



LENTEN
DEVOTIONAL
2024

WEEK SIX

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A LENTEN JOURNEY WITH JESUS BY PASTOR ROB WILSON

Introduction

We know the practice of Lent was well established by the 4th century. The word Lent is germanic in origin and means ‘lengthening’ as in days, so often interpreted Springtime.

Let’s assume, as some do, that the genesis of Lent came from early followers of Jesus preparing for 46 days to be baptized on Easter. And let’s assume that this practice was so meaningful that they took up the practice every year thereafter, not only to be refreshed again in their baptismal waters, but to actually mature, grow, and deepen their spiritual life with Jesus and other Jesus followers.

Such assumptions leave us with both an invitation and a challenge as we walk onto the path called Lent. The invitation comes from Jesus who says, “come follow me” to Jerusalem, to the cross, and finally to the world altering reality of an empty tomb. The challenge is to take the ancient practice of Lent and allow it to meet you in our contemporary world, in this season of your life, in the raw reality of what it means to follow the resurrected Jesus on a daily basis.

If I were a person preparing to be baptized into Christ, devote my very being to Him, and put my life on the line by living as He asks me to live, I would want to study that way of life closely. I would want to do more than read it but digest it and perhaps maybe even try it on like a shirt that looks good on the rack although your’e just not sure it will fit. I would want to ask questions of it and let it ask questions of me. So this 46 day journey will utilize Jesus’ longest recorded speech, called the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ to guide us, grow us, and prepare us. In reality, this devotional is only for those who do want exactly those things.

So, let’s assume that our forefathers and foremothers were right and that we won’t be the same person we are today come Easter because Jesus is about to meet us and the Holy Spirit change us. Welcome to A Lenten Journey with Jesus via the Sermon on the Mount.

4th Sunday of Lent, March 17

Matthew 6:25-34

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

Writing this Lenten Devotional has been a great joy for me. Yet it also has been demanding of my time. Last week was particularly busy and filled with many ‘worries’ (we’ll look at the word Jesus used for ‘worry’ in a moment). It is thus both ironic and humorous that I forgot to include these verses from the end of chapter 6 and thus skipped over them...all because of worry!

The word Jesus uses here that gets translated as ‘worry’ has the root meaning of ‘care’. But that root is intensified so that it’s meaning goes from simply caring to over caring. Some translators like to use ‘distracting concern’ or even ‘anxiety’.

Anxiety is a hot topic right now for all generations but especially our young people. The word ‘anxiety attacks’ has made its way into almost daily conversations, especially in our schools. Underneath Jesus’ mandate to not be anxious is the assurance that God’s love and provisional care undergirds our entire life. Using a rhetorical technique called “maiori ad minusor” where we compare two things and make an application from “major to minor,” Jesus points out God’s provision for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

Instead of living anxiously, with God’s provision assured, we are freed to seek God’s Kingdom, Jesus’ path, the Spirit’s leading. I love the fact that an essential tool therapists use in helping people deal with ‘anxiety’ is breathing. The word for “Breath” and “Spirit” is biblically related and sometimes interchangeable.

So, if today finds you anxious, overly concerned, or distracted to the point of debilitating you: breath deep the breath of God! For in doing so we discover God is ever present, ever providing, ever loving.

1. What are your areas of ‘worry’, ‘over-caring’ to the point of distraction, or ‘anxiety’ today?

2. How does the assurance of God’s provision help you let go of these anxieties?

3. Commit to seeking out where God is at work in your life today, noting it, and when possible participating in it. Then note in your journal how your ‘worry’ and ‘anxiety levels’ were changed.

Monday, March 18

Matthew 7:15

15 “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

We all have them. We have all met them. We have all followed them. And perhaps you still are. False Prophets!

Certainly, Jesus is speaking here about his common foes, the Scribes and Pharisees? Matthew records the words for the early Christian community because there were many false prophets in the 1st century (and beyond). It is also likely that he is speaking beyond that culture and time to the many False Prophets that have risen and fallen for the last 2000 years. They have come in all forms: from pastors to politicians; from men to women; from our hometowns to lands half way around the world. False Prophets are those who cloak themselves as people who can speak for God and claim to lead others to the Kingdom of God... but cannot.

Perhaps it is stretching Jesus’ words too far, but could it also be that a “False Prophet” could also include ‘anything that promises us everything and delivers nothing’. Could a False Prophet include “something that claims to point us to the ultimate but in reality, leads us to emptiness”. Dressed in sheep’s clothing, these things can and may be at first glance and in moderation good. But underneath that clothing there is a desire to command and control our attention, our emotions, our bodies, our minds, and eventually our souls. That is because a False Prophet is ravenous to be fed. And our time, energy, and resources are its favorite foods.

In this broader definition, a false prophet is any addictive substance that promises to fulfill us but will eventually destroy us. In this broader definition, a false prophet may be technology which promises to save us time but leaves us fragmented and distracted because it became like a ravenous wolf. In this broader definition, a false prophet is an idol that we set our hearts on only to discover it wasn’t worthy of our heart’s true value.

So, we are back to where we started: Jesus says “Beware of the False Prophets!” We all have them. We have all met them. We have all followed them. And perhaps you still are.

Take a moment to reflect upon what False Prophets you have followed in the past?

Take a moment to write down which False Prophets you are still following today?

Name the ways your False Prophets entice you on the one hand and become ravenous on the other?

Tuesday, March 19

Matthew 7:16-20

16 “You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 “So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 “A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 “So then, you will know them by their fruits.”

Imagine that you know little to nothing about planting a garden (that would be me). Now imagine that someone gifted you different seeds to plant in your garden. They looked alike and unfortunately, right before you put them in the ground, they all spilled onto the ground and were all mixed together. You went ahead and planted them anyway and waited.

This section is a continuation of the discussion around ‘False Prophets’. Whereas yesterday Jesus warns us to be on guard against them, today’s verses focus us on how to identify a ‘False Prophet’: “you will know them by their fruits”. That phrase forms what biblical scholars call an ‘inclusio’, it opens a section and closes a section with one clear teaching expanded upon in between.

And that clear teaching is that a prophet’s validity is not determined solely by their words but rather the three-way consistency between words, actions, and intentions. The most revealing of the three are a person’s actions, otherwise defined as a fruit because they will reveal a person’s true intentions. Those intentions can be hidden but are akin to DNA building blocks that grow something according to its intended nature.

This was a hot button issue in Jesus’ day, in the early church (read Acts 20:29) and in the centuries following. An early Christian document called “The Didache” spends a good amount of time discussing how to discern a false prophet. It lays out some specific “fruits” or actions to look for. So should we. And we should do so by using scripture first and foremost. Then, the wisdom of our forefathers and foremothers should guide our discernment. Third, we should use the Holy Spirit and prayer in this discernment process.

This threefold method allows us to watch the garden carefully. Give something time before judging it a ‘false prophet’ too quickly. But Jesus is correct, an apple tree born out of that seed will eventually bear good fruit and bless you with a warm apple pie. The tomato seed will produce a plant that in turn will bless your homemade salads. The thistle seed or God forbid, ‘Scotch Broom’ seed will be like a ravenous wolf and not bear any good tasting fruit.

Have you had an encounter with what you would describe as a “False Prophet”? Did Jesus’ words hold true in that situation?

You will know them by their fruits...do your fruits fit the person you want to be?

Wednesday, March 20

Matthew 7:21-23

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

Jesus began by warning us about ‘false prophets, then moved to a process of discerning a false prophet (bad and good fruit) and in these verses proceed to teach all Jesus followers about the relationship between faith and works.

Some find these verses frightening because not only do we read “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of God” but that some are able to do great works in Jesus’ name who will not enter the kingdom. In Acts 19:13-16 we read a story about the “seven sons of Sceva” that is a living example of what Jesus is teaching here.

The key to this passage is striving to ‘do the will of my Father who is in heaven’. Doing God’s will rather than our will is something Jesus taught us to pray. He modeled this kind of obedience to the Father’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane. And he calls us to this obedience during this Lenten season. Biblical scholar Myron Augsburger says it best: There is only one proof of love and that is obedience. And the attitude of obedience is sincere when it is evident in one’s practice. Barclay says, “Faith without practice is a contradiction in terms, and love without obedience is an impossibility”.

How do you seek out what is “God’s will” and what role does the community of Jesus followers (the church) play in your discernment?

Where is obedience to God’s will difficult for you?

Name the obstacles to your obedience and how they might be overcome.

Thursday, March 21

Matthew 7:24-27

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

My best friend from seminary gave me the best preaching advice I've ever received: Preach like you drive on the Interstate. Have an on ramp that gets the congregation traveling with you. The text will provide the message points, our job is to point them out clearly and boldly to all in the car. Once you've pointed out these things, look for the off-ramp! Don't stay on the interstate too long and by all means, don't get off, go back and re-travel the journey again!

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount concludes with a doozy of an off ramp. The sermon ends with a visual that travels well through the ages and squarely places responsibility to act in our lap. A good sermon ends with an off ramp that calls God's people to action.

We get to choose whether to apply Jesus' teachings to our life or not. We have free will. And whether we realize it or not, that decision to go beyond hearing Jesus' words and acting upon them is foundational (literally) for our life and our eternity.

It is interesting to note what remains consistent between the two houses. Both encounter rain, floods, and winds that slam against the house...such is life! Both can be beautiful, well built, wonderful houses. In fact, both houses can be identical except for the one thing that really matters: the foundation.

Jesus is inviting us to build our lives upon Him: His ways, His truth, His life. As the preceding chapters have shown us, this way of life is not easy. It reminds me of the Presbyterian wedding liturgy where the officiant says of marriage: 'this way of life must not be entered into carelessly or from selfish motives, but rather responsibly and prayerfully.'

So, as you drive down this off ramp with Jesus, there is a joyful invitation that is meant to call you to action. Perhaps this call to action can be found in the following questions that will have foundational implications for your life and eternity.

What are the foundational teachings my life is built upon?

What teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are hard for me to understand?

What teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are difficult for me to live out?

If my life were to end today, how solid is my foundation?

Friday, March 22

Matthew 7:28-29

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

I have a friend who is a Christian Summer Camp Director. Each week the camp asks a pastor or youth pastor to be their 'Guest Speaker'. One night after the speaker (who had a slightly inflated ego) gave his talk to a packed house of Senior High kids, he walked by my friend and whispered confidently: "I knocked it out of the park"! Every year since my friend told me that story, and when I'm asked to speak at camp, I usually come up to him after one of my talks and whisper jokingly: "I knocked it out of the park!"

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount really did "knock it out of the park". The crowds were "amazed". The word in Greek for "amazed" is like many words in the Greek language that contain a main word and then a prefix which can change the words meaning. The main word here is "to strike" and the prefix word intensifies the main word. Thus, the word for "amazed" literally means: To strike out, force out by a blow, but found only in the sense of knocking one out of his senses or self-possession, to strike with astonishment, terror, admiration.[1]

Jesus' sermon knocked it out of the park! It knocked people out of their ordinary religious duties by inviting them on a scandalous adventure. They realized that to call ourselves 'blessed' when we were totally and utterly dependent on God was counter-cultural but authentic to the spiritual life. They realized that to go beyond the 'letter of the law' and embrace the 'spirit of the law' was life giving. They realized that Jesus' invitation to live without worry, even in the midst of an over-anxious world was an offer they couldn't refuse.

I'm surprised the text of the Sermon on the Mount didn't end with: "Jesus passed by Peter and whispered: 'I knocked it out of the park'!" Because for centuries his sermon continues to knock us out of dull religiosity and land us squarely in authentic relationship with God and with others. I hope it has amazed you the same way.

Jesus taught with authority and in doing so amazed the people. What part or parts of the Sermon on the Mount have spoken most to you?

[1] Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

Saturday, March 23

Matthew 8:1

1 When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him.

If you didn't realize it, the chapters and verses attached to the New Testament books were not added until centuries after the scriptures were written. The reason this matters is because we often break up the flow of the scriptural narrative into blocks when they are meant to flow together like a story.

I love the words that we call Matthew 8:1 because they add an important spiritual note which is connected to the Sermon on the Mount: "When Jesus came down from the mountain". Like Moses coming down from the mountain after receiving the Ten Commandments, Jesus comes down after giving amazing new takes on old commands.

The spiritual application of these verses is that there comes a time for all of us to 'come down the mountain' of listening, learning, and pondering to the place where life gets lived out. The diploma of the classroom is meant to be taken into the reality of the marketplace. The sermon given in the pulpit is meant to be lived in the public square. My hope is that the Sermon on the Mount has challenged, engaged, and taught you about the journey of a disciple. But it is time to come down the mountain and live these lessons out for the rest of the Lenten journey.

It is also interesting to note that the text says 'large crowds followed Jesus'. I am left to wonder how long those crowds followed since it is often easier to learn on the mountainside than it is to live things out in the trenches of life's real battles. But the theme of 'large crowds' will take us now into Holy Week where tomorrow, the large crowds welcome Jesus into Jerusalem and so begins the "8 Days That Changed The World".

What parts of the Sermon on the Mount will be hardest for you to live out now that we've "come down the mountain"?

How can you stay accountable to living out the Sermon on the Mount in your daily life?