee to any other god. God sees this suffering for Him and His cause.

Jesus told His listeners that the reward of faithfulness in the midst of persecution is a place in the kingdom of God. He taught that the day would come when people would insult and say all kinds of falsehood against his followers because of His name (Matthew 5:11). In Luke's account, Jesus told His listeners that men would hate them because they belonged to Jesus. They would be excluded and insulted because of their relationship with Christ. People would consider them to be evil because they followed Christ.

When we stand for the truth of Christ we may face the opposition of those who do not know Him. We may be a thorn in the side of our communities because of our stand for the Word of God. The prophets of the Old Testament were killed because they were seen as troublemakers. The apostles were persecuted as radicals. To a world that does not know God we may be considered to be an evil influence that needs to be cut off. Even the Lord Jesus was called a blasphemer and friend of sinners.

Jesus reminded His followers that when these things happened to them they were to rejoice and be glad. They were to rejoice because they would receive their reward in heaven and their persecution proved that they were on the same path as the prophets who went before them.

Luke ends His account with a series of woes. "Woe to you who are rich for you have already received your comfort" (Luke 6:24). Jesus speaks here to those who spent their lives in pursuit of riches and pleasures. They live a life of ease and comfort and reject the purpose and will of the Lord their God. Their reward is in this world. Because they take no thought of the Lord Jesus, they will perish and be eternally separated from Him. There will be no comfort for them in the life to come.

Those who are well fed and laugh now will weep in the time to come (Luke 6:25). These individuals rejoice and laugh in their parties and celebrations. They feast and enjoy the best that life has to offer but reject the Lord their Saviour. The day is coming when they will face the Saviour they reject. They will be condemned and suffer the consequences of a life lived without any thought of salvation.

Beware, Jesus said, "when all men speak well of you." Jesus speaks here of those who live their lives to please people and gain their favour. These individuals may be spiritual leaders who are living to gain the approval of their congregations. They may be people who turn their backs on God to gain the approval of worldly friends. Whoever these individuals are, they have had to turn their back on God to gain favour with friends, co-workers or acquaintances. God is looking for men and women who will seek Him first. The disciples had to leave their family and friends to follow Him. The Lord Jesus may require this of us today. Our family or friends may not understand us and may even

reject us for our faith. Jesus calls us to be ready to serve Him no matter what others say or think of us. We must learn to die to what others think to do what we know to be the call of God on our lives. Paul had come to this place in his life when he wrote in Galatians 1:10:

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

In these opening words of the Sermon on the Mount the Lord Jesus has some very powerful things to say. He called those who wanted to follow Him to a radical lifestyle. His followers would suffer for the cause of His kingdom. They would be rejected and persecuted for the cause they represented. Their lives would stand out in the crowd as being different. They would not always be understood. However, they would know God's presence and blessing on their lives and they would rule with Christ in His kingdom rejoicing forever in His presence.

The teaching of Jesus was quite radical for that day. The faith of God's people had become legalistic. Their teachers applied the strict teaching of the law without mercy or compassion and rejected anyone who did not follow their interpretation. Far from being peacemakers, the leaders of the day were seeking to kill Jesus. They wanted people to speak well of them. Through these opening words of His sermon, Jesus was exposing their hypocrisy. He preached a genuine faith from the heart.

For Consideration:

- What does it mean to be poor in Spirit? To what extent have you lived your life in your own strength and wisdom?
- Do you hunger and thirst after righteousness? What evidence is there of this in your life?
- To what extent is your righteous life a challenge to those around you?
- Jesus tells us that this world will never be able to understand us if we follow Him. Is there evidence of this in your life and ministry?
- How much of our lives are governed by what others think of us? What does Jesus tell us here about this kind of life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a deeper hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- Ask the Lord to give you the courage and boldness to take up your cross and stand for Him no matter the cost.
- Thank the Lord for the wonderful hope we have after this life. Ask Him to keep your eyes focused on that hope.
- Ask the Lord to make you more and more aware of your need for Him and His work in you. Ask Him to

forgive you for believing that you could do things
on your own.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 2: SALT AND LIGHT

Read Matthew 5:13-16

In this next section of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told His listeners that they were the salt of the earth. There are several things that we need to mention about salt.

First, salt was used as a preserving agent. The presence of God's people in this world, like salt, has a preserving effect. As we have already mentioned, we are living in a corrupt and sinful world. The rot of sin has spread throughout our society. God has placed His people in the world to keep that sin from spreading. He calls us to live our lives as examples before the world. He calls us to preach and teach His word so that people can be set free from sin and its terrible effect. As we speak out against sin and stand for righteousness, our presence ought to keep sin from spreading. Where would this world be if it were not for those who stood up for the principles of God's Word through the ages?

Salt is also used to season our food and make it taste better. What is it that keeps God from lashing out in anger and destroying this world as He did in the days of Noah? When we look at how far this world has wandered from the truth of God, why does He continue to show patience? I am reminded of the story of Abraham in Genesis 18 where God told him that He was going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham pleaded with God for these cities. In Genesis 18:32 God agreed with Abraham that if He found even ten righteous people in those cities He would not destroy the cities because of them. When not even ten righteous people could be found, these cities were destroyed. Could it be that the presence of God's people in this world is the only thing that keeps God from destroying this world? Our presence brings Him pleasure and so He withdraws His hand of judgment for a time.

Notice that Jesus told His listeners that they were the salt of the earth. They did not have a choice in this matter. Whether we like it or not, we were placed on this earth to act as salt—preserving this world and arresting the spread of sin.

Jesus reminded His listeners that if salt loses its flavour it is totally useless. Salt that has no flavour is good only to be thrown away. It is possible for us to lose our flavour as Christians. We can live in this world without influencing it. We can choose not to stand up for righteousness and truth. We can live our lives in such a way that people do not even know we are believers. In doing this, we become like salt that has lost its flavour. When we refuse to be salt where God has placed us, evil and sin can spread. When that evil spreads, how can I change what happens as a result?

In a similar way, Jesus compared our lives to a light. The world is filled with the darkness of sin. Not knowing the truth of God it has never seen His light. Jesus compared His people to a great city on a mountain that shines down on the valley for all to see. As people watch us in our daily activities they should see the light of God shining in us, the light of hope and peace, the radiance of joy and truth.

Jesus reminded those listening to Him that a light placed under a basket is a light that is wasted. Light is meant to be seen. An unseen light is useless. How easy it is for us to hide our light. We do not want to be different from the crowd. Once again, however, we need to understand that Jesus does not offer us an option here. We are lights. If you have the Lord Jesus in your heart the only way you cannot shine is to cover the light He has put in your heart.

The thing about a light is that it was never designed to be looked at but rather to illumine something else. You never turn on a light for the purpose of looking at that light. You turn on the light to see what is in the room. In a similar way our light is designed to show Christ to the world. It is important that we understand this. Jesus concluded in Matthew 5:16 by saying that people should see our good deeds and glorify God because of them. Just as we do not turn a light on to examine it, so we do not do our good deeds to have others look at them. Instead our good deeds should point people to the Lord Jesus.

Jesus told His listeners that they were salt and light in this world. Salt preserves and adds flavour. Light illuminates and reveals Christ. The question is not whether we are salt and light but rather, what kind of salt and light are we? Are we salt that preserves and stops the spread of sin in our society? Are we light that points people to the Lord Jesus

and His work? May God give us grace to be what He has called us to be.

For Consideration:

- What kind of salt and light are you to those around you? Does your life prevent the spread of sin and evil? Does your light help people to see the Lord Jesus?
- Have you ever felt ashamed of the Lord Jesus and His Word? Explain.
- What impact is your life having on those around you?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a greater boldness to be salt and light to those around you.
- Thank the Lord that He has chosen to use you to point others to Him.
- Ask God to show you where you have failed to be salt and light.

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SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 3: THE LAW

FULFILLED AND ENHANCED

Read Matthew 5:17-48; Luke 6:27-36; 16:16-17

The religious leaders of His day accused Jesus of being a law breaker. Jesus was very aware of the confusion in the minds of those who came to hear Him and the impact that the Pharisees were having on their minds. In this section Jesus explained what He felt about the Law of Moses.

Jesus began by reminding His listeners that He did not come to abolish the Law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. Instead He came to fulfill them. There is an important distinction made here. To abolish implies that the law was of no value. This is not what Jesus felt about the law. The law was good and had accomplished everything God intended it to accomplish. It had shown that we were not able to live a righteous life before God in our own effort. It had revealed our need of a Saviour. Jesus came to be that Saviour. The prophets looked forward to the day when

the Messiah would come in fulfillment of the Law of Moses. Jesus was the one of whom both the law and the prophets spoke. Jesus stood firmly behind the Law and the Prophets. The Law of God was perfect and had a very particular purpose in the life of God's people.

Jesus assured those who listened to Him that not even the smallest detail of the law would pass away until it had accomplished everything God intended it to accomplish. Heaven and earth would not pass away until all the law and the prophecies had been fulfilled. We can see from this that Jesus had a very strong opinion of the law and the prophets.

Jesus went on to say that anyone who broke even the smallest commandments of God and taught others to break that commandment would be called the least in the kingdom of Heaven. The Pharisees had been accusing Jesus of breaking the Law. Jesus was assuring them that He held the Law of Moses in high regard. He made it clear that the one who obeyed the Law and taught others to do so would be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. There can be no doubt here about the value of the law of God in the mind of Jesus.

Jesus taught, however, that while it was important to obey and teach others to follow the Lord God, unless His listeners did better than the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees, they would have no chance of entering the kingdom of Heaven. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law observed the law of God with religious strictness. There was no one in the land as strict as the Pharisees when it came to the practice of the Law of Moses. People looked to them as the interpreters of the law. Jesus was telling His followers, however, that unless they did better than the Pharisees and teachers of the Law they would not go to heaven.

This seemed to place the people under an impossible standard. It would likely have left them wondering who could possibly enter the kingdom of God.

To explain His teaching more fully, Jesus compared what the Pharisees and teachers of the law taught with what God really required. He shows that the standard of God was even more rigorous than what they had been taught by their leaders. Let's take a moment to examine this.

The Law Regarding Murder

The Law of Moses taught that murder was punishable by death. Jesus taught, however, that a person could be guilty of murder even if they never physically took a person's life. He taught that if a person became angry with someone in their heart to the point where they wished that person dead, they were guilty of murder in their heart and were subject to judgment. If a person acted on their evil thought and attacked a person with words calling him or her "raca" (fool or good-for-nothing) then that person would be guilty enough to be brought before that Jewish ruling council. Jesus told those present that if a person called someone a fool they would be guilty enough for hell fire.

Jesus taught that those who harbour hatred and anger in their hearts are guilty before God to suffer His fiercest anger. God makes no distinction between those who act out the crime of their heart and those who simply dwell on it in their heart and mind. God looks at the heart. When we allow the thought of murder into our hearts we offend a holy and awesome God. The person who is pure of heart will not allow evil thoughts to remain. It is not just the fruit that is evil. The seed also is evil and must be cut off. These evil thoughts, attitudes and intents are in themselves sin and make us guilty before God if we harbour them in our heart.

The attitude of the heart and the evil words we speak will hinder our worship of God. Jesus reminded His listeners that if they were offering their sacrifice on the altar and remembered that someone had something against them, they needed to leave their gift at the altar and be reconciled with that person. By offending or speaking wrongly about someone, I have sinned before God. I need to confess my sin and be reconciled with my brother or sister. Jesus takes the law regarding murder to a new level. He told His listeners that God expected far more than just not killing each other. He expected respect and proper attitudes toward each other lest our worship be refused and God turn His back on us.

Jesus shows us that it is one thing never to have murdered someone. It is another never to entertain sinful attitudes of anger and resentment. While the Pharisees taught that it was wrong to kill, Jesus went further and taught that if we speak out against our brother or sister in anger and frustration we are guilty before God. The seed is as evil as the fruit. He who waters the seed of evil in his heart is as guilty as he who allows it to produce fruit.

Jesus went on to tell His listeners that God gave civil authorities the right to punish sins. In Matthew 5:25 He challenged them to come to terms with their enemies quickly before they were handed over to the civil authorities. God stands firmly behind the civil authorities who act on His behalf in matters of justice. He requires that we pay the penalty imposed on us by these authorities. They are His representatives to judge sin and evil.

The Law Regarding Adultery

Jesus moved on to the Law of Moses regarding adultery. The Law of Moses prohibited any sexual relationship

outside of marriage. This sin was punishable by death. Jesus told His listeners however that a person could be guilty of adultery without ever having a sexual relationship. There is an adultery that is committed in the heart. If a man looks at a woman and lusts after her in his heart he has committed adultery with her (Matthew 5:28). Of course the same principle also applies to women.

Again we see here the importance of the purity of heart. To nourish the seed of sexual immorality makes us as guilty as those who actually practice it. God looks at the heart. When He sees these impure thoughts in our heart He is grieved and calls us to account for them.

Because God requires purity of heart and mind, it is important that we be careful about what we look at. In an instant we can become guilty of lust in our hearts. Jesus tells us that it would be better to gouge out our eye and throw it away than to let it cause us to become guilty in our mind and hearts of adultery and lust. What Jesus is telling us here is that we should make up our mind to avoid those places and things that could cause us to be tempted and bring the judgment of God.

In Matthew 5:29 Jesus told His listeners that it was better to lose an eye than to have the whole body go to hell (Matthew 5:29). There is forgiveness for all sin, even the sin of adultery. Jesus forgave those who had been caught in adultery. We should not see this to mean that anyone who falls into this sin will go to hell. When Jesus speaks here about going to hell, He is speaking of those who refuse to turn from these evil ways and accept His forgiveness. He speaks of those who reject the Lord in favour of a lifestyle of sin and immorality

The Law of Moses taught that adultery was punishable by death. Jesus taught that even cultivating these thoughts in our heart is sinful. He called His people not just to refrain from the physical act of adultery but also to refrain from thoughts of lust and adultery in their heart. This matter is much more difficult. God knows our thoughts and will call us to answer for them.

The Law Regarding Divorce

The Law of Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife by giving her a letter of divorce. We read in Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Jesus reminded His listeners, however, that God required faithfulness in a marriage. Notice that Jesus stated that the man who divorced his wife for any other reason than adultery caused her to become an adulteress. This merits some consideration. Imagine that a man divorces his wife for an illegitimate reason. Maybe it was because of a personality conflict that he was not ready to work out. Maybe he lost interest in her. While this man may have divorced

his wife, God still holds him accountable to the vows he had made to her. They are still husband and wife in the eyes of God. If the woman then married another man she would become guilty of adultery because her divorce was not legitimate before God. The man who marries a woman whose divorce was not for Biblical reasons would be guilty of adultery because in the eyes of God she was still joined to her former husband.

Here is a case where the law of God overrules the law of the land. While the law of the land may permit divorce for any reason, we must be governed by the Word of God. We must take our marriage vows seriously. We must make every effort to be faithful to what we promised to each other before God. The Law of Moses permitted divorce. Jesus taught here that unless it is for the cause of adultery, a man and woman must remain faithful to the vows they made to each other.

The Law Regarding Vows

The Law of Moses stated that a vow was to be kept at all costs. In those days, people would swear by various objects. Jesus speaks here about the practice of swearing by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem or even by one's own head. By swearing on these objects the intent was to add legitimacy to their promise. In other words, if a person swore by heaven to do something, they were calling heaven to witness what they were promising. Jesus told His listeners that they should not make these types of vows at all. Jesus told them not to swear by heaven because it was the throne of God. Why should they risk blaspheming the throne of God by their inability to be faithful to a vow they had made? They were not to swear by anything. They had no authority over the events that took place on the earth. They could not turn a single hair white

or black on their heads. How could they swear by something they had no power or authority to control?

Instead of making vows and swearing by heaven, earth or anything else, God's people were simply to say "yes" or "no" (Matthew 5:37). Their word alone was to be sufficient. If people could not believe them when they said, "yes" or "no" then they had not proven themselves to be godly people. People ought to be able to trust our word.

The Law of Moses said that a person was to be faithful to a vow they made before the Lord by swearing an oath in the presence of witnesses. Jesus said that our word should be enough. We should not need to swear by anything. We should not need any witnesses present in order for people to trust our word. Our "yes" or "no" should be sufficient. People ought to know that we will be absolutely faithful to our word.

The Law Regarding an Eye for an Eye

The Law of Moses taught that if a man or woman caused someone to lose an eye then they would pay for it by having their own eye pulled out. If a person was guilty of causing a person to lose a tooth, they would be punished by having their own tooth removed. Exodus 21:23-25 tells us:

But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, and bruise for bruise.

Jesus taught, however, that we are not to resist an evil person. When struck we are to turn the other cheek. If someone takes our shirt we are not to take theirs in

retaliation but offer them our coat as well. If someone asks us to go with them for a mile we are to go an extra mile with them. If we are asked for something and have the power to give, we are to do so. If someone wants to borrow something from us, we are to willingly offer it to them. We are to be generous and compassionate. Instead of trying to get even, we are to suffer loss without seeking repayment. Turn your cheek, forgive instead of demanding payment. The Law of Moses said that an individual had a right to be repaid "an eye for an eye." Jesus taught that we were not to demand that repayment but forgive instead.

The Law Regarding Loving one's Neighbour

The Law of Moses taught that we were to love our neighbours. The teachers of the Law added to this that it was acceptable to hate one's enemies. There is no place in the Law of Moses that tells us to hate our enemies. This was the interpretation of the teachers of the law. They chose not to fault people who hated their enemies.

Jesus taught, however, that we are to love our enemies. We are to pray for those who persecute us. God chooses to do good to His enemies. He sends rain and sunshine on those who love Him and also on those who reject Him. His blessings fall on the ungodly as well as the godly. By loving only those who love us, we are not acting any different than the rest of the world. Even the most sinful people love those who love them. God calls believers to something vastly different. He calls His people to be like Him. He calls us to be perfect as He is perfect. While we will never see this perfection on this earth, we are to strive always to become more like Christ. The teachers of the law taught that the believer was to love his or her neighbours and excused those who hated their enemies. Jesus taught that they were to love even their enemies. They were to actively

bless and minister to those who hated and persecuted them.

The requirements of Jesus were even greater than the requirements of Moses. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law sought to condemn Him as a law breaker. If they were to be measured against the standard Jesus set, however, they would themselves fall radically short. Jesus commanded not only outward obedience to the law but obedience from the heart. Jesus standards were much higher than those of the teachers of the Law.

For Consideration:

- Consider what Jesus has to say here about obedience from the heart. Have you been obedient from your heart? Has your inner life been as pure as your outer life?
- What do we learn in this passage about entertaining the seed of sin in our heart?
- Take a moment to examine your thought life. Do your thoughts glorify the Lord God? Are there areas that need work? Explain.
- Are there people you have trouble loving? Who are your enemies? What does this passage teach us should be our attitude toward our enemies?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to consider your thought life. Ask the Lord Jesus to cleanse your thoughts so that they bring glory to His name.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for entertaining the seed of sin in your heart.
- Ask the Lord to help you to love those who persecute you and make your life difficult.
- Take a moment to pray that God would help you to love your marriage partner and be faithful.
- Ask God to open your eyes to the needs of people around you. Ask Him to show you how to love them practically.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 4: THE PUBLIC

PRACTICE OF FAITH

Read Matthew 6:1-8; 16-18

In this passage, Jesus spoke about true righteousness. He told His listeners that they were to seek righteousness from the heart and not just as an outward show of spirituality. He continues in this next section to speak about those who practiced their faith to be seen of others.

Jesus began by saying in Matthew 6:1 that we are to be careful not to do our acts of righteousness to be seen by people. We need to understand what Jesus is telling us here. He is not telling us that we need to hide our faith. In fact, in Matthew 5:14-16 He made it quite clear that as believers we are not to hide our light but put it on a stand so that all could see. People need to see our good works and glorify God because of them. Jesus is speaking here about those who practice their good deeds so that others will think well of them.

How easy it is to fall into this trap. Have you ever found yourself trying to impress those around you with your great prayers? Have you ever preached and secretly wondered what people thought of your ability to speak? The temptation to be noticed is very real. We want to feel appreciated and important.

Jesus tells His listeners that if their motive in serving God was to be noticed by people then this would be the only reward they would receive. There would be no further reward from God in heaven. Motives in service are very important. If you want God to accept your service then you must serve Him from the heart and seek His glory alone.

Jesus gives some practical examples of His teaching here in these verses. He told His listeners that when they gave to the needy they were not to announce it to everyone. I have seen churches that published the giving of each member at the end of the year in an annual report. Our giving to the work of the Lord is a matter between God and ourselves alone. Others do not need to know what we have given or even if we have given. Jesus tells us that those who give to be noticed have already received their reward. Their reward will be to be noticed by people. We have a choice to make. Do we want to receive our reward on this earth as people notice us and praise us or do we want to receive a reward in heaven by seeking God's glory alone?

Jesus told His listeners in Matthew 6:3 that they were not to let their left hand know what their right hand is doing. Don't let others know what you are giving. Give in secret. Give in such a way that only you and God know where your money, resources and time are going. Make an effort to avoid being noticed by people and receiving their praise.

What is true of giving is also true in prayer. Jesus spoke against those who prayed standing in the synagogues and on the street corners. These individuals wanted to be noticed for their spirituality. They wanted others to think highly of them. They would have the praise of men but they would not have the praise of God. Jesus challenged His followers to pray in secret. He called them to find a place where they could be alone with God and seek Him privately.

Motive is very important in our service of the Lord. There are those who pray or serve to be noticed. This was the case for the Pharisees. There are others who serve in secret because they are ashamed of the Lord. They are afraid that people will notice what they are doing and think differently of them. In both cases the focus is not God but on the individual himself or herself. God is calling us to seek His glory alone.

In Matthew 6:7 Jesus warned His followers about babbling on in their prayers like the pagans (Matthew 6:7). The babbling referred to here points to the repetition of words and prayers believing that if a request is repeated enough it will be more likely heard. Again there is a balance between persevering in prayer and babbling. God calls us to persevere in prayer for our loved ones or for those things that weigh heavy on our hearts. The babbling Jesus speaks about is very different from persevering prayer. We persevere in prayer because we believe God will work. We babble because we are not sure He will.

Sometimes the constant repetition of a prayer is an indication of a lack of faith. We keep asking because we don't think He has heard us or because we feel that He will have to listen to us if we keep begging Him. Has God heard your prayer? Do you believe that He will take care of you? Can

you simply leave the matter in His hands and trust Him without saying anything further to Him about the matter?

The people Jesus spoke about here believed that God would have to answer them because they repeated themselves so often. Somehow they believed that they could force the hand of God by their words and repetition. Their view of God was twisted. They did not see Him as a loving and caring heavenly Father. Instead they saw Him as a stingy God who hoarded up His blessings. The only way to access those blessings was to beg and plead until He gave in and granted the request. There are many people who see God in this way.

In Matthew 6:6-18 Jesus spoke about fasting. He pointed to those who made a public spectacle of their fasting. They would walk around with a sombre look on their faces and let everyone know what they were doing. They wanted others to see how spiritual they were. Again Jesus told His followers that these individuals had received their reward. They had the attention of their fellow human beings but they would not get God's attention.

Jesus taught that when a person fasted they were to wash their faces and anoint their heads so that others would not notice. When they fasted it was a matter between God and themselves. Others did not need to know. When God sees our fast and the attitude of our heart He will reward us.

The spiritual leaders of Jesus' day had a real desire for people to notice them. They wanted to receive the praise of men and women. They would receive that praise but they would not be rewarded by God. Jesus speaks to the motive behind our service. He rebuked those who served to be noticed. He was concerned about purity of heart and motive. He reminded His followers that they were to serve

for God's glory and not their own. He called for a service and worship that was free from hypocrisy and self-seeking. He sought a people whose only desire was for the glory of God.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself falling into the trap of trying to please others in your ministry? What was the result?
- Is our motive important in our service and worship of God? What does Jesus teach us here in this passage?
- Examine your walk with the Lord. Are there any areas where you find yourself wanting to be noticed by others? What are they?
- What is that difference between serving to be noticed and serving so that God would be honoured through you?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal to you any way in which you have been seeking the approval of those around you and not the approval of God. Ask Him to forgive you.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from the need of the praise of people so that you can serve Him with pure motives.

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SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 5: THE LORD'S

PRAYER

Read Matthew 6:9-15

While this passage really fits in the context of what Jesus said in the last section, it is important that we examine it on its own. In the last section we saw how Jesus warned His listeners about praying to be noticed by others. He challenged them to pray in secret. He also challenged them not to repeat themselves over and over in their prayers but to realize that their loving heavenly Father already had an intimate knowledge of their needs.

Here the Lord Jesus gives His disciples a model prayer to follow. The intention of the Lord is not that His people repeat this prayer but that they use it as an example for their own prayers. In fact, in the last chapter He warned them against the mindless babbling of prayers. This model, however, gives us a great idea of how we need to pray as believers. Let's take a moment to examine its individual parts.

Our Father in Heaven

Jesus began by showing us that we can come to God as a Father. This term "Father" is a term that indicates a relationship of intimacy. We can approach Him as we would approach a loving father. The picture is of a child coming humbly to a father for care and protection. As our father, God is not distant and uncaring. God knows our needs even before we ask. This is because God watches over His children with deep concern and compassion. Because He is a father in heaven He is unlike our earthly fathers. As a father in heaven He is perfect and all-powerful. He will always do what is right. He has our best interests at heart because we are His dearly beloved children.

This prayer assumes that those who pray are in a personal relationship with God. They have accepted His Son Jesus Christ and have become His children. You cannot pray this prayer if you do not have this personal relationship with God as your Father.

Hallowed Be Your Name

The term "hallowed" means to be holy or consecrated. The request here is that the name of God be held in honour and respect. We are living in a world that no longer respects the name of God. His name is dishonoured and blasphemed everywhere we go in our day. Those who use His name do not understand who He is. They fail to see that He is a loving heavenly father and a holy and awesome God. There are many who come to church on Sunday and sing songs of praise but whose lives are lived in rebellion against the very God they pretend to worship. They dishonour His name.

The request is that the name of the Lord God be honoured in all people and in every place. It is a call for all creation to recognize the awesomeness and wonder of God and bow to Him in respect and adoration as His name deserves. It is a cry against the evil in our society, our churches and our lives that grieve his heart.

Your Kingdom Come

What is the kingdom of God? On the one hand, there are those who see this kingdom as the kingdom the Lord will set up when He returns to earth. While this may be partially what this passage refers to here, there is also another sense to this word "kingdom." Jesus tells us that this kingdom is unlike any earthly kingdom we have seen. In Luke 17:20-21 we read:

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

The kingdom of God is within us. The kingdom of God exists wherever there are hearts and lives that surrender to Jesus as sovereign Lord. There is also a kingdom of darkness and evil. This too, reigns in the hearts and lives of those who are held in bondage to sin. The kingdom of God wages war with the kingdom of Satan. God's kingdom comes to hearts and lives setting them free from the kingdom of Satan.

When we ask that the kingdom of God come, we are asking that the Lord Jesus conquer the hearts and lives of those who are presently bound under the kingdom of evil.

We are asking that God conquer our own hearts and lives and bring them into submission to His will and purpose. There are areas in our lives that have not yet been totally surrendered to the lordship of Jesus. When we pray that the kingdom of the Lord come, we are asking that He conquer those areas of our lives to bring us into complete obedience. You can only pray this prayer if you are willing to let the Lord Jesus come and reign in your life and heart as absolute Lord.

Your Will Be Done

The request here is that the will of God be done on earth just as it is in heaven. The will of God is done in heaven without question. Those who live in heaven delight to do the will of God. In heaven there is no sin, evil or rebellion. There is only perfect harmony with God and His purpose.

When we pray that the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are asking that God bring us to a place of absolute submission to the Father's purpose. We are asking that God enable us to delight in His will. We are asking that the Lord enable us to die to ourselves and our own ideas to do only what He desires. It is a prayer that the whole earth surrenders to the Lord Jesus and walk in obedience to Him. If we pray that the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven, we must also be willing to lay everything on the altar. His will and purpose must not be questioned. There must not be any grumbling or complaining about what He brings our way.

Give Us This Day

Jesus teaches us next to pray for our daily bread. This “daily bread” does not simply refer to our physical food. The bread referred to here relates to everything we need for the day. Notice here that it is “daily” bread. Those who pray for “daily bread” place themselves in a place of dependence on God for each day. They get up in the morning and seek the Lord for the strength and enabling they will need for that day. They depend on Him for emotional, physical and spiritual strength. They trust the Lord to provide everything they need. They trust that what God does provide will be sufficient for that day. They do not depend on their own strength to get through but draw from what the Lord provides for that day. They step out with confidence and faith in God for each day. This radically impacts how they see the day. When problems come they know that the strength of the Lord will be equal to the task. They do not need to worry or fret because God will provide all they need. They do not complain for they trust His sovereign purposes and provision for each day.

Those who pray for “daily bread” face each day with confidence. The trials of life do not get them down because God provides all they need to face these trials each day. They do not worry over the future because they draw God’s unlimited resources for each day. They do not know what tomorrow will bring but they do know that when it comes the provision will be equal to the need.

Forgive Us

There are times when we do not “hallow” the name of the Lord our God. There are times when we rebel against His will and purpose. We do not always draw from His daily provision but find ourselves grumbling or taking matters

into our own hands. We all fall short of the standard God has set out for us. The Lord Jesus knew we would fall short of His standard and made provision for this in His prayer. It is encouraging to know that there is forgiveness for the times we fail.

Notice that there is a condition attached to this request. Jesus taught His disciples that they only had the right to pray that they would be forgiven if they had forgiven those who had sinned against them. We can only expect as much forgiveness from God as we have given to those who have offended us. Forgive us just as we have forgiven those who have hurt us, is the request.

To pray this prayer we must be willing to forgive those who have offended us. God has always placed a high value on relationships. It would be hypocritical to ask God to forgive us if we were unwilling to forgive those who have offended us.

Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 6:14-15 that if we do not forgive those who have sinned against us, we cannot expect God to forgive us. Only those who are willing to forgive can pray this prayer.

Lead us not into Temptation

It is true that the Lord is willing to forgive us. This does not mean, however, that we can do what we want and simply come to Him for forgiveness. Jesus teaches us to pray that God would not "lead us into temptation." When we pray this prayer we understand how weak we really are. We know that when placed in a given situation we could very easily fall. Those who pray this prayer are asking the Lord to keep them from situations that would cause them to be tempted.

We should not see from this that God tempts us to sin. Nor does He lead us to places where we would fall. Jesus is teaching us to pray that God would keep us from places where we could be tempted to fall.

For Yours is the Kingdom and the Power

Some translations do not include this phrase but it is important that we comment on it here. Jesus taught His followers to pray that God would keep them from the temptations of the evil one. He can do this because He is more powerful than the evil one. The kingdom and the power belong to Him. He reigns over all. He is able to deliver us from anything the enemy can throw at us. The enemy has no power over us. He will break the power of the evil one. He will not share His glory with another. He will reign forever as a glorious Lord over all. This final request recognizes and praises Him as absolute Lord of all.

For Consideration:

- Do you have a relationship with God that could be characterized as a father/child relationship? How does God show you He is your father?
- What are your needs today? How has God provided for those needs?
- How is the name of the Lord God blasphemed in our society today?
- Are there areas in your life that are not surrendered to the will of God? What are they?

- Are there people in your life that you have not forgiven?
- How has God kept you from evil today? What have been your temptations?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is a loving heavenly Father. Thank Him for His daily provision and grace.
- Ask God to expose those things that you have not yet surrendered to Him.
- Ask the Lord to break the evil that you see around you so that His name would be honoured again in your society.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have grumbled and complained and not accepted what He has provided.
- Ask God to keep you from specific temptations today. Be specific about this.
- Do you have a problem forgiving a certain person? Ask God to give you grace to completely forgive them today.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT
PART 6: TREASURES IN
HEAVEN

Read Matthew 6:19-24

Jesus challenged His listeners in this next section to examine their hearts to see what was important to them. He understood the pull of the flesh and the world on His followers. He knew how much they would be tempted by the things of this earth. He called them to set their hearts on the kingdom of God.

Jesus begins by telling His followers that they were not to store up treasures on earth. The focus here is on the words "store up." Jesus is not teaching that we should never enjoy the things He gives us in this life. He is teaching us, however, that the things He has given to us need to be used for His glory. Paul, speaking to the rich in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 says:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

There are two things we need to see in this passage. First, God gives us all things for our enjoyment. We ought to enjoy the things He gives us. Not to enjoy them is to insult the Giver. The second thing we need to see is that those who have received blessings from God need to share those blessings with others.

“Do not store for yourselves treasures on earth,” Jesus said (Matthew 6:19). If we have enough to store we have more than we need. If we are storing more than we need, we have some to share with others. If we keep these blessings for ourselves we keep others from the blessing God wants to give through us.

Jesus reminds us that wealth stored up will quickly go bad. Moths and rust will destroy what we have accumulated. Thieves will come in and steal it. It is better to give these extra resources to those who need them. In doing so, we store up for ourselves treasures in heaven. Those who use what they have in this earth for the glory of God will be rewarded in the life to come.

Jesus reminded His followers in Matthew 6:21 that where their treasure was there also would be their hearts. This is an important statement. At Pentecost, believers were so touched by the ministry of the Holy Spirit that they sold

their houses and properties and gave the proceeds to the poor and needy. What happened to these individuals? Their priorities were being changed. Prior to this, they had accumulated riches and properties. When the Spirit of God got a hold of them, their priorities changed. God opened their hearts to the hurts of their community. They could not bear having more than they needed when others had nothing.

The apostle James wrote about this in James 2:15-17:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Our wishes of goodwill are of no use to those who do not have what is necessary. Do we treasure our surplus so much that we could never sacrifice it for someone in need?

In Matthew 6:22 Jesus reminded His followers that the eye is the lamp of the body. If our eye is good then our whole body will be filled with light. If our eye is bad then our whole body will be filled with darkness. We understand this in the physical sense. The eye is an entrance to the body. It allows light to come in. We see the beauty of the creation of God through the eye.

The same principle works in a spiritual sense as well. What Jesus is saying here is that if we set our eyes on the things of God we will experience His light in our lives. If, on the other hand, we set our eyes on the accumulation of this world's goods and treasures, we will soon find ourselves plunged into darkness. God's blessing and the sense of

His presence will be removed from us. If we set our eyes and hearts to seeking treasures here below they may very well be all the treasures we will receive. If on the other hand we set our hearts and eyes on treasures in heaven we will store up for ourselves great reward in heaven.

Jesus concludes these thoughts by reminding His followers that they had a choice to make. They could not serve two masters. They needed to decide who they were going to serve. Would they serve God and commit themselves to using the resources He gave for His glory or would they serve money and possessions. We cannot serve both. We must make a decision. If you chose to store up treasures in heaven you must be willing to sacrifice what you have here below. If your treasure is the Lord God then your preoccupation will be to serve Him with the resources He has given. You will not be preoccupied with the things of this world.

For Consideration:

- Where is your treasure? Are you willing to offer what God has given you back to Him to use as He sees fit?
- How do we find the balance between enjoying the good things God has given and not falling into the trap of setting our hearts on these blessings?
- Is your eye set on the Lord and His purpose? What difference does this make in your life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to deliver you from setting your heart too much on the things of this world.
- Surrender all you have to the Lord. Ask Him to show you how He would have you to use your possessions and time for His.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the needs around you.
- Ask God to teach you to enjoy his blessings without holding on so tightly to them that you could never sacrifice those blessings should He ask you to do so.

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SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 7: WORRYING ABOUT TOMORROW

Read Matthew 6:25-34

In the last meditation we looked at Jesus' teaching about storing up treasures in heaven. He taught that those who followed Him needed to be willing to share with those in need. This brings up an important question. If I am not to store up treasures on earth but use them to minister to my brothers and sisters, will I have enough for myself and my own needs? Jesus answers this question here.

Notice that the section begins with the word "therefore." Someone has wisely said that when we see the word "therefore" we need to ask what is it "there for." The word "therefore" connects this section with the section we have just examined. It is the continuation of Jesus' teaching about storing up treasures for ourselves in heaven.

Jesus told His listeners that they were not to worry about their lives and what they were to eat or drink. Nor were they to be overly concerned about what they were to wear. There were things of far greater importance in life than these things. This statement calls us to examine our priorities in life. For many people food, clothing and shelter have become the focus of their lives. Jesus is not telling us that we should not enjoy these necessities of life but that they ought to take their proper places on our priority list. There are times when we will need to do without food or clothes for things of greater importance.

Jesus called the crowd's attention to the birds. These birds did not plant crops or reap at harvest time. They did not store away large quantities of food for the difficult times. God, however, provided for them and their every need. Jesus reminded His followers that they were of far more value than the birds of the air. If God was faithful to provide for the little birds, would He not care for His own children who served Him faithfully?

Of all of God's creation, man has become the most pre-occupied with accumulating resources. Some people store up far more than they need. They become self-sufficient. They do not live by faith because they seem to be able to care for themselves by their work and careful planning. Sometimes we put so much effort and thought into how to save for the future that we no longer consider ministering to those in need today. We worry and fret about how we will be able to buy our food and clothes. We are concerned about our future and how we will provide for the needs of our children and families. Jesus asked His listeners what their worrying about the future would accomplish. Could they, by worrying, add another hour to their lives? He pointed His listeners to the lilies of the field. He reminded them how these flowers did not work or spin to make

material to clothe themselves. Even Solomon, with all his servants and wealth, however, was never dressed like one of these simple flowers. If God clothed the beautiful flowers of the field, which are here today and gone tomorrow, will He not clothe His children whom He loves dearly? Do we not mean more to Him than the flowers of the field? (Matthew 6:30).

What earthly father, seeing His children in need, would not give them what they required? Our worry and fretting only proves that we have lost sight of God as our loving and caring father. We doubt His love and provision. I have not always been faithful to God but He has always been faithful to me. His love and provision do not change. He cares for me in my moments of weakness as well as when I am faithful to Him. He is a loving heavenly Father.

For this reason, Jesus tells us not to worry about what we will eat or drink or what we will wear. Our heavenly Father will provide all we need. When He calls us to give from our resources we can be assured that He will care for us when we have need.

This does not mean that we are to carelessly give everything away without consideration of the needs of our families. Jesus told His followers however, that they were to seek His kingdom and His righteousness first. They were not to set their heart on the things of this world. They were not to allow their appetites for worldly pleasures and possessions dominate. Instead they were to seek the Lord and His will. They were to make it their passion in life to know God, to love Him and serve Him with all their hearts. They were to commit everything they had to Him for His use. They were to be willing to part with whatever God would call them to give for His kingdom trusting that He would care for them in their need.

Jesus taught that we should not to be overly concerned about tomorrow. Each day has enough cares and concerns in itself. Why should we take on tomorrow's worries and concerns? When Jesus taught His disciples to pray he told them to pray for their "daily bread." God calls us to live each day trusting Him for all that we need. Why should we accumulate and store up resources for the future when the kingdom of God is suffering for lack of resources today? If we were willing to surrender what we have for others today, God, as a loving heavenly father, would provide for our needs tomorrow.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself worrying about your basic needs? What did that worry accomplish? What does this teach you about how you see God?
- Could it be that you are not experiencing the life of faith because we have not been willing to part with our possessions?
- Are you willing to place all your resources at the disposal of the Lord?
- How does our view of God as our heavenly Father affect whether we trust Him to supply our needs?
- What is the difference between foolishly giving away all we have and giving sacrificially as the Lord leads?

For Prayer:

- Surrender all that you have to the Lord. Ask Him to lead you in how to use your resources for His glory.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have been unwilling to part with your possessions.
- Ask God to enable you to seek His kingdom first in your life.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from worry over the practical needs you have each day. Ask Him to provide, and trust Him for your provision.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 8: JUDGING OTHERS

Read Matthew 7:1-6; Luke 6:37-42

Jesus taught that true religion was from the heart. It was not practiced to be seen of others. There was another aspect to the faith of the religious leaders of His day that Jesus wanted to address. They were quick to judge others who did not see things as they did. Jesus speaks to His listeners in this next section about judging others.

It is important that we understand what the Lord meant by judging in this context. The apostle Paul makes this quite clear that there are times when we are called to make judgments. Writing in 1 Corinthians 6:1-5 he says:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge

angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul discovered that there was an individual in the church of Corinth who had been having a sexual relationship with his father's wife. Listen to what Paul told the church in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5:

Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Paul passed judgment on this individual for his sin. He encouraged the church to take the matter in hand and judge the man themselves by casting him out and handing him over to Satan for the purifying of his flesh.

The words of Jesus in this passage are often quoted by those who want to justify their sinful actions. They fall into sin and when challenged, they are quick to remind those who rebuke them that Jesus taught that they were not to judge. When Jesus tells us that we are not to judge He is not telling us that we cannot challenge or rebuke those who have fallen into sin. Nor is He telling us that we cannot exercise church discipline. As parents we will often be called to make judgments regarding our children. Church

leaders will be called on to make a judgment regarding the behaviour of their members. Imagine what our society would be like if we were not able to judge those who committed crimes. Imagine what our families would be like if we chose not to exercise discipline which is a form of judgment. Scripture tells us that we are to judge sin and evil in our midst. While there is a type of judging that is a necessary part of church and society there is also another type of judgment that is condemned in Scripture. Let's take a look at the type of judging I believe Jesus to be referring to in this passage.

Judgment Based on Personal Conscience

In 1 Corinthians 10:27-29 Paul speaks about judging the actions of others based on our own personal conscience.

If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake-- the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience?

In this context Paul is speaking about his personal freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols. There were believers in Paul's day who had freedom to eat this meat while others did not. Maybe you have found yourself in such a situation in your life. Not all believers agree on what is acceptable practice. There are times when my brother or sister has freedom to practice something that I cannot practice in good conscience. Particularly when I feel very strongly about something it is very easy for me to stand in judgment

against my brother or sister when he or she does what I do not feel is right. I believe Jesus is teaching us here that we need to be careful about judging others based on matters of personal preference and conscience. In these cases we are called on to withhold judgment. Paul makes this particularly clear in Colossians 2:16 when he says:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

Judging Motives

There is another form of judgment that we must avoid. Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4:5 that they were to not to be quick to judge because they did not understand the motives and intents behind the actions they judged:

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

The Lord Jesus was often judged because He was seen as a friend of sinners. He did not hesitate to associate with the sinner. The Pharisees and religious leaders of the day judged Him for this. They believed that because He associated with such people, He was Himself a sinner. They did not see the motives behind His association with these sinners. Jesus *did not* associate with sinners because He loved their lifestyle. He associated with them because He wanted to reach them with the message of salvation. It is quite easy to assume we understand the motive behind a particular action. We cannot judge someone's motive. The

attitude of the heart can change everything. We must avoid making judgments about why someone is doing something because we do not always understand their intentions.

Judging by Outward Appearance

James condemned those who judged a person based on their social standing or appearance. Consider what he said in James 2:2-4:

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

There are times when we simply look at a person and judge them on their physical appearance. This is what James 2 is speaking about. If a person came to church with a big ring and nice clothes he was treated with respect. On the other hand, if a person came in dressed in rags, that person was not greeted or shown respect. James told his readers that if they did this they made themselves judges. God does not judge a person based on their looks or bank account. He treats all people equally. He loves the rich and the poor. We are to avoid judging an individual on the basis of their outward appearance.

Jesus' teaching on making judgments needs to be seen in the context of the rest of Scripture. When we judge others based on our own personal preferences or assuming we know their motives, we are sinning and will ourselves be judged by God. If we have falsely condemned, we will be

condemned. If we have judged incorrectly, we will be judged. If we have chosen not to forgive, we will not be forgiven. These are serious warnings for all believers.

Luke tells us that the opposite is also true. When we forgive, we will be forgiven. When we give, we will receive in greater measure. God will treat us as we treat others. We have no right to expect God to do for us what we are unwilling to do for others. Do you want God to provide for your needs? Reach out to others and do the same for them. Do you want God to forgive your sin? Forgive those who have offended you. Do you want God to show compassion to you? Then show that same compassion to others.

Jesus taught His listeners to examine themselves before they made any judgment about their brother or sister. It is quite easy to look at the speck in our brother's eye and not see the plank in our own eye (Matthew 7:3). As servants of God we need to humbly recognize our own weaknesses. The planks in our own eyes need to be removed if we are to help our brother or sister with the specks in theirs. Jesus reminded His listeners in Luke's gospel that if one blind man lead another both would risk falling into a pit because neither one could see the obstacles on the path. Teachers cannot teach what they do not know. Pastors cannot lead where they themselves do not go.

Jesus is calling for a humble spirit. We need to realize, as servants of God, that we have all fallen short of God's standard (Romans 3:23). We must be slow to judge others and must do so only when we have carefully judged ourselves. We must abstain from making judgments about the motives or intents of another. Our judgment must not be based on personal conscience or outward appearance.

As we have seen, Paul tells us that there are times when we need to judge the actions of others based on the teaching of the Word of God. The problem, however, is that not everyone will respond to the Word of God and the standard God requires. What are we to do when people refuse to receive the judgment of God's Word?

In Matthew's account, Jesus told his listeners not to give what was sacred to dogs or to throw pearls to pigs. The pig and the dog were unclean animals. The Jews considered the unbelieving Gentiles to be dogs. They disregarded the law of God and had no concern for His purposes. The Word of God is like the precious pearl Jesus spoke of here. When we give the pearls of God's Word to those who are not ready to receive them, they simply trample them underfoot and mock what we say. Sometimes they even attack us because we dare to challenge them with that Word.

Jesus would later teach His disciples that if they went into a village that did not receive His Word, they were to wipe the dust off their feet and go somewhere else. They were not to stay where they were not welcome or where people rejected the Word they brought. It is foolish to pursue a matter with a person who is not ready to receive it. To do so would only encourage them to mock not only the word we preach but also to attack us personally. Jesus seems to be telling His people here that there is a time for us simply to leave matters in His hands. God will judge in His own way and time.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever been guilty of judging people by personal conscience, outward appearance, or by what we perceive to be their motive? Give an example.
- When is it appropriate to take a stand and judge sin as sin?
- What cautions are we to take when we step out and challenge a brother or sister in Christ about their actions?
- Have you ever tried to share the Word of God with someone who was not ready to hear it? What was the result?

For Prayer:

- What are your areas of weakness as a servant of God? Ask the Lord to minister to those areas so that you can in turn minister to others.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see your own shortcomings.
- Ask the Lord to give you more patience and understanding with others who do things differently from you.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT
PART 9: ASKING AND
RECEIVING

Read Matthew 7:7-12

One of the difficult things about commenting on the life of Jesus through a harmony of the gospels is to understand the order of events. Here in the Matthew 7 the Lord Jesus spoke to His followers about asking and receiving. There is a similar passage in Luke 11 but the context is different from the context in Matthew. We should not be concerned by this. In my ministry I have often taught the same truth many times. I have used the same illustrations and even the same message in another context. What Jesus introduces here in the Sermon on the Mount He may have repeated later in His ministry. For our purposes we will only examine Matthew's account at this time.

Jesus told His listeners to ask, seek and knock. If they asked it would be given to them. If they sought they would find. If they knocked the door would be opened to them

(verses 7-8). There are several things we need to understand here. It is easy to miss the grammar of this passage. The words ask, seek, and knock in the original Greek indicate a continuous action. In other words, Jesus is not telling His followers to ask once but to continue asking. There is persistence in these words. The New Living Translation captures this when it translates verse 7 in this way:

Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened. (NLT)

Jesus is telling us to persevere in asking, seeking and knocking. We must not lose heart. If He doesn't answer your prayer right away, keep praying.

Some commentators note a progression in these words. Each word seems to get stronger. To ask is to make a request. To seek is a stronger word than ask and implies a more intense cry from the heart. To knock is to walk up to the door of heaven with our request. The picture here is of someone who stands at the door pounding on the door until it is opened. There is in these words a growing urgency. What begins with a simple request ends with the individual pounding at the door in search of an answer.

The fact that the Lord Jesus told His followers to keep on asking implies that they would not always receive an answer in the time they expected. They were to persist, however, and not give up. Jacob demonstrates this type of persistence in his prayer in Genesis 32:26. When the angel asked him to let him go, Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (NIV).

There have been times when I have wrestled with this concept of persisting in prayer. I have at times felt that by

persevering in my requests I would be a bother to God. At other times I have wondered why I could not simply ask one time and leave my request with God. Do I have to repeat the same request over and over?

Jesus calls us, however, to keep on asking, seeking and knocking when our prayers are not answered. When we know that what we ask is according to His will we have every confidence that He will hear and answer in His time. Ultimately what the Lord is asking us to do here is to continue trusting Him with our requests. Though His ways and his timing are not ours, by keeping our requests before God we demonstrate that we still trust Him to do something.

As I seek to distribute these books to believers in over sixty countries, I am constantly forced to seek the Lord. Trusting the Lord for resources to supply copies of these books to thousands of people every year requires that I be constantly asking and knocking on heaven's door. This keeps me dependant on the Lord.

Jesus promised that when we come to him "asking, seeking and knocking," He will hear our request. Some people find it difficult to ask for things. Personally, there was a time in my life when I was so hindered by such a sense of unworthiness that I struggled to come to God with my problems and difficulties. I did not understand how God could be interested in my problems. There are many people like this today. They feel that they should not bother God with their problems. They don't ask because they do not understand how much God loves them and wants to give to them. They do not believe that the Lord wants to be part of their problems.

There are other reasons why we do not ask. Sometimes we do not ask because we feel selfish. We feel that we should be content with what we have and not ask for anything more. There are several problems with this attitude. First, this mentality comes from a false view of God. Could it be that we believe that God is a very stingy God who really does not want to bless His children? Look for a moment at the extravagance of the universe. There is more for us to enjoy than we could ever possibly see in this life. There is no limit to the resources of God. What you ask of Him is small in comparison to the resources He has in store. God has much higher goals for you than you have for yourself. He has many more victories in store for you than you can ask for. When you ask God for what He already wants to give, you are not being selfish. The enemy has held many people in a sense of unworthiness and false pride. As long as we remain in this trap we will never reach the potential God has in store for us.

Sometimes we do not ask because we believe that if God wanted us to have our requests He would give it to us without our having to ask. We feel that if we accept whatever happens we are in the purpose of God. This is contrary to what Jesus is telling us in this verse. Jesus told His followers that they were to ask. This is not an option. Throughout the Word of God we are challenged to come to God and ask for His blessing and wisdom. God has designed things so that the way we receive is to ask. We do not receive because we do not ask (see James 1:5; 4:2).

To ask is to understand that God wants to give. To ask is to believe that He wants to pour out His blessing. It is to refuse to allow any sense of unworthiness or false humility stand in the way. To ask is to come boldly at Christ's invitation.

Jesus told His followers that they were to seek. When I think of seeking I think of perseverance. It is one thing to ask, it is another to seek. To seek is to take God at His Word. It is to look until we find an answer. The enemy will tell us that we will never receive the desires of our hearts. He will tell us that we should stop looking to God. The seeking heart will not stop seeking until it finds. As long as the promise of God is true, the seeking heart will continue to look for it and trust.

God calls us to boldly knock on the door of heaven. It should be remembered that behind that door is the awesome and holy God of this universe. In the days of Queen Esther, to approach the king without invitation was to die. Who can approach the door of the throne room of heaven? The Psalmist answers this question for us in Psalm 24:3-5:

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Savior."

If you are not in a right relationship with God you dare not stand at the door and knock. Could you knock if you knew that when the door opened you would face the God you had offended? When the prophet Jonah chose to disobey the call of God on his life, he hid himself from the presence of God. He did not want to face a holy and just God. Adam and Eve also hid from the Lord God in the Garden of Eden when they sinned against Him. To stand at the door and knock, if you were not willing to deal with the sin that offends the God who stands behind that door, would be very foolish. You don't knock unless you are ready to face your

Saviour. To knock you must be bold and confident in your relationship with God.

To ask, seek and knock in this sense implies a right relationship with God, a heart in tune with God and His purposes, and an understanding of His desire to bless you. If you come with this attitude, Jesus tells us that God will not only hear your request but He will also be pleased to answer.

Jesus illustrated His point by speaking about family relationships. If your son asked you for bread, would you give him a stone? If he asked for a fish would you give him a snake (verse 9)? If, as sinful human beings, we give good gifts to our children, how much more will our perfect heavenly Father give us all we need if we ask? God delights in giving to those who ask Him. He has more delight in giving to us than we have in giving to those we love the most in this life.

I have to admit that there have been times when I have not understood just how much God delights in giving to us as His children. There are times when I have believed that God really hesitated to give and I had to beg and plead with Him before He would part with His resources. This is a false picture of God. Think for a moment of the person you love most in this life. How much do you delight in giving to them? Does it thrill you to be able to buy a gift for them? Do you receive more joy in giving than they do in receiving? If you feel this joy in your heart, how much more does God feel joy when He gives to you? He willingly sent His only Son to die for you. He has proven His love for you. Do you think that you would have to beg and plead with Him for those things that He has put on your heart to ask from Him?

An “asking, seeking and knocking heart” is a heart that is confident and unashamed, pure and ready to face the Lord when He opens the door. It is a heart that is filled with faith, trust and obedience. Do you have this type of heart as you come to God with your request?

In light of this incredible teaching of Jesus about the provision of God for all our needs, Jesus told His followers that they needed to do to others as they would have them to do for them. God delights in showering His blessings on us. How can we not do the same for those around us? If we delight in receiving from God, we should share that same delight by giving to His people.

This brings us back to what Jesus told His followers about not storing up riches for themselves (Matthew 6:19). We receive in order that we might be able to give. This verse challenges us not to keep on asking for ourselves. This command to do to others as we would have them do for us comes directly after the teaching on asking and receiving from God and helps us find a balance. We are not to ask and keep storing up for ourselves. When God opens the door and pours down a rich blessing, he also expects us to share what we have with those in need. Just as He delights in giving to us, He calls us to delight in giving what we have received from Him to others.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the delight God takes in answering our prayers?
- How would you describe the person who has an “asking, seeking and knocking” attitude of heart? Do you have this kind of heart?
- What confidence does this passage give you to persevere in asking God for those things He has not yet given?
- What keeps us from asking God for the things we need?
- What does the Lord Jesus tell us to do with the blessings He has poured out in our life?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you more faith and confidence to bring your requests to Him.
- Thank the Lord that He delights in hearing and answering your prayers.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the needs of those around you so that you can minister to them out of the blessings God has given to you.

36

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 10: THE GATE

Read Matthew 7:13-14

The world has become very small. We move from one corner of the earth to another in a matter of hours. We rub shoulders with people of other faiths and beliefs everywhere we go. We are taught to respect one other. All this is wonderful but it may lead to the teaching that truth is relative. In other words, what is true for me may not be true for someone else. Some people have, as a result, come to believe that all the various streams of belief lead to God. We have also heard preachers tell us that everyone is a child of God. Jesus confronts this teaching here in this passage.

Jesus told His followers that they were to enter through the narrow gate. There are several important things we need to say about this. The gate that Jesus speaks about here is the gate of salvation and the way to God. He told His listeners that this gate was narrow.

What does Jesus mean when He says that the gate is narrow? The way is narrow first because it demands that we accept a single truth. The voices of our age may tell us that all religions lead to God. Jesus tells us that He alone is the way to God. The Bible teaches that there is no other way but Jesus. Those who believe that somehow their own efforts must count for something are offended. Others who approach the gate are proud of the fact that they are open-minded and accept all faiths and religions. When they approach this gate they are told that they must turn to Jesus alone. They too are offended by this. Those who accept that the gate is narrow become the object of scorn and ridicule. The world sees them as closed-minded and proud. "How can you say that you alone have the truth?" they question. Jesus reminded His listeners, however, that there is only one way to God.

There is a second reason why that gate is narrow. The gate is narrow because it demands total obedience and surrender to one truth. Those who go through this gate must be willing to deny their own ideas and follow the Word of God. In our day there are many conflicting philosophies and lifestyles. The follower of Jesus' teaching is seen to be old fashioned and out of touch with the modern age. Even believers are tempted by the philosophies of our day. They find themselves slipping away from the truth of God's Word. What we learn here, however, is that God expects that those who follow Him do things His way. This means committing ourselves to go against the current of our day and follow the clear teaching of the Scriptures.

Many people are unwilling to leave everything at the gate. They are unwilling to put all their confidence and trust in Jesus alone. Instead, they choose to take another road. That road is broad. The road that leads to destruction is very wide. You can take everything with you through that

gate. Because it is wide, it does not demand that you accept Jesus alone as the way. Those who travel this road are counting on their own efforts. Some are relying on other gods. This broad road does not demand sacrifice. You come as you are. You believe what you want. Everyone is accepted.

Many people are deceived as they travel this road. On the outside, this road looks very inviting. Those who travel it are very open and accepting people. They don't criticize the beliefs of others. They don't demand that others give an account of their lives. Acceptance is unconditional. They appear to be a very loving and caring people. The fact, however, is that they are on a road that leads to destruction.

The way that Jesus teaches is a narrow way. There are few people who find it because there are few who want to accept the conditions for walking on that road. They are unwilling to leave everything behind. They are unwilling to believe that Jesus alone is the way. Those who follow that Lord Jesus are a "narrow" people. They understand that the only way to God is a way of self denial. They believe that those who do not know and place their confidence in the Lord Jesus are lost and bound for an eternity separated from God and His love.

Notice that Jesus tells us that there are only two ways, the broad way and the narrow way. There is no middle way. You are either on one path or you are on another. Either you have placed your full confidence on the Lord Jesus and left everything at the gate, or you are traveling down the broad road that leads to destruction. What road are you on today?

This passage calls us to re-examine our lives. Have we been trusting in the Lord Jesus alone for salvation? Have we been trying to pull our bags through that narrow gate instead of leaving them behind? May the Lord give us grace to trust in Him and His work alone.

For Consideration:

- Are there things in your life that you have never truly surrendered to the Lord? What are they?
- Have you ever felt “narrow-minded?” What does this passage have to say to us about this?
- How should knowing that Jesus is the only way influence how we minister?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He showed you the narrow way.
- Ask the Lord to give you the strength to surrender everything to Him.
- Take a moment to pray for someone who has been traveling down that broad road. Ask the Lord to show them that this broad road leads to destruction.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

PART 11: FALSE PROPHETS

Read Matthew 7:15-23; Luke 6:43-45

In Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching His listeners about going through the narrow gate. The broad gate had a real appeal but would lead to destruction. From this teaching Jesus moved on to speak about false prophets. There is an obvious connection here. The false prophet is one who preaches the "broad way." The words of the false prophet are accepted because they please those who listen to them. In this next section of His sermon, Jesus warns His followers about these false prophets of the broad way.

The false prophets of the broad way disguised themselves in sheep's clothing but they were in reality ferocious wolves. There is a world of difference between a sheep and a wolf. The sheep is a very gentle and harmless animal. This is how these false prophets presented themselves. The wolf, on the other hand, came to destroy and devour. The wolf is very dangerous. What made these

false prophets particularly dangerous was the fact that they looked like sheep.

If the false prophet disguises himself, how can we know who is true and who is false? Jesus told His followers that it was by the fruit that they could recognize a true or false prophet. Grapes don't come from thorn bushes, nor do figs grow on thistles. In the same way, a false prophet will produce fruit that is easy to distinguish from that of a true prophet.

There are many different ideas about what the fruit is that Jesus is speaking about here in this passage. Let's take a moment to examine some of these ideas.

Miraculous Signs and Wonders

Some people see this fruit to refer to miraculous signs and wonders. In the Scriptures it is quite clear that miraculous deeds confirmed the ministries of God's servants. We read in 2 Corinthians 12:12:

The things that mark an apostle--signs, wonders and miracles--were done among you with great perseverance.

Jesus told those who listened to Him that the miracles He did proved that He was from God. He told those who saw Him minister that if they didn't believe His words they were at least to believe Him because of the incredible miracles He did.

Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. (John 14:11)

There is no question that signs and wonders did, at times, prove the legitimacy of a prophet. This was not always the case, however. Paul told his readers that in the last days there would be an increase of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders.

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9).

Jesus also reminded His followers in Matthew 7:22 that in the Day of Judgment there would be many miracle workers turned from the gates of heaven because they were false prophets and did not belong to Him.

Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

What this tells us is that while signs and wonders are evidence of the grace of God at times, they can also be counterfeited and used by false prophets. There are false prophets who perform signs and wonders. Many people are deceived into following a false prophet because they see that he or she is able to heal or perform some wonderful miracle.

Results in Ministry

There are those who measure whether a prophet is true or false by how many people attend their church or how many people have been saved through their preaching. We need to understand here that this type of fruit can also be deceiving.

Peter tells us that, in the last days, people will not put up with the truth but will gather around them teachers who will tell them what they want to hear.

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” (2 Peter 4:3-4)

In other words, the day is coming when the churches of the false prophets will be filled to capacity. If false prophets are willing to tell people what they want to hear many will follow them. We dare not base our understanding of whether a prophet is true or false on how many followers the prophet has.

Fruit of the Spirit

When Jesus tells us that it is by their fruit we will know a false prophet, I believe the only true fruit we should examine is the fruit of the Spirit. Paul tells us that when the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the heart and life of an individual there will be a change in that life. The Spirit of God will produce the character of Jesus in them. In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul reminds his readers of the fruit of the Spirit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

The clear evidence of whether a person belongs to the Lord Jesus can be seen in this fruit alone. Does the prophet demonstrate in their inner character the fruit of love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? If you want to know if a prophet belongs to the Lord, examine his or her character. Look to see if the fruit of the Spirit is being demonstrated in them. Do their lives reflect the life of the Lord Jesus in all they do? True prophets of God will show evidence of Christ's character in their lives. The fruit of the Spirit will shine through. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. This does not mean that a true prophet can never fall. True prophets can fall but they get up again and repent of their sin. They do not persist in this evil but recognize it and turn from it.

Many who speak in the name of the Lord will one day be cut down and thrown into the fire of his wrath. If you want to know whether a prophet is true or false you need to examine his or her heart. The test of a true prophet is found in the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever measured the greatness of a preacher by the results you saw in his ministry? What do we learn in this section about this? Can a false prophet be humanly successful in his or her ministry?

- How often have we been more concerned about the size of our churches than the fruit of God's Spirit being demonstrated in the lives of our members?
- Can a false prophet perform miracles? Why is it important that we have something more than signs to evaluate whether a prophet is true or false?
- As a servant of God what is more important, to see results in ministry or to demonstrate the character of Christ in your life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit in your life and ministry.
- Ask the Spirit of God to produce His fruit in your life and in the lives of those in your church.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for placing your focus on results and not character.

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SERMON ON THE MOUNT PART 12: A HOUSE ON A ROCK

Read Matthew 7:24-8:1; Luke 6:46-49

This is the final challenge of the Lord Jesus to the people who had gathered to hear Him teach on the mountain. In this final word Jesus reminded His listeners of the importance of the Word of God and its place in the spiritual battle that was before them. He told them that listening to His words was not enough. They also needed to apply them to their lives.

Jesus compared the one who heard and put His words into practice to a wise man who built his house on a rock. Luke records Jesus as saying:

He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock (Luke 6:48).

The foundation on which we build is of utmost importance. No one looks at a house and says: "My, what a wonderful foundation." Their eyes are usually drawn to the rest of the house. While the foundation is not always what people notice, without a solid foundation the whole house may fall apart. The beauty of the rest of the house will matter little when it falls down because the foundation was too weak to support it.

Jesus paints a picture of a heavy rainfall falling on the house. The streams rise and beat against the house. Because the foundation is dug deeply into the rock it resists the waves and remains firm.

Those who listen to the Lord Jesus and put His words into practice are like those who build their house with its foundation in the rock. Notice here again that it is not enough to listen. We must also put into practice what we hear. There are many who hear the Word of God but do not do what it says. They know all the facts but do not practice what they know to be true.

When the clouds are so thick we cannot see ahead of us, how will we know where to go? When the enemy causes us to fear and our emotions fail allowing doubt to creep up on us, what will give us courage to continue? It will be the clear teaching of the Word that reassures us. It is not without reason that when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He clung to the Word of God. Each time the enemy tempted Him, Jesus returned to the Word of God and found strength and direction in it. The enemy can beat all he wants on our house but we have strength in the Word of God to resist. His promises and the truth of His Word give us strength, courage and guidance.

Jesus went on to compare the person who did not listen to and put His word into practice to a person who built His house on the sand. Without a solid foundation this house would collapse when the storms of life beat against it. If we refuse the clear teaching of the Word of God where can we go for comfort, strength and direction? The house of the person who rejects God's Word will be destroyed. What is true for an individual is also true for a society. The society that does not base its laws and practices solidly on the Word of God will surely fall.

How easy it is for us to hold back on the foundation and spend our effort building the rest of the house. Digging deep into the rock is hard work. The walls of a house go up quickly. It is much more pleasing to work on the walls. As church leaders we want to see our churches growing in number. We like to see different programs running. We like all kinds of activity but what about the foundation? Do those who come to your church know the Word of God and put it into practice? Are they being disciplined and trained not just to know the details about the Word but to its application in daily life?

What about your personal life? You may be very busy serving the Lord but are your roots firmly grounded in His Word? Do you have time to study it? Do you put it into practice? If you want to have a foundation that will withstand the attacks of the enemy you must make it your heart's desire to know the truth of the Word of God and daily walk in obedience.

Some time ago I was wrestling with this concept. I wondered what good it was writing these commentaries and Bible studies. The Lord showed me at that time, however, that there are problems in our society that are solidly rooted in disobedience to the Word of God. What would be

the difference in our society if everyone sought to honour the Lord by following His Word? Would not the blessing of God fall in power on us? Are societies around us not crumbling because they are not founded on the Word of God?

Jesus teaches us here the importance of the Word of God for the strengthening of our society and personal lives. By it we are able to resist the moral and spiritual decay that will ultimately destroy us. Through it the blessing of God is poured out on us.

The crowd that listened to Jesus that day was amazed at what they heard. Jesus taught with an authority they had never seen in the teachers of the law (Matthew 7:28). That authority could be felt in His teaching. It was the type of authority that made you sit up and listen. When you heard it you knew that if you didn't listen, there would be consequences.

For Consideration:

- What does Jesus teach us here about the importance of the Word of God in the battle before us? What difference does it make, personally and in our society, when we are rooted firmly in the Word of God?
- What is the difference between hearing the Word and doing what it says? Can a person excel in the doctrines and teachings of the Word of God and still fail to apply it to his or her life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you more time in His Word. Ask Him for a deeper love for that word and a deeper desire to see how it applies to your life.
- Ask the Lord to help you to see areas of your life where you need to put the Word of God into practice.
- Thank the Lord for the Word He has given us and the comfort, confidence and direction it gives.

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THE CENTURION'S SERVANT

Read Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10

According to Luke 7:1, when Jesus finished speaking to the people on the mountain, He went to the region of Capernaum. He met a centurion in Capernaum. A centurion was a Roman officer in charge of about one hundred men. He would have been a man of some stature in his community.

This particular centurion, though he was a Roman, was loved by the Jews. He had a servant whom he highly valued. That servant had become paralyzed and was suffering terribly. The centurion, being a man of great compassion, was very concerned about his servant.

He sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to see if He would heal his servant. It is interesting that the centurion sent Jewish elders and not his own men. Could it be that his servant was a Jew? It is obvious that the centurion had a good relationship with the Jews of that region. When the

elders of the Jews came to Jesus they told him how deserving the centurion was. They told Jesus that this Roman officer loved their nation. Beyond this, the elders told Jesus that the centurion had built them a synagogue. Their comments say a lot about this man. He loved the Jewish people and had a deep respect for their faith. He was also a compassionate and generous man. It is unclear what his fellow Roman officers felt about him and his favouring of the Jews. This did not hinder him from doing whatever he could to help the them.

The Jewish elders pleaded with Jesus to do something for the centurion's servant. Jesus decided that He would go to meet him. Luke tells us that when the centurion heard that Jesus was coming to his home, he sent friends to tell Him not to come because he did not deserve that such a man as Jesus come to see him. There is a real contrast between how the Jews saw the centurion and how he saw himself. To the Jewish elders, if there ever was a Roman who deserved that the Lord heal his servant it was this man. The centurion, however, felt totally unworthy. He was a humble man. He was a man who had a position of honour in the Roman army and in the society. He had one hundred soldiers to do his bidding and servants in his home. He had built the Jewish synagogue and had the respect of the people in his community. Despite this he remained humble.

What an example this centurion is to us. How often have we allowed our accomplishments and position to cause us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. None of us deserve the mercy and compassion of the Lord. We have often failed to understand our sinfulness and believe that we deserve that God should forgive and bless us. How we need more leaders like this centurion in our churches today. We need to see more men and women who know

that though they do not deserve the mercy of God they call on Him anyway. Jesus seemed attracted to this man and his humble, generous and compassionate spirit.

The centurion asked Jesus simply to speak a word and his servant would be healed. He knew that Jesus did not need to be physically present to heal his servant. As a centurion, he understood that all he had to do was speak a word and his soldiers would obey. When he said: "Go," his servant would go. If he told him to come to him the servant would come. His servants did whatever he commanded them to do.

The centurion understood that Jesus too was a man of authority. All Jesus had to do was speak a word and it would be done. The centurion did not need to be physically present for his order to be obeyed. If he sent word for a servant to do something that servant would obey simply because the command came from him. There is incredible faith in the centurion's statement. He believed that all that was required was that the Lord Jesus issue the order and his servant would be healed. He believed that Jesus had authority over sickness, disease and death. He had seen this in His ministry. He heard how Jesus commanded that sickness leave and it obeyed. He heard how at the command of Jesus demons would flee. He was amazed at the authority of Jesus. As a man who understood authority, all he asked was that Jesus issue the command and he knew that whatever Jesus ordered would be done.

When Jesus heard these words, He told those present that He had never seen such faith in all Israel. This man was a Gentile but demonstrated more faith than all of Israel. The centurion did not need any signs or wonders. He did not need Jesus to wave His hands or call out to God in a

spectacular way. All he wanted was a word. He knew that nothing could withstand that word.

Jesus reminded those present that the day was coming when people would come from the east and the west and take their place with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. What Jesus is saying here is that the day would come when the Gentiles would be accepted into the kingdom of God as equal partners with the Jews. The doors would be opened wide for all nations to know the salvation of God. Many natural-born Jews would be cast aside and never experience the salvation Jesus came to offer. Though they were the chosen people of God, many of them would be cast into darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. They would be lost because they did not accept Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus had compassion on the centurion and spoke the word he asked Him to speak. "Go," said Jesus, "It will be done just as you believed it would" (Matthew 8:13). That was all the Lord said. The simple word "go" was sufficient. The centurion's servant was healed that very hour.

There was something very simple about this man's faith. He believed that whatever Jesus spoke would happen. He teaches us something about authority. If the authority of our earthly officials is obeyed without question, how much more will the authority of Christ, the Son of God, send the powers of darkness fleeing? He simply speaks the word and it is done. This is how the world came into being. God spoke the word and it came to be. The centurion is an example of humility and faith. We need people more like him today.

For Consideration:

- What is the challenge of this passage with regards to humility? Have you ever found yourself feeling that you deserved the blessing of the Lord because of what you have done for Him?
- Notice the simple faith of the centurion. Do you have such a faith today? What hinders you from believing like this centurion?
- Compare the faith of the centurion to the faith of the religious leaders who came to Jesus. Why did the religious leaders feel Jesus should heal the centurion's servant? What does this teach us about the religious spirit of the day?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the example of the centurion's faith and humility. Ask the Lord to produce these same qualities in you.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you doubted His word and His authority over the affairs of life.
- Ask the Lord to help you to see your unworthiness but to give you boldness to come to Him anyway.
- Thank the Lord that while we don't deserve His blessings, He is willing to pour them out on us anyway.

THE WIDOW'S SON

Read Luke 7:11-17

It was soon after the healing of the centurion's servant that Jesus went with His disciples to the village of Nain. A large crowd followed Him. As Jesus and His disciples approached, they met a funeral procession coming out of the village. They discovered that a young boy had died, the only son of a widow. The widow was present accompanied by many mourners.

This would have been a very difficult situation for the widow. Having already lost her husband, this son was all she had left. Now that her son had died, she had no one to carry on the family name. The family line would end with her.

When Jesus saw the widow, His heart was moved with compassion for her. He approached and told her not to weep. Jesus then touched the coffin. When He touched it, those who were carrying it stopped. Jesus then cried out to the young man in the coffin telling him to get up. We can only imagine the response of the people to these words.

Obviously, the people had never seen anything like this before.

As they looked on, the dead boy sat up and began to talk to those around him. He would obviously have been confused about what was happening to Him. Jesus took the boy and brought him back to his mother. The people were amazed at what they saw and recognized that Jesus was a mighty prophet. There was no doubt in the minds of those present that they had seen the hand of God that day. The result was that Jesus' fame spread throughout the region of Judea.

Only Luke records this incident. There is no further reference to this widow or to the village of Nain in the rest of Scripture. We have no record of Jesus doing anything else in this village. A very powerful work was done that day in an obscure village. A widow that Jesus had never met before was touched by the power of God. I am thankful for passages like this. We meet here a simple, ordinary woman. Why should Jesus pass through that region? Why should He come at that particular time? Why should He be moved by compassion for a woman He had never met? This passage gives me hope. Jesus delights in touching simple, ordinary people. Even the small and insignificant village of Nain experienced the unexpected touch of Jesus. There is no person too small, no village too insignificant for the Lord to visit. He comes unexpectedly and touches. He comes to heal and bring new life to the smallest and most insignificant places and people.

This widow had lost all hope. She wept because she had nothing left in life. It was at this point that Jesus touched her and revealed His presence. He gave hope when there was no hope. He can do the same for you too. Whatever your situation, it is not beyond the power of God.

Nain would never be the same. They had experienced the power of God in a wonderful way. They were not asking for it nor were they seeking it but Jesus came anyway. In compassion and mercy He touched one simple widow and her son and in so doing impacted a whole village. If Jesus would touch this widow and her son in this insignificant village I have every reason to hope that He will also reach out to me and touch my life and ministry.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the compassion of Jesus?
- What encouragement do you receive from the fact that Jesus touched this poor widow and her son?
- What situation do you find yourself in today? What comfort do you take from this passage?
- How easy is it for us to forget the “small and insignificant” people of this world? What challenge does this passage bring to us in this regard?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that there is nothing beyond His power and control and that He is able to deal with even the most hopeless condition.
- Thank the Lord that He reaches out to the insignificant and small of this world and shows compassion to them.

A WORD ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST

Read Matthew 11:2-15; Luke 7:18-30

God's servants are not always free from doubt. There are times when their faith is put to the test. There are many things that can bring this about. Sometimes circumstances drain us physically and emotionally. Some of God's greatest servants have been brought through the valley of doubt and discouragement. Job, David, Elijah and some of the great prophets of the Old Testament all felt the sting of these arrows. Here in this next section we see that John the Baptist went through such a time as this.

In Mark 6:17-20 we read that John the Baptist had spoken out against Herod. Herod was living with his brother's wife. John spoke against this evil to Herod. The result was that Herod threw John in prison.

Luke tells us that John's disciples kept him informed of the activities of Jesus in the region. From his prison cell John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one who was to come or should they look for someone else. This is a very strange question from the lips of John the Baptist. He had introduced the Lord to the world. He clearly told people who came to him that Jesus was the Messiah. What brought this sudden doubt?

One thing we know for sure is that the circumstances of John's life had radically changed. He had been empowered by God for ministry. He saw crowds of people coming to hear him preach. People were challenged in their faith as they heard John's teaching. Scores of individuals were baptized as a sign of repentance and desire to make things right with God. His ministry was extremely powerful. In an instant, however, everything changed. Now he was in prison. His ministry was stripped from him. His life was in danger. Soon he would be killed by Herod. He had plenty of time to think about what was happening to him.

John was expecting great things from this Messiah. Here he was, however, in a prison cell. Where was the Messiah for him now? Was this how things were going to end for him? When was the kingdom of God going to come and destroy the kingdom of evil? There is a real struggle here. The Messiah was here but Herod had John locked in a prison cell. He preached that the Kingdom of God was at hand but he was not seeing the evidence of the kingdom in his own life at that time. It seemed that he was being overwhelmed by the kingdom of Satan. All these things would have given John cause to ask this question. Are you really the Messiah? If you are really the Messiah, why am I stuck here in this prison cell held by the kingdom of evil? Have you ever asked these hard questions?

The response of Jesus was very gentle. He told John's disciples to return to John and tell him what they were seeing and hearing. They were to tell John that the blind were receiving their sight, the lame were walking, the lepers were being healed, the deaf were hearing again and the dead were being raised to life. They were also to tell John that the good news was being preached among the poor. How many times have we been blinded to what is happening around us? All too often we have our own idea of what we want to see happening in our church or our personal lives. We focus so much on what we want to see that we fail to see what is already happening. God's ways are not our ways. Jesus called John to open his eyes to what was happening around him. The evidence of the kingdom of God was very powerful. People were being healed and released from the power of sin and its effects. God was breaking through the darkness and bringing his light. While things did not turn out as John expected, there could be no doubt that the Kingdom of God was in their midst.

John's disciples returned to their master with an important message for him. They were to tell him that the man who did not fall away on account of Jesus was blessed (Matthew 11:6; Luke 7:23). Notice here that the falling away was on account of Jesus. There were many people in that day who fell away because Jesus was not what they expected. They wanted a very different type of Messiah. They were unhappy with a Messiah who challenged their lifestyle. They did not know what to think about a Messiah whose purpose and plan did not agree with theirs. They did not care for a Lord who demanded that they lay down their lives for him. Jesus demanded that those who follow him take up their cross. Many people turned their backs on him because he didn't live up to their expectations. They wanted a God who would serve them. Jesus is challenging

John not to let his expectations stand in the way of accepting the truth.

In our day there are many who begin the Christian life but do not persevere in it because it is not what they expected. They are happy to serve a Jesus who ministers to them but don't like a Jesus who demands that they be willing to suffer and lay down their lives for him. Many are offended and fall away because they do not like his demands. They turn their backs on him because things are not going as they think they should.

Notice that Jesus does not condemn John. He reminded the crowd how they had gone into the desert to hear John preach. He asked them what they expected when they went to see John and hear him preach. Did they expect a reed swaying in the wind? The reed swaying in the wind could be an image of some of the teachers and false prophets of the day who were unstable in their ways. They seemed to sway from one thing to another. This could also be the image of a man whose mind was not completely stable. Some saw John as a fool. To them he was mentally imbalanced and out of place like a reed growing in the desert. John did not fit into the context of the religious society of his day. To many he was a strange and foolish individual. Perhaps Jesus was asking the people something like this, "Did you go out to the desert to see a crazy man?"

Others expected to see a man dressed in fancy clothes. Were they looking for a "suit and tie" type of guy who demanded respect because of what he wore and how he presented himself? This is what the Pharisees did. They dressed up in the finest robes and walked around demanding respect. John was not concerned about the outward appearance.

“Did you go out to the desert to see a prophet,” Jesus further asked the people. This is what John really was. John was a very special prophet with a unique task. He was the man that Scripture spoke about when it said that a messenger would go ahead to prepare the way for the Messiah. From ancient times, John's ministry was prophesied. His role was a very important one. Other prophets looked forward to the time when Jesus would come but John announced his arrival and introduced that Messiah to the world. The prophets of the Old Testament predicted that a prophet like Elijah would come to usher in the kingdom of God. John was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Jesus reminded those present that even though John had a wonderful ministry, the least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than he. This statement is very important. Those who belong to the kingdom of heaven have been born again by the Spirit of God and their sins are forgiven through the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. They are indwelt by the Spirit of God and empowered in ministry.

We have a very definite advantage over John the Baptist. We live on the other side of the cross. We have experienced a new birth and a new life that John had not yet experienced. Like all the saints of the Old Testament he looked forward to the day when sin would be conquered through the cross. There are pastors and religious leaders in our day who have the respect and admiration of the people they serve. They are involved in ministries and have many followers but they have never experienced the new birth that Jesus is speaking about here.

The kingdom of God does not always advance in a way we expect. John was confused because things were not the way he had expected. The Pharisees rejected Jesus and his claims because they did not fall in line with what they

expected. Many fell away on account of Jesus. This section of Scripture calls us to die to our own ideas. God's way is not always like our way. John was locked away in prison for preaching the truth. Jesus reminded him, however, the kingdom of God was still expanding in his midst. God's ways are not our ways. If we open our eyes we, too, will see that this kingdom is still expanding, despite the efforts of the enemy to destroy it. May God give us eyes to see what he is doing in our day.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself questioning the purpose of God? What were the circumstances?
- Take a moment to open your eyes and look at what the Lord is doing in your life and society. What evidence is there of his presence?
- What ideas do you have for your ministry and Christian walk? Is this what God wants from you?
- Are you willing to serve the Lord even when things don't turn out as you expect?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a heart that does not question his purpose but willingly and joyfully surrenders to it.
- Ask the Lord to give you eyes to see what he is doing in your midst?
- Ask him to continue to expand his kingdom in his way in your life and ministry. Surrender to his work in your life.

THE REJECTION OF JESUS

Read Matthew 11:16-24; Luke 7:31-35

In the last meditation we saw how John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the Messiah who was to come. Jesus told him to look at the signs which were all clear evidences of the kingdom of God in his midst. Jesus encouraged John to look at the fruit of his ministry to be assured that he was the Messiah. John was not the only one who questioned Jesus. Despite evidence of the kingdom of God, many people in the cities where Jesus preached still did not believe in him or accept his message. Jesus speaks in this next section about the people of his generation and their rejection of him and his message.

Jesus compared the people of his generation to children sitting in the marketplace. Notice what these children are saying in Matthew 11:17:

We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.

If you have had any experience with children you can identify with what Jesus is saying here. Sometimes children can be very difficult to please. The children Jesus speaks about here are very much like this. They did not like the joyous flute music nor did they like the sad music. In fact, they didn't like anything at that moment. This is what this generation was like. John came to them neither eating nor drinking and they complained saying he had a demon. Jesus came to them both eating and drinking and they said that he was a glutton and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Nothing could please these people.

The Kingdom of God was among them but they could not see it. "Wisdom is proved right by her actions," Jesus told them in Matthew 11:19. In other words, the miracles and the message of Jesus and John proved they were from God. No one could do what these men did if it were not for the presence and power of the Spirit of God in them. Like little children, however, these individuals were not ready to listen to logic. They grumbled and complained because they did not like this or that and failed to see the truth.

Jesus spoke openly about certain cities in the region. Matthew tells us that these cities were mentioned because Jesus did most of his miracles there. These cities saw the power of God but refused to repent. They heard the Word of God but refused to listen.

Jesus spoke of the cities of Korazin and Bethsaida. He told them that if the miracles they had seen had been done in the cities of Tyre and Sidon they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. The cities of Tyre and Sidon were very prosperous trading cities. In their wealth, they became very proud. The prophets of the Old Testament prophesied their downfall. Sackcloth was a very uncomfortable type of garment worn by mourners to inflict

punishment on their body as a sign of repentance. Ashes were used to cover the face as a sign of sin and need of repentance. The person covered in ashes publicly recognized his filth before God.

Notice that Jesus told his listeners that it would be more bearable for the cities of Tyre and Sidon in the Day of Judgment that it would be for Korazin and Bethsaida. Korazin and Bethsaida had seen the Messiah. He had walked with them. He spoke to them and healed their sick but they rejected him. They had been given an even greater opportunity than Tyre and Sidon but they had turned it down. They would suffer the consequences.

Jesus also condemned the city of Capernaum. He told them that they would be brought down to the depths. Jesus had taught and performed miracles in this city. Despite the evidence of the Kingdom of God they too rejected his message. Sodom was destroyed during the days of Abraham because of its evil. Jesus told the inhabitants of Capernaum that even evil Sodom would have repented if they had seen what the people of Capernaum had seen. Because they heard the Messiah and saw his work and still rejected him, their judgment would be even greater than that of Sodom which perished in an instant under the judgment of God.

We need to understand how blind we can be to the things of God. How often has God spoken and we have not heard. How often has he revealed himself but we have not seen him. Day by day God moves among us. He opens and closes doors. He brings people to us and makes things happen but we do not see or understand. How important it is for us to have our eyes opened to the evidence of God's presence. These towns were judged because

although they had heard the Lord, they rejected what they heard. May we not suffer the same judgment.

For Consideration:

- Do you think we have failed to see and hear what God has been saying to us today?
- What keeps us blinded to what God is doing in our lives today?
- What evidence is there in your community that God is speaking and revealing himself?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes and ears to what he has been saying.
- Ask God to give eyes and ears to your community so that they too can see what he is saying to them.
- Pray that the power of Satan would be broken in the lives and hearts of those who have been blinded.

COME UNTO ME

Read Matthew 11:25-30

In the last passage we found the Lord Jesus praying to his father. Notice that he praised his Father because he had hidden the things of his kingdom from the wise and educated people of his day and revealed them to little children. Jesus reminds us here that the mind can be a very big obstacle to our faith. The Lord has shown me that there are things about him and his ways that we will never understand. We try to reason everything out instead of accepting things by faith. We fail to walk in simple childlike faith because we have allowed reason to tell us that it is too much of a risk. The people in Jesus' day did not see the Kingdom of God because their minds were clouded. They limited God and explained away what they were seeing before them.

Jesus reminded his listeners that it was the intent of the Father from the beginning of time to reveal the matters of the Kingdom of God to simple people (see Matthew 11:26). God wants people who will trust him and his word. He wants people who will surrender to him and his purposes even when they do not understand. The intellectual person

is proud of how much they understand of God and his purposes. The person with childlike faith steps out in obedience and trust even when he does not understand.

Jesus reminded his listeners that the Father had given him authority in all things (see verse 27). Our salvation and the course and shape of this world rest on his shoulders. He has a plan for our lives. He will use the events and circumstances that come our way to accomplish his purposes. Nothing is outside his control. He has absolute authority, right and power over all that happens. What is even more important is that he also cares deeply for us. The apostle Paul had great confidence in this truth when he said in Romans 8:28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Having said this, Jesus asks all who wanted, to come to him. If you are weary and burdened with life and the sin that weighs you down, come to him. Notice that this call goes out to those who are aware of their need. You can't come to him if you don't understand your need. You can't come to him if you do not feel the weight of your sin. You can't come to him if you feel that you have everything under control. You need to be aware of your need to come to the Saviour.

Notice also that you don't need to do anything, you just need to come, with all your dirt and filth. You don't clean yourself up to come to him; you just come as you are with all your needs and brokenness. You don't have to understand how it all works, you just have to come. Come to him like a little child. He promises to give you rest from your burdens and concerns.

Jesus calls us to come just as we are and take his yoke. The yoke Jesus refers to here is yoke of submission. The ox that bore the yoke was surrendered to the will and purpose of his master. Jesus calls us to surrender all we have to him and place ourselves under his care and direction.

If we surrender to him, he promises to give us rest. We don't need to fear coming to the Lord Jesus because he is very humble and gentle. His concern is for us and our need. Those who come to him will find that the yoke of submission is easy and the burden they bear is light. Jesus is not telling us that we will never have a problem. Those who have surrendered to him however, carry their burdens with delight. While the disciples of Jesus would suffer much, they willingly did so out of love for him. They would not have had it any other way. They would rather suffer and die for their Saviour than return to the ways of the world. What they found in him was so much better than anything this world had to offer. It was not a yoke they were unwilling to bear.

There is a wonderful promise here for those who will surrender to the Lord Jesus like little children. If we open our hearts and surrender to him, we will find that he offers more than we could ever imagine. Don't let your intellect stand in the way. There is a reality in Christ that your mind will never understand. There is a rest that can only come from simple trust and confidence. The ways of the Lord can never be fully understood. They must be experienced. The ways of the Lord do not always make sense to our reasoning minds. God calls us to surrender to him and let him place his yoke on our necks. Will you trust him with this yoke? Will you willingly bear the burden he places on you? Those who surrender find his yoke and his burden a delight.

For Consideration:

- How often has your intellect stood in the way of doing what God calls you to do? Do you have an example of this?
- How can you know the leading and direction of the Lord? Does his leading always make sense at the time?
- Have you ever found yourself feeling frustrated in your attempt to understand what God was doing rather than simply trusting him? How does this affect our joy and peace in that situation?
- What does it mean to take on the yoke of Christ? Have you allowed him to put his yoke on you? What difference has this made in how you live your life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that he accepts you just as you are.
- Thank him that we can trust him fully in every situation in life. Thank him that while his leading may not always make sense, you know you can trust him. Ask him to forgive you for the times you complained about his leading.
- Ask God to give you a childlike faith that takes him at his word and joyfully steps out in obedience.
- Take a moment to tell the Lord that you willingly accept his yoke today. Ask him to help you to live in complete surrender to his will and purpose for your life.

A MEAL IN A PHARISEE'S HOUSE

Read Luke 7:36-50

On one occasion the Lord Jesus was invited for a meal at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. Jesus accepted this invitation and went to Simon's home. We are not told why Simon the Pharisee invited the Lord Jesus to his home. The Pharisees had always had a problem with Jesus and his teaching. To show hospitality toward Jesus, in this culture, was to honour him. This would not have been very well accepted by Simon's fellow Pharisees. The Pharisees accused Jesus of associating with sinners. They prided themselves in not associating with such people.

Luke tells his readers that a certain woman of questionable reputation learned that Jesus was at the home of Simon the Pharisee, and she decided to go to see him there. She brought with her a jar of perfume. The alabaster box was made of a stone found in Alabastron in Egypt, and was quite valuable.

The woman came to the Lord Jesus and stood behind him, at his feet. It should be noted that the custom of the day was to recline at the table. All the guests would have been in a reclined position. This would explain how this lady could have stood at Jesus feet while he was at the table.

As the people watched, the lady began to weep. She wet the Lord's feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. To the astonishment of those present she kissed the feet of the Lord and anointed them with the perfume she had brought. There are several things we need to mention here.

We notice first that this woman was weeping. There was obviously a reason for this. It appears that she was broken in her heart. She knew that she was not living a good life. She came to Jesus as a sinner in need of forgiveness. She had obviously heard Jesus and learned of his ministry. What she had seen and heard broke her. She knew that she needed to be made right. She saw what so many others did not see. She came repenting of her sins. She stood before him and wept because she knew she was an unworthy sinner.

Notice also that she wiped her tears off Jesus' feet with her hair. Her hair was her badge of honour. If she was a woman of questionable morals she would have spent a lot of time working with her hair to make it just right. She is not concerned about this now. By wiping his feet with her hair she was honouring him. She did not wipe his feet with a cloth but with something that was very dear to her. He was worthy of this.

The perfume she brought to the Lord that day would have been used for a very different purpose in her life. She may have used it to attract men in her immoral lifestyle. This

perfume may very likely have been the most expensive possession she had. She came to offer the very best she had to Jesus. When she poured her perfume on Jesus feet she may have been saying that she had no more need of it. She was now willing to leave her former lifestyle and she demonstrated this by pouring the contents over Jesus feet.

Simon the Pharisee was horrified when he saw what was happening. He felt that if Jesus was a prophet he should have recognized who this woman was who was touching him. As a Pharisee, he prided himself in the fact that he was separate from the sinners around him. He kept himself pure and clean. He would not associate with sinners. Jesus, on the other hand, allowed this woman to touch him.

Jesus noticed Simon's response and told him a parable of two men who owed money to a moneylender. The first man owed 500 denarii and the other 50 denarii. A denari was about one day's wages. Neither one of the men had the money to pay back his loan. The moneylender decided that he would cancel their debts. Jesus asked Simon which of these men would love the moneylender more. Simon thought for a moment and told Jesus that the person who had the bigger debt would probably love the moneylender more. Jesus told him he had given the correct answer.

Jesus then reminded Simon that when he came into his house he had not offered him the normal courtesy of water to wash his feet. This woman, on the other hand, had not stopped washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. This tells us something more about the woman. Jesus' feet were likely dirty from walking on the roads. The woman was willing to dirty her hair with the dust of Jesus' feet. Simon on the other hand refused Jesus this courtesy.

Jesus reminded Simon also that he had not greeted him with a kiss when he entered his house but this woman had not stopped kissing his feet. Simon had not anointed Jesus head with oil but this woman had anointed his feet with a most expensive perfume. In contrast to Simon this woman had done exceedingly more. She had showed more kindness and love to Jesus than Simon had.

Jesus reminded those present that while this woman's sins were many, they were all forgiven. She had been forgiven much and she loved Jesus much. The more we understand our sin the more we appreciate what the Lord has done for us in forgiving it. Jesus looked at the woman before him. He knew the depths of sin she had fallen into but he also saw her broken and repentant heart. He declared her sins forgiven.

The guests present that day did not know what to think of these events. They did not understand how Jesus could forgive sins. For all their religion and education they failed to see the simple truth that this uneducated and immoral lady saw so clearly. This lady saw Jesus to be her only hope. She saw him to be her salvation. By faith she came to him and accepted what he said. She was forgiven and received the salvation she sought. The Pharisees and the other guests went away confused.

There are times when our reasoning is not enough. God calls us to accept him by faith. Too many people miss what God is doing because they are too busy trying to figure him out. They cannot move until they understand what he is doing. They cannot respond unless it makes sense. They cannot accept until they can filter it through their intellect. This simple lady received the salvation of God when all the religious people of that day missed it. She took the Lord Jesus at his word.

For Consideration:

- What was it that caused the guests at that table to miss the salvation of the Lord that day?
- How often have you been hindered in doing the will of the Lord because you needed to understand everything first?
- What does this passage teach us about the place of faith in our walk with the Lord?
- What do we learn here about the difference between religion and a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus? What characters in this story had “religion?” What characters had a “personal relationship?” What do you have?
- Are there people in your society like this woman? Who are they? What has been the response of your church toward these people?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to have a simple faith like the woman in this passage.
- Thank the Lord that he is so willing to forgive us our sins no matter how big they are.
- Ask the Lord to help you to have a personal relationship with him.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times when your faith has been more religion than relationship. Ask him to give you a more personal and intimate relationship with him.
- Ask the Lord to open your heart to the people in your society who are like the woman in this story.

Take a moment to pray for those the Lord puts on your heart today.

DEMONIACS HEALED

Read Matthew 12:22-30; Mark 3:20-27; Luke 8:1-3

As we begin this next section of the gospels, Matthew tells his readers that some individuals brought a demon-possessed man to Jesus. This demon had caused the man to be both blind and mute. This shows us something of the work of evil spirits. While we should not assume that all sickness is the result of some demonic activity, we need to be aware that evil spirits can cause physical symptoms in the individual they oppress.

We are told nothing of the details here. All we know is that Jesus healed him. The result was that the demon was forced to leave and the man could see and speak again. The crowd was astonished at what they saw. This miracle so impressed them that they began to wonder if the Lord Jesus was the Son of David. The phrase "Son of David" was a reference to the Messiah who was to come as a descendant of David. Mark 3:20 tells us that the crowds gathered around the place where Jesus ministered that day. Jesus and his disciples were overwhelmed with people on all sides seeking to be healed and to hear Jesus speak.

While the crowd gathered around the Lord and his disciples, Mark 3:21 tells us that his family came to "take charge of him." The New Living Translation says that they came "to take him home." We are told that the reason they came to take him home was because they believed he was out of his mind. Even his own family did not understand or accept what Jesus was doing. The healings and the casting out of demons was not something they understood. They came to take him home because he was becoming an embarrassment to them and their family name. If your family does not understand your stand for the Lord Jesus, you are not alone. Jesus understands perfectly what it is like to be rejected by his own family.

As for the Pharisees, when they heard how the man had been delivered from his evil spirit, healed of his blindness and given the ability to speak, they too had their opinion. They told the people that it was by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons that Jesus was driving out these demons. Beelzebub is another name for Satan. They accused Jesus of deriving his power from Satan. In saying this, they are showing the greatest contempt possible for the Lord and his ministry.

Jesus knew what they were thinking and challenged them. There are times when Jesus remained silent at the accusations of his enemies. In this particular incident, Jesus stood up for the truth. He reminded his accusers that a kingdom divided against itself would be ruined. A family that was divided could not stand. If Satan was driving out demons how would his kingdom stand? What army could succeed if their soldiers were shooting their own men? How can a marriage be strong if the partners in that marriage keep hurting each other? How can a sports team win a championship if their own team members are competing

against them? What the Pharisees were saying was quite ridiculous.

The practice of delivering individuals from demons did not begin with Jesus. The Pharisees themselves recognized that demonic oppression was a reality. There were some among them who were involved in a similar type of ministry. Jesus showed them their own hypocrisy. On the one hand they were condemning Jesus for his practice of deliverance but they did the same thing.

Jesus reminded the leaders, on the other hand, that if he was driving out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God was in their midst. Notice that the kingdom of God was demonstrated by its power. The kingdom of God was not the earthly one the Pharisees had expected. This kingdom was a spiritual kingdom. It came not to conquer countries and land but hearts and wills. What the Jews saw before them that day was evidence of the kingdom of God conquering hearts and wills. God had conquered the demonic stronghold that had held this man bound for years. The enemy had been driven back and the kingdom of God extended.

Jesus went on to remind the Pharisees that it would not be possible for someone to enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless that strong man was bound. The strong man here is Satan. What effect could we have on Satan and the advancing of his kingdom as mere human beings? He is more powerful than we are. How can we invade Satan's territory and conquer his possessions? How can we win back what he has taken from us? The only way we can take back our territory and possessions is that Satan first be bound. How can he be bound unless there is something stronger than he who binds him? The kingdom of God is stronger than the

kingdom of Satan. There before their very eyes was evidence that Satan had been bound. The kingdom of God had come. The Spirit of God was moving in their midst. The enemy was helpless against the kingdom of God.

The enemy has been bound. The Lord has given us the task of reclaiming what the enemy has taken from us. What a privilege it is to reclaim this territory. The Lord Jesus calls us to join him in gathering the plunder. Victory is assured but there is yet much work to be done.

Luke recounts that Jesus and his twelve disciples moved from one town and village to another preaching the good news about the kingdom of God. This was demonstrated powerfully by the deliverance of many who were oppressed by evil spirits and diseases. Luke tells us that Mary Magdalene was one from whom the Lord cast out seven demons.

We conclude this section with a few comments about the women who traveled with Jesus and his disciples. As Jesus moved from place to place, he was accompanied by several women. Joanna, the wife of a man Cuza the manager of Herod's household, Susanna and many others provided out of their own pockets for the Lord and his disciples to continue their ministry. Luke recognized that their support was vital in the expansion of God's kingdom. These women had a vital role to play in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples in those early years of ministry.

We see in this passage how the kingdom of God was expanded as Jesus and his disciples powerfully conquered territory the enemy had taken from them. The kingdom was also expanded, however, as the women stood alongside of Jesus in financial and practical support. While not

in the forefront, the role these women played was a vital one.

For Consideration:

- How would you define the kingdom of God?
- What evidence is there of the kingdom of God in your midst? What evidence is there that this kingdom is triumphing over the kingdom of Satan?
- How are you involved in the plundering of the enemy and reclaiming territory lost to sin? What is your particular role?
- What encouragement do you receive from the teaching of the kingdom of God? How does this understanding affect how you minister?
- Notice the role of the women who supported the Lord Jesus. How important was that role? How can you practically support the work of the kingdom?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that he has come to give us victory over the enemy.
- Ask him to give you a clear sense of the role he has called you to play in the expansion of his kingdom.
- Ask him to help you to see how you can play a supporting role for those who are on the front lines.
- Ask God to empower you in an even greater way to be a mighty warrior for the sake of his kingdom.

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

Read Matthew 12:31-37; Mark 3:28-30

We saw in the last meditation how the Lord Jesus had set a blind and mute man free from the evil spirit that had been oppressing him. While the crowd was amazed, the Pharisees attributed Jesus' work to Satan. They said that he delivered this man from his evil spirit through the power of Satan and his kingdom. It was in response to what these leaders said that Jesus shares the teaching of this next section. He reminded those listening to him that every sin and blasphemy would be forgiven except for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This teaching needs to be considered in some detail here.

To blaspheme is to speak evil or irreverently of sacred things. Notice here that Jesus told his listeners that it was possible for them to speak evil and sin against the Son of Man. This term, "Son of Man" is a reference to the Lord Jesus. You may sin against and blaspheme the name of the Lord Jesus and still be forgiven. The apostle Paul is a clear example of this. For a period of time in his life the apostle openly spoke out against the Lord Jesus. He persecuted the church and all who followed Jesus. He

dragged believers in Jesus Christ out of their homes and tried to get them to blaspheme his name. We see this in Acts 26:11 when Paul himself said:

Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

The amazing thing about the story of the apostle Paul is that one day he met the Lord personally on the road to Damascus. The Spirit of God spoke to Paul's heart that day and he was transformed and forgiven of all his sin and blasphemy. Many men and women throughout history have blasphemed and persecuted the church but were forgiven and restored to a right relationship with God. Jesus tells us that we can sin against him and blaspheme his name and still be forgiven.

Those who sin against and blaspheme the Holy Spirit, however, will not be forgiven neither in this life nor in the life to come. Mark 3:29 tells us that the one who blasphemes the Holy Spirit is guilty of an "eternal sin." An eternal sin is a sin that a person will have to pay for the rest of eternity. There is no forgiveness for an eternal sin.

What is this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and why can it never be forgiven? It is important for us to note that Jesus brings up this point after the Pharisees said that he had an evil spirit. They accused him of doing his miracles in the power of Satan (see Mark 3:30). We have already seen that a man or woman may blaspheme the Lord Jesus and still be forgiven. When the Spirit of God illumines their mind, however, they see things in a new way. It is possible to live a life of sin and blasphemy against Jesus and be forgiven because the Holy Spirit has not yet

revealed him to us. What happens, however, if we reject the ministry of the Holy Spirit who reveals Christ to us?

The Holy Spirit is our only connection to the Lord Jesus and his salvation. To reject the Holy Spirit and the light he gives is to reject the only hope we have of ever coming to faith in Christ. We cannot come to Christ apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot see, hear or understand his Word apart from the ministry of his Holy Spirit. We are blind and dead in our sins apart from the ministry of God's Spirit. He gives us ears to hear and eyes to see the things of God.

It is important to distinguish between blaspheming and grieving the Holy Spirit. All of us have been guilty of grieving the Holy Spirit in our lives. We sin against the leading of the Spirit of God often in life. Jesus is not speaking about grieving or disobeying the prompting of the Spirit of God here. He is speaking here to individuals who not only resist the ministry of the Holy Spirit but who also hate and reject his ministry.

The Pharisees saw evidence of the kingdom of God in their midst as the Spirit worked powerfully in setting people free from their demons and afflictions. Despite this, the Pharisees looked at the man who had been delivered from his evil spirit and told him and all present that what they had seen that day was the work of Satan. They closed their hearts and minds to the work of the Holy Spirit. By doing this they also closed their hearts and minds to the work to the only one who was able to convince them of the truth and bring them salvation. To reject the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to resist the only one who can bring us to Christ. Apart from Christ there is no hope of salvation and forgiveness.

Jesus compared the Pharisees to a tree that produced bad fruit. He told them that it was quite easy to determine the health of a tree by the type of fruit it produced. If a tree was healthy it would produce good fruit. If, on the other hand, the tree was unhealthy it would produce very poor fruit. What kind of fruit were these Pharisees producing? They had seen a man delivered from an evil spirit that had held him in bondage for a long time. This man could not talk or see. In an instant the Lord Jesus delivered him and set him free from bondage. The Pharisees rejected this miracle, and plainly told the man that Satan had healed him. They did not want to accept the work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus. They had no compassion for the man. There was no joy for his healing. There was no recognition of the power of God. The only fruit from their lives at this moment was condemnation, jealousy, anger and rebellion. This was a clear indication of the state of their hearts.

Jesus compared the Pharisees to a brood of vipers. They were poisonous snakes slithering around the ground biting those who passed by and infecting them with the poison of their evil hearts. What they had stored up in their hearts was now coming out in their words and attitude. Jesus reminded them that they would give an account of every careless word they had spoken.

These Pharisees blasphemed because they hated and resisted the work of the Holy Spirit. They had every opportunity but chose to resist the work of God's Spirit in their midst. They had no excuse. They heard and saw the power of the kingdom of God with their eyes but instead of surrendering to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, they rebelliously chose to fight him.

The Holy Spirit is moving in our midst. He continues to move across this world touching people and changing

lives. He is setting people free from their bondage and the oppression of the enemy. How often, however, have we like the Pharisees resisted this powerful work of God the Spirit? Jesus elevates the ministry of the Holy Spirit in this passage and reminds us that the Holy Spirit is our only connection to him. How little we truly understand the work of the Spirit of God. We need to hear him and depend on him in a new and fresh way. His ministry is essential. Without his ministry we cannot have life. To blaspheme him and close our hearts and minds to him and his work, especially when it comes to salvation, is to perish eternally.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit?
- What does this passage teach us about the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives and ministry?
- Have you ever found yourself resisting or complaining about what the Holy Spirit was doing in your life and ministry?
- Have you ever found yourself condemning what the Spirit of God was doing in another person's ministry?
- What is the difference between blaspheming the Holy Spirit which will never be forgiven and grieving the Holy Spirit which can be forgiven?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to open your heart and mind to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life and ministry.

- Ask God to forgive you for the times you condemned or resisted what the Spirit of God was doing because you did not understand.
- Thank the Lord for the ministry of the Holy Spirit that gave you life in Christ

SEEKING A SIGN

Read Matthew 12:38-45; Luke 11:24-26

The Pharisees had accused Jesus of healing a man by the power of Satan. They rejected his miracles. In light of this background, it is quite interesting that the Pharisees would now come to Jesus and ask him for a sign. Many of the people who came to Jesus had specific needs. Some brought those who were sick and in need of healing. Others came with burdens on their hearts. There is no record here of the Pharisees coming with any particular need. They simply come to demand a miracle to prove he was from God.

It could be that these particular Pharisees were not in agreement with what the others had declared about Jesus ministering in the power of Satan. It may be that they wanted more evidence of his ability in order to decide for themselves whether he was from God.

Jesus refused, however, to give them any more signs. “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign!” Jesus told them (Matthew 12:39). As Jesus looked

at the people of his generation and particularly these Pharisees, he saw their hearts. He saw that they were wicked and adulterous. He knew that they had no intention of living for him or following his purposes. He knew that while they came and listened to him, their hearts were far from him. They wanted to see his miracles and experience his blessings but they had no intention of living for him.

Jesus is not telling us that we should never seek a sign from him. There are times when we need a sign. There have been times in my life when I have not been sure of the direction the Lord wanted me to take. I have had to ask him to confirm to me if a certain direction was truly from him. The Lord has often used signs of various kinds to confirm my path or to redirect me to another path. We need to understand that the Lord is speaking to a “wicked and adulterous” generation in this context. These people refused to believe him. They were interested in having Jesus entertain them with signs and miracles but they would not commit themselves to him. Their hearts were wicked. There is a world of difference between what these people were asking from Jesus that day and what the sincere believer seeking confirmation of the purpose and will of God is asking for.

The only sign that would be given to that generation, according to Jesus, was the sign of the prophet Jonah. Jesus told them that even as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish so he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The heart of the earth refers to the grave. Jesus told his listeners that his death and resurrection would be the only sign they would be given. The Lord Jesus would conquer death itself. This sign would prove to them that the Father had accepted him and his work. It would prove that he was Lord of lords and King of kings, the conqueror of sin, death and Satan.

Jesus reminded those who listened to him that day that the men and women of Nineveh who were not even Jewish in nationality would stand up in judgment against the generation of Jesus day. When Jonah went to this pagan people they repented of their sin and rebellion and surrendered to the will of God. Jesus was greater than Jonah and yet that generation of Jews refused him. They would answer for their rejection of the Son of God who lived, worked and ministered among them.

We cannot judge the validity of a ministry on how many followers that ministry has. The people of Jonah's day accepted his message and repented. Jonah's attitude left much to be desired. He did not love the people of Nineveh. He had rebelled against the Lord and fought against his will. Despite this, he saw a whole nation repent of their sin. The Lord Jesus, on the other hand, as the perfect Son of God, was rejected. You can have a large following and not be right with God.

Jesus went on to tell the Pharisees that the Queen of the South would also stand up to judge their generation. The Queen of the South is a reference to the Queen of Sheba who came to see Solomon because she had heard of his wealth and wisdom (see 1 Kings 10). When she met Solomon she was amazed at what she saw. She recognized that the hand of God was on Solomon and his reign. The Jews of that day, unlike the pagan Queen of Sheba, did not recognize the hand of God on Jesus' life. They kept asking for signs but failed to see the signs that were before them. The evidence before them in the ministry of the Lord Jesus was sufficient. They didn't need any more. They would be judged because they rejected the clear evidence they already had.

Jesus told his listeners a story about an evil spirit that was cast out of a man. This evil spirit went around seeking rest. When it could not find another home it decided to return to the person it had been oppressing. Because this evil spirit had been defeated and cast out of that person it decided to gather reinforcements. It found seven other spirits to come with it and together they returned stronger than ever to the person who had been oppressed. The result was that the person who was delivered of the evil spirit ended up in a worse state than he was before.

What does this teaching about the spirit world have to do with the Pharisees asking for a sign? Jesus told his generation that though they had been delivered from evil spirits under his ministry and had experienced his incredible power over sin and sickness, because they did not listen or repent of their sins, their final condition would be worse than the first. By their rejection of the Lord Jesus they opened the door for even more evil to enter their land. By turning their backs on the evidence they had, they opened the door for Satan to come with even more reinforcements to conquer their hearts. This would be evident in what would happen shortly. Very soon the people who stood there seeking a sign would cry out for Jesus to be crucified. They would become instruments in the hand of the enemy to kill the Son of God who had healed their sick and cast out their demons.

For Consideration:

- When is it acceptable for us to ask for a sign from God?

- Why does Jesus condemn the people of his generation? Why is it harder for “religious” people to accept the claims of Christ than “sinners?”
- What does Jesus teach us here about the nature of the battle before us? What role do evil spirits play in the spiritual battle around us?
- What evidence is there in your life that Jesus is everything he claims to be?
- Does God lead us by giving us signs today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the evidence of his work around you.
- Thank the Lord that he is stronger than the enemy. Thank him that he has given you victory over Satan and his evil spirits.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to overcome the attacks of the enemy. Ask him to enable you to put on the whole armour of God.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the many times you have doubted the clear evidence of his love and guidance in your life.
- Ask God to help you to be more open to his leading and direction in your life.

CHRIST'S TRUE FAMILY

Read Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21

People had been gathering around the Lord Jesus and his disciples. They came with real needs. They tightly surrounded Jesus and his disciples. Mark 3:20 tells us that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. During that time a possessed man was delivered of his demon. The reaction of the crowd was varied. Some were amazed. The Pharisees rejected the miracle and said that it was done in the power of Satan. In light of all that was happening, Mark tells us that the family of Jesus came to get him. We read in Mark 3:21:

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Very likely because of the crowd, Jesus' family sent word to him through someone that they wanted to speak to him. Mark 3:21 tells us that they did so to get him away from the crowd. While Mary, his mother, was obviously concerned for Jesus, his brother simply did not believe and

may have been somewhat embarrassed by him and his ministry.

When Jesus heard that his family was waiting to speak to him, he addressed the crowd and said, "Who is my mother and my brothers" (Matthew 12:48)? This statement may have come as a surprise to the crowd. Answering his own question, Jesus pointed to his disciples and told the crowd that these men were his family. They were his family because they believed in him. They were his family because they accepted him and his ministry. He had more in common with these men than his own biological family. Jesus went on to tell his listeners that anyone who did the will of his Father in heaven was his brother, sister and mother (Luke 8:21).

There are several things that we need to see from this. Notice that Jesus is telling us that we belong to a family. Because we are part of a family we experience the support and intimacy that is part of a family. We are not alone in this Christian walk. We are dependent on each other in this family. We all need the support, encouragement and strength that this family provides.

Notice second that not everyone belongs to the family of God. It is only those who do the will of the Father who are part of this family. What is the will of the Father? The will of the Father is that we accept his Son and the work he has done for us. You cannot do the will of the Father if you reject the Son he has sent. Only those who accept the Son and his work are part of this family. Jesus' own brothers were not yet part of that spiritual family.

Notice also that Jesus called himself our brother. Jesus is our Lord and King. Here, however, he identifies himself as our brother. The term brother is significant. This term

shows us that he identifies with us. He understands what we are going through. He suffers with us. He feels our agony. He reaches out to us and cares for us. He is our protector and the one in whom we can confide. As Lord, he does not hesitate to bring himself down to our level. He shares our humanity and suffering. He understands us as only a brother can. How wonderful it is to have a God who is also an understanding brother.

For Consideration:

- There is a teaching that says that all people are children of God. What does this passage teach us about those who belong to the family of God?
- What encouragement do you take from the fact that the Lord Jesus is our brother?
- Do you have members of your family who do not accept you because of your stand for the Lord? What encouragement do you find from the fact that the Lord Jesus can identify with you in this?
- What are some blessings of being part of the family of God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that he can identify with you as a brother.
- Thank the Lord for the special blessings you have in being part of a great family.
- Do you know people who are not part of the family of God? Ask the Lord to open their heart to the Lord Jesus and his work.

- What role do you have in the spiritual family of God? Have you been faithful in that role?

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM: THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Read Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-25; Luke 8:4-18

Speaking to the Pharisees about the deliverance of the man who was possessed of a demon, Jesus told them that his deliverance was evidence of the kingdom of God in their midst. The kingdom Jesus spoke about was not a physical kingdom. It was a spiritual kingdom that was conquering the hearts of men and women and restoring them to a right relationship with God.

Instruction about the kingdom of God was central in Jesus' teaching. In this next section we will examine some of the teachings of Jesus on the kingdom of God. This comes in the form of parables. A parable is an earthly story with a spiritual meaning. Over the course of the next few meditations we will examine the parables of Jesus regarding the kingdom of God.

On this particular occasion, the Lord Jesus was sitting by a lake. We are not told why he was by that lake. I like to see him taking a moment of quiet with his Father but we cannot be sure. It was not long, however, before his presence was discovered. The crowd began to gather around him. Luke 8:4 tells us that they were coming to him "from town after town." To get a certain distance from them, the Lord got into a boat and pushed out into the water while the crowd stood at the shore, listening to him speak.

Jesus told them many things that day. In particular, however, he told them a parable about a farmer who went out to sow his seed.

As the farmer scattered his seed on the ground some fell along the path and the birds came and ate them up. Some seed fell on rocky places where there was soil and while they sprang up quickly, the roots did not go down deeply. When the sun came up, the frail plants were scorched and withered. Other seed fell among thorns and was choked by those weeds as it grew up. Some of the seed, however, fell on good ground and produced a crop of a hundred, sixty or thirty times what had been sown.

The story Jesus told was extremely simple. Those present could identify with what he was telling them. What was not so obvious to those present was the spiritual truth that the Lord was trying to communicate through this story. Notice that when Jesus finished with this parable he told them that those who had ears to hear were to listen to what he was teaching them. Not everyone would be able to understand what Jesus was saying here. They understood what he was saying on the earthly level but the spiritual meaning was completely hidden from them.

Notice that not even the disciples understood what Jesus was saying. They knew that there was a hidden meaning to the parable but they could not find that meaning. Mark 4:10 tells us that it was only when Jesus was alone with the twelve disciples that he explained the meaning of this parable. Jesus does not appear to explain what this parable meant to the crowd. He left them to understand it by themselves. This perplexed the disciples. Why would Jesus teach the crowd in this way? Why would he speak to them in parables and stories they did not understand? They asked him about this.

To answer their question Jesus told his disciples that the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven had been given to them to understand. The crowd, however, had not been given this understanding. Jesus' disciples were beginning to understand the concept of the kingdom of heaven. They saw evidence of this kingdom breaking through the darkness of their evil world. They saw its power crushing the power of Satan in individual lives and hearts. The crowd did not understand this. All they saw was the sick being healed and the hungry being fed. They did not see these miracles as a conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The people were looking for a political kingdom where they would live in peace and security. They could not see beyond this. This is why the Lord spoke to them in earthly stories and parables.

Jesus went on to tell his disciples in Matthew 13:12 that whoever had would be given more but whoever did not have, would lose even what they had. In other words, those who had been given minds to understand spiritual matters would be stretched even more in their understanding. Those who had not been given such minds or who

refused to accept what Jesus was teaching, would perish. This statement tells us two important things.

First, there is no hope for those who turn their back on the central teaching of Christ about the kingdom of God. Jesus came to establish his kingdom on this earth. The whole earth had been given over to sin and Satan. Satan ruled over the hearts and minds of every person who was ever born on this earth. Jesus came to break the power of that kingdom. He came to set his people free from the dominion of Satan and his power. To reject the Lord Jesus is to remain under the kingdom of Satan. It is to perish forever.

Notice second, however, that those who have been given eyes to see the kingdom of God and accept it will be given more and more. This shows us that the kingdom of God is ever expanding in the hearts and lives of those who submit to Christ as the Lord of this kingdom in their heart. Even after many years of knowing the Lord Jesus as my Lord and Saviour, I still have a long way to go. The Spirit of God continues to shape and mould me. He is forming me more and more into the image of Christ. He is showing me more and more what it means to surrender to Christ and his Lordship in my life. I continue to grow in my understanding of the rule of Christ in my life. I expect that God will continue that work throughout this life and the life to come.

Jesus reminded his disciples of what Isaiah said about the people of his day. They were a people who saw many things but they did not see the truth. They heard many things but did not grasp the meaning of what they heard. God revealed himself in very powerful ways in the Old Testament but his people still failed to honour him as their God. This was because their hearts were hard and calloused. They resisted the truth. Had they accepted what they heard and saw, they could have been saved.

Unlike the people of Isaiah's day, the disciples had been given eyes to see and ears to hear what Jesus was teaching. They were willing to learn. They were open to what Jesus had to say. This was not the case for the crowd that had gathered that day. Jesus knew the attitude of the people's hearts. He knew they were not ready to hear what he was teaching. He taught what the people could understand but did not waste time and effort telling them truths they would not accept nor did they want to hear.

Jesus then proceeded to explain to his disciples what the parable of the sower meant. He told them that when someone hears the message of the kingdom of heaven and does not understand it, the enemy comes and snatches it away from their hearts, lest it take root and grow. Satan hates the message of the kingdom of God. This message is the message of the Lord Jesus who came to conquer sin and evil. Satan wants that message to be hidden. He will do everything to keep the seed of the kingdom from taking root in the hearts of men and women. The seed sown on the path is the message of the kingdom of God stolen away from the hearts of men and women by Satan and his angels. The soil on the pathway is hard from many people trampling on it. Jesus compares the hearts of this first group to the hardened soil on the pathway. The seed does not penetrate, nor will it take root.

The seed sown among the rocks is like people who hear the Word of God and rejoice in what they hear. They are excited to hear about the kingdom of God. They like the miracles and signs. They like the demonstrations of power and the blessings but when persecution and trials come, they shrink back. When they realize that this kingdom demands sacrifice and suffering, they fall away. Like many people in our day, they want the blessings but are not ready to lay everything on the altar.

The seed that fell among thorns is like the one who hears the Word of God and the message of the Kingdom but becomes entangled in the cares and concerns of this world. The result is that they grow for a time but are quickly attracted to the things of this world. The enemy distracts them and they become entangled in worldly pleasures and possessions. The result is that they are not able to produce spiritual fruit. They are unproductive. They are of no use to the kingdom.

The final seed fell in good soil. This seed is like those who heard the Word of God and accepted it. These individuals willingly offer themselves to the Lord to serve and honour him. They are willing to lay down their lives for this kingdom. They are sincere believers who produce much fruit for the kingdom.

In the accounts of Mark and Luke, Jesus reminded that the true believer is to allow his light to shine for all to see. He challenged his disciples to act on what they had heard him teach about the Kingdom of God. He reminded them that the measure they used would be given back to them. If they did nothing they would receive nothing in return. If, on the other hand, they gave themselves wholeheartedly to that kingdom they would receive the wholehearted blessing and enabling of God. As they stepped out in service of the kingdom, they would receive an enabling in proportion to their faith. God would give them all that was necessary to accomplish the task.

Jesus teaches us here that the Kingdom of God is in our midst conquering the kingdom of Satan and evil. The seeds of the kingdom are being sown. The enemy fears the message of this kingdom and does his best to keep its reality hidden. He steals the message from some hearts. He chokes out the message in other hearts. Despite his

efforts, however, the message of the kingdom is being planted in hearts that are ready to receive it. That message produces fruit in the lives of God's true children. They receive the message, surrender to it, and lay down their lives in service of his kingdom. God promises to provide for all who surrender to his reign and Lordship. He enables them for the battle and uses them to accomplish his great and awesome purposes.

The kingdom of God continues to expand in our day. Day after day, men and women, boys and girls are accepting the Lord Jesus and surrendering to his reign in their lives. The seed of the kingdom continues to be planted in good soil. That seed is growing and producing fruit. Satan does his best to defeat this kingdom but despite his greatest efforts it continues to grow. May it grow day by day in your life and mine.

For Consideration:

- Have you met individuals like the ones Jesus speaks about here in this parable? What type of seed characterizes your life?
- How important is the teaching of the Kingdom of God according to Jesus? What evidence is there of the presence of the kingdom of God in your life, church and society?
- How would you define the Kingdom of God?
- The kingdom of God is at war. How should this influence how we live our lives?
- What kind of measure are you bringing to the Lord in your ministry and personal life? Are you willing to step out in greater faith and service?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to be a faithful warrior in the battle before you.
- Thank the Lord that he promises to give us all we need to accomplish the work of the kingdom. Take a moment to consider what the Lord would have you to do for the sake of the kingdom. Ask God to provide you all you need to accomplish the role he has for you.
- Ask the Lord to open the eyes of those around you to the reality of the Kingdom of God.
- Take a moment to pray for your friends and loved ones who do not know the Lord or understand their need to open their hearts to the kingdom of God.

**PARABLES OF THE
KINGDOM:
THE PARABLE OF THE SEED
GROWING BY ITSELF**

Read Mark 4:26-29

The parable of the seed growing by itself is found only in the book of Mark. Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of God. Again in this second parable Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a seed. He illustrated this by a story of a man who went out to plant his seed. We understand from the last parable that the seed refers to the Word of God. It is important that we notice here that the task of scattering the seed has been given to us. Jesus speaks here about a man (or woman) who went out to scatter that seed. As servants of God we are called to be sowers of the seed of the Word. The sowing of the seed takes place in many different ways. For me personally it takes place through writing. Others will spread that Word through casual conversations with those around them. Still others will

demonstrate it by the way they live their lives. We will not all sow in the same way but we have all been called to sow the seed of God's Word in the hearts and lives of those around us.

There is something very powerful about the seed. When seed is sown in good soil it will grow. Jesus reminded his listeners that when the seed is sown, it will grow on its own. He can be sound asleep in his bed but the seed he planted will continue to germinate and grow in the ground. There is an important lesson for us here.

The seed of God's Word grows without our help. The task of the sower is to sow the seed. He does not have the power to make a seed grow. God has put life in the seed. The writer to the Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 4:12 that the Word of God is a living Word:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Like a seed, the Word of God has power to set down its roots and grow in the lives of those who receive it. This is the work of the Holy Spirit who gives life to that Word. It is a powerful word with the ability to transform lives.

While we understand the power of the seed in the world of farming we often fail to understand it in the spiritual world. We have more faith in the seed we plant in the ground than the seed we plant in the hearts and lives of men and women. We understand our helplessness to cause the seed in the ground to grow but we feel we need to do something more to make the seed of the Word grow in the hearts and lives of people. Jesus tells us that the seed has

power to grow by itself. You can't give life to the seed. It already has life. We feel we need to convince and persuade men and women. Jesus tells us to simply plant the seed. If you and I will plant the Word, God will do the rest. God will breathe life into that seed and cause its roots to go into the soil of the heart.

Notice what Jesus tells his listeners in Mark 4:28.

All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk,
then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

Notice how Jesus told his listeners that the seed produces fruit "all by itself." The sower plants the seed and then goes home to bed. His work is done. The rest belongs to the Lord. Isaiah the prophet puts it this way in Isaiah 55:11:

So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will
not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I
desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

The important thing for us to notice here is that the seed needs to be sown to produce life. The seed can sit on the shelf for years and never produce life. If you want it to produce fruit you will need to plant it in the ground. It is our task to sow the seed. It is the work of God to make it grow. The Word that we sow is powerful. When it comes into contact with a receptive heart it will set its roots down deeply. All by itself it will sprout and produce wonderful fruit in the life of the one who receives it.

There are several very important lessons we need to learn from this parable. We need to understand first the power of the Word of God. We can sow with great confidence realizing that as we do so, that seed will produce fruit.

What an encouragement this is to me as I write this commentary. The Word I am sowing will go out across the world. By God's grace it will be sown in receptive hearts. The result is that fruit will be produced in the hearts and lives of God's people and the kingdom will expand. I may never see that fruit, but I can be confident that when I sow the seed it will produce the fruit God intends. Be faithful in your preaching. Be faithful in your evangelism and encouraging. Spread the Word. Sow it in the hearts and lives of those you meet and let it grow.

The second thing we need to understand here is how helpless we are to cause that seed to grow. The seed grows all by itself. We are called to sow and trust God to do the rest. This places all of us on the same level. God is not looking for powerful people. The power is in his Word. He is simply looking for faithful people who will live that word and share it with those they meet.

The seed of the Word is very powerful. It is our greatest weapon against the enemy. He does not like God's Word because it reveals the truth and changes lives. The truth of the Word sets people free from Satan's lies and deceit. Let's be encouraged in our efforts. Let's keep sowing and spreading the Word. Let's remember the power of that seed to grow and produce life all by itself. One of the greatest tools of the Kingdom of God is the Word he has given us. It is active and living and will set people free from the strongholds of Satan.

For Consideration:

- What does this passage teach us about the power of the Word of God?
- Have you ever found yourself trying to make the seed of the Word grow in someone's life?
- How have you been sowing the Word of God? What gifts has God given you and how are you presently using them to spread the good news of the Word of God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the wonderful power of his Word.
- Ask God to enable you to be a better "sower of seed." Ask him to show you how and where he wants you to sow.
- Ask God to forgive you for your lack of confidence and faith in the power of his Word to transform lives.

51

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM: THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS

Read Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus was teaching about the Kingdom of God. In this parable he again compared the Kingdom of God to seed sown in the ground. He told a story of a man who sowed good seed in the ground. While he was sleeping, the enemy came and sowed weeds among the good seed. When the good seed grew up so did the weeds. His garden was filled with good plants and weeds growing together.

Notice that while the enemy was successful in sowing weeds among the good plants, the two were quite different. Anyone who has experience in weeding a garden knows that it is not always easy to identify a good plant from a weed as they are just coming up out of the ground. The difference, however, becomes more obvious in time.

We need to understand that the enemy will not hesitate to sow bad seed. These bad seeds infiltrate our churches. They set bad examples and hinder the witness of the church. They discourage true servants of God and lead them astray from the path God has set for them. By sowing weeds among the good seed, the enemy is seeking to hinder the work of the kingdom of God.

One thing is sure in this passage, there is a battle raging in this world. The Kingdom of God is advancing and the kingdom of darkness is not happy. As in any war, we should not be astonished that we are the targets of enemy attack. Things will not be easy for the believer. The enemy wants to sow confusion and chaos in the Kingdom of God. We will see true servants of God attacked with discouragement and temptations of all kinds. It would be wonderful to say that we belong to the Lord Jesus and the enemy cannot touch us but this would be to deny the reality of the spiritual battle around us. The focus of Satan's attacks is the Kingdom of God. Satan does not want this Kingdom to spread and will do his utmost to destroy it. We will be the target of his arrows. He will seek to deceive us. He will sow his weeds into our minds. You will see them popping up in unexpected places. These weeds of anger and resentment will rise in your church meetings or in your worship services. He will bring people to your church who do not love the Lord but who show all the signs of being believers. He will use even sincere believers to bring division and chaos to the body. We need tremendous discernment in this battle.

Jesus is telling us here that things will not always be neat and clean for us. As the Kingdom of God spreads on this earth, the enemy will be very active opposing its advance. Things will be messy. That is the nature of the battle. Believers will have to be discerning and cautious. The enemy

is cunning and deceitful. He will infiltrate our ranks, seeking to deceive and oppose the work God is doing. At this time in history, the Kingdom of God advances through trials and tribulations. The day is coming when our enemy will be destroyed but for the moment we should expect a battle.

In the parable Jesus taught that day the servant asked the master if he wanted him to pull out the weeds. The master told him that he was to let the weeds grow with the wheat because in pulling out the weeds he might also uproot the wheat. The master told his servant that the day would come when his harvesters would go through the field and collect the weeds. These weeds would be bundled up and burned. The wheat, however, would be gathered and brought into his barn.

There are several details we need to understand in this verse. Notice first the gentleness and concern of the master. The master refused to allow his servant to pull out the weeds lest any good plants should be rooted out as well. Anyone who has weeded a garden knows how easy it is to pull out the good plants with the weeds. Sometimes the roots of the weeds are so entangled into the roots of the good plants that it is almost impossible to pull out the weed without also pulling out the good plant with it. What is important for us to understand here is that the master is concerned for every one of his good plants. He does not want even one of them to be lost.

Notice second that the good plants grew in the midst of weeds. The Kingdom of God is expanding in the midst of the kingdom of sin and evil. All around us is the darkness of evil. We shine in that darkness. God does not remove us from this world but leaves us to be a light to it. Satan is doing his best to choke out the fruit of the Kingdom of God

but we continue to produce fruit. As believers we need to learn how to live godly lives in the midst of darkness and evil.

Notice also that this is not a time for judging. That time would come. Right now it is time for expanding the Kingdom of God. There are believers who spend their time judging and criticizing others. They cannot accept the way others see or do things. God uses all kinds of people and ministries for the expansion of his Kingdom. How often in our eagerness to get rid of the weeds have we written off or hindered vital ministries. Instead of advancing the Kingdom some people spend their time fighting and judging each other. This parable reminds us that things will not be perfect in the battle before us. Different types of plants are growing in the soil. The time for judgment will come but for now, we are to advance his kingdom.

The apostle Paul had to deal with this very issue when he was put in prison. He recognized that because of his imprisonment many people were stirred to preach the gospel. Not all of them preached good news of the Kingdom as they should have. Despite this, however, Paul rejoiced that God's Word was advancing. Listen to what he said in Philippians 1:14-18:

Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way,

whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.

Paul chose not to judge the motives and intention of those who were preaching the gospel around him. He left that judgment to the Lord. Jesus is not telling us here that we should not deal with sin in our midst. What he is telling us, however, is that things will not always be clear for us. People will be different from us. We will have to serve for now in the midst of certain confusion. The enemy will surround us. Brothers and sisters around us will not always see things our way. The expansion of the Kingdom of God will, at times, be messy. We cannot afford right now, however, to spend our time judging each other's motives and methods. What is important is that the Kingdom of God expands in our hearts and in the hearts of those around us.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn in this passage about the spiritual battle that rages around us?
- What kinds of weeds has the enemy sown in our midst?
- Have you ever found yourself judging others who are doing battle along side of you? Who in particular have you been judging?
- What is the difference between weeds and good seed? Do all good seeds look the same? Explain.
- What is your role in the expansion of the Kingdom of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a greater tolerance for those who do things differently from you.
- Ask the Lord to keep you faithful in the midst of the battle raging around you.
- Ask the Lord to show you what your role is in the expansion of his Kingdom.
- Take a moment to pray that the Lord would bless the ministry of a brother or sister who is different from you.
- Ask the Lord to give you courage to face the difficulties that come as the Kingdom of God advances in this world.

**PARABLES OF THE
KINGDOM:
THE PARABLE OF THE
MUSTARD SEED**

Read Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19

In this next parable, Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. As far as seeds are concerned, the mustard seed is a small seed. The mustard seed is used in Scripture to speak of something that appears to all outward appearance to be insignificant. Later in his ministry Jesus would compare faith to a mustard seed. In Matthew 17:20 he said:

I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

While the mustard seed may seem to be insignificant, there is tremendous potential in it. That tiny mustard seed, when planted in the ground, can produce wonderful fruit. As far as herbs go, this particular variety of mustard seed that Jesus speaks about here grew larger than any other herb. It matured into a small tree. Even the birds of the air would come and rest on its branches. What is Jesus telling us here about the Kingdom of God? There are several things we need to see here in this parable.

It is important that we note from this parable that the Kingdom of God does not come with great pomp and glory. For the Jews of Jesus' day, this parable would have been very difficult to understand. When they thought of the Kingdom of God they expected something very different. To compare the Kingdom of God to an insignificant mustard seed would have been very strange to the Jewish mind. The Jews expected the Messiah to come and conquer Rome. They expected a physical kingdom on this earth where they would live in peace and be rulers over the entire world. They expected great armies and military power. They expected wealth and prosperity. They expected gold, silver and everything their hearts desired. Jesus' teaching was strange indeed. The mustard seed was insignificant. It was small and nobody noticed it.

There are many people today who have the same problem. Like the Jews of Jesus' day, they are looking for great signs. They refuse to accept the Lord because they are looking for a thunderbolt from heaven. They expect to see pomp and glory. They cannot understand how simply believing could be enough. Jesus condemned the people of his day who were constantly asking for bigger and greater signs. They would not believe unless they saw the miracles, the signs and the wonders. Even when they saw them, they were not content. The Kingdom of God

advances often in very quiet ways. It advances through ordinary everyday circumstances and people. It advances through kind words and simple demonstrations of Christ in real life. Its soldiers are ordinary people.

I have been discovering that the work of the Kingdom of God is very often ordinary and common. As I sit in a coffee shop day after day typing on my computer I am advancing the Kingdom of God. As I pack one book after another to send overseas through the book distribution ministry that God has given me I am advancing the Kingdom of God. These efforts seem to be so ordinary yet they are part of the plan of God to expand his Kingdom. I am planting mustard seeds. We often want to do big and wonderful things for the Lord. We want to see thousands come to know him. We want to see countless people set free from the darkness and the power of sin. We want to stand before great crowds. Some may do this but, for many of us, the kingdom of God is advanced through simple ordinary "mustard seed" acts and actions. We plant one mustard seed at a time. The task seems to be so insignificant. We often wonder what we are accomplishing.

What is important for us to understand here is what Jesus tells us about planting mustard seeds. The task may not be glorious but it will produce fruit. The simple insignificant mustard seed will grow up to one of the most important plants in the garden. Your efforts will not go unnoticed. That seemingly insignificant action on your part will accomplish much for the kingdom. Be encouraged in your small efforts. Keep planting the seed. The seed will grow up and produce fruit.

For Consideration:

- What are the ordinary activities you are involved in for the Lord? How does this passage encourage you in those activities?
- Have you ever found yourself looking for bigger and better things? Could it be that God is asking you to be a simple mustard seed sower?
- Is it possible to miss the purpose of God in your life because you are looking for a more glorious ministry?
- Can you think of a time when a simple “insignificant” act produced unexpected fruit in the life of someone you knew? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to be content to be a mustard seed sower.
- Thank the Lord that he does advance his Kingdom through ordinary means.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have grumbled and complained because you did not feel that you were given a better job in the advancing of the kingdom. Ask the Lord to help you to accept the role he has given you.

53

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM: THE LEAVEN

Read Matthew 13:33-35; Mark 4:33-34; Luke 13:20

During this time in his ministry Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He did this because the people did not have the mind of God to understand the spiritual truth he was speaking. Matthew reminds us that this was prophesied long before Jesus came. The Psalmist foretold that the Messiah would speak in parables when he said in Psalm 78:

I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter hidden things, things from of old.

For Matthew, this was proof that the Lord Jesus was the Messiah to come.

Mark 4:34 tells us that while Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds, he explained the meaning to his disciples

when they were alone. He told his disciples that they were to tell the people later what he had told them in secret.

So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. (Matthew 10:26-27, NIV)

Jesus explained and revealed these parables to his disciples so that they could go out and reveal them to the crowds. It was as they learned from him that they could minister to others. The same truth applies today. As servants of God we can only share with others, what God has revealed to us. It is only as we sit at his feet and learn from him that we have anything to share with others.

In this next parable the Lord Jesus compared the Kingdom of heaven to yeast. He illustrates this by speaking about a woman baking bread. She took the flour and put the yeast in it. She then took this mixture and kneaded it until all the yeast is worked through the flour. The illustration is extremely simple yet has some powerful lessons for us to learn.

The parable of the leaven or yeast reminds us of the powerful inner working of the Kingdom of God in the heart and life of an individual. The yeast grows inside the dough and expands it. In a very similar way the Kingdom of God is expanded in the hearts and lives of God's children. The primary work of the Kingdom of God is in our hearts. The yeast of his Kingdom moves into every corner of our hearts and minds transforming them more into his image. This parable reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not about numbers and large churches. It is not about external signs.

The Kingdom of God is within us. The Kingdom of God is expanding in our hearts and lives. It is conquering our thoughts and attitudes. Like yeast it spreads from within, throughout our lives, bringing every thought and attitude captive.

The second thing about the yeast is that it not only spreads but causes the dough to rise. It changes and fills the bread. What began as a lump of floppy dough becomes a delicious bread that satisfies our hunger and sustains our lives. This is what the Holy Spirit wants to do in you and me. He wants to fill every part of our lives and change them. His presence can be felt and seen in the lives of those he fills. There is a radical transformation that takes place in those who know his filling. They are empowered and transformed.

We need to understand here that it is the yeast that does the work not the dough. All too often we miss this point. We believe somehow that it is up to us to change. We believe that by our own efforts we can become like Christ. The dough needs the yeast if it is going to change. You cannot change yourself. All you can do is surrender and let the yeast do its work. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to fill and to empower us. All we can do is surrender to his inner working. Like the yeast of this parable, the Spirit of God moves into every part of us and exposes those areas that need to be transformed. He changes our attitudes and our thoughts. God is expanding his Kingdom in the hearts and lives of those who love him. He is doing this in a very quiet yet powerful way. If you look at your life you should see evidence of the Kingdom of God. You will see the change that is taking place in your heart. The Kingdom of God is expanded wherever a heart bows in surrender to the Lord Jesus. May God teach us to surrender to what he is doing in our hearts and lives.

For Consideration:

- We see here how the disciples were to share what the Lord was teaching them. What has the Lord been teaching you? How important is our time with him? How does this time impact your ministry with others?
- What does this passage teach us about the work of the Kingdom of God in the hearts and lives of God's people?
- What does this parable teach us about the futility of trying to serve or live the Christian life in our own strength?
- What evidence is there in your life of the Kingdom of God expanding?
- What does this passage teach us about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you any areas of your life that are not completely surrendered to him.
- Ask the Lord to open your heart and mind to the inner working of his Holy Spirit.
- Thank the Lord that he wants to transform us into his image.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have not surrendered to his work in your life.

54

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM: THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS EXPLAINED

Read Matthew 13:36-43

When Jesus was alone with his disciples he would explain to them the meaning of the parables he had been teaching. We have an example of this here in Matthew 13. In this passage Jesus explained the meaning of the parable of the tares or weeds as found in Matthew 13:24-30.

It was the disciples who asked the Lord to explain to them the meaning of the parable of the “weeds in the field” (verse 36). Jesus explained that the one who sowed the good seed was the Son of Man. The reference to the Son of Man is a reference to Jesus. This title for Jesus identifies him with us. He put aside the privileges of his deity and took on a body like us. He suffered just as we do and faced

all the temptations we face. He is the one who came to sow the good seed of the Gospel in this world.

Notice second that the field in which the Lord Jesus sowed the good seed is the world. The good seed represents the “sons of the kingdom.” The sons of the kingdom are those who have accepted the Lord Jesus. They are true believers who belong to him. The weeds that were sown in the field represent the sons of the evil one. The evil one is Satan. The one who sows these evil ones in the field is the devil. The angels are the harvesters that the Lord would send at the end of the age.

Before moving on any further in this interpretation we need to take a moment to consider what Jesus is telling us here. There are three points we need to emphasize.

We are Planted in this World by the Son of Man

Notice here that it is the Son of Man who plants us in this world. There are two things that we need to understand from this. First, if the Lord planted us here, we are here by his design and purpose. He has a plan and purpose for our lives. He has planted us in the circumstances we are in right now for a reason. You may not understand it but there is a purpose in your situation. You need to be willing to accept what he has given you and grow in the soil in which he has placed you. How many times have we said: “If only my circumstances were different I could grow and produce more fruit?” Realize that you were planted where you are by God's design. It is in that soil that he expects you to grow and produce fruit.

The second thing we need to understand here is that it is the “Son of Man” who plants us in this world. The term “Son of Man” is very important. He is called Son of Man and not

Son of God here for a reason. He is called Son of Man because he can identify with you as a human. He too was planted by his father in very hostile soil. He knows what it is like to be rejected and ridiculed. He does not plant you without identifying with you. He went before you to show you that you could produce fruit in the soil in which you were planted.

We Must Rub Shoulders with Those Planted by the Enemy

The Lord Jesus reminds us through this parable that as we grow in the soil of this world, we will have to grow beside those who belong to the enemy. These weeds sown by the enemy will make things more difficult for us. We are called to shine in the midst of darkness. We are called to be different. We are called to produce fruit in the midst of adversity and trials. We should expect that there will be difficulty and struggle for us as we walk side by side with those the enemy sows along our path. We will not be understood but we must not compromise our standards. The enemy will not give us his territory easily. We will have to persevere.

There will be a Harvest

Jesus reminded his disciples through this parable that a day of harvest is coming. On that day, the Lord will send his angels to judge the earth. The fact that there will be a harvest should cause us to realize that we need to bear fruit. We have been placed here for the purpose of bearing fruit. The day will come when the Lord will return to harvest what he has planted. On that day, we will not be able to say, "Lord, I didn't like the soil you put me in and I didn't produce fruit." You are planted where you are right now for the purpose of producing fruit. That fruit must be produced in the midst of great difficulty and trial but it must be produced.

Jesus reminded his disciples also that the day was coming when the weeds would be pulled up and burned in the fire. In the Lord's time, sin and evil will be judged. What a terrible day that will be for those who do not know the Lord. On that day, those who have rejected the Lord will be punished. They will be thrown into a place that Jesus describes as a fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The gnashing of teeth describes for us an intense pain and suffering. Those who are in this furnace are conscious of their pain and agony.

I do not pretend to understand the horrors of this furnace of hell. It is hard to imagine such pain and agony. We cannot deny the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus here, however. Many have tried to explain away this judgment. They tell us that a God of love would never punish like this. They tell us that hell is not a real place. The reality of the matter is that Jesus tells us that the day is coming when he will send his angels to gather up those who have rejected him and spurned his offer of forgiveness. They will be cast away into a fire of judgment.

As for the righteous, however, their destiny is very different. God will take them to be with himself. God will bring them into his kingdom and minister to them. They will shine with his glory and be forever in his presence. God will be their Father and they will be his children.

Those of us who know the Lord Jesus have been planted as good seed in this evil world. We are his instruments in this world to shine and produce fruit for his glory. The day is coming when the Lord Jesus will return to harvest the fruit we have produced for his glory. May God make us faithful.

For Consideration:

- What circumstance has the Lord placed you in today? Are you producing fruit in that soil?
- Have you ever found yourself grumbling and complaining because you did not like where God planted you? What does this passage have to say to this attitude?
- What evidence do you see around you of weeds planted by the enemy?
- What comfort do you find in the fact that the Lord Jesus identifies with you in your struggle?
- What does this passage teach us about the reality of the judgment to come?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that he has rescued you from the judgment to come.
- If you do not know the forgiveness of the Lord, take a moment now to come before him and seek his forgiveness.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for grumbling about the soil he has planted you in. Ask him to make you more thankful and fruitful.

**PARABLES OF THE
KINGDOM:
THE PARABLES OF THE
HIDDEN TREASURE AND THE
PEARL OF GREAT PRICE**

Read Matthew 13:44-46

In Matthew 13:44-46 the Lord compared the Kingdom of God to a hidden treasure and a pearl of great price. We will examine his teaching on this here in this next section.

In the first of these two parables Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a treasure hidden in a field. Notice here that this treasure is in a field. The field, in other parables, is compared to the world. The Kingdom of God is not something that is going to come some day, it has already come. The Kingdom of God is in this world. It is expanding each and every day. The Lord Jesus is working through his Holy Spirit in lives and hearts of people all over this world. Each

day people are being added to the Kingdom. Each day the Kingdom of Darkness is being driven back. Even in our own lives, we are seeing strongholds of darkness being broken. The Kingdom of God is not distant. It is already here.

While the Kingdom of God is already among us, it is hidden to many people. This kingdom is hidden because eyes are not open to see it. The truth of this kingdom is hidden not because people have never heard of Christ and his work but because they do not have eyes to see it or understand it. They have no concept of the Kingdom of God and the reality of the presence of the Spirit and his work.

The people of Jesus' day did not understand that the Kingdom of God was among them. The Pharisees rejected the work of Christ. They saw the evidence of the kingdom in the preaching of Christ and the miracles that he did but they did not believe. In contrast to this, the Lord Jesus told his listeners that the man who discovered the hidden treasure sold everything he had to buy the field where the treasure was hidden. He was willing to sacrifice everything for that treasure. His priorities in life changed.

When we discover that the Kingdom of God is a present reality, we can accept the situations that come our way. Jesus is Lord right now. He is working out his purposes in this world. He is expanding his kingdom. He is seated on his throne. Whatever comes our way, we know he is in control. We accept that he is Lord not just in the future but right now.

For the longest time in my spiritual life I did not live in the present reality of the Kingdom of God. I believed that one day the Lord Jesus would return and give me the victory I could not have over sin and evil now. I believed that the

day would come when the Lord Jesus would break the power of the enemy and give me the joy and peace I craved for in my heart. I believed that one day I could overcome but it was all in the future. I expected to see victory when the Lord returned. I did not live in the reality of a present victory. Then one day the Lord powerfully demonstrated that victory was possible in the present. He showed me that the Kingdom of God was present and it could overcome the power of darkness and evil. What a difference that made. I began to understand that I did not have to wait until I got to heaven to experience the reality of the Kingdom of God. I could have victory today because the Kingdom of God was here. That Kingdom was overcoming the power of darkness now. When we understand that the Kingdom of God is a present reality we begin to expect to see forces of evil driven back. We live in the reality of victory over sin and evil today. Like the man in this parable there is a new excitement and dedication toward that kingdom.

What an incredible thing it is to discover the presence of the Kingdom of God in our lives. How we long for the day when we will see the Lord face to face. What we need to understand, however, is that we can experience the reality of heaven, at least in part, here on this earth. The wonderful joy and peace that he promised can be ours now. The victory over sin and evil can be ours today. This reality is worth everything we have in this world. The one who discovers the reality of this Kingdom will willingly sacrifice everything for it. Everything else pales in significance when you see the reality of the Kingdom of God and Christ's present power over evil and sin. There is security and comfort. There is healing, intimacy and victory. Why would anyone want to return to the world and its ways when they understand that they can live in the reality of the Kingdom of God today?

The second parable that Jesus told the people that day was about a merchant who went in search of fine pearls. He discovered a pearl of great value. This pearl was of such value that he sold everything he had to buy it. Nothing could be compared in value to this wonderful pearl. Jesus reminded his listeners in Matthew 16:26:

What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

You can have everything this world has to offer but if you do not surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ you have nothing. Over and over in the Scriptures the Lord called his listeners to surrender all that they had for him and his kingdom. For those who understand the reality of the Kingdom this is not a sacrifice but a delight. They willingly surrender the things of this world to obtain something even greater.

These parables remind us of the present reality of the Kingdom of God. They remind us that we can experience the power and presence of God and his reign today. Do we live in the reality of this Kingdom? The man who discovered the hidden treasure in his field was filled with joy when he understood that such a treasure was available to him. Do you experience this joy today? Do people see evidence of the Kingdom of God when they look at your life? Do they see the evidence of this Kingdom in the fruit of the Spirit that is growing in your life? Do they look at you and understand that the Kingdom of God is already here?

There is a difference between the Kingdom of God at war as we see it today and the Kingdom of God at peace as we will see it in heaven. Even now, though we are at war, we can still experience the wonder of his power and

victory. How much greater it will be when the influence of the Kingdom of Darkness is destroyed?

This passage calls us to step out boldly. The power to overcome is with us. The passage also calls us to be willing to surrender all to see the kingdom of God advance. If you understand the wonder of this Kingdom, this will not be a sacrifice to you. It will be your delight to give all that you have.

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there of the present reality of the Kingdom of God in your life?
- What difference does it make when we believe that the Kingdom of God is here now?
- What is the difference between the Kingdom of God as we see it right now and the Kingdom of God as we will see it in heaven?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that he is reigning and conquering right now.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to demonstrate the reality of the Kingdom of God in your life.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to see evidence of the Kingdom of God around you.
- Ask the Lord to make you more willing to give all you have for the sake of the kingdom of God.

56

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM:

THE PARABLE OF THE NET

Read Matthew 13:47-50

In this next section, the Lord Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a fishing net cast into the water. The fishermen let the net down into a lake. When the net was full the fishermen pulled it up to the shore and sat down beside it to sort through what they had caught. The good fish were collected up in baskets while the bad fish and anything else were thrown away. Jesus tells us that this is how it will be in the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous. The wicked will be thrown into a fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This parable is quite similar to the parable of the weeds that Jesus has taught his listeners earlier. There is, however, a very significant difference. In the parable of the weeds it was the enemy who sowed the weeds in the field.

In this parable we have no mention of an enemy. The fish are caught by themselves in the net. The message of the Kingdom of God and its power to deliver from sin and evil is a very appealing message. Who would not want to be set free from the power of the kingdom of Satan and darkness? There are many who want what the Gospel has to offer. They are caught up in the wonder of this message. Not all who are caught up with this message, however, are truly saved.

There are many reasons why people respond to the message of the Gospel. Some truly want to be set free from their sin. They want to go to heaven and be with the Lord. While many want to be free from sin and evil, not all are ready to surrender everything to the Lord Jesus. This is what the crowd that followed Jesus everywhere he went was like. They wanted to be healed but they were unwilling to commit themselves to serving him.

Others are caught up in this net because they, like the people of Jesus' day, were amazed by the signs and wonders he performed. Many were healed and set free from their evil spirits. They saw the power of prayer and the evidence of the Kingdom of God breaking through the darkness of evil and sin. They joined with those who professed the name of the Lord Jesus because they had been healed or because they had been touched in some way by the power of the Kingdom of God but they were never saved. They experienced the power of the Kingdom but they were not born again into the family of God. There are many people like this today.

There are others who are caught up in this net out of tradition. They were brought up in a certain family. They were surrounded by true believers all their life or they were part of a believing family. They joined themselves with those

who belong to the Kingdom of God because this is their tradition. Churches are filled with people who are there simply because this was the church their parents attended. They are caught up in the net of the Kingdom of God but they do not really know the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour. They have accepted all the externals but they are not born again.

Some are caught up in this net because they fear people and long for praise. Jesus tells us that there will be many who did miracles in his name that do not belong to him. There are Christian leaders today who minister because they enjoy the praise. On the other hand, there are those who pretend to know the Lord and live for him because they fear that if they do not, they will not be accepted. Sometimes being a "good Christian" is the acceptable thing to be. They want others to think well of them so they join with those who belong to the Kingdom. They have all the external signs but they do not know the Lord personally.

Still others allow themselves to be caught up in this net because they truly believe in the lifestyle that Jesus taught (or at least certain elements of his teaching). We have all met individuals who believed that Jesus was a wonderful teacher. They enjoy his teaching on love and compassion. They even commit themselves to follow his good example. They believe in the lifestyle but they have never been born again into his family.

What is important for us to note here is that the message of the Gospel is in itself attractive. Many people will respond to this wonderful message but not all who respond to it are truly saved from their sin. This message of the kingdom, like a net, is cast out into the world. All kinds of fish are caught up in it. In your church you will find all kinds

of people. They have responded to the message of the Kingdom but not all truly belong to the Kingdom. This parable challenges us to examine our hearts to see if we are among the good fish or among those who will be thrown away.

The parable reminds us that the day is coming when the Lord will judge the earth. He will send his angels to sort through the fish caught in this great net of the Gospel. In that day, his angels will examine the attitudes of the heart. Those who belong to the Lord will be taken to be with him. Those who do not, will suffer the judgment of God. How important it is that we examine our hearts. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 22:14 that not all respond to the message of the Kingdom of God: "For many are called, but few are chosen" (KJV).

The kingdom of God is like a great net that goes out and catches many different types of fish, some good and some bad. The day is coming when all that will be changed. The angels of God will sort through all who have responded to the message of the Gospel and only those who belong to him will inherit his kingdom. Will you inherit his kingdom?

For Consideration:

- How did you respond to the message of the Gospel when you heard it?
- How can you know if you truly belong to the Lord?
- How easy is it for us to assume that people belong to the Lord because they have responded to the message of the Gospel? What does this passage

teach us about the different ways of responding to the message of the gospel?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you the assurance that you truly belong to him.
- Ask the Lord to minister to those in your church who have responded to the Gospel for the wrong reason.

**PARABLES OF THE
KINGDOM:
THE PARABLE OF THE
HOUSEHOLDER**

Read Matthew 13:51-53

Jesus taught this final parable of the Kingdom to his disciples. Jesus' disciples had grown up with a very different understanding of what the Kingdom of God would be like. They expected a political kingdom with the Messiah as the head. The fact that Jesus was teaching about a spiritual kingdom was difficult for them to grasp. Jesus recognized that these concepts were new to his disciples. In Matthew 13 Jesus told his disciples that the teacher of the Law who had been instructed in the Kingdom of Heaven was like the owner of a house who brought out both old and new treasures from his storeroom. We need to examine what Jesus is saying here.

Those who have been “instructed in the Kingdom” said Jesus bring out of their storeroom both new as well as old treasures. We cannot miss what Jesus is saying here. Notice first, that the message of the Kingdom is like a wonderful refreshing treasure. In 2 Corinthians 3:14-16 Paul says that a veil remains over those who preach the law.

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

The law was powerless to transform lives. Jesus came to change all that. He came to set up his Kingdom. He came to empower a people who would move forward as conquerors. He came to demonstrate that, as we surrender to his reign in our lives, we can live in victory. The truth of victory and power over sin in our lives and society is a wonderfully refreshing truth. It is the wonderful new treasure we share as teachers of the Kingdom of God. It is a message of salvation, hope and renewal through the Lord Jesus Christ.

This new reality, however, does not contradict the old truths. The prophets of the Old Testament all looked forward to the day when the Kingdom of God would be a reality in the hearts and lives of God's people. They prophesied about such a day. Those who teach the truths of the Kingdom of God teach what the prophets of old taught. They teach what God had shown them. The old treasures Jesus speaks about here are the prophetic teachings of the prophets of the Old Testament who longed to see the day his Kingdom was established on this earth.

Jesus was reminding his disciples here that what was happening around them was refreshingly new but it was prophesied long ago. What they were seeing was the fulfillment of the words of the prophets of old. Those who taught the Kingdom of God, spoke of an old truth that had become a new reality in their day. They brought out of their store house the treasures of the Old Testament prophets and the new treasures of the reality of the gospel message fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

Those who preach and teach the Kingdom of God preach and teach an age old message prophesied by the prophets of the Old Testament. These prophets spoke of the coming Kingdom and longed to experience it. Those who preach this Kingdom, however, also preach a message that is refreshingly new in its reality. Those who preach about the Kingdom of God bring out of their storehouse of knowledge a treasure that is as old as the prophets who spoke about this coming kingdom. They also teach a message that is as fresh as the new day for this message speaks of a kingdom that is present with us and conquering new territory with each passing moment.

For Consideration:

- How is the news of the presence of the Kingdom of God an old treasure?
- How is the message of the Kingdom of God a fresh and new message? What do we experience that the people of the Old Testament did not experience?

- What is it about the message of the Kingdom of God that is refreshing and encouraging to you personally?
- How does an understanding of the reign of Christ and his present kingdom change how we live and preach?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to teach you more about the reality of his Kingdom advancing in our lives and society.
- Ask the Lord to help you to live more and more in the reality of his Kingdom.
- Thank the Lord that Satan does not have the victory. Thank him that from the very beginning of time he spoke to the prophets about his powerful kingdom that would conquer sin and evil.

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