

Become a  
**disciple** of Jesus  
who makes  
**disciples** of Jesus.

For thousands of years, people have asked, "Who was the real Jesus?" Was there a real Jesus, or was He just a fictional religious character? If there was a real Jesus, what do we really know about His life? Are there historical, not just religious, documents about Him? There are many different interpretations of who Jesus was and what He did. The key question people want to know generally involves one or more of the following questions: "How can we know with certainty who Jesus was, what He did, how He lived, how He died, and what mysteriously happened after His death."

This book starts a chronological journey through God's audacious plan to change the world by sending Jesus into it. This story changed me, my family, the church I lead, and I believe it can change you. As you begin this journey, think about what our world would look like without Jesus. Or better yet, what does our world look like because of Jesus?



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THE REAL JESUS

Book 1, Third Edition

Grill



# THE REAL JESUS

Disciple-making Series | Book 1

Adam Grill



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*The Real Jesus | Book One, Third Edition*

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## INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, people have asked, “Who was the real Jesus?” Was there a real Jesus, or was He just a fictional religious character? If there was a real Jesus, what do we really know about His life? Are there historical, not just religious, documents about Him? There are many different interpretations of who Jesus was and what He did. The key question people want to know generally involves one or more of the following questions: “How can we know with certainty who Jesus was, what He did, how He lived, how He died, and what mysteriously happened after His death.”

Jesus’s identity was multifaceted, viewed through various lenses. To the Romans, He was a disruptor of the peace, leading a minor religious movement that needed suppression. To the Jewish people, He was a prophet, a figure of controversy who needed to be restrained. To other ancient religions, Jesus was inconsequential. To His followers, He was the Son of God, a belief they held steadfastly.

The followers of Jesus did not come to this conclusion because it would gain them power, money, prestige, or influence. The followers of Jesus realized this after living with Jesus, watching Him die, seeing Jesus after He was raised from the dead, and then seeing Jesus ascend to heaven before their eyes.

Jesus is a historical person, a fact that takes little effort to prove. Plenty of Roman and Jewish writings prove Jesus existed. But proving Jesus was the Son of God, well... that is a whole different task. The best scholars and historians still debate this issue and world leaders have even gone to war because of conflicting beliefs about who Jesus really is.

Despite the shifting tides of religious sentiment and the waning of Christian participation, the question of Jesus’s true nature continues to intrigue. His identity remains a subject of fascination attesting to this enduring curiosity. People continue to ask questions about Jesus. Consider how many secular magazines publish articles about Jesus. In addition, the Bible is printed around 80

million times every year! The Bible is still the bestselling book of all time (sorry, Harry Potter fans). Whether we like it or not, books on Jesus can be purchased at every airport in America and often at your local grocery store checkout line.

Even after 2,000 years, the intrigue about Jesus has remained. People who do not like religion are often still curious about Jesus. Who do you think the REAL Jesus was? Let me encourage you to write down who you think Jesus was in the lines below. Understand there is no wrong answer.

**This is who I think Jesus was:**

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Let's be honest. If Jesus was God, He devised a ridiculous plan to "save the world." If Jesus was God, why would He allow Himself to be born into a meaningless family in an insignificant part of the Roman empire? If Jesus was God, why would He entrust the future of his movement to a ragtag group of commoners? If Jesus was God, how could He die because death would mean He was not an all-powerful God? Unless... Unless God had an audacious plan that was about to unfold, that would never make sense unless you came to understand it.

"Audacious" is a word we do not use very often, yet it describes Jesus' life quite well. Audacious is a word that could describe many well-known people throughout history. Americans would not celebrate the 4th of July without the audacious plan of throwing tea into a harbor. America might not have had a civil rights movement without the audacious sitting of Rosa Parks.



Elvis Presley's audacious dance moves introduced rock 'n' roll. Bill Gates' audacious dream of a personal computer changed how the world interacts. Throughout history, the audacious choices of people have changed the direction of other people's lives.

I made an audacious choice in 2011 when I felt called by Jesus to leave my career in construction and go into ministry. It was audacious because I was 29 years old. I was leading all construction services for the US operations of a multi-national company. I lived in one of the richest areas of our country, in a gated community, and had "made it" by American standards. Following Jesus meant I would move our family across the country to take a ministry job that put my income well below the poverty line; we would move into a cockroach-infested rental and rely on food stamps and government insurance to get by.

This book is a chronological journey through God's audacious plan to change the world by sending Jesus into it. This story changed me, my family, the church I lead, and I believe it can change you. As you begin this journey, think about what our world would look like without Jesus. Or better yet, what does our world look like because of Jesus?

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



### READ & DISCUSS

I encourage you to read and discuss this book with another person or with a small group of people. This book was designed to be studied with one or more people because that was what Jesus modeled for us throughout His life here. This book is a simple tool to help anyone walk through Jesus' life chronologically and learn who the real Jesus was, is, and always will be.



### KEY PASSAGES

Each chapter has specific Bible passages to read. Let me encourage you to buy or download a copy of the Bible to read as we go on this journey together. All the passages quoted in this book are from the New International Version. I would also suggest buying a copy of Thomas & Gundry's *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels*, which pulls out all the Bible passages about Jesus' life and puts them in chronological order for you.



### READ

Read the suggested passages in your Bible or *Harmony of the Gospels* before continuing with the book. You will also find parts of the Bible sprinkled throughout the book. Every time I directly quote the Bible, those words will be in *red italics*. This has been done to help you distinguish God's Word from mine. You will also notice that whenever God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are referenced (He, Him, They, Me, My, etc.), it will always begin with a capital letter because it helps remind us that we are referring to God, Jesus, or The Holy Spirit.



### WEEKLY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When you gather, I encourage you to begin EACH SESSION with the same three questions. We do this to help you get to know your

disciples personally and to become aware of what is happening in their lives. Start with these questions every time:

- What is one thing you are most thankful for since we last met?
- What is one thing that stressed you out most since we last met?
- What did you do to follow through on your last “I will” statements?



## LIFE APPLICATION

At the end of every chapter, there will be a Life Application section. There, you will find one question that is unique to each chapter and two questions that are the same. Honest answers are always best. The questions help generate conversation and help you consider how to apply Jesus’ life to your daily life.

Discuss your answers to all three questions when you get together. I encourage you to write your disciple’s “I will” statements in your book next to their names. That way, when you meet, you can ask them how they did at following up on their “I will” statement.



## LEADING OTHERS

There are several ways to walk through this book with others, depending on how much your disciples want to read each week. The two methods we have seen work the best are:

- Read one chapter a week and meet weekly or bi-weekly. When you gather, start with prayer and the opening questions. Then, talk through the highlights you and your disciples recall from the chapter. Next, have everyone share how they answered the Life Application questions. Pray together and schedule your next time to meet.
- Read one chapter daily and gather weekly or bi-weekly to



discuss. When you gather, start with prayer and the opening questions. Then, talk through everyone's single big takeaway from each chapter read. Next, share how everyone answered the Life Application questions chapter by chapter. Pray together and schedule your next time to meet.

## CHAPTER 1

# HOW IT ALL BEGAN



Luke 1

I am not a trusting person. I tend to be quite skeptical. I do not trust people just because they say something. I can be hardheaded and tend to need to learn lessons myself. None of those qualities are particularly good, but they do endear me to one of the writers of the Bible: a man named Luke. Most scholars agree that he wrote the book of Luke in the Bible. Dr. Luke is one of my favorite writers in the Bible because he was a lot like me. He was a very logical guy who wanted to know the truth. He said as much in his first letter!

Luke 1:1–4, <sup>1</sup> *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,* <sup>2</sup> *just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.* <sup>3</sup> *With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,* <sup>4</sup> *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

I don't know how many doctors you know, but my older brother is a chief medical officer (a doctor who manages other doctors). My brother is one of the most logical and methodical people I know. Most doctors are naturally skeptical. Science teaches us to doubt everything and prove everything. Dr. Luke was commissioned by Theophilus, who was a prominent Roman, and asked Luke to find out what really happened with this guy named Jesus. Luke wrote this letter to Theophilus to let him know, in his own words, that he <sup>3</sup> *carefully investigated everything.*” Everything they had heard about Jesus, all the crazy claims about what Jesus did, all the crazy stories about who Jesus was.

Luke did not use the rumor mill as his evidence. He went to

the people and personally interviewed and cross-examined the eyewitnesses, people who saw with their own eyes all the claims made about Jesus. Luke likely spent years interviewing, studying, and analyzing everything people claimed about Jesus. Then, he wrote the Book of Luke with all his findings. Luke is one author we will learn from on this journey.

Luke begins his findings with a story about Jesus' uncle and future cousin. The beginning of Jesus' story on earth is unlike anything most would expect. It starts with an old man and woman who would bear John the Baptist (Jesus' future cousin whom we will learn about soon) and Jesus' future mother, an unmarried teenager. It all seems crazy and unlikely.

If you are anything like me, you will find that the Bible is filled with many "why" questions regarding this man named Jesus, His purpose, and how the stories all fit together. These "why" questions are the reasons why I wrote this book. I searched for answers and discovered that if you are willing to put in the time, you will find the answers in the Bible. My hope is for you to find answers to your questions about Jesus as well as answers to cultural topics facing today's world. I also hope that you will come to know Jesus intimately by the conclusion of these writings, whether you know Him now or you haven't a clue about Him.

Regardless of the outcome of your readings, if you stick with me, you will learn about the earthly family of Jesus (mom, dad, siblings, a cousin, an aunt, and an uncle). You will discover that Jesus lived a real life. You will see He experienced rejection, hunger, thirst, betrayal, temptation, joys, and sorrows just like us. You will not only gain more head knowledge about Jesus, but you will also understand why those who knew Jesus were fundamentally changed by the experience of sharing life with this radical life-changing man who later claimed to be God. You may even understand why the disciples of Jesus were willing to die to show that they believed Jesus was the key to eternal life in



paradise and that this came through one's faith and devotion to Him.

The first four books of the New Testament (the second half of the Bible) each tell a different perspective on Jesus' life and ministry. We will read from all four throughout these chapters, but I would encourage you to read and study each of these four books, which are also called the Gospels, in their entirety.

Luke begins with quite a bit of detail about John (the cousin of Jesus) and Zechariah (John's father). It would be impossible to exclude John's story as intertwined as it is with the life of Jesus. The book of Luke connects the birth stories of John and Jesus in an unexpected way. Later, you will learn that John believed his life's mission was to <sup>17</sup> *"prepare the people for the coming of the Lord."* John and Jesus were not rivals, but each had his place in the unfolding of God's divine plan. They both had many miracles surrounding their births and lives. Let's read some of this story.



## Luke 1:1–25

In the first six verses, we learned a little about John's parents, enough to know that John had everything needed for him to become a very powerful priest in his culture and community. John would have been raised and expected to become a Jewish priest, memorizing the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and all Jewish prayers. John's story continued with his birth announcement in verses 11–17. An Angel of God announced the birth of Zechariah's first and only son. Stop and imagine that. Imagine you are Zechariah, an old and important priest who had served God his entire adult life. He most likely had most of the Old Testament memorized, and he would have been someone everyone looked up to and considered a godly man. John's dad had the privilege of going into the most holy place in the Jewish faith (the Holy of Holies), which was a huge honor and might

only happen once in the life of a priest. Zechariah would have owned and worn the traditional priestly clothes of his people. Highlight these central points in your Bible because they will become important when you encounter John later in Jesus' life.

Take special note of what happens next because it is intriguing. At this moment in the story, Zechariah was at church serving God, and God sent an angel who brought him some awesome news that, in his old age, he was going to be a father! But look at how this godly man responded, <sup>18</sup>*Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."* Did you catch Zechariah's lack of faith? This man of God doubted. He had been a servant of God for his entire life. He had just heard directly from an angel what was about to happen, but he still missed the miracle right before him! Please don't miss this: **age does not define your ability to follow God or your spiritual depth.**

John's parents had never conceived a child of their own. In that day and age, people believed that infertility stemmed from a sin issue (a bad thing they did in their past). The fact that they could not have children until they were past childbearing age would show God's miraculous work through them. This was important because God would be revealed and glorified in doing something that could be credited to Him alone. Zechariah doubted and received a tough consequence from God. God's plan continued, and Elizabeth became pregnant in her old age and gave birth to John. This story is a great reminder that age does not define a person's spiritual depth, and a person's years of going to church does not define their faith.



### Luke 1:26-45 & 58

The book of Luke is filled with details. This does not sound like a story that starts with "once upon a time." Luke gives his readers

very specific details. Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, something happened.

*<sup>26</sup> God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God." He had to tell her not to be afraid because she was terrified, just like any of you would be if this happened to you! <sup>31</sup> "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

I doubt Luke realized when he wrote those words what a profound impact this story would have in changing the course of history! The story he was writing was one that people would die to share with others for thousands of years. However, Luke was not worried about any of that. He just wanted to make sure others knew what he had discovered. He wanted to make sure skeptics would know the truth.

Luke does not tell us much about Mary (the mother of Jesus), but we can be sure that getting pregnant before she was married was not part of her plans or dreams. If you think about this couple, Mary and Joseph probably did not know each other well, or perhaps at all, before they were pledged to be married. At that time, you may have hoped that your arranged marriage would be one of falling in love, having children, and finding happiness. If you hit the jackpot, you would live long enough to meet your grandchildren. The reality was that after a few generations went by no one would remember you. This was the reality for Mary and Joseph. They were born into a dusty little village that meant



nothing to the world. Since Israel was a small, powerless nation, people were born, lived, and died, and their names fell into the dustbin of history. Joseph and Mary were destined to live another random life in a random part of the world. However, God had a different plan, and the time had come for God to enter his creation in an astounding way. Thanks to Luke, we know that God is a God who is involved. We should always remember this: **what seems random to us is purposeful in the mind of God and His plan for mankind.**

Let's think about Mary a bit deeper. Verse twenty-eight tells us an angel spoke to her. Can you imagine how overwhelming that would have been? The angel's message would have been overwhelming even to imagine, let alone happen, yet that is exactly what was laid before this young girl. She must have thought about how Israel had not been an independent kingdom in over 500 years, and now this angel was telling her that she would have a son who would rule over a kingdom that would never end. Who would believe that? Yet Mary's response to what the angel told her was a simple question, <sup>34</sup> *"how will this be?"* Then this young girl, in total obedience, responded by saying, <sup>38</sup> *"I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled."* *Then the angel left her.* This clearly shows that **God is not a God of chance but a God of purpose.**

Mary's response was shocking, to say the least. We never hear of the angel coming back to talk to Mary again. But I bet she wished the angel would have because her life was about to get complicated. She was an engaged teenage girl who would soon be unable to hide her pregnancy and would have to explain what happened, knowing EVERYONE would think she was crazy. I am sure there were days when Mary wished God would send the angel back to her to explain what was happening to her teacher, school bully, or momma.

God's plan continues, <sup>39</sup> *At that time Mary got ready and*

*hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"*

Mary ran to her cousin, whom she could trust. Like us, we run to that cousin or friend we know we can trust when we hit tough times! The Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of God, told Elizabeth what happened without Mary saying anything.

Can you imagine the shock and then relief for Mary? She now had someone she could talk to; someone who would not think she was crazy and who knew she had not been with a man before marriage. So, Mary stayed with her cousin for three months and then returned home. And if you are thinking all of this is crazy, wait until the next chapter when we get to Jesus' birth story!



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Think about your past. Is there anything in your past that you have always wondered why it happened? Could it have been God?
  - In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
  - As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...
- 
-



## CHAPTER 2

# THE BIRTH STORY OF JESUS



Matthew 1:18–25, Luke 2:1–21, John 1:1–18

In the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the birth story of Jesus was told from each authors unique perspective. Each author gives us the story of Jesus through his lens, and as you will learn, they are four radically different men.



Matthew 1:18–25

Engagements in Jesus' time were not like today. In our culture, it can mean many things, but it usually happens in one of two ways. In both cases, people become engaged because they are in love. In case one, they are engaged, move in together, make sure they like living together, and then get married later. The second way comes when two people have found the person they want to be with for the rest of their lives, so they become engaged to start that process. They live separately, start planning their wedding, one day are married, and then begin living together.

In the day and age of Mary and Joseph, neither of the above engagement descriptions explains how it worked for this couple. Joseph's engagement to Mary was a legally binding contract. They could not get out of that contract unless specific things happened. Most men married at 18 years old, and most girls were married shortly after becoming women (around 13). They did not live as long as we do today, so they married much younger. In Jewish culture, you were not allowed to live together before marriage or have any sexual relationship before marriage (Jewish people believed that was God's design).

But Mary was pregnant, and we all know how that happens. So, in verse nineteen, we find that Joseph planned to divorce Mary. Why divorce? It was because they were in a legally binding

contract to get married. It was clear to Joseph that Mary had broken their marriage contract by being with another man. After all, she was pregnant, and Jewish law not only allowed him to break this contract but required it if adultery was proven.

This part of the story tells us that when Mary went to Joseph to tell him what happened, he did not believe her story; he thought she was lying. We know this because he would not have intended to divorce her if he believed her. But Joseph was a good man, so he would do it in a way that would not disgrace her. With these details in mind, do you find God's plan for His Son's entrance into the world curious, even perplexing? Frankly, it is not how I would expect God to enter the world. How about you?

Then we read, <sup>21</sup> *"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* Even before Jesus was born, we see the defined purpose for His life, the reason Jesus came to earth, and why He decided to take on the flesh of man and become like us for thirty-three years. It goes on to say,

<sup>22</sup> *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

It took an angel speaking directly to Joseph for him to believe what Mary said. As a man, it would probably take the same thing for me.



## Luke 2:1-21

I love how Luke starts his description of Jesus' birth. Remember, Luke was a brilliant doctor who set out to write an orderly account



of the events of Jesus' life. This is how he began,

*<sup>1</sup>In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup>(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup>And everyone went to their own town to register. <sup>4</sup>So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup>He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.*

No one would write such a detailed document if they were writing a fake story, especially because he was writing this for a wealthy Roman. If this had been fake, he could have discovered the truth about Jesus and would have easily seen his falsehoods. Therefore, when you read this account, remember that Luke was recording the exact details of what happened. And because I, too, wanted to be certain, I fact-checked these details using other sources. If you still have doubts, there are documents you can use to research this census for yourself. The *Breviarium totius imperii* was written entirely by Emperor Augustus. Jewish historian Josephus also mentions this registration in his writings. In 100 AD, Justin the Martyr said three times that Jesus was born under Quirinius, and he again appealed to the register taken by Rome.

In the remainder of this passage, Luke includes many specific details. This is why most historians believe that one of the people Luke interviewed, one of his “eyewitnesses,” was most likely Mary, the mother of Jesus. Take a closer look at this verse, <sup>19</sup>*But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* This one sentence is why many scholars believe Luke went directly to Mary to learn her version of the story. Who better to talk to than the mother of Jesus? Luke shares facts that only an eyewitness, like Mary or Joseph, would have known. Why does this matter? It is simply another cog in the wheel of understanding Luke's mission of attending to accuracy and detail.



## John 1:1–18

The story John writes begins quite differently than in Matthew or Luke. He focused on who Jesus was before He was born. Let me show you.

*<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup>Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

John's account began by talking about the eternal nature of Jesus as the very "Word of God." Jesus is not just a person but the living embodiment of God. Focusing on how Jesus is God and always was God, John continues to explain the importance of a different John, Jesus' cousin known as John the Baptist. John said this about Jesus' cousin John,

*<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup>He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup>children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. <sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John's saying, "The Word became flesh," makes no sense unless you know that Jesus referred to Himself as the "Word of God" throughout the Bible. Jesus existed before He was born to Mary when He took on flesh and blood as a baby named Jesus.

John then makes a crucial point when he said,

*<sup>15</sup> (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) <sup>16</sup> Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. <sup>17</sup> For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*

John wanted to be certain that the reader would know that Jesus was, is, and will forever be God.

These are three accounts of Jesus’s birth, each from very different yet complementary perspectives. I hope that as we walk through Jesus’s life, you will see how well the gospel writers bring clarity when their books are read together.

Have you ever thought about the blessing Jesus had from having such obedient parents? Stop and think about it. Mary and Joseph were obedient beyond imagination just to reach the birth of Jesus. Their obedience to God’s leading was proven over and over during their lives. Mary and Joseph gave up their dream wedding, had an unexpected pregnancy at a time when that would have meant disgrace for the entire family, and had to marry quietly with no party, no friends, and no send-off for a honeymoon. This would not have been any person’s dream for how to begin a marriage. Then, Mary and Joseph had to travel across the country far from family, friends, and everything familiar at the hardest time possible for them. They had to settle for giving birth in a place where most of us would not let our indoor pets give birth. I want to ask dozens of questions about why God did it this way, but let’s end with a life-changing truth. **The best gift you can give to the people you love (your children, parents, friends, co-workers, neighbors) is a life of obedience to God.**



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Think about the people at work, school, or home. What is the legacy you want to leave?
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

## CHAPTER 3

# THE BOYHOOD OF JESUS



Luke 2:21–40, Matthew 2:1–23

The customary tradition for the Jewish people was to wait eight days before circumcising their male child. It was also customary to wait to name the child. This was because so many children died within the first week of life. After the birth of a son, the mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days, meaning the mother had to remain at home. Then, she had to offer a sacrifice on the fortieth day at the temple. Jewish law also required firstborn children to be taken to the temple to be presented as an offering to God. The ceremonial offering of the child was a way to give back to the Lord your “first fruits” for God’s service. You can see another example of this in 1 Samuel 1:11, 22, 28. You may also want to read Leviticus 12 to learn more about the custom of offering a spotless lamb with a young pigeon or a dove for this ceremony. Joseph and Mary were poor, so they could not afford a spotless lamb, but there was a provision for the poor to offer two pigeons instead. Interestingly, Joseph and Mary could not offer a spotless lamb for Jesus, but later in Jesus’ life, Jesus would say that He was a spotless lamb being offered as the sacrifice for mankind.



Luke 2:21–40

Beginning with verse 25, you read a wonderful part of this story. Imagine this extremely old priest to whom God had told that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah (the future savior of the Jewish people). On this day at the temple courts, hundreds of people would have been shuffling around. Yet, with hundreds of people crowded into the temple courts, Simeon the priest, *<sup>27</sup> Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.* God moved within this old man to go out into the temple courts. Consequently, he was



there when the parents of Jesus brought Him to the temple to conduct the ceremonial offering. Simeon then took Jesus into his arms and was elated that God's promise to him had come true! He got to meet the person his salvation would come through, baby Jesus! Simeon said, <sup>32</sup> *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."* What Simeon just said would have been shocking to hear. Up to this point, God's promise was for Jews only. If you were not Jewish, you were a Gentile. This man of God saw in his vision that Jesus would change the status quo and God's promise would now include Gentiles. This was also important because the early church fought that idea for a long time. The early church upheld the Jewish view that Gentiles were pagans who could never be a part of their faith until God showed them they were wrong as recorded in the Book of Acts. Simeon was not finished with his message, and he said to Mary, <sup>34</sup> *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,"* <sup>35</sup> *so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."* Can you imagine hearing that about your baby boy? He ended his prophecy with a difficult message for a young mother to hear, <sup>35</sup> *"and a sword will pierce your own soul too."* It is possible Simeon was foreshadowing when Mary would stand next to her son and watch him die 33 years from now. Soul piercing, indeed.

Following Simeon's came another prophet, <sup>36</sup> *There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,* <sup>37</sup> *and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.* <sup>38</sup> *Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*

By this point, it must have been clear that Jesus would not be a typical child. Joseph and Mary knew Jesus was special because

of the words angels had spoken to them and the miraculous way Mary became pregnant. However, they must have marveled at what they heard on this day, as they likely had no idea who their son was destined to become. And so, after this encounter with Simeon and Anna, their tiny family returned to Nazareth. This is an important fact because the next event in the life of Jesus may not be what you think.



### Matthew 2:1–12

When did the three wise men visit Jesus? At the stable where Jesus was born, right? That is what every manger scene shows. That is what every Christmas movie depicts. But is that what the Bible says? Bear in mind we are walking through the life of Jesus in chronological order. We are well past Jesus' birth and have not heard or seen any wise men. Does that surprise you? The word "Magi" was originally applied exclusively to members of a priestly caste of the Medes and Persians who interpreted dreams. However, it also included people who seemed to have superior knowledge and ability, including astrologers, soothsayers, and even oriental sages. Here is a question: Would you say these Magi were not led by God? They were following the star God put in the sky for everyone to see. The entire Jewish nation that was supposed to be looking for the Messiah missed this obvious sign from God. However, the Magi, who were not Jewish and not a part of God's covenant, somehow saw and followed God's sign. Interestingly, the men who showed up to worship Jesus were not from the Jewish people. Note the irony in that. We should ask ourselves if we see God in our own culture or choose to overlook God's signs.

I want you to envision a new picture here. These pagans, wise men, or astrologers were following this star and had no idea how long it would take them to get to where they were going.

You may wonder if this was simply three men with three camels on this long journey. If you study, you will find that was highly unlikely. They were setting out on a trip without knowing how long it would take, where it would take them, or what they might encounter along the way. Therefore, they would likely have set out with their slaves, servants, and supply caravans. They would also have had an extensive regiment of guards because they were traveling with very expensive gifts. Many scholars believe they stopped and talked to Herod because they did not want Herod to think they were invading due to the size of their caravan. Babylon and Persia had a long-standing war relationship with the Jewish people in that area. If anyone saw an entourage of this size coming with soldiers, it would have been a little disconcerting to King Herod. So, part of their detour to talk to Herod could have been to ensure he did not think they were invading his territory. This is quite different from the picture painted by the Christmas story we all hear. One further note: The Bible does not say “the baby,” it says <sup>8</sup> “*the child,*” because Jesus was not a baby when the wise men came. (Sorry, nativity set enthusiasts!)

Herod’s chief priests knew exactly where Jesus would be born (see verse 5). Did you notice in the reading that Herod’s experts found that with little effort? It was clear to them that Bethlehem was the place to look. They were able to quote Scripture to make their point. What does this say to you? Their failure to believe was not due to ignorance. Israel knew precisely where the King of the Jews would be born, but it was the Gentiles who worshiped Him first. When they said, <sup>5</sup> “*this is what the prophet has written*”, they admitted that God was the author of Scripture and the prophets were His voice to people. That reference came from Micah 5:2, with the last line from 2 Samuel 5:2 and 1 Chronicles. 11:2 (note these are Old Testament books in the first half of the Bible). Interestingly, they could say at once where the Messiah would be born, but they did nothing with their knowledge. They had all the

information and knowledge to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, yet did nothing with it. In the same way today, people can go to church their whole life and miss the whole point of going. In the same way, people can read the Bible consistently for their entire life and never become a follower of Jesus. Our modern era has more knowledge, more resources, and far more research capabilities than the Jewish people or early church could ever have dreamed of having.

In verse eleven, I noticed something I had never previously considered. If you have ever seen a manger scene, you noticed a newborn in a stable, animals all around, and three wise men. We know from Scripture when the wise men came, but we have no idea how many wise men there were. We only assumed three because they offered three gifts. This is where the idea of three wise men began. However, I think we have missed the most important point in the story of the wise men. When God spoke to them in a dream, they *listened* to God, packed for their journey, and left to find Jesus.



### Matthew 2:13–18

In this passage, we read how God provided for the life of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. This tiny family had a group of God-fearing wise men show up out of nowhere, and what did these wise men do? They freely gave gifts fit for a king right before Joseph and Mary were forced to make an expensive move. Jesus' life will continually show us that when we follow God, He will provide everything we need, not everything we want, but everything we need. As you read verses 16–18, we read that Herod used the information from the Magi to discover the age of Jesus. Then he ordered his men to kill every male child around Jesus' age. Can you imagine the pain it could have caused Joseph and Mary to run away if God revealed to them what was coming? Or the pain of hearing after

you fled that all your friends, family, and neighboring boys were slaughtered because Herod wanted your son dead. That is a pain that I cannot imagine having to bear for the rest of my life. Being the parents of Jesus was not easy. But it does teach us that **when God calls you to do something, God will provide what you need.**

Yet why would God have them flee to Egypt? Could it be because, at the time, Egypt had the most advanced educational practices, and therefore, Jesus would have received the best education possible? We will see later in Jesus' life that He was well-educated and extremely intelligent. Jesus spoke at least three languages, and He could read, write, and teach with clarity. That educational foundation began in Egypt. Again, we see that God blessed this family with exactly what they needed by sending His Son to Egypt, where an excellent education ensured that Jesus would have the skills required to complete His mission on earth.



### Mathew 2:19–23

The obedience of Joseph was amazing. No matter what God called him to do, he did it. No matter where God called him to go, he went. He was about to uproot his family again, and he obeyed. Would you move to another country if God called you to do that? Would you leave your job if God called you to? Would you willingly do something you felt God called you to do even if you did not know what was coming next?

One last thing to point out about young Jesus, Luke 2:40 says, *<sup>40</sup>And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.* Jesus grew up like all of us do. Jesus had to learn things, like we all do. Jesus was just like us with one exception: He was able to do what Adam, the first man, could not do; He remained sinless. Jesus overcame any temptation we have been tempted with, and that is why He

can help you with your temptations, too. If you feel plagued by a sinful behavior or habit you cannot overcome, I want you to know that if you truly seek Jesus, He will help you. Please think about the life application below, pray about the questions, and ask God what your next step is.



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Jesus was blessed with Godly parents who were willing to follow God no matter the personal cost to them. Are you willing to do anything for your family?
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...





## CHAPTER 4

# JESUS' FIRST WORDS



Luke 2:41–52

Do you know what the first words of Jesus were? Often, we read the Bible quickly and without an inquisitive mindset. If, instead, we take a slow walk through every page, we can more clearly see what God has for us to learn. You may even discover that suddenly, the Bible not only comes to life, but it becomes so much more!



Luke 2:41–52

I want to unpack what was happening in the verses because it is easy for us to pick up our Bibles and read something like this without knowing what it means. Let's learn some of the context together before we get to Jesus and His first words. The Jewish Festival of Passover was one of the three annual festivals that Jewish men were required to keep. That meant no matter where your family lived, the man of the house had to travel to Jerusalem for these festivals. For us, this would be similar to an expectation to see mom or dad on their birthday or travel to your parents for holiday celebrations. This expectation was not just a family rule but was required for the entire faith community. Every Jewish man was expected to come to one place and celebrate together. This passage tells us that Joseph had been doing this yearly, indicating the rigid obedience this family had to Jewish law. During this week-long Festival, there were two feasts: a Passover feast and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (for more information, read Exodus. 12, Leviticus 23, Deuteronomy 16). Jewish pilgrims were required to stay at least two days. Passover commemorated one of the miraculous ways God protected the Israelite people in Egypt.

During Passover, Jerusalem would have been bursting with

people. Verse 42 tells us that Jesus was there for a different reason. He was about to come of age, and now was the time he would have been learning what it meant to be an adult Jewish man. At the age of twelve, a boy was prepared for his entry into the religious community, which took place when he turned thirteen. At age thirteen, Jewish boys became obligated to observe Old Testament law. That is when Jewish boys celebrate their Bar Mitzvah. This tradition and obligation predates Jesus and is still practiced by Jewish boys today. Jewish families took seriously the training of the next generation. They took it so seriously that boys began to learn portions of the Law at age five. Under their mother's direction, they also began reading the first five books of the Bible. They were required to study daily. By thirteen, the boys began wearing the Tefillin, which is a little box tied onto the forehead and around the arm. This box held biblical passages. The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) commanded adult Jewish men to bind the Tefillin onto the head and upper arm with leather straps in fulfillment of Deuteronomy 6:8, *You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they should be for a reminder between your eyes*. Tefillin were worn during weekday morning prayers. This practice is still carried on by devoted Jewish people today. By this age, Jesus, or any Jewish boy, was expected to have memorized entire sections of the Old Testament. Boys who wanted to go on to be a Rabbi would need to memorize the entire Torah.

Consider how different our families, our schools, and our communities would be if every parent still took the training of their children in the ways of God this seriously. Have you ever thought about the kind of ancestor you want to be or what future generations will say about you? You will be a spiritual ancestor, whether for good, bad, or neutral. Have you ever considered making a covenant with God, one that says: "I will be a Godly spiritual ancestor and invest spiritually in the generations to come after me?"

Our children and grandchildren are like sponges. As I was writing this, my daughter Addie was in my office with me. She called her grandfather just to talk, and he challenged her to memorize Psalm 23. Addie grabbed one of my Bibles and sat there for a good 30 minutes and practiced until she could do it! Then she called her grandfather back and recited it for him! Grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, friends of the family, what are you doing to disciple the next generation? We must take seriously the example we see here with Jesus. His parents, his community, and his church took seriously the call to train up the next generation, and we must do that as well.

In verse 43, the story gets interesting, Jesus is lost! In that day and age, people traveled in caravans for safety. The women usually went first, and the men followed. Joseph may have thought that Jesus was with Mary, and Mary that he was with Joseph. The caravans were so long that it would take an entire day to look through them. They searched up and down, back and forth, throughout the caravan, and Jesus was not with them. Has anything like this ever happened to you? This happened to our family on at a 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. We were there with our kids, Jenny's sister, her five kids, and Jenny's parents. Jenny left to go back to the car to drop something off and then came walking back a few minutes later. I asked her where Belle was. She thought her mom had Belle. Her mom did not. We found all the kids, and none of them had Belle. This would make anyone freak out, and we were no exception! So, we all split up, and it took a good fifteen minutes to find little Belle. It was awful!

I can only imagine the panicked feeling Jesus' parents had going days without knowing where Jesus was. I am sure they traveled as fast as they could back to Jerusalem to look for Jesus. I can picture them running back toward the temple where they had been days earlier. At long last, Mary saw Him at the temple. Jesus was so advanced in his Biblical training that He amazed the

teachers at the temple. I can imagine Mary crying, listening, and eventually interrupting to say, <sup>48</sup> *“Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”* I love Jesus’ response; I picture Jesus as a young, innocent boy responding with a quizzical look while saying, <sup>49</sup> *“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”*

Since Jesus’ dedication at the temple in Jerusalem, this was likely the second time He had been there. Usually, only the man of the house came to these festivals; the wife may have attended on occasion, but children only when there was a specific reason. Jesus had been growing into consciousness of **who** He was and **why** He was born. Jesus was saying, “The light has come on, and I know my purpose in life.” Reality burst forth from the depths of his childhood unconsciousness as he sat in God’s house, the temple courts.

I love to study the Bible and want to share what some scholars and historians believe happened in this passage. Among the famous doctors and rabbis who were living and teaching in Jerusalem at that time was a man named Hillel. He was a famous Jewish person; he would have been very aged at this time because he lived over 120 years. He was probably the one who was referenced here. His intellectual rival was Gamaliel, a famous Jewish leader who trained Saul of Tarsus. (You might know Saul as the future Apostle Paul.) He, too, was most likely present. Additionally, a famous, rich man named Nicodemus, who studied under Hillel, was also likely there. We will meet Nicodemus again later in the life of Jesus. Historians think with great probability that amongst those “doctors” whom the boy Jesus questioned at that Passover Feast, some, if not all, were these well-known men sitting there.

Keep that in the back of your mind because these men will return later in Jesus’ life and not always in positive ways. Remember that Jesus would soon officially enter the community

of Jewish men. That day at the temple, Jesus showed that He was more than ready to observe Jewish law. Jesus was so absorbed in His preparation that He did not realize His parents had gone home without Him!

There is something else I want to draw out here. Note that it was His mother who spoke to Him. Jesus and Mary must have had a special bond because in this culture, a woman would never have gone near, let alone interrupt important men like the ones sitting around Jesus. Verses 46 and 47 clearly show that His parents sat and watched because they saw Jesus answering and asking questions. Then something, or someone, prodded Mary to jump in, and when she did, there must have been an expression on her face that evidently distressed the young Jesus. Listen to His reply to His mother, “Mom, why were you searching for Me? Didn’t you know I had to be in My Father’s house?” Jesus was saying, “Why did you have to look around? Why didn’t you look here first? Mom, you, of all people, should have known I would be in My Father’s house, where My Father’s work was being done. Where else would I be?”

There is depth here to ponder; Jesus had spent twelve silent, uneventful, and normal years in Nazareth. Jesus grew up in a common home with a father who was a carpenter and a stay-at-home mom. He lived in a home filled with other brothers and sisters. So, perhaps the natural development of the Son of God gradually obscured Mary’s and Joseph’s memories of the birth of their son. Perhaps the hard life in that time jaded them, or maybe hard times and hard circumstances diminished the calling on their son. Or could it be that they had forgotten or come to doubt who Jesus really was?

Think about your life. Perhaps at one time, you were passionate about God. But then life happened, and you walked away from God. Maybe you made some bad choices in life. Whatever the reason, over time, you forget who God called you to be. Time,

rough patches in life, tragedy, sickness, death, and pain all have a way of making us forget the promises that God has made. In this story, we see Mary and Joseph gently reminded by the quiet words of their boy of what had happened twelve years before. This son of theirs, Jesus, was the Son of God. Maybe you need to be reminded by a pastor that God loves you. God wants to be in a relationship with you. God has not abandoned you. Do not let life cause you to forget the truth of who God is! This passage ends like this, <sup>50</sup> *But they did not understand what he was saying to them.* <sup>51</sup> *Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.* <sup>52</sup> *And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.*

This is the last thing we know about Jesus' childhood. Right after His trip to Jerusalem, He went off the grid for around eighteen years. After that visit to Jerusalem, Jesus appears to have lived and toiled as a carpenter in Nazareth with Joseph, Mary, His half-sisters, and His half-brothers. Justin the Martyr, living a century and a half later, speaks of the plows and yokes in Jesus' hands that He had fashioned during that long quiet pause in His life. Why weren't these years spent in Jerusalem and the temple neighborhood? Jesus spent most of His life outside the center of busy life and active Jewish thought. Justin the Martyr spoke to this by saying, "The labors of the workshop, the peaceful valley, under the eye of the Father, was a more favorable sphere for the development of Jesus than the ritualism of the temple and the rabbinical discussions of Jerusalem."

Please understand that your past does not matter. God can still work through you. Jesus grew up in obscurity, but clearly, God the Father used Him to do great things. God can work through you as well. The only question is **will you join God in the purpose He has planned for you?**

Joseph is never mentioned in the gospel story again; the probability is that he died sometime in that period of eighteen

years. However, His mother kept all these sayings in her heart. Just as twelve years before, Mary had treasured up the shepherds' strange story of what the angels had said to them about her child, as she had done when the Magi laid their costly gifts before Jesus in Bethlehem and when Simeon and Anna in the temple spoke their prophetic utterances over the infant. So now His mother, in quiet humble faith, stored up again her son's sayings in her heart.



LIFE APPLICATION

- In a column, write down the names of your kids, grandkids, step-kids, nieces, nephews, and so on. Next to each name, write down one simple way you can invest in each of them that will plant a seed for Jesus. Then begin doing it!
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 5

# JOHN THE BAPTIST



Matthew 3:1–12, Luke 3:1–3

One of the biggest reasons people say they do not go to church is because of hypocrites. So many people have been hurt by people in the church. And then they tend to project that negative image onto God. And trust me, I get it. Years ago, in ministry, I lived in a house the church owned for its pastor. I will never forget mowing my lawn one Sunday and having some leaders of the church show up to rebuke me for sinning like that. I was blown away! How was it a sin for someone who worked every Sunday to mow their lawn on Sunday? See, these leaders applied things from the Bible but in the wrong way and out of context. It was an educational moment for both me and them. The same thing happened to Jesus on more than one occasion and plenty of others in the Bible.

As we journey through the life of Jesus, we will take the time to highlight the lives of other important people who lived during Jesus' time. John the Baptist is one such a person. I mentioned in an earlier chapter that John and Jesus were cousins. Their lives intersected before birth, and they likely had a few other meetings at family weddings or gatherings. We don't see their lives interconnecting again until the beginning of Jesus' ministry. However, John's story began long before that. My goal for us is to come to a deep understanding of the life of Jesus that hopefully will change the way we live our lives here on earth. A part of that involves gaining an awareness of who John the Baptist was and his role in the life of Jesus.

John was just a regular young man who decided to serve God. John the Baptist was someone many of us can relate to. A person wildly popular with one group of people and hated by another. Have you ever felt like that? If so, you have something in common with John. In his day and age, John was known for

drawing massive crowds from all over Israel to hear his hard-hitting prophetic message about repentance. Think of him like Billy Graham, a great religious man whom people were drawn toward. He also believed God called him to be a forerunner for the Messiah who would save the Jewish people. He was a magnet to the common people, but at the same time, he was a lightning rod to the religious leaders of his day. The established Jewish leaders did not like John's message. They did not like the idea that John was out in the countryside baptizing people! The religious leaders wanted to restrict what common people could do; but here was John, a common person, preaching, baptizing, and telling people to repent and turn to God! He was not authorized by the religious leaders to do any of this! The religious authorities in John's day did not like him and wanted to stop what was happening. But no matter what they did, they could not seem to stop this movement.



#### Matthew 3:1–4

We previously learned a little about John's parents. We know that Jesus's mom and John's mom were cousins and pregnant at the same time. We also read that John's dad was a guy named Zechariah. Zechariah was a descendant of the priestly line and was a priest when we first read about him. John's mom, Elizabeth, also came from a priestly line. Elizabeth traced her heritage back to some very important priestly people! Let me explain why these facts matter. Priests wore expensive linen robes and ornate belts, carried an ornate staff, and were highly respected in the community; this heritage would have been predicted and expected for John. Yet, the reality was that John wore a camel hair robe and a simple leather belt. I picture him looking like Chewbacca from Star Wars. By wearing this less-than-priestly garb, John was defining his identity as very different from his priestly heritage. I want you to really think about this. John was

raised to do religious activity in a very specific way. John was raised in a family tradition going back for generations that said you practice religion one way, and anything else is a sin! Everyone can relate to this because everyone grew up in some sort of family that led you toward their version of right and away from their version of wrong. All families have their patterns to keep kids away from what they define as right and wrong.

John's father was serving in the temple as a priest (wearing everything mentioned above) when God came to him to tell him he was going to have a son. Religious activity was the fabric of John's life. For John, this meant he always dressed a specific way, had his head covered, and wore specific clothes in specific places. His priest would have always appeared in ornate robes. John knew the customs and he knew the traditions. However, John chose to dress, speak, and live in a way that broke away from his family's religious traditions.

I know how hard it is for some of us to accept change, but imagine being John's parents. Imagine seeing your son dress like a disgrace to your family. Imagine seeing your son doing things he was not allowed to do according to community traditions you loved and respected. It would be incredibly hard. Unless... Unless John's parents had the same "perspective" as John, a perspective that said robes, head coverings, belts, and so forth were not the point. Maybe John's parents were not tied to traditions but were tied to following God. I find it so interesting that the person God chose to usher Jesus into His ministry was a guy who was bucking all the traditions of the religious leaders in his day. That seems to tell me that God wants us to focus on Him and not on traditions. We will dive deep into Mark 1:1–23 later, but if you want to see what Jesus had to say about this, take a few minutes and read that passage. John and Jesus seemed to LOVE to rock the boat! And as we all know, when you mess with someone's traditions, it is going to get messy! The bottom line is **GOD first, not traditions!**



## Matthew 3:5–12

For those of you who are new to this story, Pharisees and Sadducees were the Jewish religious leaders of that day and age. They were the ones who memorized the Old Testament of the Bible. They were the people who should have seen the signs of Jesus' coming, but they overlooked them because they wanted to retain power and keep their traditions and their authority more than they wanted to follow Jesus. And you will see this again and again as we walk through the life of Jesus. Jesus was the hardest on the Pharisees and Sadducees. Don't let that fall on deaf ears! Jesus was the hardest on the people who grew up in organized religion and missed the point of it! If you are new to church, you might find it interesting that Jesus was harder on His faith's religious leaders than any other group of people. The only group of people with whom you could say Jesus was confrontational with was the religious people, and that was the same group with whom John chose not to identify with. God is not looking for you to be legalistic! God is not looking for you to have all kinds of head knowledge that you do nothing with. God is not looking for you to be religious. God is looking for people to be real. God is looking for people who will simply follow Him. **God is looking for you to simply open your life and heart to Him and learn from Him.**

So, back to John, he saw these religious leaders coming and said, <sup>7</sup> *"You brood of vipers!"* Do you think these religious people liked being called a brood of vipers? What John was saying was, "Hey you church leaders over there. I see you watching me. I see you analyzing me. Your teaching is spiritually poisonous! Your false teachings are killing people!" And if that is not bad enough, John goes on to say, "Unless you religious people produce fruit of God and keep a repentant heart, God is going to cut you down and throw you into the fire." John was saying in a not-so-subtle way, "You are going to hell unless you change!"

So, what do you think this means for people who call

themselves Christians today? It is so easy to look at this group of people in the Bible, whom we could not possibly identify with, and miss seeing ourselves. The people John was talking to were Biblically literate people. This group memorized the entire first five books of the Bible (Torah). They were dedicated to the word of God. They knew the Old Testament far better than I do from an academic standpoint. They had a specific prayer schedule. They were in the synagogue several times a week. They gave their tithe (first 10% of their income) to the synagogue. From our standpoint, they would have been the most dedicated “Christians” of their day and age. But John just said they missed the point of all that Bible study and their years in church. He said they were destined for hell, not heaven. Is this a bit sobering for you to think about?

Verses 11 and 12 were the launching pad for a ministry which would come through a person much greater than John which is why he says, <sup>11</sup> *“After me will come a person who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* People would have been thinking, “What does that mean?” John goes on to clarify that this meant a person was coming who would separate the good from the bad, the wheat from the chaff. Now let us go back to what he said to them in verse 10, that those who do not produce fruit are going to hell. Here again, he said the same thing, except for using wheat kernels in place of bearing fruit. John said, “Whoever does not produce God’s fruit is destined for judgment and hell.” This was a rough message! That wasn’t some warm and fuzzy message to make everyone feel good and go home feeling cozy and good about warming up a seat in church.

John’s message was one of repentance. Every person alive needs to understand that they are a sinner, and they need to repent and ask God for forgiveness. Repentance means you change the direction of your life! It is one thing to understand you sit under a Holy God and need His forgiveness, but it is another thing to redirect your life with that knowledge. There were all kinds of

people around John, regular people who were coming, repenting, and being baptized. There were also religious people coming and judging John and his message. The question is, **which group do you fall into?**

When a Godly person communicates a hard message to you, do you reflect on your life to see if you need to repent and change? Or do you sit, judge, and refuse to change? Do you have so much pride that even when you know that you need to change, you refuse because you do not like the messenger or the message? Pride is honestly one of the hardest things to break in our lives. And pride is what kept these religious people from seeing Jesus.

Before we close out this chapter, I want to let you know that doubt is not bad. If you doubt there is a God, or that Jesus was God, that is ok! God is not afraid of your doubts. God would love for you to be real about your doubts and then simply seek truth because **if God is truth, then when you seek truth, you will find HIM!**



### Luke 3:1-3

Luke a highly educated doctor, was writing about John the Baptist and said, “I am going to report the *exact* details of what happened. In the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius, when Pilate ruled Judea, when Herod ruled Galilee.” I want you to note the specific details. Does that sound like it’s in a galaxy long-long ago and far-far away? Does that sound like once upon a time? Does that sound like a fairy tale? Or does that sound like a guy who was telling people who were alive and knew what was going on to go ahead and fact-check him? If you are inventing a fictional story, you would never pin yourself to something people could use to prove you are lying! Luke would never have said this if he was making up a fake story because the people in that day and age would have known it was all garbage. He just wanted people to know John <sup>3</sup> *went into all*

*the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

God is not calling you to become religious. God does not demand that you become perfect before you become His follower. God does not want a group of people who obey a million laws. God wants real people who will come to Him in their brokenness, admit their sins, and try every day to follow Him a little more.

You can use me as an example. I have not always been a pastor. I worked in a regular job for a long time. It was a terribly slow process for me to learn how to listen to God and to submit to God's call on my life to be a pastor. It was a 29 year process of every day following God a little more. There were times I slept in and did not go to church! There were months when I did not open my Bible once! There were times I never even thought about praying to God. I have been where you may be now. However, I promise you that the more I learned about following God's leading instead of mine, the better life got for me! If you are still breathing, it is not too late to give your life to God. If you feel broken today, there is no better day than today to give your life to God and let him put you back together. If you were raised to be religious, there is no better day to break away from religion and step into a relationship with Jesus than today. Today can be the day when you are made new!



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Ask God to help you see areas of your life where you are unrepentant; then ask Him to forgive you.
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...





## CHAPTER 6

# THE HARDSHIPS IN THE LIFE OF JESUS



Isaiah 53:2–3, Psalm 69:7–12, Matthew 13:55–57

I want to provide you with added perspectives on the life of Jesus. I know every one of us has an idea or a picture of how we think Jesus looked. Right now, as you are reading this, what do you think Jesus looked like? If you grew up in a Caucasian neighborhood, you might think Jesus was a good-looking, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Caucasian man. This may be a news flash for you, but Jesus did not have white skin, blonde hair, or blue eyes! Did you know the Bible said Jesus was not great-looking, that there was nothing that would naturally attract people to Jesus? Does that surprise you?



Isaiah 53:2–3

The Bible paints a less-than-attractive picture of the coming Savior of the world, doesn't it? Jesus was not a handsome man. Jesus did not walk around with the charisma and looks of a male model that would have drawn people to Him. Jesus was of royal lineage, but no one would have known by looking at Him. Jesus was an ordinary guy, nothing special to look at, no distinctive swagger, no larger-than-life personality that drew people in. Hebrews 2:17 said Jesus was like His brothers in all things. Jesus was an extraordinary person in an ordinary body. It is important for us to note that because it can remind us that what is on the outside is not as important as what is on the inside.

This may make some of us pause and ask, “Why would God put His Son in an ordinary body?” The answer is found in 1 Samuel 16:7, *“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”* God wanted to make sure we were clear that

He doesn't care about the outside. What matters to God is the inside. As people living in a culture that makes idols out of beauty, learn a lesson from this. Work on your mind, heart, and soul. I would like to say this especially to the women reading this. In a culture where you are held up to these impossible standards, please know that God created you just as you are, and He loves you just as you are. If the culture says you are not perfect, guess what? Neither was Jesus by culture's standards! Love yourself for how God created you, uniquely and individually.

Jesus did not live an easy or cushy life. Imagine what it was like growing up in His family, growing up with brothers and sisters whom you were never quite like. Imagine growing up in a town where everyone knew your mom was pregnant before she was married. At that time, pregnancy before marriage would have been a horrible, shame-filled label to live with. Imagine growing up in a town where everyone also knew your dad planned to quietly call off the marriage because your mom was not pregnant by him. Imagine the things people said to Jesus growing up as a little boy.



### Psalm 69:7–12

Growing up, for Jesus, would have been hard. Theologians believe this psalm is a glimpse into His life. Does this change the way you view Jesus? I am sure some reading this are adopted or live in blended families, so you understand verse 8 where it says, *<sup>8</sup>I am a foreigner to my family, a stranger to my own mother's children.* It is tough to be different from the rest of your family, and clearly, Jesus was different. If you grew up with siblings, you know how ruthless we can be to each other while growing up. Imagine how hard it would be growing up with a brother like Jesus, who was always good! My older brother was mostly a good kid. He got straight A's, he was on the chess team, and overall listened to our

parents. Then I came along, and let's just say I did everything about the opposite of my older brother. Which is why our little brother was always asked by teachers, "Are you going to be like Justin or Adam?" In other words, are you going to be a teacher's pet, or should I just save us time and send you to the principal's office now? I know it is rough being the little brother of a good person, and my brother was nowhere even close to being perfect, like Jesus.



### RE-READ Psalm 69:7-12

Now take a few minutes and think about growing up in that kind of reality. Maybe some of you can relate to this. Jesus was made fun of; He was dishonored. Jesus felt like an outsider in His own family and town. He was a joke to the people in his town, was mocked by the elders of His church (verse 12), and had to hear drunk people sing drunken songs mocking Him. Can you imagine the pain Jesus felt? I am sure some of you are going through tough situations. Jesus understands, He knows pain, He has been there, and He is there with you no matter what. Jesus will carry you through the hardest of trials in the same way God the Father carried Jesus through His trials. The only question is will **you turn to Jesus in your pain or run from Him?**

Imagine trying to serve God fully and having the elders of your church openly mock you for it! It hurt Jesus to the point where He wept, fasted, and put on sackcloth! I can see Jesus crying as He wandered through His city seeing the sin of so many people who did not care. I can see Jesus crying out and asking God to forgive people as they mocked Him for trying to help others. Jesus knew pain and suffering! Jesus suffered most of His life. It says in Isaiah 53:3, *He was a man of many sorrows... familiar with suffering...* Let that sink in for a minute. Our salvation came at no small price. Can you believe Jesus would voluntarily endure all that for you

and me?

It would be hard to raise someone who always did what was right or to be the sibling of someone who always did the right thing. But it would also have been hard to be Jesus. No one likes a goody two shoes, right? Think about all the people in His community who had no idea He was the son of God, who thought He was just this crazy do-good kid, an illegitimate son of Mary, the boy who was not Joseph's. What about the kids on the playground? We all know how cruel kids and adults can be. We may assume it got better for Jesus as He grew older, but His adult life was not easy. Let's read a conversation of some people in Jesus' hometown.



#### Matthew 13:55–57

This was Jesus' own community saying to the adult Jesus, "Who do you think you are? We know you. We know your dad, mom, brothers, and sisters." They challenged Jesus because they saw him grow up! The people who knew Jesus best did not want to see the reality of who He was. They could not bring themselves to accept that a boy who was raised in their town could be God-made flesh. And honestly, I understand that.

Jesus did not help His image because He hung out with all kinds of sinful people. Jesus chose not to hang out in the synagogue all the time. Jesus did not go to seminary, and He did not hang out with well-known religious leaders. Jesus was constantly with people whom the religious people avoided. Jesus spent time with the kind of people that most church going people would be OFFENDED if they saw their pastor with! Think about it this way. How would you feel if your pastor's great-grandmother was a prostitute, his mom got pregnant before she was married, if one of his closest followers was once demon-possessed, if he hung out with drunkards, and went to dinner parties with the

worst of sinners in your town? Would you be excited to say, “That is my pastor!!!” These were just a few of the reasons it was hard for many people in Jesus’ day and age to say that Jesus was God. Because no one could imagine God doing that. But this is precisely why Jesus said in Matthew 9:12, it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. Jesus said He did not come to call the righteous, but the sinners, and we cannot ever forget that.

Before we continue, I want to give you some added perspective on the writers of the Gospels. If you are new to church language, this refers to a group of books in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I think this brief look into the men who wrote them will help as we read through these books. Hopefully, this will help you understand a little bit about each author and his purpose.

**Matthew:** He was an eyewitness to Jesus’ life. He physically spent time with Jesus. He did not start believing in Jesus until chapter 9 of his book!

- Matthew was one of the final twelve of Jesus’ crew.
- He was a Jewish man who collected taxes for Rome.
- Matthew does not give a chronological overview of Jesus’ life or events.
- Matthew would have been hated by most people in his culture because of his chosen profession.
- Tax collectors were considered terrible sinners by the Jewish people. He would have been looked down on if he dared to walk into a Jewish synagogue.
- He would have been given the cold shoulder by the Jewish people because his job was only done by traitors.

I want that information to sink in. Matthew would have been a person no one really accepted. Yet when it came to Jesus, Matthew was one of Jesus’ closest followers. Do you see the irony? Do you see part of what we talked about earlier with Jesus?

We look at the outside of a person, but God looks at the inside.

While people thought Matthew was a horrible sinner, God looked at Matthew and saw a future leader in His movement. Think about it this way: Matthew's view of Jesus is through the eyes of a tax collector, through the eyes of a sinful man who was considered a traitor, a rat, a liar, a cheater, and a thief by his own people.

**Mark:** We do not know of Mark meeting or traveling with Jesus. There is some debate over Mark's profession, but most scholars believe Mark was a scribe.

- Most scholars believe Mark was a disciple of the Apostle Peter and wrote the book of Mark for Peter. We know Peter did this with other letters. Peter's disciple, Silas, wrote first and second Peter. This all makes sense because Peter was a fisherman, and in that time most fishermen were not highly educated. So, it was unlikely Peter would have been a scholarly writer.
- The book of Mark is a simple book, which makes sense because Peter was a simple man.
- Peter would have been considered to have a lowly career in that culture.

THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY:

Peter's view of Jesus is through the eyes of a simple fisherman. A simple tradesman. An unimportant person with an unimportant job.

**Luke:** Luke was a highly educated doctor who never met Jesus.

- He was born in Antioch and schooled in Rome.
- Luke's book is important to us because he gives us a timeline for Jesus' life. He begins with an orderly, chronological overview of what he learned about Jesus.
- He was a highly educated man writing an account of Jesus' life for Theophilus, a Roman provincial governor, which may indicate Luke had a high social position.

- Luke did not write from the eyewitness perspective that Peter or Matthew had. He talked to people who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life. Luke was like a detective, and he crosschecked and referenced things to make sure every detail was true.

THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY:

Luke's view of Jesus is through the eyes of a highly educated doctor who gathered information from many eyewitnesses.

**John:** John outlived all the other disciples of Jesus. I know people say you should not have favorites, but John was Jesus' favorite! Jesus called John alone *"the disciple whom I love."* (John 21:20)

- John was a fisherman.
- This book was written when John was an old man.
- This book was written long after Matthew, Mark, and Luke; and you can see that John fills in some gaps in those books.
- John wrote this book to ensure the early church had things straight because the early church had started to stray from Jesus' teachings.
- John was reminding the church of what Jesus said they should be doing, teaching, and believing.
- In chapter one, John does a beautiful job of explaining that Jesus is fully God.
- John then takes twenty-one chapters to explain how Jesus was also fully man, which was the problem that Jesus' hometown could not come to grips with.

THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY:

John's view of Jesus is through the eyes of Jesus' most beloved friend.





## LIFE APPLICATION

- Think through your life's hardships. Have you ever thought about how the hardships of your life could be helping you become the person God created you to be?
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

## CHAPTER 7

# JESUS' FIRST RECORDED MIRACLE



John 2:1–12

There are many ‘*if*’ thoughts we may ponder while reflecting on the life of Jesus. These thoughts may be based on past experiences or things we have heard or read. Perhaps you grew up in a somber, less-than-fun church family, so you wonder *if* Jesus had something against fun, *if* Jesus was legalistic, or *if* Jesus did the things you have heard He did. What about miracles? Have you wondered *if* Jesus really did miracles? *If* you have doubts, read on; it might change your mind from no... to maybe... or perhaps a resounding yes.

You might even wonder *if* it is worth the time to read this to learn about Jesus. Have you ever thought about what makes Jesus different from other religious leaders? Every major world religion has something in common, including Christianity. Every leader of every religion in the history of our world has one thing in common: their religious leader died. This includes Christianity because, as you will read later, Jesus died. However, one thing sets Christianity apart from all other world religions. Jesus is the only leader who said He would prove He was God by dying and raising from the dead. Later, you will read about Jesus rising from the dead, coming back to life, and proving His divinity. What sets Christians apart is that they know God did this so that their sins could be forgiven and they could be reconciled to God through Jesus’ sacrifice. No other religion claims what Christianity does. Christianity claims that God loved mankind so much that His only son left heaven and entered His creation. He left heaven to show everyone how to live like Him. Jesus gave His life for all mankind so everyone could receive forgiveness for their sins! Christians believe Jesus defeated the one thing that no one else could: death.

Now, a logical response to that is, how can we be certain

Jesus did that? Well, did you know there are all kinds of firsthand accounts from eyewitnesses who saw Jesus alive after His death? We will review all of those real-life stories later in Jesus' life. Jesus conquered death, something no one in history has even claimed to do. In that action, Jesus proved he was fully God. In that one miraculous action, Jesus supplied a means for us to be forgiven for every bad thing we have ever done so we can be reunited with God! That is what I call good news!

Do you realize miracles are happening around you right now? Are you sitting still? The fact you can sit still is nothing short of a miracle! Earth is spinning on its axis at 1,040 miles per hour. We are also flying through space at an average velocity of 67,108 miles per hour. That means you are moving 87 times faster than the speed of sound as you sit reading this! To top that off, the Milky Way is spinning at the mind-boggling rate of 483,000 miles per hour. Yet, you are sitting peacefully as you read. If that isn't miraculous, I don't know what is! When was the last time you thanked God for keeping us in orbit? I'm guessing never. You've probably never said to God, "God, I wasn't sure we were going to make the full rotation today, but You did it again!" No one does that, but why? Could it be God is so good at what God does that we take it for granted, even the miracles? Here's the thing for most of us: **we already believe in God for the big miracles. The trick is trusting Him for the little ones. Miracles are all around us all the time!**

Look through a microscope, and you will see countless miracles. Trillions of chemical reactions occur in your body every second of every minute of every hour of every day. You are inhaling oxygen, metabolizing energy, and managing equilibrium, which is incredible considering how we are spinning and speeding through space. You are manufacturing hormones, and teenage boys are manufacturing a few too many! Your body naturally fights against things that hurt you and heals itself! Your heart will beat a hundred

thousand times today! Your blood will flow through about sixty thousand miles of arteries, veins, and capillaries. If you laid them end to end, they would circle the earth two and a half times. If your personal genome sequence were written out, it would be a three-billion-word book. The NIV Bible has 726,109 words, so your genetic code is the equivalent of about four thousand NIV Bibles! If your genetic code were an audio book and you read one double helix per second, it would take a century to put you into words. There never has been, and there never will be, anyone like you. And that is not a testament to you; it is a testament to God who created you. You are a miracle handmade by God! Yet so many people say to me, “Pastor Adam, I have never experienced a miracle.” Let’s be clear: everyone has experienced a miracle. **The question is not have you seen a miracle? The question is, are you willing to see a miracle?**



### John 2:1–12

Jesus started His recorded miracles by becoming a winemaker. He literally transformed jugs of water into the best wine ever. One of the reasons I love reading the Word of God is that there is so much in there that we would say is impossible. We need to come to understand that **with God, nothing is impossible!**

This passage tells us that this was the first sign, or miracle, through which Jesus revealed His glory. The Bible does not tell us how or when Jesus realized He could do miracles, but I am certain it was not at this wedding feast. We do not know when Jesus realized that He was God or that He could do miracles. If you look at His mother’s prodding in this passage, it is pretty clear she knew He could do the impossible, or she would not have said what she did! I am not trying to add anything to the Bible, but John states that Jesus did far more than he recorded. John 21:25, *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were*

*written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.*

Jesus is at a wedding party with His mom and disciples. Weddings in that period of history lasted for a week. In the story you read, they are on day three of this wedding party and a problem arises. <sup>3</sup> *When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."* <sup>4</sup> *"Woman, why do you involve me?"* Jesus replied. *"My hour has not yet come."* <sup>5</sup> *His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."* I would bet some of you think that when Jesus called His mother 'woman,' it was disrespectful. However, in that time this would have been a term of endearment for His mother. It was a form of addressing a female you loved. Children also notice that even Jesus did not get a pass when it came to respectfully obeying His mother. She made it clear He was to fix the wine shortage. The Bible clearly says we are all to listen to our mothers and fathers. But here is a question you may not have asked. Why would Mary have cared enough or even have been aware of a wine shortage in the first place?

The Bible does not tell us who this married couple was, but it was either friends of Jesus or, more likely, one of Jesus' sisters who was getting married. Many scholars believe it was Jesus' sister because Jesus' mother was so concerned about the wine shortage, she had the inside scoop, and she was able to order the servants to do whatever Jesus said to do. Imagine running out of anything at your wedding. It would be embarrassing. But why does Mary tell Jesus to fix it? Did Mary expect Jesus to do a miracle because she had seen Him do things like this while growing up? Did Mary do this because she knew Jesus always did the right thing? Did she go to Jesus because Joseph was gone and he was the eldest son? We don't know, but clearly, Mary knew Jesus would do something. Jesus' response seems odd, <sup>4</sup> *"why do you involve me, my hour has not yet come."* Why did He say that? The best explanation I have read supported the thought

that Jesus knew once His public ministry started, it meant the slow march toward His death. Listen to Jesus' response through that lens. Can you hear the plea in His voice, "Mom why did you tell Me to do that! Mom, now I must act! Now you have started the clock ticking. You don't understand that once I start, there is only one ending for Me." When Jesus said, <sup>4</sup>"**why do you involve me**", we see Jesus in His humanity realizing that His mom had just started the slow march to His death. Can you see this? The human Jesus had been laughing, dancing, and having fun at His sister's wedding, and then suddenly, the reality of what was coming hit Him. This fills my eyes with tears every time I think about it.

Jesus, being obedient to His mother, took over 150 gallons of water and turned it into around 800 bottles of wine! In addition to owning restaurants, my little brother is a Sommelier, which is a fancy way to say a professional wine taster. His whole adult life has been spent collecting wine, and it has taken him years and years to collect as many bottles of wine as Jesus is about to make in a matter of seconds. Can you imagine the faces of the servants when Jesus tells them to go and present it to the master? It is doubtful that any of the servants knew Jesus or believed that He could do miracles. So, they presented the wine, and let me remind you of this once again: running out of wine might seem like no big deal to you. However, it would have meant public shame in that day and age. This is the **first** miracle of Jesus. Why? This miracle was not about saving a life or healing someone from near death. **This miracle was about saving face!**

Does that teach you something about God that you might have missed? Jesus was making himself known to the world. This was God, who became flesh and blood, and the first sign He gave of His divine nature was turning water into wine. In the scheme of life, saving someone from public shame or embarrassment seems insignificant as far as problems go, right? This should show us how much God cares about the tiny details in our lives. God is not

with you only for massive things. Here is the point: **If it is a big deal to you, it is a big deal to God.** That is who God is.

Notice what happens next. Jesus is at the wedding party. This is day number three and the master of the banquet said, <sup>10</sup> *“Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink.”* The word for ‘too much to drink’ in the original language was *methysko*, and it more literally means drinking to the point of inebriation. That means people were drunk, and Jesus gave them 800 bottles of wine. I am not saying it is acceptable to do anything to excess or that it is acceptable to get drunk. The Bible is clear that it is wrong to be drunk, but, for some reason, Jesus chose to meet these people right where they were.

Can I suggest that before judging people, we need to understand something. God is the judge, not us. God gets to choose how He is going to draw people to him. Too many Christians are fixated on what they consider sin, and because of that, they miss the glory of what God is doing right in front of them. Christians need to understand we are all sinners and stop judging. We all need God, and those who are sinning need God! And if God chooses to meet us, or others, amid their sin, that is good! They were out of wine, and God decided to give them the best wine they had ever tasted! Here is the point: **When we are running on empty, we need to understand that God can fill us up.**

When we are running on empty, Jesus shows up and does what only He can do; He fills us up! I don’t know all the different situations you are in today, but God does, and you are right where God wants you to be, even if it is not where you want to be. What are you out of? Time? Love? Money? Energy? Hope? What has run out in your life that you need God to refill? What do you think? Do you think God is still performing miracles today?

Here’s what’s interesting: everyone wants a miracle, but no one wants to be in a situation that necessitates one! So, let’s make

sure we read this story right. There would have been no need for a miracle *if* there had not been a problem. *If* the wine had not run out at the wedding, there would have been no need for this miracle to happen. Sometimes the way God chooses to do a miracle might not align with how or what we want Him to do!

It is also possible that this week God will nudge you to participate in a miracle in someone else's life. Maybe today, you will be prodded to take someone to lunch, pay for someone's gas, send a letter to a friend who is no longer a friend, or serve your wife, husband, or parents. Water is two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. It is the most basic chemical compound we have. Isn't it amazing that the most basic chemical compound was used for Jesus's first miracle? This miracle reminds us that God does not need much to do the impossible. After all, He created all of us out of nothing! If God can do that with water, what can He do with you? What could He transform in your life, or what could He do through you? Are you willing to step out in faith and follow Jesus today, no matter what He asks? All of you are one **God-sized** idea away from changing the world!



### LIFE APPLICATION

- Take time to examine your life for places where God has performed miracles. Thank God for those blessings. Ask God to use you to be a miracle for someone else this week.
  - In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
  - As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...
- 
-





## CHAPTER 8

# CLEANSING THE TEMPLE



John 2:12–25

Have you ever struggled with anger? Do you think anger is sinful or wrong? As a young man, I struggled with anger issues. I cannot tell you how many times I slammed my door shut or how many times I **BLASTED** the soundtrack to the Last of the Mohicans to protest my parents' punishment. I had anger issues and did not know how to show it properly.

Throughout the Bible God himself gets angry, and it always stems from un-holiness. Anger is not sinful, if it is righteous anger. What you are about to read is anger caused by people who should have known better but acted in a way that brought dishonor to God the Father. The result? Jesus was angry, righteously angry.



John 2:12–25

When I think about this passage, it makes me smile because of what Jesus did, which might sound odd. But you see, it makes me think about people today. So many people are looking for a reason to avoid going to church. If Jesus were to come to a church near you and act like this, I would bet that next Sunday, the crowd would be a lot smaller. The problem for many of us is that we do not want to see who we really are or how we really act. Therefore, we don't want to see Jesus for who He really was. In this passage, you have people who spent their entire lives in synagogue behaving in a way they had come to believe was not only right but also good! I can hear them asking who Jesus thought He was to come along and suggest or, even more shocking, demand that they stop doing something they were trained up to believe was right in their own eyes and good in the eyes of God! Do you see the picture? No? Let me keep painting it, <sup>13</sup> *When it was almost*

*time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.* I want to ensure we all know what this means when it says Jesus was going to Jerusalem for Passover.

Passover is the first of the seven annual festivals the Jewish people celebrate and is considered the foundational feast upon which the other feasts were built. Jewish people have celebrated Passover every year since the time of Moses. Think about that! For almost 3,500 years, our Jewish brothers and sisters have been celebrating something. What you might ask, well rewind in history over 3,000 years. By that point the Jewish people had been living in Egypt for over 400 years (Exodus 12:40). The time had come for God to fulfill His covenant with a man named Abraham and bring the Israelites back to their homeland as He had promised (Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–21). God then picked Moses to bring his people from Egypt back to Israel. God spoke to Moses in a desert through a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). It was there that God revealed to Moses that He was going to rescue his people from slavery, and He was going to do this through Moses (Exodus 3:7–8).

As you keep reading through Exodus, you find this didn't go well. In Exodus 11, God pronounced a harsh consequence on Egypt because they would not let the people go. God proved his divinity in a way that no magician in Egypt could replicate. At midnight, the Lord was to pass through the entire land of Egypt and kill the firstborn of every home. Let that sink in. Everyone was about to lose their first-born child, but God also supplied a way to prevent this from happening. If the family killed a lamb and wiped some blood over their doorpost, then the angel of death would pass over that home (Exodus 12). Hence, why it is called Passover, a time when God's Spirit would *pass over* if they followed His instructions. Since the Pharaoh of Egypt was worshiped as a god, a god's son, the Pharaoh's son was about to die. Additionally, all Egyptians who worshiped the Pharaoh would

see their first-born son die if they did not do what God said to. With this final plague, God would dramatically set His people free from the bondage of Egypt. In Exodus 12:14, God commanded that Passover be observed as a memorial forever.

This was why Jesus was in Jerusalem. As we just read, this feast had been observed for a long time before Jesus entered the picture. A few centuries before this passage, we can learn in Jewish history that a somewhat traditionalized Passover service had emerged. The ritual Passover service was called the Seder, which comes from the Hebrew word meaning “order.” It prescribed the traditional order of the Scripture readings, prayers, symbolic foods, and hymns in the Passover service. The basic order of the Passover Seder remains today much as it was during the time of Jesus, even though the service continued to be embellished with more songs and traditions up through the Middle Ages.

Several important facts must be understood concerning the holiday feast of Passover.

- There was only one Passover in history. This event occurred when the Lord passed through the land of Egypt and executed judgment. Every observance since then has been a memorial commemorating that single event.
- Passover is an ancient feast that spans some thirty-five centuries of human existence. This festival forms the primary background for understanding the events of the Upper Room, the symbolism of Communion, and the meaning of Jesus’s death.
- Passover holds great distinction among the religious feasts of the world. Passover is the oldest continually observed religious feast in existence today. It is still a strong, cohesive force within the fabric of the Jewish community and culture.

One last thing, in about three years Jesus will go back to Jerusalem during Passover for a vastly different reason. He will return to be crucified and become that sacrificial lamb for

all humankind.

As we know from earlier in Jesus' life, this was not His first time in the temple. He was at the temple as a baby when Simeon and Anna prophesied about Him. Jesus was at the temple as a young boy, and He astounded the Bible teachers and scholars of the day with His wisdom and knowledge. In this passage, Jesus is back at the temple as a fully grown man.

Do you know what Jesus' profession was before going into ministry? He was a carpenter, but not like a carpenter today. If you have been to Israel, you know that every ancient building was made from stone, not wood. Hebraic scholar James W. Fleming said this: "Jesus and Joseph would have formed and made nine out of ten projects from stone either by chiseling or carving the stone or stacking building blocks." Another reason why it is most likely that Jesus and Joseph worked with stone was because Nazareth was only three miles from the ancient town of Zippori. During the first century, Zippori was developing at a rapid rate under the reign of Herod Antipas and would eventually be called "the jewel of all Galilee" by Jewish historian Josephus. Herod's massive beautification project would have required the help of every available and skilled carpenter, likely including Joseph, in the surrounding area. Joseph would have been in the perfect location to commute to work because halfway between Nazareth and Zippori was an enormous rock quarry.

That is why later Jesus will refer to himself in Luke 20 in terms like <sup>17</sup>*I will be the stone the builders reject*, or *the cornerstone*. In 1 Peter 2, we are called to be <sup>5</sup>*living stones*. Why does any of this matter? Look at verse fourteen, <sup>14</sup>*In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves*. There is nothing wrong with what was happening in this part of the verse. This is what God demanded in the Old Testament. People had to make sacrifices based on the kinds of sins they committed. That is how the sacrificial system worked, which God had put into place. Jesus

was not getting mad about that. You might think the problem is with the word “selling” because you should not sell things in church, but selling is also not a problem. Jerusalem was packed with somewhere between 300,000–400,000 pilgrims for Passover. They had traveled from all over the country to be there, so it was not possible for them to travel from far and wide with their animal sacrifices. Therefore, many animals or birds had to be purchased locally.

The problem enters the picture with the second part of verse which said, <sup>14</sup> *and others sitting at tables exchanging money*. They had money changers because Gentile money could not be used at the temple due to the graven images on it. The priests had found a way to skim some extra money from the people. If they made a ‘holy temple’ currency that everyone had to use, guess who set the exchange rate? Who would you guess always came out on top? The priests made a nice profit from the people coming to atone for their sins. Do you see the problem now? The problem was not what they were doing but that over time, they allowed their hearts and their purpose to become corrupt. They had allowed corruption to creep into God’s house. Sounds awful, right?

This happens in our lives all the time. We think I can watch this TV show or movie, and it won’t affect me. Then over time, it does. Or we drink this, smoke that, but then it’s not enough. So, we shoot up, and our once-in-awhile becomes every weekend, and eventually, addiction becomes a reality. Does that seem like a severe analogy? Well, what about gossip? We allow it in our lives because it doesn’t hurt anyone, but then it does. It hurts you. Maybe for you, it is buying something to make yourself feel better, but over time, you look back at a mountain of debt and wonder where it came from. Or you eat ice cream because it makes you feel happy, but then over time you look down and wonder where your toes went. Things can start out with a good purpose, but then over time, if we are not careful, we can lose our

way. Some of you could say this is the story of your marriage. It started out great, but now you feel distant and disconnected. Are you thinking about getting a divorce? God wants you to hear this: there is still hope! If you will allow God to refocus you, things can change! The question for all of us today is, **am I willing to be as zealous for God as I am for \_\_\_\_\_?**

In that blank, fill in your greatest passion: sewing, football, your children, grandchildren, career, spouse, etc. What are you honestly most zealous about? What are you most passionate about? What does everyone know you are the biggest fan of? What would everyone who knows you say you are obsessed with? What consumes you? Because you are about to see what Jesus was consumed with.

*<sup>15</sup> So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup> To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."*

Jesus was passionate about the name and reputation of His Father. Jesus could not stand the idea that people would turn His Father's house into a market, a place to profit from other people. Have you ever thought about what are you zealous about and why?

A childhood friend of mine is a stone mason. His name is Tim. Tim is a BIG dude, about twice as wide as most guys, he could bench over 400 pounds, and he leg pressed an unreal amount in High School. Tim was recruited by the University of Michigan to play football and started as a freshman. Tim is now a stone mason, and he is one guy you would not mess with if you saw him. Why do I share that? Have you ever wondered what Jesus looked like? I would bet most of us picture Jesus as meek and probably slender. However, Jesus was probably a very strong man

with a very powerful build. He would have had to be, or how do you think Jesus could have endured the end of His life if not for the massive and powerful build that being a stone mason gave him? If an everyday, normal-sized guy is going crazy and turning tables over, people will take notice, but not everyone will run. Yet, if someone built like an NFL football player goes crazy, everyone gets out of their way.

In this passage, Jesus made a whip out of cords and then released and scattered the animals. Can you imagine the chaos of cows and sheep suddenly running all over and breaking things? Can you imagine Jesus, with a whip in hand, turning his attention toward the people, walking with it toward the table of money changers? Can you imagine their faces when he flipped their table, and the money flew everywhere? Think about the fear and chaos when He yelled at them, “GET OUT OF HERE!” Can you imagine the shock of being Jesus’ disciples and seeing this play out before your eyes? What has consumed Jesus? I am sure some of them wondered if they should stop Him. Maybe try to talk Jesus down off the ledge. The Bible says in verse 15 that Jesus drove everyone out. Remember, the temple was packed because hundreds of thousands of people were in town for Passover. They came to this one place, and Jesus drove everyone out of the temple courts. Jesus stopped everything. Why?

*<sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”* Jesus, who loved God, who grew up loving the temple, loving the house of God, came back as an adult. What he saw going on tore Him apart. It consumed Him, and He said, “This stops now!” Jesus could not help but be moved into action. Here is the point: **Anger is not a sin IF anger comes from a consuming passion to honor God.**

The problem is that we often get angry because someone does something we do not like. Our anger is about us, not God. Jesus was angry, and it was righteous anger. Jesus’ anger stemmed from



seeing the direction of the temple going astray. Jesus was angry because the people were not following God's intended purpose. This should make anyone in a church today ponder if we have slipped away from God's purpose for our church. In Matthew 28, Jesus clearly stated our purpose is making disciples. Have we slipped? Has the church at large moved its focus to other things? Have we forgotten the commands of God as they did in this passage? **What are we focused on today?**

Jesus was zealous for God's name and reputation and did not want anything to damage that. Jesus did not want anyone to think that the selling of animals and exchanging of money had anything to do with a personal relationship with a real and living God. The problem Jesus saw was that people were more concerned with the marketing of a religion than a vibrant relationship with God. Does that sound like part of the problem in the church today? How easy it is to turn what is meant to be a living relationship with a living God into a dead, lifeless ritual and religion. What makes your blood boil more, someone damaging your reputation or God's? What consumes you? Jesus was consumed with God's name, God's fame, and God's glory.



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Write down the things you are most passionate about then look over that list and ask, "What consumes me, what is most of my time devoted to, what is most of my talent devoted to, where do I spend most of my treasure?"
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...



## CHAPTER 9

# A NIGHTTIME LOOK AT JESUS



John 3:1–14

Every day is full of choices. Some of those choices we are proud of, and others not so much. We can look back over our lives with 20/20 vision and see things we wish we had done differently. Our mistakes stand out like a sore thumb. It is easy for me to look back over my life and see all my mistakes. Many of those mistakes were made because I did not have the right perspective in life. Like when I thought it would be a GREAT idea for me and my friends to fill the trees of one kid's house with toilet paper for three weeks straight. On the fourth week, we figured he would try to catch us, so we placed boulders across his driveway so he would not be able to chase us in his car. I will never forget that night as we laughed and filled the trees around his house with toilet paper. Then we saw the garage open. We heard his father's brand-new muscle car start. We heard him peel out of the garage. We laughed because we KNEW he would see the rocks and stop. He did not. We stood in shock as we heard the car crash into the rocks. Then we ran. We hoped we would not get caught. Then, around midnight, the cops showed up at my parent's house asking for me. I was busted. Looking back, it was a VERY stupid idea, but at the moment, I didn't have that perspective. I needed someone to help me see how bad my choice was. And that same is true in our story from the Bible in this chapter. But there is good news: **A relationship with Jesus will make you NEW!**

2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* Notice it doesn't say, "anyone who **believes** in Jesus." It says, *"if anyone is in Jesus."* The Bible tells us that Satan and his demons believe in Jesus. They know who Jesus is, yet they choose to rebel against Him. Belief is not the key. The Bible makes it clear that there is

more to a relationship with Jesus than just believing. Believing is a step, but it is not the end goal. We may say, “Jesus, you are my Lord and Savior, but my finances are my business.” We say, “Jesus, forgive me, but business is business, and I am doing what it takes to get ahead.” That is not being **in** Jesus. Saying those kinds of things means you are partially surrendered to Jesus. But when you are **in** Jesus, fully given to Jesus, you will surrender your life to Jesus. That is what the Bible means about being made new. This can happen to any of us. It happened to me!

Let me give you an example of how this played out in my life. A few winters ago, I went skiing with my wife’s family, and they told us we would be meeting some old friends on the slopes. One of those friends had also been a friend of my older brother in high school. And let’s just say I was anything but kind to him back in high school. The first thing he said to me was, “Now I know where I can return the living room set.” Why? Well, in high school, we set an entire living room up on his parents’ front lawn one night, complete with furniture, rugs, end tables, lamps, you name it, and it was there. Kenny and his family spent the weekend with us and even went to my church to listen to me preach. After that weekend, Kenny said, “I cannot believe you are the same Adam I knew. You were so bad! I cannot believe how different you are!” Kenny didn’t understand that I was not the same Adam he had known because Jesus had made me new! Jesus can make you new as well! And the great news is that God accepts you as you are, but God loves you enough not to let you stay where you are today. There is always a next step for a follower of Jesus! Jesus never stops making us new.

We will read a real-life story about a man named Nicodemus. You might remember that name from earlier in Jesus’ life. When He was a boy at the temple, with all those scholars talking with Him while His parents thought He was lost. Remember that many scholars think Nicodemus was one of those men there who was

amazed by young Jesus. Nicodemus was a very important Jewish leader. He was a Pharisee, meaning he was in the religious elite of his day and age, and he knew the Old Testament very well. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, which meant he was an elite ruler within the hierarchy of the Jewish people. He was also a religious master of sorts because he was called “Israel’s teacher.” So, this man was one of his time’s most religious, spiritual teachers. You might liken him to the Pope, Billy Graham, or Mother Theresa. Nicodemus was from a religious group that meticulously followed 613 different religious laws!



### John 3:1–21

Nicodemus went to meet with Jesus at night because it would have been inappropriate for someone with his standing to meet with someone like Jesus. Jesus was shaking up the old order of how people like Nicodemus operated in faith and life. But something about Jesus drew Nicodemus in. They met in the dark of the night, and Nicodemus said, <sup>2</sup> *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”* This intellectual, religious leader admitted that Jesus must have been from God, not because he knew him personally but because there was no other way he could explain what Jesus had been doing.

Jesus gave what could be considered a weird response when He said, <sup>3</sup> *“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”* Nicodemus replied, <sup>4</sup> *“How can someone be born when they are old?”* Nicodemus asked. *“Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”*

Nicodemus took Jesus literally and said that it was not possible. Nicodemus didn’t understand; it made no sense to him. Remember, Nicodemus knew the Old Testament like the back of his hand, and he could not figure out how this aligned with what

he had been taught. Nicodemus was thinking of all the religious laws he had lived out daily, and he could not see how this agreed with any of them! The problem for Nicodemus was that his Jewish upbringing and training was all about what you did to earn your way to God. Yet, Jesus was saying there was no way to earn your way to eternity! **Jesus said the only way to enter eternity is by being born again!**

There was something beyond being baptized as an infant, more than being circumcised on the eighth day, and more than just going to a religious service weekly. It took more than just being a good person to get into heaven. Jesus continued in verses 10–15, saying, “Nicodemus, you are the best teacher in the land, and you don’t get it! Nicodemus, your mind is thinking about this from a purely human point of view! Nicodemus, you’re forgetting to add God to the equation!” This is why Jesus said, <sup>5</sup>*“Very truly, I tell you no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and spirit.”* Jesus is talking about a spiritual birth. Which is why He said, <sup>6</sup>*“flesh gives birth to flesh.”* In other words, we marry, we have kids and our <sup>6</sup>*“flesh gives birth to flesh.”* But Nicodemus needed to learn that only <sup>6</sup>*“spirit gives birth to spirit.”* When we accept Jesus, the Spirit of God washes over us like a second birth. That is why baptism is not a direct route into heaven! God is not trying to give us a better life or trying to help us improve our lives, but He truly gives us a new life. God is not asking you to turn over a new leaf but to experience a new life.

To be a part of the kingdom of God, to be a part of God’s family, you cannot work your way there. You need to be spiritually born again. We are all physically born. But Jesus said, “If you’re born once, you die twice. You will die a physical death, and then ultimately, you’ll die a spiritual death.” The good news is that we can be born twice. When you are born twice, you are born through physical birth, and then you’re spiritually born anew! You die once by a physical death, but spiritually, you will live forever

with God in heaven. It is not by your power, by your strength, or by your religious effort. Religious behavior can make you nice, but only Jesus can make you new!

Listen to the most famous passage in the entire Bible, which comes from this passage, *<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Nicodemus learned that he had to accept the son of God, Jesus, as his Savior to enter heaven. Think about the weight of that. This top-notch church leader learned that obeying all the 600+ laws was not his ticket into heaven. He had to learn that heaven is our destination through Jesus alone.

Jesus concluded His conversation with Nicodemus with these words, *<sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.* And then Nicodemus left.

This story reminds me of a TV show that my wife hates but that I love, *Barn Wood Builders*. This show is about a guy who finds old farm barns, carefully disassembles them, transports them to a person's dream location, and transforms an old barn into a modern dream home! My wife does not like this show because they never show the entire finished home! She wants to know the ending; I want to imagine the ending. This passage does not tell us how Nicodemus responded or if he became a follower of Jesus. Did he walk away and go home? Did he laugh at Jesus? Did

he stay and debate with Jesus? Did he run out and tell everyone Jesus was really the Messiah they were looking for? We do not know. But the good news for all of you who are like my wife, Nicodemus will appear in the Bible again in John 7, where he somewhat defends Jesus. Then we see him again years later in John 19 after Jesus' death.



### John 19:39–42

Nicodemus reappeared at the end of Jesus' story at his burial. None of his closest friends were present, but this member of the Jewish elite was wrapping the body of Jesus for burial. Everyone was gone, but Nicodemus remained. Nicodemus was made new to the point that he was willing to do what no one else would do: prepare Jesus' body for burial. He was about to get a first-hand view of what Jesus said to him back in John 3 about being raised up! In three days, Jesus came back to life and gave Nicodemus and all of us who believe today eternal life through Him!

The story of Nicodemus teaches us that being a moral man who followed all the rules is not the point. He was doing everything right in the eyes of his people, culture, and faith. But Jesus said, "Nic, that isn't enough; that isn't what it takes to get to eternal life!" The life of Nicodemus teaches us that it is all right to have doubts, questions, and misunderstandings about anything. However, we must decide what we think about Jesus. Will we stop at mental ascent or truly come to *know* Jesus and become a true follower of Jesus?



### LIFE APPLICATION

- Jesus challenged Nicodemus to open his eyes, take his eyes off of himself, and focus on God for a moment. Jesus is asking you to do the same. If God can use a broken, sinful person



- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 10

# THE WOMAN AT THE WELL



John 4:1–42

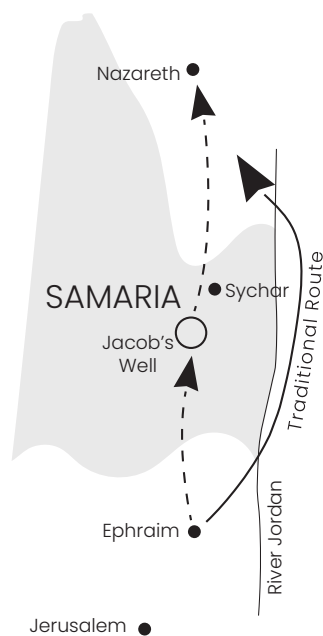
One moment can change a life. One conversation can shift a person's entire trajectory. One unexpected encounter can open a whole new world. This was the case for a woman who was simply going to a well to get water. She thought her day would be as normal as any other, but one interaction with Jesus changed everything.



John 4:1–9

Jesus set out to travel north from a region called Ephraim toward Nazareth. Any faithful Jewish person who wanted to make this journey would travel eastward first, then along the Jordan, and then head back west to Nazareth. No dedicated follower of the Jewish teachings of that time would have taken the direct route straight north, depicted by the dotted lines. But that is exactly what Jesus did.

The logical question is, why? Why would the Jewish people take a longer route that is also a more difficult path? Jewish people took the longer route because of prejudice: they wanted to avoid the Samaritan people. Jewish people would travel almost twice the distance on a much hotter and more uncomfortable road just to avoid the Samaritans. The Samaritan people had been brought in by the Assyrians to populate the area after they had removed the Jewish population. The Samaritans only



accepted the five books of the Jewish Scriptures and intermingled the Law of Moses with local idol worship. There were countless reasons why the Jewish people despised the Samaritans. There were plenty of reasons why Jesus should not talk to this woman based on His upbringing. It was no wonder why she was surprised when Jesus addressed her.

Jesus cut right through ignorant, narrow-minded prejudice and went through Samaria. In verse 5, Jesus arrives in the countryside of Sychar; and we learn that Jesus is hot, tired, and thirsty. We read *<sup>7</sup>When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?”<sup>8</sup>His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.*

Jesus was resting outside of town near a well not used by the townspeople but was a countryside well for the farmers and travelers. This woman did not choose to get water at the town’s well but instead walked miles outside of town to get water at noon. Normally, women would have filled their water jugs early in the morning and late in the day. They would never have filled their water jugs at noon when it was the hottest point in the day. To do this at midday would have been foolish. Yet, this is where we find the Samaritan woman, likely because she was looked down upon by everyone in her town due to her past marital choices. She was drawing water at the worst possible time at the furthest location possible to avoid the other women. She was doing it now because she was an outcast in a society of people considered outcasts by the Jewish people.

Imagine being this woman. Imagine if you were an outcast in a society of outcasts. That was her lot in life. Remember that Jesus was a Jewish man sitting at the well, and He asked for a drink. *<sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.* She said that because according to the Jewish Law, Jewish teachers (rabbis) were instructed to

never talk to a woman in public, not even to their wife or sister. The rabbinical law said, “It is better to burn the law than to give it to a woman.” In that culture, women were regarded as unable to understand complicated subjects like theology and religion.



## John 4:10–15

Jesus treated her with respect. He talked with her even though custom would have forbidden it. He asked her for a drink even though custom would have forbidden that. Jesus cared more about her than tradition or religious custom. Jesus meant it when he said, *“I did not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.”* (Matthew 9:13, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:32). Jesus knew by the fact she was here at this time of day that she was a sinner. And Jesus did what He always does. He seized the moment and transformed a life. Here was a thirsty woman coming to draw water, and He said to her, <sup>10</sup> *“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked of him and he would have given you living water.”* Jesus said the “gift of God” is here, and He wants to give you His Spirit to satisfy what you are craving. Jesus said, “If you knew about the Holy Spirit and who it is that is talking to you, you would have asked Him for this living water.” But this woman misunderstood what Jesus meant.

She thought Jesus was offering a water supply that would be continuous, like most people in the developed world experience daily. We have water piped into our homes so that water is always available to us. When we feel thirsty, we drink from the never-ending water piped into our house. This is what Jesus was saying, not in a physical way, but in a spiritual way. Jesus was offering her the Spirit of God to be available when needed. Many Christians never seemed to learn this truth. Too many Christians do not realize that there is a place where their inner thirst, hunger, desire, and restlessness can instantly be met. Anyone who accepts Jesus

has a refreshing, invigorating, exciting life available to them. Life like that has the qualities of love, joy, and peace. The point is that **Jesus is the wellspring of eternal life!**

This woman was struggling with this water analogy. Something was inhibiting her understanding. Jesus knew what it was, and He knew He had to help her deal with it. This is where it can get awkward to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus loves us just as we are, but He loves us so much that He will not ignore the things that cause us harm and need to change. Everyone needs to work on **changing daily** to be more like Jesus. Jesus demonstrated this truth with this woman when He dealt with a sin issue in her life. No one likes being called out on their sin issues. However, if we are going to grow closer to Jesus, we must deal with and remove sin systematically from our lives.



#### John 4:16-26

Jesus just dove into her life, but He did it with great care. His words did not drive her away. Sometimes, Christians can get so zealous for speaking the truth that we forget that Jesus did this with vast amounts of love, not condemnation. Until we admit our sins, there is no way for God to make us new. Jesus knew she had to get to that place, so He continued dealing with her sin issue. She admitted she had five husbands and was now living with another man. Clearly, there was a thirst in this woman's heart for something more, something she was not getting from these men. C. S. Lewis said it this way, "The hunger, thrill, and excitement of falling into romantic love has been a trap throughout the history of the human race. It is one of the most remarkable phenomena to which the human race is subject. That richer, quieter love is the fuel on which the engine of life runs. Falling in love is the explosion that gets it started." This woman kept leaving once the explosive love was gone, and things simmered down. That is the

same problem countless people have today. Once that explosive love is gone, divorce comes, then the hunt for the next explosive relationship. Yet, in the end, they end up burned up and miserable. This was the kind of woman Jesus met at the well. He knew that He needed to gently lead her to face the thing that was destroying her! He had to help her understand that this part of her life was ruining the rest of her life!

Her response was very revealing when she said, <sup>19</sup> *“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet.”* She might have said, you hit the nail on the head! She then said, <sup>20</sup> *“Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”* In other words, she told Jesus, “You Jews say the only place a person like me can get cleansed is in Jerusalem, but my people say here on this mountain. So where do I go? How can I find God? How do I find forgiveness?”

Jesus responded by telling her that soon where you go to be cleansed will change. The time was coming when geography would no longer be an issue. Temples or buildings would not be necessary to worship God. Jesus knew that He was going to destroy all the symbols of worship on earth so that temples, buildings, and geographical locations would no longer be significant. Jesus was saying, “Here is what true worship is: true worship is done in your human spirit.” It is what we call worship from the heart, and it must be done in truth, never for show, never something you do with your body while your mind is somewhere else. God is looking for those who mean what they are singing and who, from the heart, are singing these things to God. That is what worship is, the joining together of the Spirit with our spirit. She responded with, <sup>25</sup> *“I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”* Then something happened. <sup>26</sup> *Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”*



## John 4:27–42

This woman was so excited that she didn't even take her water back! She ran to town to tell everyone her life had been made NEW! <sup>29</sup> *“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”* <sup>30</sup> *They came out of the town and made their way toward him.* Remember this woman was considered an outcast by her own people. They must have seen some kind of radical change in her countenance to listen to her. Something was new about her. They did not say, “Oh, here she goes again with another man, and now she wants us to see him.” Instead, they listened to her and followed her out of town! Remarkable, isn't it? The passage goes on to say,

<sup>39</sup> *Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.”* <sup>40</sup> *So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days.* <sup>41</sup> *And because of his words many more became believers.* <sup>42</sup> *They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”*

This is a beautiful story of one life made new, which laid the groundwork for many more lives becoming new. This is a wonderful real-life story about one very broken person who came to know Jesus and how knowing Him changed everything for her and her town. This is a testament to the fact that it does not matter where you are or how much you have messed up in life. What matters is where you are going from here.

As a pastor, I am privileged to hear how many people came to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. And most of the time, they tell me about other people who guided them to the point where they accepted Jesus. They saw what God had done in another person's life and how that affected them. How seeing God working in someone else led them to believe. Just like you saw in

this story! I want to encourage you to please share your story, too. This one woman was not afraid to say that her life changed. And then, after two days with Jesus, the whole city began to believe. The Samaritans moved from merely believing the Messiah would come to understanding Jesus was the Messiah and had come! We, too, must decide if we will believe that or not.



LIFE APPLICATION

- Jesus began his conversation with this woman by placing himself in the position of need by saying, “Will you give me a drink?” Jesus reached out for help in a way she could meet it. This is a great model for connecting with people. Allow yourself to be in a position of need, ask a person for help, and then be willing to see where the Lord leads the conversation.
- In today’s reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today’s reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 11

# EXTREME FAITH



John 4:43–54

Putting our trust in Jesus requires a totally different kind of thinking. It can feel like you are learning a brand-new language. I will admit that hearing someone say you need to have “faith” in a person you have never met who can somehow help you and give you life after death sounds crazy. But in reality, faith is quite a normal part of our day. We have faith that our body will repair itself when damaged by accident or sickness by some miraculous force. We have faith that Earth, as it hurdles through space at 67,000 miles per hour, will not affect our ability to sit still and read this. We take for granted so many amazing faith-filled things that we experience daily. The Bible teaches us that it is God who holds all this together and that we go nowhere by accident. God is the master of space and time. Every time that you meet the right person at the right place at the right time, it is not just a coincidence. It was God creating an opportunity for something much greater than you realize in the moment.

One Sunday, I was at church, and a young man named Reed showed up. He did not come to church to learn about God; he was an atheist. He came because he heard we took mission trips to El Salvador, and he wanted to talk to someone about that country. Reed was born in El Salvador. His mother was an unmarried maid who became pregnant. She felt there was no way she could care for Reed, so she gave him up for adoption. Reed was adopted by an American family who lived close to our church. Reed went from high school right into the military, but he had an alcohol and anger problem that eventually got him kicked out of the military. Reed and I started spending a lot of time together, and eventually, I took Reed with me on a mission trip to El Salvador. On that trip, Reed accepted Jesus and was baptized in the ocean there. After

another trip with me and a lot of spiritual growing, Reed asked if we would help him find his biological parents. I had never done anything like that before, but I knew some people who might be able to help. After months of reaching out to those connections, they found Reed's mother and his two sisters! We booked tickets, got on a plane, and flew to El Salvador.

I will never forget that day as we drove into a small town called Santa Anna, where Reed's family lived. We stopped on the edge of the town at a Mister Donut for breakfast. After some fried plantains, refried beans, and eggs, we got back in the car. We drove into a very rundown section of town. Reed, this strong soldier, got out of the car and began walking between tiny metal shacks toward where we heard his mother lived. I remember opening the door and seeing this strong soldier walk inside the door and collapse in tears the moment he saw his birth mother for the first time. That was not a coincidence. That was a divine appointment, and through the process of that divine appointment, Reed truly found Jesus. We were able to connect Reed's family with a local church pastor I knew, and they also came to know Jesus. Reed's story was later shown on a Christian television station and was broadcast worldwide. People around the world heard about Jesus from Reed's story. Coincidence? I do not think so. God sets up divine appointments. It is our job to keep them with extreme faith!

We have seen Jesus' lordship over the little details of life. Now, we will see that Jesus's lordship is not bound by normal human limitations. We will see one of those moments in the life of Jesus when He met the right person at the right time and had no earthly explanation for it other than God the Father setting up a divine appointment. Here is a thought to hold onto: **You are one step of faith away from being a part of someone else's miracle.** If you could take hold of this truth, it would be a game changer for you and those around you.



## John 4:43–54

This passage shows us that Jesus is not bound by space, time, latitude, or longitude. Jesus can heal people He has never met and who are nowhere near him! Jesus' power extends to anywhere He chooses and at any time. This story is an example of the faith of a royal official. We will also find that this official's effort to save his son was the catalyst for a miracle. Here is the thing about miracles: **Miracles are not earned, but they may require effort.**

This royal official was about to learn this truth. <sup>46</sup> *Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum.* <sup>47</sup> *When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.*

This father had heard about all the miracles Jesus had been doing, and he knew that only a miracle worker could save his son's life. So, this father took a 25-mile hike from Capernaum to Cana in the hopes of being able to find Jesus.

In life, like the royal official, there come times when we have to make an effort in order to see God move. We have to make a choice to step out in faith and go like the royal official. We have to acknowledge that nothing but God can solve our problem! We must make a choice to seek God, even when we don't want to. Like this royal officer's effort, your effort won't make miracles happen, but your lack of effort can keep you from ever experiencing a miracle. This father walked or rode a horse for a day or more to see Jesus. He put in the effort!

Think about Reed's story. I could have said, "I don't have time to spend with this random atheist who showed up at my church. I have a lot to do. I don't have time for this broken young man who hates God." I could have said, "I am done with you, Reed, after all the 3 a.m. drunken phone calls I get. I could have said I am tired of the 1 a.m. drop-in visits where you were drunk and

crying. I am done getting called by the bar to come pick you up.” But if I had said any of that, I would have missed the miracle of seeing a child united with his birth mother. I would have missed the miracle of seeing a young man so broken and far from God come to know God! I would have missed the miracle of seeing faith transformation across continents! I would have missed the miracle of Reed’s story being recorded by Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and transmitted around the world! But that meant I had to get drunken phone calls often. It meant I had to go pick up a drunk kid at the bar more than once. It meant our door was knocked on in the middle of the night with a broken young man crying. We do not earn miracles, but we must put in effort. This is where faith comes in. Regardless of looking foolish or what others may say, when we step out of the box and place our faith in Jesus, that is where miracles happen.

We often find ourselves in the same place as this royal official, seeking what we think is a higher power to do what we cannot. That higher power could be medicine, a doctor, a rich person, a boss, a better athlete, etc. Throughout our lives, we will seek people whom we think can get us what we want in life. Have you ever wondered why it is that when there is a major tragedy, even people who do not believe in God pray? Why, after national tragedies, do TV hosts who bash Jesus suddenly allow people on their show to pray for our nation? Most people believe Jesus existed because there is so much evidence outside the Bible about Him as a person, but they are not sure about Him being God. They are hopeful but not convinced. Jesus understood this when He said, <sup>48</sup> *“Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.”* <sup>49</sup> *The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”* <sup>50</sup> *“Go,” Jesus replied, “your son will live.”*

Up to this point in Jesus’ story, He has not appeared to have healed a single person. This would be his first miraculous healing. This royal official clearly believed that Jesus could do something,

or he would not have come to see Jesus. He clearly believed that if Jesus would just come to where his son was, then maybe He could do something. But Jesus just asked why everyone needed to see signs and wonders to believe. **Why do you doubt? Why do you need to see God do something BIG to believe?**

Do not miss that even though there was doubt, even when Jesus did not do what this man thought He needed to do to heal his son, the man took Jesus at his word and departed. He followed Jesus' instructions and returned home.

Put yourself in this father's shoes for a minute. Imagine this was your child on death's doorstep. You have found this Jewish Rabbi who had been doing some unexplainable things. Would you be willing to take a risk and ask Him to heal your son? Would you trust Him if His response was, "Why do you have to see me heal your son to believe? Go home, and he will live." Would you simply go back home? Would you trust what He said? Would you do what this man did, taking Jesus at His word? **What promise of Jesus could you be leaving on the table?**

When this father left, his son was on the brink of death. He left his son because he saw an opportunity for healing! While walking home, he saw his servants walking toward Capernaum to find him. He had no idea what they were going to say. He believed that when Jesus said his son would live, we all have that side of us that would be fearing the worst. I know moments like this all too well. My son Wyatt was diagnosed with cancer in the spring of 2021. It was the worst, scariest, most traumatic day of my life. I felt completely lost while holding my crying wife, not knowing what tomorrow would bring and not knowing if our son, who had just turned ten only four days before, would live. This father and I were in the same place. Then this father heard some of the best news in his life, <sup>51</sup> *While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living.* His son was alive!

Imagine the joy! Imagine the tears flowing from this father's

eyes! His son, who was at death's doorstep, was alive and well! It reminds me of the day the doctors walked into my son's room and said, "Wyatt is in remission! The cancer is gone!" This father wondered as I did, was it Jesus? He asked what happened, <sup>52</sup> *When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him."* <sup>53</sup> *Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live."* True faith entered this man's heart. Every lingering doubt in his heart was gone. But the story didn't end there. This passage ended with his entire household believing in Jesus!

Let me encourage you to journal! Write down what you are asking God for. This man did NOT come to faith until he noticed God deliver on exactly what He said He would to the minute! It will build your faith in God when you write down what you are seeking God for and then look back at those moments and see how God came through. Some miracles come quickly, like in this story. Others may not happen for years. My church launched our fourth location in a building I had been praying for God to make into a church for over six years, and another pastor on my staff had been praying for the same request for over 30 years! I cannot tell you how, when, or where they will happen, but if you pray through, God is going to break through. A moment will come when you will be able to look back and see the moment the miracle began. The important thing is to remember to show up and make the effort to seek Jesus. In this short encounter with the real and living God (Jesus), everything changed for this royal official, his son, and their entire family! Here is the reality: **One moment in the presence of Jesus can change everything.**

The royal official, who, from the world's point of view, was superior in every way to a simple Jewish Rabbi named Jesus, chose to humble himself and ask Jesus for help. He was a royal! He could have commanded Jesus! He could have forced Jesus

to come with him! He could have imprisoned Jesus if he did not respond to his liking. But this man with only a glimmer of faith in Jesus chose humility.

Also, note how Jesus responded. Jesus did not ask him to withdraw the Roman occupation and let God's people go free before he would do anything. Jesus did not ask him to change Roman laws first. Jesus did not list his sins and tell him to stop all of them before He would heal his son. Jesus did not say this man was unworthy of coming to Him for help because he did not have faith in God already. Jesus simply healed the official's son at that very moment, with no strings attached. Jesus freely offered the man a favor without asking for one in return. So often, if we really look at our lives, we will see we do very few things without a personal agenda. This is important: **Extreme Faith without an agenda can be a catalyst for a miracle.**

Keep seeking God, and just like the royal official, you will feel your heart skip a beat when you see how others' prayers were answered in your life! And you will see how your prayers were answered in others' lives. I pray that God will help you see that Jesus is still doing miracles today! You are one God-sized idea away from changing the world! Will you keep the appointments God is setting up for you?



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Take time today to willfully go a little slower. Notice the people around you and ask God to use you to speak life into someone.
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...





## CHAPTER 12

# WHAT DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE?



Luke 4:14–30, Matthew 4:18–22

I grew up in a small town where there were probably more cows than people, and so the story you are about to read resonates with me. Small-town life has an ebb and flow that you simply do not find in large cities. In small towns, word travels fast, and gossip travels even faster. In this story, there was news to share. Mary's illegitimate son was coming home. Remember, in Jesus' hometown, everyone would know that Jesus was conceived before Mary was married. We do not know if the people thought Jesus was another man's son or Joesph's or if Mary tried to tell people He was God's son. What we do know is that news spread when someone saw Jesus on the road to Nazareth. I have no doubt the entire town was buzzing with gossip about why Jesus was coming home. I am confident people were speculating about what great things Jesus might do for all of them. I doubt the people had any idea that they were about to learn a hard and valuable lesson.



Luke 4:14–30

Everyone in Jesus' hometown heard about the remarkable things He had been doing. Jesus had healed a child, turned water into wine, drove a bunch of people out of the temple during Passover for some reason, and healed a Royal's son! Jesus' hometown was eager to have Him home and see what was going on for themselves. Upon arrival, Jesus walked into the synagogue (their version of church), walked to the front (where the preacher normally is), took the scroll (the first few books of the Bible), and began to read. People were riveted! What was Jesus going to read? What was Jesus going to say? What was Jesus going to do? Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah: <sup>18</sup> *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because*

*he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* The people listening were astonished by what Jesus had read! Then Jesus sat down and said, <sup>21</sup>*"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

Jesus's words shocked and angered the people of His hometown. What He read was a prophecy written thousands of years before He was born about the future person who would come and save the Jewish people. In front of everyone who knew Him, Jesus said, "I am the Savior you have been looking for! I am fulfilling this prophecy spoken by Isaiah!" It seemed that everyone was tracking him until that last comment. Right after He said that... it all went downhill. They reminded Him that He was Joseph's son, even though they knew He wasn't. They knew He had always been 'different' from the other boys of Nazareth. His statement made a switch flip, and they went from praising Jesus, wanting to hear how He was able to do miracles, to wanting to kill Jesus in the span of a few minutes!

Jesus said, "I know what you want. You want to see me do what I did in Capernaum, where I healed someone." But it was what Jesus said next that sent them through the roof. He said, "You all lack the faith to see that. You will not be seeing what others have because you are not as faithful as a Roman who did not follow all of our Jewish laws!" Jesus verbally slapped them across the face!

Jesus spoke harshly to the hometown crowd because they should have known better. They had grown up Jewish! They should have known the signs! They should have known who Jesus was! Jesus was their neighbor! They should have seen it better than anyone else alive, but they did not want to believe it! They did not want to see the reality right in front of them! They wanted to cling to their traditions more than see God move in

their midst! Their lack of faith caused God to not work in their midst. Understand this: **Faith energizes God.**

We have seen, and will continue to see, that without faith, God sometimes chooses to withhold His power. For some reason, God allows our faith to be a part of the process. So, let me ask you a question: **how is your faith?** Do you really want to see God move? Do you really want to see God do miraculous things? Could the reason you don't see God move be due to your lack of faith? Not faith in you, your abilities, your natural skills, your money, your job, your spouse, or your teammates, but faith in God alone. Jesus' hometown chose to not believe and, instead, to try to kill Him for calling them out. So, Jesus left.

After this encounter, Jesus' ministry took off. Jesus had been with his disciples for about a year and a half, which means we are about halfway through Jesus' entire ministry life. At this point, Jesus is going to start deeper training. He is going to start training His disciples on how to do what He has been doing. He would start training His disciples on how to help others become disciples of Jesus. Jesus had a specific training method. This is what it was and was not.

Was	Was NOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• on-the-job training</li><li>• doing life with them</li><li>• going on mission trips</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• classroom training</li><li>• seeing them once a week</li><li>• funding others to do what they didn't want to do</li></ul>

If you are reading this, then you probably are at least interested in knowing more about Jesus. Yet, how many of us are content to stay in the classroom learning about Jesus, going to church one hour a week, throwing a few bucks in the plate, and calling it good? That was not the kind of life Jesus and His disciples lived.

That is not the kind of life Jesus ever called anyone to live. It is impossible to become a real fisherman by just reading books. You need to learn how to sit still, feel that slight pull of a fish, when to jerk your pole, and when to let it sit. You must learn what to do with the dirt on your hands after you put a worm on and what to do when a fish swallows the hook. Sure, you could grab a pole and maybe catch a fish or two with no training, but if you want to be effective, you must get out of the books and go fishing!

Jesus is about to go on six fishing expeditions with His best friends! You will see that as the Jesus movement grew, so did the size of these fishing trips. The trips start small and gradually grow in size and frequency. This is the shift in His movement from simply come and see to follow me and learn how you can make disciples. This begins the exciting times of Jesus' ministry! **Has Jesus made you new? Are you excited to go with Him on this journey?**



#### LIFE APPLICATION

- Do some self-examination and ask yourself where you are in your relationship with Jesus. Are you following Jesus or coming and going as you want? Have you left your safety net to become a disciple?
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 13

# FOUR FISHERMEN



Matthew 4:18–22, Mark 1:16–20



Matthew 4:18–22

In this passage, Jesus gives a **new** call to his followers. When Jesus first called them in John 1:39, Jesus said simply, *“Come and you will see.”* In Matthew 4:19, we see Jesus taking His call to another level. He said, *“Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people.”* Do you see the shift? It is no longer just about watching Jesus do His thing. Now, it is time to come, follow, and be trained to do what Jesus did. Andrew and Peter had already been with Jesus on and off for over a year when Jesus came along and asked them to step up their level of involvement with Him.

When I was a young boy, I heard a pastor teach on this passage. He said that some men were out fishing, and Jesus walked by and called to them. They dropped everything and followed Jesus. I thought, wow! That is crazy! To drop everything for a guy you don’t know! To leave your dad’s business to follow a guy you did not know! That was to me crazy! Who would do that? Then, when I had to study deeply in seminary and learned that this call to action came much later, I thought, well, that makes a lot more sense! Jesus had already invested a year and a half into these guys before he asked them to come closer and learn how to make disciples like He had been doing.

Church tradition has passed down that John was one of the two unnamed disciples who followed Jesus at Bethany. So, it is most likely that three out of these four are not getting their first but their second call here. James would have known a lot about Jesus from seeing Him with his brother and from being around this fishing port.

Now, Jesus was issuing a new call. This was no longer just coming, seeing, and going back to fishing whenever you wanted to. Now, it was come, see, and I am going to teach you a new skill and trade. This meant learning that **disciples leave everything and follow.**

Do you see the contrast? You can no longer come and go as you please; now, you must leave behind your current life and follow Jesus. You might ask, “What does that look like?”

- A disciple is sold out for Jesus.
- A disciple is consumed by living for Jesus.
- A disciple is active in Jesus’ ministry.
- A disciple is actively talking with others about Jesus.

**So, here are a few questions for you to wrestle with:**

- Do you come and go to church when you want?
- Do you read your Bible when you feel like it?
- Do you pray on occasion or when you have some need?
- Do you talk to other people about Jesus?

Or have you stepped into the realm of being a disciple of Christ? Are you willing to leave behind things to follow Him?



### John 1:35–42

John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, was still in full-blown ministry, and Andrew was his follower. Then, John the Baptist told Andrew to go and follow Jesus. After Andrew did, he took his brother Simon (Peter) to see Jesus for himself. Jesus had already spent around a year and a half with them before the call to become fishers of men.

This is where it is helpful to study Jesus’ life chronologically, like we are, instead of reading straight through the books of the Bible. For example, Mark 1 starts with Jesus’ baptism, goes to His



time in the wilderness, and then moves right into this passage. It is not obvious that, between Mark 1:13 and Mark 1:14, there is a year and a half gap in time. Let's take a look at that.



### Mark 1:14–20

The clue is right in the first words of verse 14. *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.* <sup>15</sup> *“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”* Think back to just a few minutes ago when we were in John's book. These disciples were sitting with and learning from John the Baptist, so it is clear that he is not yet in prison. This timeline using actual events and people shows us that the call we are looking at today was much later, after John was in prison.

Jesus' earlier investment in His disciples set the stage for this call on their lives. Jesus did not just walk onto the sandy beach of Galilee and call them to follow Him. Adult men do not ditch their profession to follow random people. Jesus had a deep relationship with these men. After building that relationship, Jesus asked them to follow Him with a commitment that had a cost attached to it. Knowing this background helps to make sense as to why they would drop everything to follow Him. Furthermore, they must have been discussing this with their business partners and families. It must have been something they had already been talking about with Jesus over the past year and a half. Peter must have talked to his wife about it. James and John must have talked with their dad about it.



### Mark 1:19–20

James and John were brothers working in the family business. When Jesus came that day with the call to follow Him, they left

their father, Zebedee, in the boat. If this were a random act, their dad would have run after them to figure out what was going on. Yet, he did not call out and ask, “Where are you going?” He did not yell for them to come back. Zebedee had hired men in the boats, ready to step into place when his sons left. It seems like there was some planning in place and that Zebedee had counted the cost to himself and decided his sons were doing the right thing. We will see later, and very clearly, that Zebedee’s family was made up of strong believers and strong supporters of the ministry. This family became a key partner in the movement. Have you ever thought about **what you might need to leave to follow Jesus?**

I grew up in church, and I do not remember it being explained to me just how much the followers of Jesus left behind to follow Him. I want you to stop and think about it. From time to time, Peter left his wife and maybe his kids for extended seasons of ministry. Peter & Andrew left behind their business. James and John were heirs to a fishing business, but they also left it to follow Jesus! They all left the trades in which they were trained. They chose to leave their families and friends. They left the comfort of where they grew up. They left their income source. That would not have been easy for anyone to do! The cost is high to follow God. No matter what He calls us to do, the cost is high.

If you are reading this book alone, I want to challenge you with something here. This is clearly when Jesus started training His followers to do what you have been reading about Him doing. I encourage you to pray and consider who you could start walking through this book with. Jesus took four people fishing; who could be the four (or one) people you begin to teach about Jesus?



### LIFE APPLICATION

- What do you need to leave behind to follow Jesus? Take time in prayer and ask God to reveal what is stopping you. Who

could you walk through this book with?

- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

## CHAPTER 14

# JESUS' FIRST FISHING TRIP



Mark 1:21–28

When I was a boy, my Papa loved to fish. Since I loved being with him, I learned to love fishing, too. But I was not a fisherman, and so my Papa had to spend time teaching me. I had a lot of faith that Papa would turn me into a great fisherman, so I was ALL IN whenever he would say, “Let’s go fishing!”

Jesus is about to take his first friends on a different kind of fishing trip. He is planning to show them how to fish for people because, remember, that was the call Jesus gave them. Jesus used the term *“fish for people”* in Matthew 4:19 to refer to the process of leading people to faith in Him. Let’s see where they go.



Mark 1:21–28

Jesus started this training at the synagogue. He took them to the church of His day and age for their first fishing trip! Let’s be honest. That is not what I would expect! I would have expected a drug market, bar, nightclub, or something like that. Instead, Jesus took them to their version of church and began teaching from their version of the Bible. Interestingly, this was not a one-time event. Over ten times in the New Testament, you will find Jesus teaching in a synagogue.

Let’s unpack what the synagogue represented. While most churches today have primarily one pastor, in Jewish culture, it was normal to have many different teachers. The Jewish people viewed worship as the assembly of people for the purpose of study and prayer (the Old Testament shows us just that in Ps. 116:17, Isa. 1:11,15, and 1 Sam. 1:10). Studying Scripture became important because the Israelite people wanted to prevent the sins of their ancestors from being repeated. The best way to

avoid repeating history was to study it, so they added that aspect to help them avoid past mistakes. The synagogue also became the center of all Jewish life and identity. It was the community center, and over time, it became the school, meeting place, courtroom, place of prayer, lodging for travelers, a place for small groups of Jewish students to read and study Scripture, a place to pass down traditions, and so on. This meant the worship of God, studying God's Word, friendship, community celebration, and even the governing of the community were all done in the same place. That was how "church" worked in the time of Jesus.

You can see why Jesus would go to the synagogue first. And why He kept returning, because it was the center of the Jewish community. The early church (born in the book of Acts in the Bible) patterned itself after the synagogue and continued the same practice of living and worshiping together. Church was never designed to be a one-day-a-week event. Today, most of our churches are not community centers, so it is different for us.

Local elders governed the synagogue. An elder could be any male aged thirteen or older. A local person called a Hazzan was responsible for maintaining the building and organizing the prayer services (Mark 5:22, 35, 36, 38; Luke 8:41–49, 13:14). The Hazzan announced the coming Sabbath (day of rest) with blasts on the shofar (ram's horn). The Hazzan oversaw the worship services, the prayer leader, readers of the Torah (Jewish law), and even the one who delivered the short sermon. This teaching came from any adult member of the community. In the time of Jesus, and still to this day at Jewish gatherings, any male thirteen or older could be called upon to give the sermon! Can you imagine if you were placed in the preaching rotation at a church? That is how it was done. All men were recognized as being able to share the meaning of God's Word. In this way, the community encouraged even its youngest members to be active participants in its religious life. The priests were welcome to participate in synagogue life,

including worship, but they did not lead everything.

The early Christians continued to attend synagogues, although they had a new interpretation of the Torah now that Jesus had been revealed as Messiah (Acts 13:14). Christianity was born out of the synagogue. Believers were to gather as churches, not single individuals seeking God alone. We address God as “our Father” because we are His assembly. We are one body because we are made that way through Jesus (1 Cor. 12:12–13).

In our fractured, broken world with all of its self-preoccupation, the model of the synagogue and its robust community sends an alluring message. A group of people who were centered around God in all things and who loved each other so much that they would willingly give up anything to serve each other seems very different from how the world operates today.

In our Bible reading, we find three things that amazed the people. The first was that <sup>22</sup> *Jesus taught with authority, not as the teachers of the law.* **Jesus taught with authority.** Jesus did not teach like the teachers they had heard their entire lives. They were trained religious experts. They knew all of the Jewish laws, but apparently, they did not teach with the passion or clarity that Jesus did. The people loved to listen to Jesus!

The second thing that amazed the people was that **Jesus taught a NEW way of life.** They said, <sup>27</sup> *“What is this, a new teaching?”* They had been in the synagogue their whole life, but what Jesus was teaching seemed so different from what they had always heard. They liked this new way of life, but why? Jesus was reading the same scripture they had always read. Why did it seem so different? The people in Jesus’ day had gotten used to hearing about traditions, rules, and laws.

The third thing that made Jesus’ teachings different was that **He could command evil spirits!** They said, <sup>27</sup> *“He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”* People were amazed because Jesus ordered impure spirits to leave, and they obeyed

Him! If you think back over what you have read so far, how many times at this point had Jesus cast out an evil spirit? The answer is zero! The first time He did it was in a synagogue!

Read this again: <sup>23</sup> *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out,* <sup>24</sup> *“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!”* The demon inside this man knew exactly who Jesus was. This demon knew Jesus’ background. This demon even declared he knew Jesus was God! The demon knew all those facts about Jesus, which begs a question. Because this demon had knowledge of Jesus, was he a follower of Jesus? No! Will this demon be in heaven one day? No!

Knowing facts about Jesus does not guarantee one’s inheritance of eternal life. Just saying, “Jesus is God,” does not gain someone eternal life. Knowing Jesus’ story is not the key. That can be clearly seen here. Satan and his demons all know Jesus’ story. The key must be something else, and it is not belief in who Jesus is! It is not just declaring with your mouth you know who Jesus is either. So, what is it? What were/are Satan and his demons unwilling to do?

The answer is simple. Satan and demons will not submit to God and the Lordship of Jesus. Satan and the demons were/are unwilling to acknowledge that God is the ruler of all. They are not, and never will be, in control! Satan and his demons are still living this lie, thinking they will overcome God and become God. In the same way, we are tempted to become our own gods and not depend on God for anything. If we are honest, we all have areas of our lives that are not fully submitted to God.

My first ministry role was as a mission pastor. I traveled around the world helping people lead others to faith in Jesus. I found out something after just a short period of time. It was much easier to reach people in other countries because, in America, we think we can provide everything for ourselves. We work at a job,

so we get paid. We buy what we want because of the money we earn. We put the dinner on the table. We pay for medical care. We buy cars and toys for our kids. We send our kids to college. We... We...We...We might not say it, but we often think we are our own god. God has blessed America and its Christian foundation, and we take it for granted. Jesus showed His first disciples what was necessary to be His disciples, and it was by fully submitting to Him as Lord of Life. **Are you truly submitted to Jesus as Lord of your entire life?**



LIFE APPLICATION

- It is time to move from just following Jesus to doing ministry with Jesus. Who could you go fishing for with Jesus? Jesus did not go alone, so meet with a few friends, pray together, and then plan the fishing trip God lays on your hearts!
- In today’s reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today’s reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 15

# JESUS' SECOND FISHING TRIP



Mark 1:29–39

The second fishing trip originated in the hometown of Simon (whom Jesus later named Peter), one of Jesus' key followers. He was married, had a fishing business, and owned a home. Peter traveled with his wife, did ministry with his wife, and, at times, traveled without her. In today's reading, they were all at Simon Peter's house, where his mother-in-law is sick. Beginning here and continuing through the book of Acts, we will see the importance of both going to church and doing ministry in your own home. As they gathered, they studied God's Word, shared food, did life together, and prayed for each other. This was the model of effective ministry for them. Most churches today call this "attending church and belonging to a small group."

I know that for many people, the idea of going to someone's house to study the Bible with several random people does NOT sound appealing. I felt the exact same way years ago! When Jenny and I moved to Tennessee, she met a couple at the church we attended, and they invited us to join their small group. I told Jenny I had ZERO desire to "do life and study the Bible with those people." She kept pressing me to go until I said, "Fine. But here are the conditions of our going:

- Do not ever share anything personal about us.
- Do not ever ask me to share.
- Do not ever ask me to read the Bible out loud.
- Do not expect me to become friends with these people.

That is a 100% true story. I went into that small group with my tough-guy exterior, sat, and didn't participate. But over time, God began to change me, and He can really do far more than we think is possible. Let's watch that come true in today's reading.



## Mark 1:29–39

The typical home in Jesus' time consisted of one or two rooms. Nothing could happen that would not affect everyone living there. I have no doubt that the illness of Simon Peter's mother-in-law impacted the entire household. As the disciples were out and about, I am sure he talked to his friends and Jesus about its seriousness. Furthermore, they were using his home as their ministry base. Then, in verse 31, we see a miracle. Jesus healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law! This led people to bring others to Jesus, and as that word spread about His healing power and driving out of demons, this pattern became a staple of Jesus' ministry.

One of the hardest parts to understand about Jesus is why he healed some people but not all. This is a hard concept to come to terms with. However, God heals some people for reasons beyond our comprehension but does not heal others. Although Jesus may have wanted to heal everyone, He only healed those to whom the Father directed Him. Jesus always did what God the Father wanted Him to do, nothing more or less. Sickness and death are the result of the sin in our world. Why God only heals certain people is beyond our understanding, especially for those of you who are struggling with sickness or have lost a loved one to it. I had this same wonder when my son developed cancer at the age of ten and was not instantly healed! Yet, we must understand, just as Jesus did, that life is about the glory of the Father and not about our wants or desires. Even when one overcomes sickness, death is still part of living. We cannot escape our mortality. Every healed person eventually dies.

Jesus' days were often long and demanding, much like we find ours to be. Yet, in this passage, we see Jesus showing us what to do to trade anxiety and fear for energy and joy. <sup>35</sup> *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.* After a long day

of ministry that would have gone late into the night, Jesus did not sleep in. He woke up early, went to a quiet place, and talked with His Father. How awesome is that! Jesus modeled a lifestyle of getting alone with His Father to refill, to recenter on God's will, and let go of yesterday's stress. We need to learn to do the same. If our day is long and hard, we must wake up early and connect with God. We must seek God's next steps for our lives and not simply allow life to happen. What came next reveals that Jesus let God determine this next fishing trip, and He simply followed. He did not allow the pressures of other people, circumstances, or challenges to guide His way. God the Father determined the next steps for His Son.

God designed us with a wide variety of personality types. Yet, the great news is that every single person can be transformed to bear the likeness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Simon Peter had an amazing heart. He wanted to see more people healed, so he thought choosing to heal people was obviously the best next step. He wanted to decide what Jesus' next step should be, and he was missing an important element in being a follower of God: asking God first. Jesus had to say "no" to Simon Peter's plan. Simon Peter didn't say, "I have been praying, and God said we need to minister more at my house." He said, "People are here, so we have to serve them!" This reminds me of myself far too often. I see a need, I make a great plan, and, at the last second, I say, "Oh, we had better pray and ask God to bless what we have decided to do." God should determine our next steps beforehand. We need to learn to ask for direction, listen, and follow.

Look at how Jesus responded to Simon Peter, <sup>38</sup> *Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."* <sup>39</sup> *So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.* Can you imagine the shock on the disciple's faces when Jesus says, "No we need to go somewhere else?" Can you hear the

“but Jesus” responses? But, Jesus, the people are already here! But, Jesus, I already opened my house! But, Jesus, they are inside, and I kind of told them you would see them. But, Jesus, what will I tell them if you don’t show up? But, Jesus, I will look stupid going back now without you, so you need to come! Can you hear their minds spinning, with how can I get Jesus to do what I want Him to do?

How did Jesus know it was time to move on and to change course? Jesus knew because he was centered on the will of the Father through prayer. Learning to discern God’s voice over your desires is not easy. Do not get discouraged, though! As you read the Bible, you will learn how to see God’s will. As you continue seeing how Jesus makes decisions, you will learn to discern God’s will. Keep reading! Keep learning! Keep praying! And I promise that in time you will learn how to separate God’s will from your own or other people’s.



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Spend time praying and asking God to guide you. See if you can sense God’s direction for your life.
- In today’s reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today’s reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 16

# JESUS' THIRD FISHING TRIP



Luke 5:1-11

Has this ever happened to you? You are at work one day, doing what you do for a living, something you have done for years. Then someone who has never done your job walks up and tells you what you should be doing. In today's day and age, everyone thinks they are an expert on everything because they read about it on social media. And we all know if it comes through social media, it is absolutely true! How dare you challenge them! This isn't something that only happens to people with "normal jobs." My older brother is a doctor, and the same thing happens. People see a commercial, and they tell him what he should do. Who cares about his 10+ years of medical school and 20 years of experience? CNN said this drug is the answer! When this happens, doesn't it frustrate you? Jesus had people confused about His role in their lives, too.

Jesus had been building a relationship with Simon for nearly two years, and He said to Simon, "let's go fishing." Mind you, Simon was a professional fisherman. So, for Simon, this was a friend asking him to do something that might seem crazy. Yet, while he doubted Him, he was willing to try it.

Jesus first took His disciples to church and then into one of the disciple's homes. In this passage, we find the third place Jesus takes them: in the middle of the community by a lake. Jesus was always where the people were. He continued doing what He had done on every fishing trip so far: teaching and modeling what life was like while growing closer to God daily.



Luke 5:1-11

Jesus had been hanging out with Simon for nearly two years by

this point and was standing by the lake teaching. As the crowds grew, Jesus jumped into a boat and pushed out from shore to teach. Why did He do that? Why did Jesus teach from a boat when the crowd was pressing in on him? He did this for a couple of reasons. First, sound travels quite easily over water. Second, there is a naturally occurring amphitheater on the shores of the Sea of Galilee by Capernaum! The acoustics would have made it easier for people to hear Jesus. Jesus did not do this to get further away from the people. Jesus did this so that they could hear him teach better! Today, this spot is called the “Bay of Parables.” Gospel stories that seem odd or illogical often turn out to have sensible explanations when you think about them carefully or when you see the locations where everything happened. Before we continue, do me a favor and circle the word Master in this passage. <sup>5</sup> *Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”*

**When God prompts us with a Fishing Trip, we have two choices:**

**Choice 1: We can tell God, “No; I am not going to go.”**

We see this happen in the Bible when people say “no” to God. Then guess what we see after that in the Bible about that person? NOTHING! We can refuse God’s call, and then God will go find someone else who will obey. Or we can respond another way:

**Choice 2: We can tell God “Yes” and trust him to help!**

The Bible is filled with stories that describe what happens when God drops an impossible idea on someone’s heart, they follow, and it comes to life. What I imagine Simon Peter wanting to say to Jesus sounds more like this, “Come on. I am a professional fisherman, and you are a carpenter. I am tired. I have been working hard fishing all day. Fine. I will throw the net back in, but I am a little defeated today. Fishing is how I provide for my family, and I have caught nothing. I will do it, but may I remind



you who the expert is here?” Peter looks at Jesus with the “Are you sure” look but slowly lets the nets down on the other side of the boat. *<sup>6</sup> When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. <sup>7</sup> So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.* How did Jesus know? How did this happen?

Was the point of this fishing trip to provide fish or was there a deeper purpose? *<sup>8</sup> When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”* Peter’s eyes were opened at that moment, and not because he had just had the best fishing day of his life. The “this” that Peter saw that caused him to drop to his knees and say, *“Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man”* was that, for the first time, he realized who Jesus really was! After almost two years in his relationship with Jesus, he finally caught who Jesus was. This was not about catching fish. It was his heart, mind, soul, and spirit catching Jesus!

This fishing trip changed Simon Peter’s understanding of Jesus. Remember you circled the word, Master earlier? Before this trip, Simon Peter viewed Jesus as his master. Circle the word “Lord” in the verse above. This trip totally changed how Peter viewed Jesus. Let’s look at the difference:

- A master is a person who has people working for him, especially servants, slaves, or skilled practitioners of a particular art or activity.
- A Lord is a person who has power, authority, or influence; a ruler.

Simon Peter went from submitting to Jesus because He was his leader/teacher to submitting to Jesus because His authority was the ruler of all mankind. Simon Peter came to the realization that Jesus was God! And like any person, he realized he was not worthy to be in the presence of God. He asked Jesus to leave him

because he was a sinner, a doubter, and unworthy of being with God. **Is Jesus your master, or is He your Lord?**

Jesus gave people a choice to follow Him, and there were many to whom chose not. Some people followed Jesus for a season and then left. Some people followed Jesus and then betrayed him. They were all given a choice, and they made their choice. You also have a choice to make Jesus Lord or not. You can choose to follow the teaching of Jesus when it is convenient. Jesus gives us a choice, just like we see Jesus doing throughout His life on earth.

When God gave us free will, He said that the choice is always ours to believe or not. However, Jesus is Lord whether we submit to Him or not. The Bible is very clear that all people will bow to Jesus as Lord at the end of time.

### **We have two options:**

1. Submit to Jesus as our Lord during our life on earth, and after our life on earth is over, bow to our Lord, and spend eternity in paradise with Him.

OR

2. Live for yourself while on earth, and after our life on earth is over, bow to Jesus, acknowledge Him as Lord, and be eternally separated from Jesus in hell.

### **THE CHOICE IS OURS.**

I want to circle back to something Jesus said, <sup>10</sup> *Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid.”* God knows our shortcomings and still loves us. He knows every detail of our lives and still loves us. Jesus said do not fear. I love you for who you are, so get up because I have plans for you! And what were the plans Jesus had for Simon Peter? The rest of the verse make the plan very clear, <sup>10</sup> *from now on you will fish for people.”* <sup>11</sup> *So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.* No matter where

you are today, Jesus loves you! God still loves you no matter what you did last night, last week, last month, or last year! There is nothing you can do to make Him stop loving you! But you must also understand that God loves you enough not to let you stay where you are today. For every person, there is a next step to take, and today is the day for you to take it! Let me ask you again: **is Jesus your master or your Lord?**

Don't miss that Jesus left Simon's house with his disciples to go to the Sea of Galilee to teach, but Simon left and went fishing! He left and went to earn money. Maybe Jesus offended Simon when He told him that He wasn't returning to his house to talk to more people. Maybe Simon was struggling to follow Jesus. Maybe Simon was struggling with the idea of leaving something behind to follow Jesus. Maybe Jesus went back there to teach people and connect with a friend with whom He had a strained relationship. Jesus went to where everyone gathered to find food for their families, but there was no food. They caught no fish.

We don't know what was going on in Simon Peter's mind, but we do know that Jesus stopped by to teach and connect with His disciples. Simon and his crew were calling it a day. No one fishes during the heat of the day, so why would they try at the worst time to fish? Imagine the shock when they saw their nets come up FILLED with fish! Here is the point I want to make sure you all see: **Jesus gave Simon a second chance.**

- Jesus didn't give up on Simon because he was mad at Him.
- Jesus didn't give up on Simon because he doubted Him.
- Jesus didn't give up on Simon because he left for a period of time.
- Jesus didn't give up on Simon Peter, and he doesn't give up on you!





## CHAPTER 17

# JESUS' FOURTH FISHING TRIP



Luke 5:12-16

Sometimes, Jesus performed incredible miracles in front of all types of people. Other times, we see Jesus do a miracle for one person and tell them not to tell anyone! Jesus did miracles for influential people and for outcasts. Interesting, isn't it? Do you ever wonder why?

Have you ever thought about how you treat people who are outcasts to you? Many years ago, I had the privilege of working with my facilities leader to lead a man named "G" to Jesus. G was considered by many as an outcast because G was in prison. He was a scary-looking dude. He was a good foot taller than me, tattooed from head to toe, including a tattoo across his neck to make it look like it was slit open. He was nervous about starting to attend our church because he thought people would never accept him. He would follow me around, looking like a bodyguard you would not want to mess with. Over time, God began to heal G in ways he would have never thought possible. Then God sent G back into his old world as a changed man to reach people there for Jesus. God always has a purpose for what He does or does not do. Today, you will read about how Jesus reacted to outcasts in His society.



Luke 5:12-16

When I read stories like this, I often wonder who told Luke this story because it would have had to have been an eyewitness. We already learned in Luke chapter one how Luke learned all these stories. We have no idea who told him, but it was someone who saw this happen. Maybe it was the leper himself.

To have leprosy in those days was a death sentence. It also

forced people to isolate themselves from anyone else (read Leviticus 13 if you want to learn more). God told His priests to assess people for leprosy, and that was a detailed process. Leprosy was a disease that completely wrecked the human body. Ulcers developed, burst, and had a foul discharge. Eyebrows fell off, eyes became unmovable, vocal cords became ulcerated, the voice became hoarse, and the breathing sounded wheezy. Slowly, the sufferer became a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of that kind of leprosy was about nine years, and it ended in mental decay, coma, and, ultimately, death.

If you had the “good” kind of leprosy, it might have begun with the loss of all sensation in some part of the body. Then, muscles would waste away. The tendons would contract until the hands became like claws. Then, the progressive loss of fingers or toes until, in the end, a whole hand or foot just dropped off. The duration of that kind of leprosy was from twenty to thirty years.

The problems did not stop there! In ancient times, lepers were considered unclean, and they were forced to separate themselves from the public. The mere touch of a leper brought uncleanness, and breathing the same air as a leper was believed to be dangerous. When someone was pronounced “leprous,” they were cast out of society. They had to dwell in the wilderness, in caves or tents. In ancient Israel, lepers were commanded to wear certain clothes, keep a certain distance from people, wear special bells, and cry “UNCLEAN!!! UNCLEAN!!!!!!” if someone came close. Think about living like that!

Imagine knowing that you had this disease. Imagine knowing you would never again be able to hug your child, father, mother, or spouse every again. You would know your future was a slow and painful death as an outcast. You would know that you could not even get close to other people without warning them to avoid you. There was no cure for leprosy in Jesus’ time. It was not until 1873 that the term “Hansen’s Disease” was given to this disease,

and a pseudo-cure was found.

Can you imagine the life of this man? It was horrible! It reminds me of how G felt walking into church that first Sunday, knowing he was an outsider and everyone would judge him. Now, re-read this passage with all of that in mind.



### RE-READ Luke 5:12-16

This man not only made it into town but also moved very close to Jesus. He broke every rule to fall on his face before Jesus. He knew all too well that he should not be there, so he took a posture of humility when he said, <sup>12</sup>“*Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.*” He was saying, “Jesus, I believe you can do the impossible and I know you can heal me! Jesus, please be willing!” What Jesus did next was nothing short of remarkable, <sup>13</sup>*Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him.*

Can you imagine being one of Jesus’ disciples at this point? You heard this guy flop on the ground behind you, you turned to see who fell, and it was a man with leprosy! His clothes told the story of what he had. He was wearing the clothes of a person with leprosy! As you were still recoiling in fear for your own life, you backpedaled to not breathe in the same air as this man, but Jesus moved TOWARD the man! Then Jesus did the UNTHINKABLE! Jesus bent down and touched him! I can almost hear His disciples crying out, “NO Jesus, you cannot touch him!” And the instant Jesus touched him, the leprosy on his body vanished! Jesus touched him, and he was healed.

Jesus taught His friends something profound. Jesus loved outcasts, unlovable people, broken people, lost people, and people who were not walking with God. You will continue to hear this throughout the Bible because it is vital to your relationship with God and your impact on your world for Jesus. Sadly, many



Christians do not lean into this reality. **Jesus said He came for lost, broken, and messy people.**

I have heard far too many people say, “I don’t treat anyone like an outcast!” But consider this... imagine a couple of dudes who thought politically, socially, sexually, and religiously the polar opposite of you rode their motorcycles up into the grass in front of your home, with flags flying that represented their worldview, and parked them. Then they walked up to your door. They did not ring the doorbell but walked right into your house. They did not remove their muddy boots but walked into your family room and dropped their sweaty bandanna on the side table. They sat in your favorite chair and kicked their muddy boots up on the chair next to you. Then they grabbed your popcorn and started eating it. Would you embrace them and be glad they were there?

We all have people we treat like lepers. Maybe for you, it is the jocks at school or the nerds you would not be caught dead with. Or maybe it is Democrats or Republicans or Independents whom you avoid like the plague. Or maybe it is those people at the gym who are always working hard, and you hate them because they are so fit and you’re not. Or maybe it is that person in the office who is below your position. Or maybe you are too classy to go to Walmart, so you only shop at Target. I could go on and on, but you get the point. **We all have people we treat like lepers. Who are they in your life?**

Far too often, people surround themselves with people who look like them, talk like them, and think like them. It happens in churches, clubs, civic organizations, political organizations, etc. We, like Jesus’ disciples, recoil from people whom we see as radically different from us, especially those people we think are messy, broken, or misguided. Yet, Jesus *intentionally* sought out the outcasts of society! Jesus *intentionally* sought out the unlovely people. Jesus *intentionally* loved the socially rejected people. Jesus *intentionally* said life is not about personal preferences or the way

you were raised. Jesus said it isn't about our will but God's will. **Is your life more about your will or God's will?**

I am so thankful for Jesus because I was a leper. I have willingly sinned so much in my life. I have made so many mistakes. I have willingly disobeyed God. I am spotted and stained with sin. I am a spiritual leper. But Jesus found me. Jesus reached down to me amid my sin. Jesus reached out and said, "Adam, that sin does not define you! Adam, I, Jesus, God, define you!" Jesus healed me spiritually, just like He wants to do for you! I can look at my life now, and it is so different because I now live for Jesus and not Adam. If Jesus has not done that for you yet, understand He is reaching out to you today and asking you to take His hand because He has great plans for you!

There is one last thing to note, <sup>16</sup> *But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.* We see this often in the life of Jesus that He slipped away to have time to pray and talk with God the Father. Jesus healed the person with leprosy, withdrew to a lonely place, and prayed. Jesus said, "I went fishing, Dad, and I caught this guy for you. Dad, I slipped away from everyone to see what you have next for me." Don't miss that this was Jesus' habit. His way of life. Jesus modeled for us a lifestyle of getting away and praying to connect with the Father.

You will never see Jesus saying: "Everyone seems to think this is good, so I will go with it!" We see Jesus constantly slipping away to spend time with God the Father to get centered on God's will and not His will! This pattern continued until the day Jesus died on the cross. We need to learn to follow His example of having a lifestyle of meeting with God, listening to God, and obeying God.



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Honestly look at your lifestyle. Who do you treat like lepers? Who do you avoid like the plague? God has called you to fish

- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...



## CHAPTER 18

# JESUS' FIFTH FISHING TRIP



Luke 5:17–26

What would cause a group of Catholic bishops, denominational presidents, and radio preachers to take time off work and travel halfway across the United States? What would make them drop everything and travel to Kermit, West Virginia, to see what was happening with some upstart preacher causing a stir? I purposefully used a town in the middle of nowhere because it would have to be something BIG for them to go there. This is exactly the question that we need to ask about this verse, <sup>17</sup> *One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem.*

Jesus was teaching again, and loads of people, including the religious leaders, were there to listen to Him. The religious leaders also felt compelled to go because Jesus' teaching was drawing their crowds away, and they needed to see why. They were there for a vastly different reason than the crowds. They wanted to confront and discredit Jesus. It was not just a few leaders opposing Jesus; they were from *every village of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem*. If you look at a map, you find Capernaum at the top; that is where Jesus was, and you can see that Galilee was still close. Samaria was further south, and Judea and Jerusalem were much further south. These religious leaders came a long way to see what Jesus was teaching. These religious leaders must have had high expectations to make them spend that much money, travel so far, and invest that much time to arrive at this place where Jesus was teaching. It must have been very important to them.



## Luke 5:17–26

Jesus had been doing amazing things, and the people responded by following Him. However, the religious leaders did not like what Jesus was doing. Understand that the Pharisees were the good “church-going” people of their day and age. They were the key leaders in the synagogue or church in Jesus’ time and opposed what Jesus was doing and teaching.

Jesus had started a discussion with the religious leaders a few months before this when He was in Jerusalem. At Passover, they accused Him of saying He was equal to God, and they did not like it (Read John 5 if you want a refresher). So, over the last few months, they had been putting together their best arguments against this radical heretical teacher named Jesus. They thought of Him as a charlatan, a heretic, a fake, a terrible person, and a liar. But after this healing, Jesus clearly showed everyone that there was some kind of power inside of Him. Perhaps they were there to fight with Jesus or to ask Him honest questions because, clearly, He was doing some things that God must have empowered Him to do. Otherwise, it was impossible to do the things Jesus did. The religious leaders knew that even if God used this radical teacher called Jesus, God alone could forgive sin. So, Jesus threw a curve ball into that, as well.

In verse 18, we read about four men carrying their friend who could not walk. The crowd was so large that they could not even get close to Jesus. So, they devised a plan to make a hole in the roof to lower their friend in front of Jesus. That is what I call devoted friends! They were willing to do anything to help him get closer to Jesus. Here is another question: **Do you love anyone enough to do ANYTHING to help them meet God?**

Verse 20 throws another big curve ball at these religious leaders. Jesus just told them who He claimed to be, and it worked them up into a frenzy! And look at how Jesus responds to their thoughts: <sup>22</sup>*Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why*

*are you thinking these things in your hearts?* <sup>23</sup> Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’?” The answer was obvious. It is easier to say a person’s sins are forgiven because no one knows if it is true! However, Jesus proceeded to do both: forgive his sin and heal him. Amazing, right? What these men did led to their friend’s healing, his sins being forgiven, and countless people praising God. Lovingly serving those who have needs will always reveal God. God said that by your good works, people will see you are His. Everyone there that day clearly saw God, including the religious people!

Followers of Jesus live with a specific purpose: to help draw others into a personal relationship with Jesus and to allow the Holy Spirit to rule in their lives. Our purpose is to draw in the lost and equip those who have become followers of Jesus. If we are not doing those two things, what is the point?

I want you to imagine for a minute that your boss is God. When you show up at work, you report directly to God. Then imagine if tomorrow you walked into your place of work, and your boss (God) said, “Doing good works for My Kingdom is now part of your job.” Would your life look different? If God said, “I want you to give the BEST of your time, talent, and treasure to Me.” If your yearly performance review depended on that, would your life look different? Give that some thought because God said this in Colossians 3:23, *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.* Do you need to make some mental shifts based on this verse? Whatever you do, do it for God. Do it to reflect God because people need to see God when they see you! Are you a reflection of Jesus?



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Ask God to open your eyes to how you can use your life as a conduit to help others connect with God, like you read in this

- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 19

# JESUS' SIXTH FISHING TRIP



Luke 5:27–32

In middle school, my mom **made us** serve on Monday nights at the Lansing Rescue Mission. I actually liked it, but I sure did not want her to know that. The people we served there were remarkably just like us, except they were homeless. One night, I sat down next to a guy who was a doctor. He was obviously very intelligent, and he asked great questions. However, he was also a heroin addict. He said it had ruined his family, his career, his reputation, and his life. Then, one day, he met Jesus in the very room where we were sitting. He told me it might not look like much, but it was a powerful place. And Jesus was a powerful person.



Luke 5:27–32

In verse 27, we are introduced to Levi (also called Matthew in the Bible). He was a Jewish tax collector. This meant that he was viewed with disdain by his family and neighbors because he was collecting money for the Roman government. The Romans were their enemies and viewed as the enemies of the one true God. So, he was a traitor and a rich one at that. While the average Jewish person of the day was living hand to mouth, Levi was storing away the gold from his people's hard work in his back room.

In Roman culture, tax collectors made their living by ensuring they charged more than Rome required. That extra they skimmed off the top they could keep for themselves. The more they skimmed, the richer they became. Since the tax system was not like today, no one knew what Rome required, so they had to pay the tax collector whatever amount he demanded. The tax collector had the power to throw anyone in jail, or even worse if they did not pay. So, Levi was despised and rejected by his community. Levi's

only friends were other tax collectors or other sinful people whom all the other “good” Jewish people avoided. Levi was like Scrooge, the guy everyone in town hated.

Because of his profession, Levi could not participate in the things of God because of his alliance with the Romans. His job helped expand the Roman occupation of God’s lands, and the Jewish people did not approve of any Jewish person siding with the Romans. The money that he was collecting was used to fund the occupying soldiers who were not known for treating the Israelite people with kindness. Jesus walked by Levi in the tax collector’s stall, and suddenly, Jesus invited him to follow Him. Levi was amazed and wondered how he could be a part of something like the movement Jesus was building. Could he be a part of this guy’s inner circle? With that backdrop, read this again, *<sup>27</sup> After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, <sup>28</sup> and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.* Jesus was out walking the streets of Capernaum and recognized Levi, or maybe God the Father impressed on Jesus’ heart that this was the next one to call to follow Him. There would have been no sweeter words than Jesus’ call to Levi because Levi would never expect a religious leader to talk to him, let alone offer to join him! Levi was an outcast because of his job, but he was still Jewish.

What an extreme act of love for Jesus to extend grace to someone like Levi. What a major risk Jesus had just taken to ask someone with a reputation like Levi to follow Him. By doing this, many people would negatively label Jesus because of the company He was choosing to keep. By hanging out with people like Levi, Jesus gave His critics the perfect fuel for defamation and gossip.

Levi was one of many who would have been viewed as a religious outcast. And then Jesus went to a feast at Levi’s house! No one there would have been viewed as a part of the religious elite. *<sup>29</sup> Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large*

*crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.* Jesus went to this party at Levi's house with a few of the most notoriously bad members of the community. You see, Jesus was willing to invest in both religious people and those whom the community branded as broken, lost, and sinful. However, one group in particular was very upset, <sup>30</sup>*But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"* They could not see beyond the exterior. Jesus saw inner broken hearts and spirits; they saw swindlers and prostitutes. Jesus focused on all these lost and broken people, not those already in the synagogue.

We hear people talk like this in church today, as well. It sounds like this: "Why do pastors talk to all the new people? Why doesn't the pastor focus on the kind of music I like? Why does the pastor remind us to give our tithe? The new people should know how to behave in church or not come. The church should not be about making lost people more comfortable; they should learn to enjoy what I like. Everyone else needs to change, not me!" This, in essence, is what the Pharisees were saying in this passage! The greatest point for us to learn from this passage of Scripture is that **Jesus wore the title Friend of Sinners as a badge of honor.**

This event is one of the reasons why, in Matthew 11 and Luke 7, people called Jesus a glutton, drunkard, and a friend of sinners. They did not understand Jesus, so they tried to shame and ridicule Him. However, Jesus was giving us an example to live by. Listen to what He says in response, <sup>31</sup>*Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>32</sup>I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* Jesus was fine being friends with both sinners and saints.

When I was writing this, I stopped and tried to fathom something. Can you imagine the depth of humility and courage Jesus had to have had to be able to live this way? Can you imagine how hard it would have been to be perfect (having never sinned)

yet befriend such broken people? How hard it would have been to befriend someone like Levi. I honestly cannot fathom the level of humility and courage it took to come to earth and save the most vile and corrupt among us, as well as those religious people who haughtily saw themselves as saints already.

This reminds me of something that happened years ago. A great woman of God came to me all excited because God had laid something big on her heart. She asked to meet with me to talk about a new ministry she wanted to launch. She wanted to start going into the local strip club every Tuesday night with a few other ladies to pray, get to know the ladies who worked there, and show them the love of Jesus. Her husband was the vice president of my elder board, and he owned a prominent company in the area. He was about the most conservative man I knew. When she came to me with this idea, I said, “Awesome! How can I help you?” What do you think Jesus would have done if he had been asked the same question?

By going into a strip club to pray for those working there, these ladies shared Jesus’s love. Did I worry that the religious people in our church judge them, and me? For sure! However, there ended up being many stories of lives changed because of their love. One of the stories that truly broke my heart involved three generations. One girl found herself pregnant at fourteen. She later became a stripper so she could afford to keep her baby. She had no family at all. Then, when her daughter was fifteen, she, too, became pregnant. When her little girl was born, she started stripping at the same club her mother worked in. When her daughter was six years old, she met these same ladies from my church. They offered to watch her daughter while she worked. After some time, she agreed. Slowly, over time, this mom met Jesus. She had no idea how she could raise her daughter without the money that stripping brought in. However, these same ladies found her an apartment, gave her clothes, found her furniture, brought her

groceries, and helped her find a new job and start a new life.

Is anyone calling you a friend of sinners? Whose reputation are you protecting more: yours or God's? It would be beautiful to me if people would say, "If only sinners could see enough of Jesus in me to call me their friend, not because I partake in their sin but because I embrace them despite their sin." Don't forget: Even though Jesus hung out with sinners, He never took part in their sin. Please keep this firmly in mind.

If you are an alcoholic, you should not minister in a bar. If you are a man, you should not minister in a female strip club. If you are addicted to food, you should not minister at a buffet (Ok, just kidding on that one.) But seriously, we do not go where we are likely to stumble and fall. Jesus will never ask that of you, ever. We all need to know our limits and ensure we do not get pulled into sin while trying to expand God's kingdom. The reality is that Satan will attack you where you are the weakest, so do not put yourself in a place where you struggle. Be wise! Stay connected to Jesus. Depend on Jesus for wisdom as you reach out to the lost and broken.



## LIFE APPLICATION

- We have just begun our sixth fishing trip with Jesus. Have you gone fishing with Jesus yet?
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 20

# JESUS' SIXTH FISHING TRIP—PART II



Luke 5:36–39

I spent many years working in the construction and development world. God blessed me and I advanced in my career rather rapidly. While that was a blessing, it was also a challenge. Trying to lead people my father's age or older was not easy. I cannot tell you how often I heard people say to me, "I have always done it this way" or "Trust me, son. I have been doing this longer than you have been alive, and this is the best way." We can all get stuck in our ways and not realize there might be a better way. That is why companies can go from industry titans to bankruptcy. Change is HARD. That is why companies like Blackberry, Netscape, MySpace, Sears, and many others have gone from the industry standard to an afterthought. Jesus understands our weaknesses as well as our reluctance to change.



Luke 5:36–39

Most Bible passages we have been reading are the words of Jesus. His word is designed to be more than just words on a page; they are designed to be life-transforming principles. In this passage, Jesus is saying that you cannot just keep doing what you have always done because that will not work. If you have a favorite shirt and it gets a hole in it, you cannot take the exact same brand-new shirt and cut a piece out of it to repair the hole in the old shirt and expect it to go well. It will cause it to tear more and make it worse. Yet how often do you hear people say, "Well, that is how I did it back in the day. It worked then, and it should work now!" Just because it worked once does not mean it will work again. That is why Jesus said, <sup>37</sup> *"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins."* <sup>38</sup> *No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins."* Why? New

wine will burst the old skins; the wine will run out, and both the new wine and the old wineskins will be ruined.

Think about it this way. If we suggest to new Christians that our worship services and ministry programs will always be done the old-fashioned way, it will eventually do two things: destroy the old way and destroy the new ideas for change. Look at what Jesus said next because it speaks directly to how some people feel about this topic! <sup>39</sup> *“And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’”* Old wine is smooth and mellow and lacks the bitterness of new wine. Old wine is better than new wine. The old ways of doing anything are smooth, mellow, and comfortable. The new ways of doing things need time to come of age and work out some kinks, just like wine.

Few people embrace the new ways of doing things right out of the gate. Few people hear new music styles and immediately prefer them. Why? Because the old music, the music they grew up with, just sounded better. The old almost always feels better than the new. That is what Jesus said, but do not just hear what you want from this verse.

You cannot miss Jesus’ point because there is a problem: there is a limited amount of old wine. There is a limited amount of time that old wine will be around. There is a limited amount of time when all of us will be around. What happens if we stop collecting wine? What happens when we run out and we have no more wine? What happens if we keep collecting wine but force it into the old wineskins? They burst, and we lose the wineskins and the wine.

What happens if we stop caring about what the next generation wants? What happens if we tell the next generation that all their business ideas are terrible? They will go out on their own, start a new business, and then we will go out of business! What happens if we tell the next generation that all their church ideas are terrible? They all leave the church, and our church slowly



dies. Current statistics show that around 80% of kids raised in the church leave the church after high school and never plan to return. So, Jesus is asking us through this parable: **do you care more about seeing the next generation thrive in your industry or church or would you rather watch the business or church you love die and keep stubbornly going your way?** This is a simple principle to understand but one that is unbelievably hard to lean into in our lives, businesses, and churches.



LIFE APPLICATION

- We just finished our 6<sup>th</sup> fishing trip with Jesus. Have you gone fishing yet? If you have not, what do you think is holding you back?
- In today’s reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today’s reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 21

# JESUS SELECTS THE 12



Luke 6:12–19, Mark 3:13–19

In my first job out of college, I had the glorious title of assistant to the backend superintendent. Yes, I had a glorious title like Dwight from *The Office*. I gave NO ONE my business card. I dreamed of owning my own construction company one day, and I looked at this as just a stepping-stone job. Then, about a year into my career, the company decided to centralize purchasing and let the sub-contractors select who they wanted to work with. I was voted in, but I was NOT happy about it. The field guys called the office the graveyard because that is where a career went to die. I felt like I was voted off the island. I was removed from the team I wanted to be on and was placed on one I did not want to be on. I did not know that this would become the catalyst for my career to take off. Sometimes (no, always), God knows what we do not, and we need to learn to trust His leading, even when it is not what we want at the time!

Have you ever dreamed about making it on a sports team, theatre troupe, musical group, or the top team at work but ended up not being selected? We do not always know what a coach or leader sees that leads them to reject us, but Jesus reveals how a Godly leader approaches leadership selection. As Jesus' movement grew, He needed to select those whom He thought could become the leaders to keep His movement going after He was gone. This is honestly one of the hardest parts of leadership because as a leader pulls part of his team in closer, he is also pushing part of his team further away. That can be a hard pill to swallow for those who do not make the cut.



## Luke 6:12–19

Think about this meeting for Jesus' disciples. How many people do you picture with Jesus? Let me expand your picture. It says, *<sup>12</sup> One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. <sup>13</sup> When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.*

Next, we read that *<sup>17</sup> He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, <sup>18</sup> who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, <sup>19</sup> and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.*

Many people think that Jesus had the twelve He was with most of the time and then chose those twelve to lead. However, scholars would say it was somewhere in the mountains of Naphtali northwest of Capernaum where Jesus had called His disciples to come. His followers gathered together from all the places He had been ministering for over the last two years. These men and women arrived and likely wondered what Jesus would say or do and why he called them there. This paints a quite different picture of Jesus selecting the twelve. Jesus called together all his disciples, broke away from them, and prayed all night. He must have heard who to select during His time with the Father because right after that, He selected the twelve disciples from His many followers.

I am sure some of the followers that Jesus did NOT select were less than appreciative of His choices. Someone may have said to Levi (Matthew), “Son, I was worshiping Yahweh (God) when you were still stealing money from us real Jews, so don’t tell me how to live for God.” Andrew, James, and John were likely on the brunt end of a “stupid fishermen joke” more than once. One of the key points I have learned from the disciples of Jesus was their

desire to listen to Jesus and learn to focus on His teachings and not their understanding and preferences. That took time, and it will take us time, as well. Our influence will depend on God's call to each of us and our sphere of influence.

If we will influence others like Jesus did, we must learn to be like Jesus. We need a Biblically rooted view of Jesus, and part of that is understanding how Jesus' life was devoted to the will of His Father. One way to be sure we are doing that is to notice the shifts in the ministry of Jesus. For instance, Jesus began pouring more of His time into His twelve chosen disciples after this point. We will discover that this phase of Jesus' teaching focused on these men's influence, growth, and development.

None of us have a "perfect life" or know with 100% clarity what we need to do in the next phase of life. In truth, I have never heard anyone say they are 100% sure they always make the right choice. What we need is more time in prayer, like Jesus. Maybe we should take a night and invest in prayer when it comes to big decisions. Jesus gave us this perfect model of praying before any major or even minor decision. He sought the heart of His Father first, and we need to follow that model. Jesus did not just listen and say, "Sure, Dad. I will get that done sometime in the future." Jesus knew it was time to select His inner circle, so He asked His Father for guidance through prayer. He did what He felt God the Father was telling Him to do. Jesus had a major decision to make, so He spent the entire night praying, talking, and listening to His Father for direction. Here is the first key to becoming a Godly leader: **Godly leaders pray and seek God's direction when building teams.**

Up to this point, Jesus had been pouring into a large group of people, and now we see a shift to invest in these twelve young men. Jesus had been building a strong bond with them to prepare them for this moment. Rewind two-plus years and look at John 1:39. He called a few to *"come and you will see."* He explained

who He was and how the Scripture backed that up. Later, His call shifted to *“Follow me,”* He taught them that He was the ONLY way to eternal life. Then the third call came when we saw Jesus’ call in Matthew 4:19 to *“Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.”* The point here is that we can get impatient for the next step for our team. However, we must remember that **Godly leaders realize they must invest in a few who, they believe, will one day be leaders.**

That is what Jesus was doing in this passage. Jesus realized they were ready to be on His leadership team. They were ready to start leading others. After two-plus years with Jesus, they were ready for the next step! It amazes me that it only took two years for them to reach that point, especially when I compare that to most people today who spend their entire lives attending church but seem to think they are never ready to move forward into leadership. Imagine how different our world would be if every two years, every church released twelve new people ready to take leadership roles in or create new Christian organizations, start or plant churches, become pastors or missionaries, or any number of other new ideas. All for the purpose of leading more people toward God.

Jesus then kicked His ministry up another notch by pushing His disciples toward constant growth. This wasn’t “come, believe in Me, and then warm up a church chair for the rest of your life.” Jesus constantly challenged His disciples to take another step, to give more of their lives to Him, and to devote more of their lives to reaching the lost. He was teaching them that life was not about their preference. It was about just one thing: building the Kingdom of God. **Being a real disciple of Jesus who can influence others toward the same goal is a never-ending process of dying to flesh and constantly growing.**

Growth is never easy. When we were kids, we physically experienced growing pains. When we leave our college years

behind, and our metabolism starts to change, we will grow in a different way if we don't change our eating habits. Far too many church people do not want to grow up, learn to feed themselves from God's Word, worship Him, and respond to the call of Jesus. Church research will tell you that the top reason for leaving the church is that people say they are not being fed spiritually. People who have been in church for decades, middle-aged Christians, are screaming "Feed me" like an infant. These are people who have never learned how to pick up their own fork and dig into the Bible, learn how to turn on the oven, and bake in the Word of God. They have never taken the next step with Jesus and begun to realize life is not just about them. The key point here is that **Jesus wants everyone to grow into a disciple-maker and join His disciple-making team!**

Jesus knew He needed His Father's counsel in choosing who would be included in this group to go on to influence the world for all future generations. Therefore, His first thought was to go up the mountain alone and pray. Look at the wording: <sup>13</sup> *When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.* He called the entire population of His disciples to Him, and out of that huge group, He chose twelve. He did not choose twelve out of twelve. He chose twelve out of hundreds or thousands of people. This begs the question of why those twelve. Did that mean all the others were sent home without any further mission? Not at all. God alone knows the heart of every person. He chose the twelve because He knew they would be the best ones to lead in the future. God had a purpose and mission for them, just like He does for you and me. This also does not mean God did not have a plan for the others. Countless other people in the Bible have played various roles in Jesus' ministry at this point and in the future. These were just the twelve that Jesus selected as the "leaders of leaders."

Jesus gave the twelve a new identity as Apostles, which means

“one sent forth.” This new identity set them apart from the other disciples Jesus had. It clearly told everyone that they would be in a closer relationship with Jesus. And note that this was not a popular vote on who became a disciple. It did not work for them like it did for me in my first big career shift. Jesus did not give everyone a leadership position so that no one would have their feelings hurt, either. Here is the point: **Jesus was not afraid to place the right person in the right place. He first asked His Father, who looked into the hearts of the followers and chose those who would listen to His Son and become doers of His Word.**

I am sure that on that day, at least a few thought they would have been a better choice than Judas the betrayer, Levi the sinful tax collector, or any of the uneducated fishermen whom Jesus chose. From a worldly perspective, I would be willing to bet there were plenty of people who were offended that Jesus did not pick them. That is the hardest part for leaders... making the hard choices. It is hard for a coach to cut some people, but it must be done. It is hard as a business leader to place someone new on the leadership team while knowing all along it will offend others. Part of the journey these twelve had to go on was to learn how to follow God’s leading, to follow Jesus, and to learn how to give their lives fully to Him. And we must do the same thing today. These are the first steps in learning to be a leader like Jesus.

Remember, in chapter 13, you read about Jesus calling four people to follow and learn from Him? I challenged you to think about who you could walk through this book with. Here we are eight chapters later; now, Jesus has selected twelve to follow Him. Those twelve were charged with teaching other people about Jesus. The twelve Jesus chose had not been with Him for years and did not know all the details, yet they followed and began teaching people about Jesus. Who could be your one, four, or twelve? Who could you begin walking through this book with to



help them learn more about Jesus?



## LIFE APPLICATION

- What stage of relationship are you in with Jesus? Are you actively seeking to let more of your plans go to follow Jesus' plans? Are you actively trying to become more like Jesus? Who could you walk through this book with to help them learn more about Jesus?
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...



## CHAPTER 22

# JESUS SET EXPECTATIONS



Luke 6:20–49 & Matthew 5

Expectations can be tough. Expectations are *two sides of the same coin*. One side is the person setting the expectation; the other side is the person expected to meet it. My father had high expectations for me and my brothers. My dad expected us to behave respectfully, do well in school, and honor our elders at school, home, church, and community. My dad wanted each of his boys to grow up to have these skills, which, he would say, were precursors to leading well. That was my dad's side of expectations.

Then there was my side! I loved to rebel against some of these expectations, sometimes discouraging my dad. I was the type of kid who had to learn everything the hard way and, often, more than once. When I wrote this chapter, I began by looking up a definition of “expectation” as referenced in the Bible. It means **that which is expected, based on, and inspired by the Word of God**. As I think back on what my dad expected, it was Biblical. Now that I am a father, I expect the same in my children. If you were to ask my kids what my expectation of them is, they would all reply, “Be a leader.” Whenever I drop my children off anywhere, I tell them, “Be a leader.” In other words, do not follow the crowd but lead others toward righteous behavior. God our Father expects nothing less of His leaders. However, leading in God's Kingdom looks vastly different than leading in the world.



Luke 6:20–26

Jesus stood before His disciples and began with some extremely difficult words. I would not consider this passage a pep talk. This was Jesus setting expectations for His disciples. He began by first describing the blessings that will accrue to those who are

suffering, downtrodden or reviled. He then pivots to woe after woe, describing those who are unfaithful to God's covenants. Not exactly inspiring. Verse twenty-three showed some promise of a turning point with these words, <sup>23</sup> *"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets."*

Jesus set expectations by clearly describing to His disciples what life would be like if they continued to follow Him. Many of these men still believed they were going to overthrow the Roman government. So, Jesus set clear expectations for His disciples and told them in plain talk what life was going to be like. The truth is **Godly leaders set honest expectations upfront.**

Jesus was honest with them. However, most people read this passage: "We are blessed if we have nothing and if we have a terrible life here on earth." Few people would have chosen to sign up for that life! Then verses 24–26 seem to make it even worse! I could make us think that if we have anything good in this life, God will punish us in the life to come. However, that was not what this was saying, and this is where it is helpful to deeply study the Bible. Matthew (Levi) also recorded this sermon in his gospel and gave some additional context. Matthew said this in chapter 5, <sup>3</sup> *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* These additional insights change everything. In Luke, there is something else to help us understand this. A pastor taught me that these blessings and woes are *two sides of the same coin* in helping to set expectations for what the disciples would experience in their ministry based on God's point of view.

**Expectation 1:** It is possible to experience times of spiritual or physical poverty or hardship (Luke 6:20) and times of rich blessings (Luke 6:24). God may allow poverty to keep us

dependent on Him. Likewise, we must be careful in times of wealth and not forget Who is blessing us.

**Expectation 2:** We may experience times of hunger (Luke 6:21) and times of abundance (Luke 6:25). Hunger causes us to remember our source, God. When we are well fed, we should not forget Who provides it.

**Expectation 3:** We will experience times of pain (Luke 6:21) and times of great joy (Luke 6:25). Pain causes us to lean into His strength. We must be careful in our joy, remembering to help others in their pain and bear one another's burdens.

**Expectation 4:** Christians may indeed be hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for the name of Jesus (Luke 6:22–23) but also may experience being spoken well of (Luke 6:26). We need to be careful never to receive glory as ours. God shares His glory with no man. Persecution is a reminder that life will not always be easy for those who live like Jesus.

Jesus set the expectation that we would go through good and tough times, and no matter the times we were in, we were always to look to God for strength and guidance. Instead, it is so easy to look at our talents or bank accounts, but we must not fall into that temptation. Jesus looked at the people around Him and spoke to their hearts. Jesus was setting the expectations for leaders in His kingdom. And next, He would lay out God the Father's plan for reaching the world through these leaders.



#### Luke 6:27–49

Jesus began with, <sup>27</sup> *“But to you who are listening I say.”* Jesus was acknowledging that some of the disciples had already stopped listening. Jesus knew, just like pastors know while speaking, that we lose some of you. Jesus explained His expectations on how His followers should live. If you are a follower of Jesus, you love your enemies! If you are a follower of Jesus, you do good to those

who hate you, and you will give to others freely. While clearly spoken, they were not easy expectations to live out. However, there was still more to following Jesus. Re-read verses 37–42. Yet again, Jesus does not mince His words. If you are a follower of Jesus, do not judge other people. If you are a follower of Jesus, do not condemn other people. Instead, freely give (there is that one again) and freely forgive.

There is still more to following Jesus in verses 43–45, where he says, <sup>43</sup> *No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.*<sup>44</sup> *Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars.* <sup>45</sup> *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*

This passage is one that I quote in counseling more than any other. In fact, as I was writing this, one of our ministry leaders came in to talk about some “stuff,” and this passage spoke directly to the heart of the issue. They were struggling with someone who kept producing bad fruit but did not understand why. The answer is simple: you reproduce what you are. What does an apple tree reproduce? Apples! What does an orange tree reproduce? Oranges! Has an apple tree ever in the history of the world started dropping oranges? Of course not! Because we reproduce what we are.

Jesus’ message was, these are My expectations of you, and this is how I will see if you are living it out. What is deep down in your heart will come out of you. Jesus is watching to see the kind of fruit your life will bear. Jesus is listening to what comes out of our mouths. If Jesus appeared to you today, **what fruit could you show Him that would prove you are His disciple?**



## Luke 6:46-49

Jesus continued with this powerful and challenging sermon when He said, “Do not call me Lord. Do not call me your Savior if you are not going to put My words into practice.” Do not call yourself a Christian or a disciple if you are going to just do your own thing. Jesus knew that people who lived their lives halfway committed would not make it through the storms of life. However, He also knew that if we go ALL IN and build our life on Him, then nothing this world throws at us will ever shake us!

Remember: this sermon was not delivered to just the twelve closest followers of Jesus. It was given to the twelve and a crowd that included many followers from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and the coastal region. This life is not a game. At the end of your life, you will stand before God, and He will ask you to explain everything about your life. **What are you going to say?**



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Read Luke 6 and write down the core values you see in Jesus’ movement. Then, pick one person in your life whom you have been condemning, have felt hateful toward, or have been judging, and freely extend them forgiveness and grace.
- In today’s reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today’s reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 23

# SALT & LIGHT



Matthew 5:13–16

I grew up in a family of amazing cooks. Both of my grandmas were super talented in the kitchen! My mom began cooking for her entire family in 6<sup>th</sup> grade! My brothers and I grew up in the kitchen, first in a baby wrap, then in the “walker,” and finally on a little stool beside my mom. I will never forget my little brother asking for an Easy Bake Oven for Christmas one year because cooking was a big part of our family. That Christmas gift paid off because now my little brother is not only a chef, but he also owns several restaurants! And any good chef knows that salt is the most important thing in any dish! Did you know Jesus thought salt was especially important, too? Not just in cooking but in each of our lives.

In American culture, there is a ton of misinformation about Jesus and Christianity. Today, it is totally acceptable to reject most of the teachings in the Bible but still say you are a Christian. It is acceptable to live a lifestyle totally contradictory to the teachings in the Bible but say you are a Christian. Jesus wants His people rooted in the truth of the Bible and the Bible alone. The life of Jesus should affect how we live in every area of our lives. Sometimes, we need to be salty!

Jesus said in Matthew 5:13, *“You are the salt of the earth.”* That is who you are. You are not only a Christian; you are salt. Everyone back then knew that salt was a preservative. They did not have cold storage like we do today, so salt was the answer. A preservative is a substance added to food to prevent decomposition due to chemical change or bacterial action. When there is no preservative, things begin to break down. Think about Rome. Think about every powerful nation in history. They have all risen, decomposed, and fallen. So, here is what Jesus was saying to His

followers and to us: **You are the preservative of the world!**

If you do not act like a preservative, the earth will rot and die. Bear in mind the culture in which Jesus said this. Jesus was speaking in the Roman world where “might meant right.” As I wrote this, I was in Athens, in another culture where “right” was determined by those who won the battle. In Roman times, there was no universal morality or ethics. The best warriors won. Women had no rights; children had less than no rights. Mercy, generosity, and compassion were not virtues but weaknesses. Most of us cannot imagine living this way, but you can still visit countries today with this worldview, and if you watch closely, you can see how it plays out.

Much of what Americans consider common human decency did not exist in Jesus’ time and still does not exist in many places today. Even in America, we can see that what was a common courtesy just a generation ago is gone. Our world is decaying as we stray from Jesus and His way of living life. A simple example would be opening doors for the elderly, pregnant women, or anyone else out of kindness. That was a common courtesy one generation ago but is rare today. We are losing the foundation that Jesus established in this passage. Jesus set a new standard of serving others. America was founded on that heightened moral standard and continued for generations. Yet, now, as we stray from that foundation, we see our nation slowly decaying.

This teaching about being “salt and light” exploded through the 1<sup>st</sup>-century followers. They began living out this idea that if God loves me, and God loves you, I should love you, too. Suddenly, everyone had value and worth, even when culture said otherwise. They understood that as followers of Jesus, they must speak truth in love. This ideal, truth in love, is probably one of the most difficult ledges on which to balance. That is why Jesus said that by this ONE THING, all people will know that you are My followers. John wrote it this way in chapter 13, <sup>34</sup> *“A new command I give*

*you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* <sup>35</sup> *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*” People will know we follow Jesus by the way we love, treat, and care for those around us. Jesus said I know this will be new and different, but it will take hold. You are the salt; you are the preservers of the world! And we preserve by gently sharing the hard truths of Jesus with LOVE, not just salt.

Jesus also said in Matthew 5:14, *“You are the light of the world.”* Often, we do not want to be light; we just want to believe and be left alone. We have no desire to go and be salt and light. People have said to me, “I prayed that prayer, and now I just want to go back and live my life as I see fit and go to heaven when I die.” Jesus would respond with, “Umm, I don’t know who taught you that, but the truth is if you believe in Me, you are the salt of the earth and light of the world.”

At the time this was written, the traveled world was exceedingly small. People did not venture far from home. They had no idea that the world was as massive as it is. You and I are to be the light of a world that they did not even know existed. If you follow Jesus, you will be a light in places you could never imagine. Take me as an example. I was a farm kid. I grew up in a small town in Michigan that is unknown to most. I did not graduate at the top of my class. I attended a small college and earned business management, accounting, and theatre degrees. I am nothing special. If anything, you can tell I am a bit odd with that mix of educational interests! Still, I allowed God to use me as His salt and light, and now I have spoken God’s Word all over the world! I have preached sermons that have been played in over 50+ countries. But it is NOT because of me! Believe it or not, I NEVER wanted to be a preacher! God has done amazing things through me because I was a willing vessel and nothing more, and you could say the same if you choose to submit to God fully one day.

If we grasp this and follow what Jesus taught us, we can change the world. I know this is true because God already did this through a group of people who were less educated than anyone reading this. They also had fewer resources and less of everything compared to our culture and our lifestyles. We are a living testament to this truth. We would live in a dark world if the disciples had shirked their calling to be salt and light. They stepped up and changed the world! And God has given us everything we need right at our fingertips to change the world again!

Jesus added to the statement about us being light in Matthew 5, <sup>14</sup> *“You are the light of the world. A town placed on a hill cannot be hidden.”* Jesus said that just as a town on a hill cannot be hidden, that is how you should live your life. You are like a strategically placed town. To which we may say, “Nope, I grew up in the middle of nowhere, and I do not even want to live here. I am stuck here; I am not strategically placed.” If you think that, look at what Jesus said next, <sup>15</sup> *“Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”* <sup>16</sup> *In the same way, let your light shine before others.”*

Look at what Jesus said to this group of people who had never gone anywhere and had very little, <sup>16</sup> *He said, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”* Your actions are to **be seen** by others in your community! If other people notice you doing good things, what does it cause them to do? Scripture says that seeing you being salty and providing light will help others see the glory of God. This is incredibly powerful! Jesus was saying, I want you to live your life in such a way that people see your good deeds and say, “Why do these Christians keep bringing us food when they hardly know us? How do they find the time to serve others? These are the nicest people I know. They are church people, which kind of scares me, but they are the most caring people I know. They are so generous.”

Jesus said that He wants our deeds, actions, and lives to be so extraordinary that people start connecting the dots between our lifestyle and our Heavenly Father. If you have not noticed it yet, Jesus said that our WORDS and our ACTIONS need to align and point somewhere. Jesus wants you to be a dot connector! Jesus wants your light to shine so bright that it outshines everyone else and causes people to notice. Then they will come to you to find out why you are salt and light, and you will point them to the Father rather than yourself. It is not about us; it is about bringing glory to Him! Interestingly, Jesus had many followers, but He called His disciples to be Salt and Light. **Be salt. Be light.**

I know something about everyone who is a follower of Jesus: someone else was salt and light for you. For some of you, it was someone who did not even mean to be or didn't even know they were. They did not necessarily think they were a "city on a hill." They were just trying to be a real follower of Jesus, and you noticed. Some of you are deeply grateful for the person God brought into your life or for your husband or wife's life that radically changed you. I bet that no one ever said to you, "I am a strategically placed person to be salt and light for you." But that was what they were! When we are on the receiving end, we see how that person changed us. However, when we are the other person, the God-placed person, we tend not to realize that God has us planted there for a specific reason.

Listen to this truth. Salt always preserves. Light always shows the way. Salt works even when you cannot see it doing anything! Light shows you the path even when you take it for granted. Wherever you are, Jesus says that you are salt. Wherever you are, Jesus says that you are light. Salt always preserves. Light always points to God. You have no idea who around you may be on the verge of a breakthrough because of your saltiness and light! Let's not grow complacent. Let's be the salt of the earth! Let's be the light of the world. Let's not be afraid to live our lives so that, at

times, we are even slightly irritating to people as we point them back toward Jesus. Let's point the way forward!



## LIFE APPLICATION

- Seek out a way that you can be salt and light to those around you to such an extent that they take notice and glorify God.
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...



## CHAPTER 24

# LIVING TO A HIGHER STANDARD



Matthew 5:17–48

Growing up the son of a successful bank president who was prominent in the community meant I was expected to live to a higher standard. And as I said in the last chapter, that was not something I wanted to do. I got into my fair share of trouble in school and did many things I wish I had not done. When you have a less-than-pristine reputation, it can also mean you are falsely accused a lot. That is why it was so hard for the principal, who knew me too well, to believe on the last day of my senior year, when my friend and I were skipping class, that it was my friend and not me who shot a teacher in the face with a squirt gun! The principal did not even believe that it was NOT my idea! Everyone assumed I was the ringleader. See, our reputation follows us, for the good or the bad. That is why Jesus called His followers to live to a higher standard.



Matthew 5:17–48

Jesus was falsely accused because of the kind of people with whom He hung out. Jesus understood this all too well, and here we find the religious leaders accusing Him again. So, Jesus spoke the truth to them.

*<sup>17</sup>Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of*



heaven. <sup>20</sup> *For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The religious leaders were trying to convince people that Jesus was eliminating the law of Moses. Jesus clearly stated in verse 17 that this was not His plan. If you have ever been a leader, you have had this happen to you. People assume they know your motives even if they have never asked you. So, Jesus replied by saying, “You think you know what my motives are, but you are wrong.” He went on in verses 18 and 19 to make it very clear that nothing in the law will change until the Messiah has returned and everything in God’s plan has been accomplished. He then turned the table on the religious leaders and told them to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; their righteousness needed to surpass the level of righteousness taught by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. That statement, coupled with His prior announcement that He had come to fulfill the law, meant that doing God’s will included following the commands defined and declared by Jesus, made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Scripture teaches that salvation is through Jesus alone. However, our work on earth will determine our reward in Heaven. Eternity is longer than anything we can imagine. **Have you ever thought about how your life will impact your eternal life?**

Jesus moves on and explains what else we need to do. <sup>21</sup> *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’”* Jesus was jumping right into it with a strong message: do not commit murder. But next came a command that was even harder for most people, <sup>22</sup> *“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”* Remember, leaders are called to live to a higher standard. Jesus said, “Do not even think an angry thought about a brother or sister. Do not even go there mentally because if you do, you will be subject to judgment.” Jesus was

telling the leaders to **keep their minds pure and forgive quickly.**

If you struggle with anger or forgiveness, take note and read the rest of what Jesus says. Verse 24 clarifies that none of us are allowed to hold grudges. That we are all called to seek reconciliation. He continues with, <sup>27</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* Leaders are called to live to a higher standard. This did not just say not to commit a physical act; it said don’t even think about it! Do not think lustful thoughts. Do not go there mentally. Now, Jesus has said twice that we must rise above the battlefield of our mind.

Then Jesus said, <sup>29</sup> *“If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”*

Let me translate this to fit our current society. If the Internet causes you to stumble, get rid of it. If your cell phone causes you to stumble because Facebook or Instagram shows you things you should not view, get rid of those apps! If your computer causes you to stumble, put good filtering software on it or trash it. If going to that place or that store makes you stumble, stop going. If talking to that person causes you to have impure thoughts, stop talking to them! Jesus told his leaders to **keep themselves pure and remove stumbling blocks.**

Jesus has more, <sup>31</sup> *“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup> But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*

You will hear people say there are never grounds for divorce,

but that is, in fact, not a Biblical view. The Bible does give a few reasons why divorce is permissible. However, here is what is essential: **Keep your marriage pure.**

Next, Jesus talks about oaths, <sup>33</sup> *“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’”* <sup>34</sup> *“But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;”* <sup>35</sup> *“or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.”* <sup>36</sup> *“And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.”* <sup>37</sup> *“All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”*

This passage concludes that your word is your bond. You do not need to swear by anything because people know you are a man or woman of your word. Unfortunately, in our modern world, your word is no longer your bond; yet if you will lead like Jesus, it STILL is. Here is the point: **Keep your word.**

Verses 38–42 cover a variety of things, <sup>38</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’”* <sup>39</sup> *“But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”* <sup>40</sup> *“And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.”* <sup>41</sup> *“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.”* <sup>42</sup> *“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”*

If you asked my wife, she would tell you that I say, “We must rise above.” I always tell our kids that they need to rise above and lead. Last night, when I was talking with our youngest, she was sharing about how she was struggling with friends and even said, “I know, Dad, I need to rise above; it is just hard.” Jesus’ leaders do not allow themselves to be drug into conflict or fighting. They go above and beyond the call of duty or culture. Jesus is setting a much higher standard than the law of Moses. This is the point: **Rise above conflict and go the extra mile.**

There is another lesson from Jesus, one that is even harder. It says, <sup>43</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* This is not easy for anyone. We all need help with loving our enemies. Praying for our enemies is tough. This is a hard teaching, but that is the kind of lifestyle that Jesus is calling us to live. Jesus is very clearly saying: **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.**

In verses 45–48, we learn that people who do not believe in God may often adhere to God-like behaviors with people they like. However, Jesus calls you and me to go above, to live to a higher standard with the difficult people in our lives. These are not easy commands to follow. Yet Jesus knows that changing the world takes tough disciples willing to live to a higher standard for the sake of their fellow man.



## LIFE APPLICATION

- If all of us lived to this higher standard, we would look radically different from our culture. What section of this do you need to work toward to be a leader for Jesus?
- In today’s reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today’s reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 25

# DISCIPLES OF JESUS FORGIVE



### Matthew 6

When I was in the business world, I thought pastors had a pretty easy gig. They only had to talk one day a week, could have lunches with people who loved them, and were treated kindly by everyone. Then God called me into ministry, and I quickly realized that was not even remotely true. Well, I do talk a lot one day a week, but the part about people always loving and being nice to their pastor is often far from the case. I remember being in a congregational meeting and having a person get up and lie about me, scream at me, and say all kinds of terrible things. I remember my wife leaving that meeting and crying as I rose above the fray, stood, and took it. My wife was ready to pack our bags and never walk into that church again. We sat and prayed together, and Jesus reminded us that we had no choice but to forgive and follow His call to continue leading the church. So, we took the higher and harder road. We forgave, we stayed, and we tried to keep leading the church toward Jesus.



### Matthew 6:14

Jesus just cuts to the chase on this issue. If someone offends you, hurts you, sins against you, hurts your spouse, hurts your child, hurts a family member, is always a jerk, or rubs you wrong, what are you to do? Let me take it one step further: if Jesus is not standing with you when your life ends, saying HE took away your sins, you are not going to make it into eternal life. The answer is FORGIVE. Jesus said **godly leaders refuse to carry an offense and instead freely forgive.**

Trust me. I know this is not easy, but that is the standard Jesus is calling us to achieve. Consider this. When someone comes along

and offends or hurts you, who is the ONLY person who can choose to pick up that hurt or offense? YOU! You alone can choose to pick up that hurt and carry it forward into your life, or you can choose to lay it down and freely forgive. And trust me, life is much better when you make that decision.

Once, I was talking with a great man of God about this topic. We were driving one day, and he asked me, “Why are you always so positive?” Do you want to know what I said? “God has taught me not to pick up offenses. I choose not to pick up and carry the junk people throw at me.” I know many people think that it is easy for a pastor to say because everyone is nice to them. I wish that were true! Ask anyone who has been on a church board or has served as an elder or deacon, and you will find out quickly that people are easily offended. I actually learned to respond this way before I was in ministry. While in construction, my role was to constantly hire and fire people. I had to learn not to allow what others thought to affect me, or I would have been a miserable person. This is hard for all of us, but I can promise you that if you follow this leadership principle of Jesus, it will **RADICALLY** change your life!



#### Matthew 6:19–24

Jesus also said this, <sup>19</sup> *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. <sup>24</sup> No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”*

This teaching is a hard reality for most of us. We cannot be devoted to our money and God at the same time. There is a

straightforward way to see if you are more dedicated to money than God. Husbands and wives can do this together. Parents can do this with their teens. Jump on your Online banking. Open your checking account. Look at the deposits. Then, look at the gifts to your church and see if they are 10% or more. Or look at your recent tax return and do the same thing. God asks his followers to tithe, which means giving God back the first 10% of what you make. That is all God asks for. Looking at your finances will make it crystal clear if you are devoted to God or to money. Jesus is saying that **godly leaders care more about storing treasure up in heaven than on earth.**

Many years ago, Jenny and I were praying about leaving the corporate job where I had made a great deal of money. Our first ministry job would offer us less than 10% of what I had been earning. So, we had to ask ourselves a question: if we felt God asking us to take this leap of faith, did we believe this life was the foundation of the life to come, and if we did, would we place our lives in His hands and not worry about money. You want to talk about a hard decision! To leave our gated community in South Florida and move to Virginia Beach to live well below the poverty line was the hardest decision of our lives. It was a decision to follow God and not money, but it was the best decision we had ever made. Have you noticed Jesus hitting on these things that we all struggle with? But Jesus was not done.



#### Matthew 6:25–34

Do you ever worry? Come on and be honest. Worry about your retirement, the president, the direction the world is heading, about the future of a sports team, etc. **DON'T WORRY** because it does **NO GOOD!** Jesus said that godly leaders **will not worry but will trust God to provide.**

I have counseled many people bound up in all the “what ifs”



in life. People who live in a constant state of worry, doubt, or fear. And when I talk to them about what Jesus says here, they tend to say, “That is easy for you to say...you don’t know what I am going through.” And they are right. I do not, but you know who does? God! Jesus! And God knows what we all need, and do not need. God promises to be there if we will turn to Him. So, try trusting that God is in control and stop worrying. I think your life will change in some great ways.

Let’s recap these two chapters of Matthew and how it applies to leaders:

#### CHAPTER 5:

- We keep our minds pure and forgive quickly.
- We keep our minds pure and remove obstacles.
- We keep our marriages pure.
- We keep our word.
- We rise above conflict and go the extra mile.
- We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

#### CHAPTER 6:

- We do the right thing in private.
- We refuse to carry an offense and freely forgive.
- We care more about storing treasure in heaven than on earth.
- We will not worry but will trust God to provide.

I know this chapter can send you in one of two directions. This is like the movie Matrix. You can choose the blue pill or the red pill. Please understand that what Jesus was laying out was the framework of how He wanted His followers to live. Jesus KNEW that they would fall short of this! Jesus KNEW that there was NO way they could do all this on their own! Jesus KNOWS that you are never going to measure up to all this. What Jesus wants you to do is simple: daily strive to be more like Him and more like this outline of how a true leader lives. Jesus wants you to

do what you CAN do, and then Jesus will step in the gap and do what you CANNOT do. Not one person should walk away feeling overwhelmed or unworthy!

Think about it this way: Jesus loved you so much that He wanted you to understand how He wants you to live. And Jesus loves you so much that He was willing to give up His life so that the Spirit of God, His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, could come and live inside you to make this all possible! Understand that Jesus wants to help you become this kind of leader! And He sent His Spirit to live in His followers to make this possible. This is impossible without a real relationship with Jesus, but it IS possible when we have Jesus living through us! Isn't that exciting?



LIFE APPLICATION

- Review the ten callings Jesus gave His leaders. Evaluate your performance in each area. Make a plan to leverage your strengths and minimize your weaknesses so you can strive to live up to His higher standard.
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

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## CHAPTER 26

# TAKE THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED



Matthew 28:18–20 & Matthew 7

Robert Frost authored a poem called “The Road Not Taken,” and there has been controversy over his intended meaning. However, an interesting commentary said, “A yellow leaf prefigures one of the essential ideas of the poem, showing how a single decision can transform a life.” At the poem’s end, Frost concludes by saying, “I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” I love this poem; it makes me think about the choices I have made in my life. There are probably more single choices that affected my life than I realize. One decision that clearly had an impact on the rest of my life was the college I chose. In truth, I did not choose it. My girlfriend did, and I went there because I did not want to be away from her. Had I gone to Michigan State instead of Huntington College, I doubt I would have married my middle school sweetheart and had now four amazing children with her. Most students do not pick their college based on a relationship, nor do most parents want them to, but taking that less-traveled road was one of the best decisions of my life.

Often, things simply do not pan out the way we had dreamed they would, and so we ask, is there more to life than this? I have great news! There is an answer to this question. It is the same answer for all of us and will save us from a lot of heartache. The answer will never shift in your lifetime, and it can free you from the feeling that there is a void inside of you. That void we feel comes from the fact that we, as people, are inherently selfish. I know it is true of me. I would rather win the lottery than see you win it. I would rather that I was born with the talents of Michael Jordan than you. I would rather be as smart as Albert Einstein. I wish I could preach as powerfully as several well-known pastors. I wish for a lot of selfish things! We are naturally selfish; it is

human nature. And that is what causes this dilemma in our lives. It is what causes us to miss the point of life. It is the root cause of so many of our unhappy feelings. The answer to this problem is in the Bible, and Jesus can help us find it.



### Matthew 28:18–20

*<sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

These instructions reveal a clear purpose for our lives... if we accept them. I have taught on this passage more than any other in the Bible. God’s message for you is particularly important and timely, yet extremely hard. We live in a time and place where we are bombarded by temporary trivial things in our day-to-day routine of life. We have places to go, meals to eat, errands to run, boxes to check, responsibilities to take care of, people to care for, money to make, mouths to feed, and diapers to change. In reality, we all have an endless to-do list. None of the things on our list are bad, and some of them are more enjoyable than others, but this is the reality of everyday life.

However, if we are not careful, we can become so caught up in the day-to-day that we forget, neglect, ignore, or even miss the eternal purpose of life. We can get so caught up in the things of this life that we forget that this life is only the foundation of the eternal life that follows those who believe in Jesus Christ. If we are not careful, we can get so caught up in the daily routine of living that we miss God’s purpose for our life. We can get so caught up in the daily priorities of our lifestyle that we miss the point of why we are on this planet in the first place. We... can...

just... miss... it.

My goal in this chapter is to help us lift our eyes from the temporal and refocus on the eternal, to lift our eyes for even just a few minutes and focus on that which will last forever, to show you how to take the road less traveled for the purpose of living life with purpose. I do not want to reach the end of my life and look back and realize I missed the whole purpose of why God created me and placed me on earth. I do not want you to get to the end of your life and look back and realize you missed your whole purpose. If we are not careful (even good church-going people), we could end up doing just that!



## Matthew 7

**Are you a disciple of Jesus?** I did not ask if you are a Christian because Christianity means many things in our day and age. All kinds of people say they are Christians, but they are not following the teachings of Jesus, and they are certainly not disciples of Him. They claim Jesus forgave their sins and they will spend eternity in heaven, but their life on earth looks nothing like Jesus'. There is more to being a disciple than just knowing about a person. Head knowledge does not make you a disciple of a person. Here is Webster's definition of a disciple: **someone who accepts and helps to spread the teachings of a famous person.**

So, are you a disciple of Jesus? Have you accepted Jesus as your savior AND are you spreading the teachings of Jesus? Note it is two-pronged: accepting and acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Savior. It is not one or the other but both. We must reorient our life to further the mission of Jesus. We must follow Him and study His teaching to be His disciples. If you are honest, you might have to say, "Well, I am a Christian, but I am not really doing anything to spread the message of Jesus." Or "My life looks about the same as everyone else. Besides going to church, my life is not different

from anyone else I know.” If your answer is YES, I am a disciple of Jesus; pay very close attention to the passage we are about to read and examine your life.

Matthew 7 is broken up into six parts, each teaching us another aspect of discipleship. Judging others is covered first in verses 1-6. The provision of God is then covered in verses 7-12. In verses 13-14 comes the sobering truth of the narrow versus the wide gate. True and false prophets are described in verses 15-20. Then we come to verses 21-29 about true and false disciples and what defines a wise and foolish builder. Please read the entire passage because we will only focus on verses 21-29, the most troubling part to me.



### RE-READ Matthew 7:21-23

A slow walk seeking a full understanding of this passage is critical because this is Jesus warning us that there is something more to understand regarding our salvation, <sup>21</sup> *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”* Jesus clearly states that not everyone who calls out to God and says, “I am a Christian,” will inherit eternal life. There is something *more* than just calling on Him or knowing about Him.

The *more* to inheriting eternal life is clear: <sup>21</sup> *“only the one who does the will of my Father”* will be welcomed by Jesus into heaven. If that is not troubling enough, verse 22 seems to be even worse news: <sup>22</sup> *“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 in your name perform many miracles?’”* So, doing **MANY** good things is not enough. **ONLY** the **ONE** who does the will of the Father. In other words, few people will follow the will of the Father, and only the few who do will be invited into heaven. Jesus used the word “many,” not one or even a few, but many will not

enter heaven. Even people who speak prophecy in Jesus' name, people who drive out demons in Jesus' name, and people who do **MANY** miracles in Jesus' name will not be welcomed into eternity with Jesus.

Many have done good works in the name of Jesus. But when they arrive at the end of their time, and Jesus looks at their heart, He will see the truth. He will know why they did what they did, and it was not for Him. And then He will say, <sup>23</sup> *"Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* There are people who clearly think they are going to heaven, but they are not! They are doing good things in Jesus' name, but they are not disciples of Jesus Christ. Yes, they might know how to talk like they know Jesus. They might know how to dress right for church. They might act pious and holy, but when that day comes, and they stand before Jesus, He will say, *"I never knew you."* **My heart's passion is that none of you hear those words.**

Can you be sure this group of people will not include you? You have probably met a person who talked about how he was the best athlete ever, how he was the captain because he was so good, and how he held the team together with his prowess on the field and leadership skills. Perhaps you knew the truth: he was lazy and had simply been gifted with an athletic body and a charming personality. Then graduation came, and his assumption was that he would receive a full-ride scholarship. However, the college coaches saw through the façade, so he was not asked to join the team. Those kinds of people then tend to spend the rest of their lives talking about the glory days and how they had been robbed by ignorant college coaches instead of looking inside at the truth. The truth is that talking is easy, doing is hard, and changing is harder still. Jesus often said that He was far more concerned with our walk than our talk.





## RE-READ Matthew 7:24–29

Jesus tells us that if we are wise, we will hear His words and put them into practice. Let me lighten up this chapter and give you a funny visual. When I was growing up, I loved looking at bodybuilding magazines. I wanted to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger. If you could see me today, you would clearly see I obtained my objective... well, not really. Although I knew a lot about Arnold as a kid, I was not his disciple. I did put some of the things into practice. I even have a t-shirt that shows I could bench press 300 pounds in high school. But I never became a bodybuilder. Another example was Nolan Ryan. I loved him as a kid. I bought all the Nolan Ryan cards I could find and knew all his statistics. I even bought a gold-plated card! All of that love for Nolan Ryan did not make me a disciple of his. I had some broad knowledge of him but no real or life-changing relationship. I did not reorient my life to become like Nolan. I even quit playing baseball in middle school.

The same is true of so many people who grow up in church. We can know about Jesus' life, what He did, who His Father was, and how to talk like we know Him, but we never take the step to begin a relationship with Him. We never become a disciple. We never go ALL IN and start spreading Jesus' teachings. Jesus gives us extremely specific instructions on how we are to live our lives here on Earth. The problem is that we get caught up in this temporary life. We start living for this world and not for Jesus. And suddenly, we may wonder, **is there more to life than this?** And where do we find what that is?

I am not adding one thing to this. I am just reading the Bible with you and asking you to ponder what it says. This is directly from the One who made you. This is directly from the One who crafted you. This is from the One who knows you better than anyone else, the One who loves you no matter what you do or do not do. This is God saying what He created you for. This is your

mission in life. This is why you are here.

Read Matthew 28 again, <sup>18</sup> *Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

This is our “more to life,” our purpose on earth: Spreading the gospel of Jesus! If you are a disciple of Jesus, this is your life’s purpose on earth. Yet many believers who are not yet fully devoted followers of Jesus would rather sit back and just enjoy the good life, sit back, pray now and again, read the Bible sometimes, worship God in the safety and privacy of a church, and talk about God with other Christians. Too many believers NEVER talk about God and the gospel with those who do not know Him. They are content to live in a Christian bubble. They are quiet about Jesus around their non-Christian neighbors, classmates, co-workers, employees, and family members. They feel no urgency in their lives to tell the lost how they can be saved from their sins or how they can be saved from eternal separation from God. They do not wake up in the morning with “spreading the good news” on their minds. That question does not drive them. They do not rearrange their lives to make it happen. It is not even an afterthought for many people. I say this with deep compassion but also with urgency because it matters to Jesus. **Who have you personally led to accept Jesus?** An overwhelming number of people reading this would have “zero” as their answer; statistics tell me this.

Another equally important question is: **Who are your disciples?** Can you point to people with whom you have an active discipleship relationship? The reality is that some of us have been a follower of Jesus for one year, two, five, fifteen, or forty years but have never created one disciple or led one person to believe in Jesus. Maybe we did once, but as life went on, our passion for the

lost faded. I do not say this to condemn anyone. I do not say this to heap guilt on anyone, nor do I ask these tough questions to make you feel bad. However, I will continue to ask challenging questions to help you realize that if you are not careful, your selfish nature can turn your mind to focus solely on yourself or your family. Far too easily, we can forget why we are here in the first place. We can get to the point that we sing about the love of God, study the Bible daily, attend church weekly, and give generously to our church. Instead, we keep the good news of Jesus all to ourselves. If we are not careful, we could reach the end of our lives and look back and realize we missed the point. All of the good things we were doing were not the point. God has given us a command to make disciples of ALL nations. I do not want one person to ever reach the end of their life, stand before God, and realize: **You never made a disciple. You did not follow Jesus' commission and command to you.**"

Think about it this way: if the ultimate purpose of life were to just enjoy the goodness of God, then as soon as Jesus saved us from our sins, life would be over. There would be no point in being here on Earth. But we do have a purpose here on earth. God left us here for a reason. Hear me, follower of Jesus: you are on a mission! You are on earth for a purpose and a reason. You have been saved by His grace to GO make disciples! This is life's greatest purpose; this is the amazing *more* to life.

A famous magician and atheist, Pen Gellet, said something that made me pause when I heard it. Listen carefully. Pen said, "How much do you have to **hate** somebody to **not** witness to them? How much do you have to **hate** somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and **not** tell them that? I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I would tackle you. And this is **more** important than that." The **more to life** is just that. And

we cannot be afraid to share that with others.



## LIFE APPLICATION

- How could you reorient your life today in a way that makes disciple-making a priority?
- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will..



## CHAPTER 27

# UNDERSTANDING AUTHORITY



Luke 7:1–10, Matthew 8:5–13

Coming under another person's authority is difficult for some of us and yet relatively easy for others. It was not easy for me. For a long time, I resisted authority. When I was a Senior in high school, my mother told me that God had placed a calling on my life and that I would be in ministry one day. I rejected her authority by laughing it off and replying to my mom that it would never happen. I had pastor after pastor tell me the same thing when I was an adult! I continued to run from the calling for years. Today, I can look back and clearly see that God was working in my life, even when I did not realize it or want to submit to it. I can see how God was working in me, even when I did not want much to do with Him. In the same way, the centurion in this passage had no clue God was at work in his life. God has been working in your life for a long time, too. The reason you are reading this is because God is drawing you to Him. Lean into that. You have no idea what will happen when you start walking with Jesus or what Jesus will do in your life when you do.



Luke 7:1–10

You just read an incredible story. The “*all this*” mentioned in verse one was the Sermon on the Mount, which we read about in the prior chapters. Right after Jesus had laid the foundation for leadership in His Kingdom, He left for home. Then Jesus ran into a Roman centurion, and in this interaction with the Roman soldier, we can learn four amazing Godly leadership principles regarding authority.

First, let's find out more about this person. Verse 2 began with, <sup>2</sup> *There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly,*

*was sick and about to die.* A centurion was a professional officer of the Roman army. Most centurions commanded groups of around eighty legionaries, which were the regular Roman infantry. Senior centurions commanded cohorts, which were groups of five hundred or more soldiers. In our modern terms, this is called a Battalion Chief. And still, more senior centurions commanded a legion of around five thousand soldiers. This centurion who came to Jesus for help was an important Roman soldier. Bear in mind that his job meant he was assigned to kill groups of people, and he would assign his men to kill, imprison, and torture people. More specifically, he and his soldiers were called by the government they worked for to keep these bizarre religious Jewish people under wraps. His soldiers would have worked with people like Matthew (Levi), one of Jesus' followers, to make sure people paid taxes to Rome. And if they did not pay, they would be beaten, imprisoned, or worse.

Clearly, this centurion was not like others. We know this by the following description of him.

*<sup>3</sup>The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, <sup>5</sup>because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue."*

This centurion sent the Jewish elders to Jesus. He must have had a great relationship with them because they were on his side. Not only were they on this Roman's side, but they also pleaded with Jesus on his behalf. The story goes further by telling us that this Roman soldier helped build their synagogue. As I was studying and trying to figure out how this centurion could have done that, it became evident that this man was a powerful Roman leader. If he had been able to fund and build a temple, he would have been in a very senior position of leadership. This man built a temple for God. The Romans worshiped a plethora of gods, but

for some reason, he was drawn to the God of the Jews. Could it be God was drawing this man to Himself long before he knew he needed Him?

Perhaps this has been the story of some of you. You can look back over your life and see how God was drawing you to Him long before you wanted anything to do with Him. Maybe that is you right now. I already told you that was my story. I grew up in church and still ran from God. This Roman was a man of some sort of faith within an evil, idol-worshiping culture. This Roman showed us that we can be Godly people in godless environments. I know some of you think that you cannot act like a Christian in your job but trust me. You can! And since we are talking about leadership principles in this section of Jesus' life, make sure you do not miss this **Leadership principle: Godly leaders love those they are leading, they hurt for them and care for them, and they use their authority to help them.**

Good leaders must truly love those under their command, feel their hurt, and care for them. If we are going to lead like Jesus, we must love like Jesus. Look at what happened with this centurion who reached out and took a chance on Jesus. *<sup>6</sup> So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof."* Matthew also recorded the centurion saying, *<sup>8</sup> "But say the word, and my servant will be healed."* This centurion was utterly unique. We learned that he must have been a very powerful Roman leader, yet he showed great humility toward Jesus. He knew Jesus could do what he could not. What he said next, "I do not deserve it" and "I am not worthy," were statements of great humility. **Leadership principle: Leaders understand that a display of great humility does not undermine their authority.**

Even though this man had the power to command Jesus to do anything he wanted, even though he could have sent his



soldiers to force Jesus to come or be thrown into jail, he chose the path less traveled. He chose the path of asking with a humble heart. **Leadership principle: Godly leaders realize they are not worthy of the great honor of serving alongside Jesus and recognize that they are not the ultimate authority.**

This Roman centurion, who could have commanded thousands of soldiers, realized he did not deserve the honor of standing in the presence of the Commander of all the angel armies! Do you realize that Jesus is the ultimate commander, and He wants to serve you? Have you ever thought about how ridiculous it is for God himself to want to serve you? How amazing it is that the creator of our entire universe wants to help us in our brokenness, even though none of us are worthy? **Jesus wants to serve you and me.**

Then in the next few words, this Roman commander shows us another leadership principle: This centurion says: <sup>7</sup> *“But say the word, and my servant will be healed.”* <sup>8</sup> *“For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”*

I used to pastor near the largest naval base in the world. The military leaders in my church taught me a lot of things, but one of the most important was what we just read in the Bible. Soldiers must trust those in leadership above them and trust that their leaders are seeing the bigger picture. They must trust the orders given to them and obey even if they cannot see how their task serves the greater good. **Leadership principle: Godly leaders have faith to trust God’s authority for miracles that eyes cannot see.**

The primary depiction of the Romans and Roman soldiers was that they were violent. Throughout the New Testament, they are painted in a negative light. Bear in mind that Jesus had just selected his core apostle team and was coming back into town

with several hundred of His closest followers. Think about what he said next... really think about what this would have sounded like to his followers. <sup>9</sup> *When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."*

Jesus was amazed, maybe even shocked. The crowd following Jesus were His followers from all over Israel. Stop and think about the irony; think about the implications. Jesus must have thought this would be a good teachable moment for all of them, so He followed these Jewish elders to this Roman's house. On the way there the centurion sent some friends to tell Jesus that He does not need to come to his house. How did they know Jesus was coming? Well, if hundreds of people are following you as you walk with the elders of the town, it would be a certainty that word was spreading! And this important Roman centurion would certainly know that Jesus and hundreds of His followers were headed his way. So, he sent word,

<sup>6</sup> *"Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. <sup>7</sup>I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word and my servant will be healed. <sup>8</sup>For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*

This Roman leader clearly understood that Jesus had power and authority over everything. He believed that Jesus was capable of healing anyone, anywhere, at any time. This Roman explained that he knew how and where Jesus' authority came from and that it was far beyond his own power and authority! The Bible says that this AMAZED JESUS! That is why I find this verse so amusing! God clearly has a sense of humor because He decided to use this unexpected person to teach the Jews about faith, authority, power, humility, and submission.

Jesus turned around to His followers and said something to

them. Again, remember that centurions were generally considered to be killing machines. Jesus turned around to His followers and the crowds following as well and said, <sup>9</sup>*“I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”* Jesus was standing next to some prominent Jewish elders. Jesus was clearly stating that He can bring anyone to faith in Him. God was not exclusive to the Jewish people. God was not exclusive to the people who went to temple or church. Jesus can reach anyone, from any background, in any place, at any time... then and now.

It seems fitting in this story that Jesus himself was surprised and amazed at the trust this centurion demonstrated. Jesus was surprised to find faith in a centurion that surpassed anything He had seen in anyone from Israel. We can learn something from Jesus’ own surprise at the idea of an enemy soldier proving to be a model of faith and leadership for the people of God. However, we should not be surprised by the unlikely places that faith shows up in our own world. It could even show up in those we think are our enemies.

God can use those we perceive as our enemies to teach us about true faith and His authority over everything. In the end, this story is reminiscent of Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6:27: *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”* Did you know that I have found only two times in the gospels where we see Jesus commending a person’s faith? Right here and in Matthew 15:28. Both compliments on faith were made by Jesus to people outside the Jewish faith: one to a woman and one to a man. By doing this, Jesus very clearly communicated that He came for all people of all nationalities, male or female, slave or free. Jesus clearly demonstrated that the faith that pleases God is not an exclusive thing reserved for the religious crowd. It is open to all.



- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
- As a result of today's reading, how will you apply what you learned? Answer as I will...

- In today's reading, what did you learn about God, yourself, and mankind?
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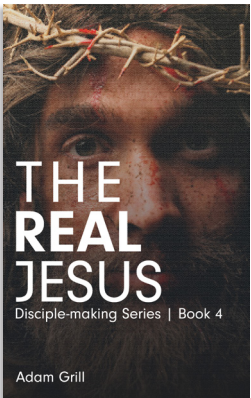
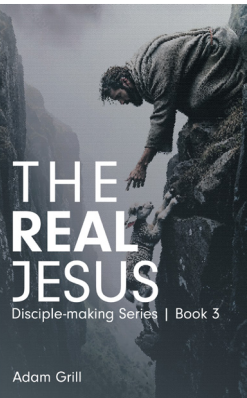
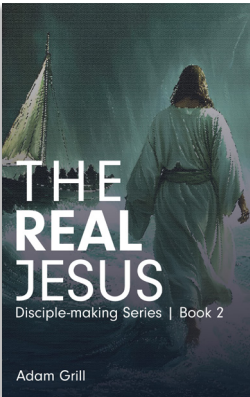
# FROM PASTOR ADAM

Congratulations on finishing the first book in *The Real Jesus* series! I hope you learned a lot about who the real Jesus was, is, and always will be. I hope you have taken up the challenge to become a disciple of Jesus who is making more disciples of Jesus. If that still seems too daunting, email us at, dm@familychurch.app and we will gladly help you however we can. We can even partner you with someone to help you walk through these books virtually or in person!

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