

## What Jesus Said



What Jesus Said

# What Jesus Said

And the Life He Modeled For Us

Greg Hildenbrand



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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to my paternal grandmother, Alma Marie Hildenbrand, who was a beacon of God's love during my first three decades of life, and whose light shines even brighter in death. She saw good in me long before I recognized it in myself.

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## Preface

The foundation of Christianity is actually much simpler to understand and, at the same time, more difficult to act upon than most of us imagine. It is easy to become so enthralled with what authors, preachers, and academics say *about* what Jesus said – the commentaries on the words – that we overlook the simplicity of what Jesus actually is recorded to have said.

The premise for this book is that many of us who call ourselves Christian have lost track of the life Jesus actually modeled for us to live. I will point out that Jesus' basic instructions are understandable by nearly everyone, as long as we keep our focus on the foundational ways of living with and relating to others that Jesus actually taught. Christianity only becomes complicated when we pay more attention to the commentaries on Jesus' words than we do to the words and actions themselves.

I believe many of us have made Jesus' instructions complicated because they are so *hard* to actually put into practice. When a parent tells their child not to bully their younger sibling, the difficulty is not that the older child does not understand the instruction. The difficulty is that bullying the younger sibling is so hard *not to do!* Jesus calls us to simple lives of service to others, but we desire lives of material comfort and safety. The problem is that living a life of

material comfort and safety often conflicts with a simple life of service to others is opposed to our cultural norms of material acquisition and personal comfort.

It is my hope that the following pages will assist the reader in better understanding the *gestalt* – the larger picture – of what Jesus’ life was actually about. While we may never grow out of our tendency to seek what makes us comfortable and safe, we may at least better understand why our spiritual lives sometimes do not progress the way we feel they should. Our application of spiritual principles, as laid out by Jesus, is often in need of adjustment if we seriously intend to follow Jesus. We must accept, however, that when we make a conscious decision to follow Jesus, he will lead to the cross. We will be required to lay down much of what we consider important today in order to experience oneness with Christ.

Following Jesus requires sacrifice and suffering, but our lives are full of sacrifice and suffering anyway. When we suffer because of our commitment to follow Jesus, we make conscious choices that give meaning and purpose to our suffering, while bringing humanity as a whole closer to the kingdom of God of which Jesus speaks.

Greg Hildenbrand  
November 2018

## Introduction

*This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.*

John 21:24

This book focuses on the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels. A reasonable case can be made that Christianity has strayed from its roots. In fact, some go so far as to say that Jesus would not recognize himself in many of today's churches that claim him as their leader. For this reason, I think it is worthwhile to attempt a foundational review of his life and teachings. One question that arises as we begin is this: How do we know what Jesus actually said? Is the Biblical record a reliable source?

The chronological proximity of when Jesus lived and when his words were finally written down is one concern. The New Testament books that contain the majority of the words attributed to Jesus are the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The books written closest to Jesus' life, however, are the letters written by Paul. Paul never knew Jesus in the flesh, however, nor does he quote him. Even Paul's letters were written several decades after Jesus' death. The Gospel of Mark, believed to have been the earliest of the Gospels, was written 40 or so years after Jesus died. The last of the Gospels, John, is dated 20 or so years after Mark. There are plenty of Jesus quotes in the four Gospels, but the time that passed between

Jesus' life and their writing is a concern for some, in terms of the accuracy of the quotes.

Another issue is which, if any, of the authors of the Gospels actually heard Jesus speak. There is some evidence that it was followers of the initial disciples who actually wrote the books, meaning their writings are at least a generation removed from anyone who witnessed Jesus face to face. The stories of Jesus, no doubt, were passed along verbally from person to person, generation to generation, prior to actually

***Jesus' teachings may have been better understood some years after his death, allowing the authors time to reflect upon and live into the teachings.***

being recorded in written form. Because few people were literate in Jesus' day, most persons were good listeners with better-developed memories than ours are today. Even so, some legitimately question the dependability of the recollections contained in the Bible.

A final issue with relying on the Gospel record to discern what Jesus said is with the multiple translations. Jesus' native language was Aramaic. He likely also knew at least some Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. The New Testament authors first translated Jesus' words into Greek, a language very dissimilar to Aramaic, and have since been translated into many other languages, including English. As the argument goes, could the actual words of Jesus have been accurately preserved through all the different translations?

How are we to know, two thousand years and many cultures later, what Jesus actually said? For me, the answer lies not in the factual accuracy of scripture but in the overarching themes that are consistently presented. For example, a child may hear his teacher say, “Your homework is due tomorrow.” The student’s mom says, “You heard your teacher. Get your homework done tonight.” The student’s dad says, “Do as your mother said.” These are three very different phrasings, but with an identical theme. The importance is not the actual words, but the call-to-action inspired by the words. In Jesus’ case, it matters less that his words were recorded verbatim and more that the message Jesus communicated was preserved faithfully. I believe a strong case can be made that Jesus’ teachings may have been *better* understood some years after his death, allowing the authors time to reflect upon and live into the teachings.

Another important argument as to why we can rely on scripture to study what Jesus said has to do with one of his favorite teaching mediums – the use of parables. Jesus taught using parables, and no one debates the factual nature of a parable. They were stories told to illustrate a point. The New Testament authors may have used parable-like paraphrasing to capture Jesus’ teachings, and to the extent that is the case, I think the essence of the teachings is very likely intact.

All of this is to say that the argument of whether Jesus’ words are accurately captured in scripture is not a concern to me. The more important questions are what did Jesus’ teachings mean at the time they were spoken, and what do they mean for us today?

# 1 - Repent!

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

Matthew 4:17

The first instruction from Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark is to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15). This line is exactly what John the Baptist is quoted as saying earlier in Matthew (3:2), and occurs after Jesus was baptized by John and had spent 40 days in the wilderness. It seems safe to assume these words hold a special significance, since they mark the beginning of his ministry. What does it mean, exactly, to *repent*? The current understanding has largely to do with being sorry for poor behavior. In Catholic traditions, parishioners can attend *confession*, where they admit to a priest where they have fallen short in the recent past: “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned...” Certainly, confessing our shortcomings and seeking forgiveness is a healthy practice, but the fuller meaning of repentance goes beyond being sorry for less-than-stellar behavior.

Dictionary.com<sup>1</sup> defines *repent* as “to feel such sorrow for sin or fault as *to be disposed to change one’s life for the better*” (emphasis added). The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which literally means “a transformative change of heart: *especially*, a spiritual conversion.”<sup>2</sup> To repent is to turn around or to make



a conscious choice to change the direction of one's life. It goes to the core of our inner being and seeks to change us from there. Much more than saying, "I'm sorry," to repent is a determined, sustained, and conscious action to chart a different course for one's life. This, then, is Jesus' initial instruction for those who wish to follow him.

For me, there is an Advent-feel about repentance in that it invites us to prepare for something magical and mystical. It is magical in that the life Jesus calls us to is largely foreign to our daily routines. It is mystical in that it cannot be explained or foreseen, except by faith. In Luke 3:4, John the Baptist, echoing the prophet Isaiah, says, "Prepare the way of the Lord,

***Much more than saying, "I'm sorry," to repent is a determined, sustained, and conscious action to chart a different course for one's life.***

make his paths straight." John's Gospel records the words as "Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). To the extent that John's words are a call to repentance, it is a call to a *process* and not a single event; a preparation for an extended journey, as opposed to a specific destination.

This directive from Jesus for repentance points to a new focus for our lives. Jesus offers a bridge to this new life, but the first step of this *journey of the heart* is ours to take. In one of his daily meditations, Richard Rohr writes, "You cannot know God the way you know anything else."<sup>3</sup> This journey is not one of becoming upwardly mobile in order to rub elbows with the societal elite. There is not anything wrong

with upward mobility, *per se*, except that is not an orientation conducive to finding God. Its motivations are wrongly placed. Our deepest essence cannot be focused on material gain and also upon God. In fact, the journey Jesus invites us to is more likely to take us among those society rejects. We, along with Mary and Joseph, must make the long *heart-journey* to Bethlehem and find our way to the dark of the stable. The Christ within will not be born among the lights and parties at the Inn with everybody who is anybody. There is no room there for this birth. The Christ within is born in the simplicity, solitude, and minimal provision of the stable.

To repent is to change our priorities. We focus less on ourselves and more on others. We are less concerned with accumulating *stuff* and more on acquiring useful items for those in need. Our priorities shift from success to meaning. This change is not something forced upon us, that we are guilted into beginning, or even something that is possible without our willing consent. As we turn our faces toward God, we are naturally pulled in a new direction, a direction an earlier version of ourselves likely would have shunned. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

## 2 - Follow Me

*And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Mark 1:16-17*

*In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Mark 1:35*

The childhood game of *Follow the Leader* consists of one person – the leader – acting in certain ways while the other players do as the leader does. If the leader takes 3 steps forward, twirls around, takes 2 steps back, and then does a summersault, it is up to the followers to copy the leader's actions. In a way, Jesus invites us into a game of *Follow the Leader*. He says, "Follow me," and we are to do as Jesus does. One foundational habit of Jesus, found throughout each Gospel, is going to a quiet place to pray. Some of us pray before meals, at bedtime, and in church with a congregation, but how well do we follow the way Jesus modeled prayer? First, Mark says Jesus got up while it was still dark. We receive so much visual stimulation from our surroundings that darkness is foreign and frightening. Yet, how can we expect to focus on God's presence when the seductive lure of visual distractions constantly bombards us? We may be better able to commune with God in the dark. Second, Jesus went to "a deserted place" to be alone with God. When was the last time we sat alone, longing only for God's company? Jesus found solace and rejuvenation in his prayer life. Do we? Perhaps

we are not comfortable with prayer because we have not fully entered into it the way Jesus did. Following Jesus, I believe, begins with grounding ourselves in prayer.

In the context of Jesus saying, “Follow me,” it is important to remember he did not say, “Worship me.” Jesus worships God the Father, the one so far beyond our earthly comprehension that all we can do is fall on our knees in reverent submission. God is unknown and unknowable to the human mind. On the other hand, we can know and love Jesus as we would any other person. God came to earth in the person of Jesus, as one of us, so we could know God through him and *follow*. There is an important distinction between worshipping and following. We will only worship and/or fear that which we cannot comprehend. One appropriate response as we consider the vastness of God is astonishment and awe – like standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon or tracing the path of the Milky Way on a clear, dark night. God in Jesus, however, was comprehensible. Sometimes we act as if he were not in order to ignore the personal obligation to follow him, which can be uncomfortable and inconvenient. We are to *worship* God, but we are to *follow* Jesus. Following is an act of presence, dictated by the circumstances of the moment. The Gospels help us understand what Jesus did in his day and, through that understanding, to project how Jesus would likely act today.

Some Christian churches, my own included, spend a lot of time and energy on issues that Jesus apparently never addressed. To our knowledge, Jesus did not mention homosexuality, gay marriage, women in the priesthood, or practicing LGBTQ persons

serving as clergy or being welcomed into Christian fellowship. Regardless, these issues define and divide many churches today, both between denominations and within congregations. I suspect these divisions in the church named for him make Jesus weep. Remember, there were no “Christian” churches in the time of Jesus, who was a Jew. The followers of Jesus formed the Christian church because they desired a new forum within which to more faithfully follow him. How far have we strayed from following our leader?

Most of what we know of Jesus’ actions on earth fall into the categories of loving, teaching, healing, and including. He brought acceptance and grace where there was judgement and condemnation. He gave knowledge where there was ignorance, and healing where there was illness. He reached out to those condemned to the outskirts of society and brought them in. What does it mean to follow Jesus? One thing it means is for us to provide love, knowledge, healing, and inclusion wherever we find hatred, ignorance, illness, and exclusion. To do so requires a centered presence with and attentiveness to the life around us. A regular practice of quiet time alone with God, as Jesus modeled, is a good place to begin.

### 3 - The Kingdom is Near

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Matthew 4:17*

According to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus' first instruction to his followers was to "Repent." He follows this directive with a brief justification. In my paraphrase, Jesus says: "You need to change the focus of your life *because* the kingdom is very near and available to you here and now, but you will never experience it from the path you are on." The kingdom of heaven Jesus refers to may or may not be a place we go when we die, but it most certainly is a state of being *here and now*.

It is difficult to overemphasize the central position the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God (the terms are seemingly interchangeable), has in the teachings of Jesus. This kingdom is the nexus from which his teachings emanate. Jesus refers to the *kingdom of heaven/God* 85 times in the four Gospels. He refers to *the kingdom* another 34 times. Clearly, there is something significant about this kingdom that Jesus invites us to know and experience.

Most of us were taught to think of heaven as a faraway place where the good and faithful go after they die. The alternative, *hell*, is where those not qualifying for heaven go. Our stay in either place is, according to some, eternal. While I prefer not to speculate about possible states of being after our physical death, I have certainly experienced both heaven and hell on earth. It is to these present states of the human condition that I believe Jesus is referring when he tells us the kingdom is near.

What Jesus says about the kingdom is instructive. Aside from the many comparisons he draws, i.e., *the kingdom of heaven is like...*, Jesus refers to the kingdom as a place that is very close. In Matthew 4:17, Jesus says "the kingdom of heaven *has come near*" (emphasis

added). Elsewhere in Matthew (12:28) he says, “the kingdom of God has come *to you*.” In Mark 12:34: “You are *not far* from the kingdom of God.” From Luke 17:21: “the kingdom of God is *among* you.” The unmistakable common theme is that this kingdom is not somewhere far away, but this kingdom is *here*. As if this is not convincing, in Luke 9:27, Jesus says: “But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

Point number one is that the kingdom is near. Point number two is that the presence, knowledge, or experience of Jesus is integral to our ability to enter the kingdom. Third, while many Christians believe Jesus is *the* entry point to heaven (Jesus, in fact, claims

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as much in John 14:6), I do not believe the Christian experience of Jesus is the *only* entry point. Rather, all points likely require a knowledge or experience of God in the flesh, which is exactly what Christians believe of Jesus. In other words, entry into heaven on earth requires a *Jesus-like encounter* with the divine, which is available to all, all of the time, including those who have never heard of or experienced the Son of God manifested in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus, in referring to the kingdom, is talking about a state of being that is present *now*, while we are alive on earth, and we enter it through Christ, the Son of God. We are not separate from God; only our lack of faith makes it seem so. In a Daily Meditation<sup>4</sup>,

Richard Rohr wrote, “The belief that God is ‘out there’ is the basic dualism that is tearing us all apart. Jesus came to put it all together for and in us. He was saying, “This physical world is the hiding place of God.” Although the body of Jesus left this planet 2000 years ago, he is still present through the reality of the Spirit, offering us entry into the kingdom whenever we are ready – right here, right now, next week, or when we die. The ticket to the kingdom is repentance – rearranging our priorities. Once our heart is set on the right path, Christ will lead us to the kingdom.

## 4 - Come and See

*When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.”*

John 1:38-39

In John 1:35-42, Jesus walks by John the Baptist and a couple of his disciples. John says, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” John’s two disciples begin following Jesus, who turns around and asks, “What are you looking for?” The men ask where he is staying, and Jesus says, “Come and see.” This directive to Jesus’ first disciples two thousand years ago remains a directive to those of us wishing to follow him today: *Come and see*.

To *come* implies we must leave wherever we are, and to *see* means to open our eyes, heart, and mind to



what is revealed in our coming. Those who wish to see must first come. Another important word in this story is the word translated as *staying*, which can also be translated as *abiding*. There is a way to consider this encounter that I find helpful. When John's disciples saw Jesus, identified by John as the *Lamb of God*, they immediately wanted to know more. Something about Jesus intrigued them. Perhaps they saw something in him they were missing in themselves. Therefore, they

***To come implies we must leave wherever we are, and to see means to open our eyes, heart, and mind to what is revealed in our coming.***

asked where he was staying. Personally, I think what they asked was more along the lines of *Where do you abide?* The difference is significant because if, indeed, the disciples were drawn to Jesus, they would want to know about his spiritual center of gravity, or certainly something deeper than his physical habitation.

Where we abide can refer to our state of consciousness and/or a state of relationship. It is our go-to mode for living. Our abode is where we reside internally, as in the center point from which we live and move and have our being. Jesus, as the Lamb of God, was in a relationship with God that these men wanted to experience for themselves. Thus they ask: Where are you abiding? Those of us who seek to follow Jesus will eventually ask the same question. If this interpretation of the story is reasonable, the journey Jesus invites us to is an internal journey more than an external one. Jesus invites us not to a

different geographic state, but to a different state of conscious awareness.

Jesus tells the men, “Come,” meaning to leave wherever they are. In this case, it meant for the disciples to leave their current lives, including leaving their mentor, John. For us, it may mean many things, but wherever *it* is, Jesus invites us to a different life than we have today. To come somewhere is to leave one’s current abode. Jesus might as easily have said, “Leave!” The command requires an affirmative decision, followed by action on our part to accomplish.

Finally, Jesus says, “See.” Only after we have come to where he abides can we begin to see what he wishes to reveal. To witness the inner reality of Jesus is to experience what it means to live in unity with God. It is not enough to listen, nor is it sufficient to read or talk it out with others. We only experience this divine reality by trusting, following, and committing to a new type of freedom and a new state of being.

Here is the problem for many of us: our lives are like a hamster wheel in that we confuse activity with progress. We are worried and distracted over many things and overwhelmed with the day’s demands. We run faster and faster, but at the end of the day/week/year we have progressed no farther along any road upon which we wish to be traveling. This is discouraging because no matter how hard we work, neither the scenery nor the schedule changes, and the only tangible result we have to show is total exhaustion! I understand Jesus’ invitation to come and see as one to step off the hamster wheel, leave the cage, and enter a new, expanded reality. How we

actually do this, from a practical standpoint, is another matter that each of us must figure out for ourselves – just as Jesus’ disciples had to figure out how to leave their former lives in order to move to a new one.

Either way, all who want off their current hamster-wheel-abode are invited: *Come and See!*

## 5 - Peace! Be Still!

*He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea,  
“Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead  
calm. Mark 4:39*

Jesus had been teaching to a crowd on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Evening came and Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” Jesus fell asleep in the back of the boat when a “great windstorm” arose and threatened to swamp the boat. His disciples woke him up and said, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus got up and rebuked the wind, saying to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The wind stopped blowing and “there was a dead calm.” Jesus said to his disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

How many times in life have we felt beaten and drenched by the winds and rain of life’s challenges and wondered, “Lord, do you not care that I am perishing?” Serious health issues, suffering loved ones, job insecurities, troubled relationships, bills piling up – name any issue and many people

experience the feeling of drowning under that particular pressure. Difficult times seem to attract more difficult times. Old wife's tails like "God will never give you more than you can handle" are discouraging, at best, if not patently false. Even so,

***There is no security, no stability, and no calm  
outside of our total reliance upon the  
provision of God.***

Jesus looks out over our situation and says, "Peace! Be still!" In my experience, the seas have always calmed, although seldom on my timeline. During the calm after the storm, I hear Jesus patiently whisper, "Have you no faith?"

And yet, this is our journey. Iron is sharpened by iron, and our faith is strengthened by our challenges. Anyone can be faithful when life is easy. Life, however, is never smooth for long. Our emotions rise and fall like the waves, turbulent and rough one moment and smooth as glass the next. We tend to believe we have life under control during our moments of calm, only to experience something that sends us flailing in the waves again. We become victims of our emotions, unless and until we learn to rise above the turbulence of our surroundings to the dead calm of Christ.

A little-understood fact of life is that there is no security, no stability, and no calm outside of our total reliance upon the provision of God. There is no bank account large enough, no home solid enough, no body healthy enough, no relationship strong enough to stand against every storm that may come. There is no insurance policy comprehensive enough to assure

the restoration of life to a previous state. Everything of the earth deteriorates and dies, as has been true for billions of years. Our world is in a state of constant flux as God creates and recreates new life in its stunning diversity. If we are unwilling to consciously change with our surroundings, we will be worn down like a boulder stubbornly fixed in the middle of a raging river. The wearing down over time, however, will not be the fault of the river or the rock – it is simply the nature of creation.

Perhaps when Jesus looked out over the stormy sea and said, “Peace! Be still!” it was more a command to his frightened disciples than it was to the sea. “Trust me – I’ve got this,” may be another helpful translation. Yes, life will be rough. But it is our own resistance to what is that makes it so. It is *our* lack of faith that is on display, not God’s lack of care for who we are *at our essence*, which is eternal.

Some changes to our world – hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, fires – cause immeasurable suffering to many of the individual lives who inhabit it. But life, as a whole, survives and thrives. Individual life on earth was never intended to be permanent because the earth must continually redistribute the elements that compose our bodies and all of creation into new life forms. We are blind to the grace of every circumstance because we mourn what we believe we have lost instead of rejoicing in what is gained.

Jesus’ words, “Peace! Be still!” are a directive, calling us to trust God’s sometimes-raging river. When we strap ourselves in and commit to enjoying the ride wherever it takes us, we are less likely to be consumed by the seeming tragedies that occur along the way. We, too, will perish in God’s stormy sea one

day. Paradoxically, only then will we truly know the peace of Christ. Until that day, we can only know the peace of Christ through faith.

## 6 - Do Not Be Afraid

*He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"* Mark 4:40

When we are afraid it is usually because we have lost a sense of control, we are in an unfamiliar situation, or darkness has made our surroundings appear strange and threatening. We can be frightened because we feel our life, or the life of a loved one is in danger. Fear is a common reaction whenever something out of our comfort zone is occurring. On the one hand, we are told to *fear* God, as in Leviticus 19:14, and on the other hand, sprinkled throughout scripture, is the directive not to fear God's messengers.

Biblical encounters with a divine being – God, Jesus, or an angel – are often preceded with the directive to have no fear. For example, in Genesis 15:1, God visited Abraham in a dream and said, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield." In Matthew 1:20, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." In Luke 1:13, an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard." In Luke 1:30, the angel Gabriel appeared

to Mary and said, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” It is as if the message was, “Do not allow your fear to make you too uncomfortable to receive the message.”

About 25 times in the four Gospels, Jesus says not to be afraid or not to fear. In the passage from Mark 4:40, the disciples are on a boat crossing the sea. Jesus is asleep when a strong storm hits and threatens to sink the ship. The disciples are in fear for their lives when they wake up Jesus. He calms the sea with a word and says, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” What is so interesting about this story is the connection Jesus draws between fear and faith. Is Jesus suggesting that a person with sufficient faith should have no fear?

The night before Jesus was crucified, as he prayed, he asked, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me...” (Luke 22:42). Was that an

***Is Jesus suggesting that a person with sufficient faith should have no fear, ever?***

expression of fear? Personally, I think there is an important distinction to draw between fear and dread. The human part of Jesus dreaded the pain, suffering, and humiliation that was before him in a way similar to how we might dread an upcoming Calculus final or a course of chemotherapy. The divine part of Jesus knew there was a greater purpose for his suffering, and so he relented, “...yet, not my will but yours be done.”

Perhaps the type of fear Jesus warns against is the type that manifests as *worry*. We fear many things because we suspect they may negatively impact our

current or future states of being. Of course, the vast majority of what we worry about does not happen. Invariably, the outcomes of that which does happen are seldom as disastrous as our worry leads us to believe. Worry reveals a significant lack of trust in God's care and hinders our ability to be fully present to whatever is going on.

Anyone who has believed in the goodness of God over a significant period knows that faith does not prevent tragic things from happening. Certainly, there are events and circumstances on earth where fear is a rational reaction. Our faith, however, can help put suffering into a meaningful context. God does not promise bad things will not happen, only that we will not have to carry the burden alone. In addition, God assures us that, over time, *all* things work together for good (Romans 8:28) in ways we simply cannot imagine. God always works to transform suffering into blessing.

In Luke 12:22, Jesus is explicit: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear." We are in good, albeit invisible hands worthy of our trust. Fear of God, as in an *awe-inspired reverence* for God's incomprehensible presence, is a good, healthy fear. Worry and speculation about future possibilities reveals a faith deficit and only saps our strength. God may be speaking to us through our fear-inducing events, but succumbing to worry will only inhibit our ability to receive God's message. Why are we so afraid? Have we still no faith?



## 7 - By Bread Alone

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Luke 4:1-4*

Accounts of the temptation of Jesus are recorded in Matthew (4:1-11), Mark (1:12-13), and Luke (4:1-13). After Jesus had been baptized by John, he went into the wilderness for 40 days. Matthew and Luke record that Jesus was fasting during that time. The devil met Jesus there and issued three temptations when Jesus was at his weakest from the extended fast. The first challenge was to turn a stone into bread. The second was to receive authority over all the kingdoms of the world in return for worshiping the devil. Finally, Jesus was encouraged to throw himself onto the rocks from the pinnacle of the Temple, knowing that God would protect him. Jesus refused each of the temptations, left the wilderness, and began his public ministry.

Whether one reads this account as a factual or a metaphorical account is beyond my purpose here. What I address here is how the temptations of Jesus are about the use of personal *power*, and how these are temptations we too face, in endless variations,

throughout our lives. If the life of Jesus is the standard for our life, we have much to learn from how he used, and refused to use, the power at his disposal.

Although scripture does not give a reason for the fast, it seems safe to assume it was a part of Jesus' preparation for his ministry. The first challenge was to use his power to turn a stone into bread and end his fast. On the one hand, if I were hungry and had such power, it would be difficult not to use it in that way.

***The temptations of Jesus are about the use of personal power, and how these are temptations we, too, face.***

Unfortunately, that would betray his purpose for fasting and nullify the benefits from the difficulties he had already endured. Jesus' response is "One does not live by bread alone" (Luke 4:4).

The second temptation was to betray his lineage, as revealed by God at his baptism ("You are my son, the Beloved"). By reflecting anything less than the Father, Jesus could not fulfill his purpose of making God known to us. We are frequently encouraged to settle for something less than what we strive for, and we are given the power to settle through our free will. It is not that God will no longer love us if we settle for less, it is that we will disappoint ourselves for giving in, as well as failing to accomplish that which we set out to achieve. Jesus' response to the devil was "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only" (Luke 4:8).

The third temptation was to threaten damage to his physical body on the assumption God would keep

him safe. After all, God had a huge purpose for Jesus in the world. We know God takes us where we are, in whatever shape we are in, and uses us for purposes beyond our comprehension. Even if angels did not save Jesus from the rocks below, surely God would find a way to use him. This temptation was about showing how low we can sink and still have God lift us up. Jesus' response is "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Luke 4:13).

It is in our most vulnerable moments when we are tempted to use whatever means are available to ease our suffering, regardless of whether we believe we are tempted by the devil, by human nature, or our own personal weakness. The end does not justify the means when it comes to personal holiness. Patience, trust, and faith are required. The way out is by going *through* the difficulty, not by taking shortcuts around it. Inevitably, at some point or points in our lives, we will find ourselves in a metaphorical wilderness: hungry, alone, and tempted. In our weakest moments, it is helpful to remember how Jesus handled temptation: by persisting after our prayerfully-determined aims, by being as faithful to God as God is to us, and by treating our bodies as God's temple. God's strength manifests in our weakness.

## 8 - Rejoice and Be Glad

*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*

Matthew 5:12a

In the next several essays, I will reflect upon the Sermon on the Mount, as found in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. This is one of the longer of Jesus' discourses recorded in the Gospels. The initial part of this sermon is referred to as the *Beatitudes* (Matthew 5:3-12), or the *Be-attitudes*, which provide a distinctively Jesus-way of processing our life experiences.

Rather than starting with the first beatitude, I will begin with what I consider the summarizing point of the series: "Rejoice and be glad." Although one can say I am pulling this quote out of its context (rejoicing when others persecute us), I believe it is a reasonable conclusion to all of the statements preceding it. It puts the teachings into a larger context, revealing a worthy purpose for them. They tell us that life is good, regardless of occasional and apparent evidence to the contrary. Outside of this context, the statements may seem nonsensical.

Each of the nine Beatitudes follows an *if-then* type of format, i.e., if *this*, then *that*. More specifically, Jesus says, "Blessed are (the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, etc.), for (theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth, etc.). So, a situation is named, and its accompanying blessing follows in a concluding statement. The ultimate conclusion, as revealed in Matthew 5:12, is to "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." A condensed version of the same teaching is found in Luke 6:23, where Jesus says, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven." Most of the situations named are not at all what we would consider worthy of leaping for joy, nor does our world encourage or reward them. The lack of a short-

term reward is how we intuit that Jesus is referring to a different type of reward than any immediate response we may or may not receive. More accurately, Jesus is referring to blessings we will not recognize without being intentional about our life experience. There are hidden blessings for diving deeply into any given moment. As long as we skim obliviously along from moment to moment, we cannot experience the depth and the beauty that lies beneath. It is under the surface of our moments that the blessings of the Beatitudes manifest.

When Jesus says, "...your reward is great in heaven," I do not believe he is referring to a post-death existence. Most of us have developed a limited understanding of *heaven* as an eternal paradise available to those who have been good enough in this

***When Jesus talks about heaven, he is referring to a state of being, or a level of consciousness available to us here and now.***

life to warrant such eternal bliss when this life comes to an end. While I do not deny that such may be our experience after death, I do not believe that is the heaven to which Jesus refers. Rather, he is talking about a state of being, or a level of consciousness available to us in the here and now. This is the state Jesus calls heaven, where we can be one with Jesus, and through Jesus be one with the Father.

With this as context, we can begin to understand the Beatitudes as lessons from Jesus about attitudes for *being* here and now, for diving beneath the surface of our life experience, and for harmonizing our lives into unity with God. Being poor in spirit, merciful,

and pure in heart become key to our ability to find the heart-space where we can meet Jesus in the moment, regardless of where or how we are. Sometimes, the behaviors and events least praised and admired by those around us are the very ways most conducive to experiencing heaven on earth. Whether we suffer, mourn, or are without the advantages others seem to have over us, we can *rejoice and be glad*, knowing that our disadvantagedness holds the key to the kingdom of heaven. Life is good, *even now*. This, then, is the direction in which the Beatitudes point.

## 9 - The Poor in Spirit

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Matthew 5:3

The first Beatitude of Jesus tells us the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. As he so often does, Jesus mixes metaphors in a way that many will reject as nonsense. For others, it is an invitation to explore the teaching in a deeper, deliberate way. The images of *poor* and *kingdom* seem a poor match for each other. Those who are poor are those who have little or nothing. Images of kingdoms, however, call to mind abundance and access to things considered good and beautiful – a large castle, an extended estate, servants, vineyards, and lavish banquets. Kingdom images often also include excesses, such as gluttony, lust, and all sorts of abuses of power and privilege, of lives built on the backs of the poor and oppressed.

Although the text refers to the poor in *spirit*, I think the lot of the poor was intentionally used by Jesus as an example. Poor people, by definition, do not have a lot of extra *things*. I often see homeless people with (presumably) everything they own in a paper sack. Some barely squeak by with life's necessities, while others require assistance to live at even a marginally life-sustaining level. They are burdened by what they lack. The non-poor among us, on the other hand, are prone to become burdened by our excesses. I suspect what Jesus means when he refers to the *poor in spirit* are those with an *unencumbered* spirit. These are people who can move between places and life situations with ease because most of what they need is contained within themselves. Their

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faith assures them of provision for their needs, and they trust that those needs will be met as they arise. This requires a level of faith I do not possess, but I understand how freeing it would be. For most of us, seeking a *less* encumbered life would be a reasonable and helpful beginning.

Those who have done mission work in third world countries have witnessed first-hand the unencumbered spirits and inherent joy of those who are poor in spirit. If the electricity goes out, the internet is down, the car stops working, one's computer crashes – few of these first-world “catastrophes” impact their lives at all. St. Francis of Assisi is said to have directed his followers to work

with and live among the poor of their time. The purpose was not, however, to “help” the poor folks so much as it was to allow the poor folks to help change his followers. I went on a mission trip to New Orleans three years after Hurricane Katrina decimated the area, and we were told to make sure we did not focus so much on the work that we did not spend significant time with the residents. In my arrogance, I assumed it was so we could serve as emotional, as well as physical support to them. In retrospect, I realize the goal of spending time with these folks was so they could change and help us instead of the other way around. We people of *privilege* have much to learn about attaining the freedom to experience joy in the moment, which is a key to the kingdom of heaven. Our encumbered lives pull us out of our moments back into the past or forward into an unknowable future.

I do not wish to be overly negative about the blessings of privilege. It is not that our possessions are evil. It is, however, that our *attachment* to our stuff stands between us and the experience of the presence of God. Many people misquote 1 Timothy 6:10 as, “Money is the root of all evil.” The passage actually says, “...the *love* of (i.e., attachment to) money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” So it is with our possessions. When they possess us, when they become the central objects of our desire (as opposed to being tools for our use), when we become dependent upon them, they stand as a barrier between us and the gates to the kingdom of heaven.

Far from a call to vagrancy and homelessness,



Jesus' invitation is to let go of our earthly attachments and dependencies, which is an altogether different kind of poverty. Blessed is the unencumbered spirit...for he/she will freely enter the kingdom of heaven while yet on earth.

## 10 - Those Who Mourn

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

Matthew 5:4

The second of the Beatitudes seems almost too obvious to warrant serious consideration, that those who mourn will be comforted. If it were so obvious, why would Jesus bother to say it? Perhaps the answer, as is so often the case, is that the truth in the statement is deeper than it appears. For one thing, one does not have to look far to find people who mourn who are not being comforted. After my father died, I mourned (poorly) for years. Yes, there were many who stepped up to comfort me, but what about the sleepless nights, the dreams, and the times I simply wanted to share something with my dad? I was never able to introduce him to my wife or children. He was not present to congratulate me on graduations or other achievements. Where is the comfort when one heart mourns for another, and there is no one near to ease the burden?

Interestingly, mourning has many causes. We most often think of mourning from the loss of a loved one by death or other separation. Mourning can

also occur from life-altering events over which we have no control. In addition, mourning happens with regret over past behavior, although this type of grief is often pushed beneath our conscious awareness. In the book God For Us<sup>5</sup>, Lauren Winner offers several fascinating insights into suffering. She writes, “There is something light in mourning – or at least something lightening – precisely because there is something *true* in mourning. To mourn the consequences of sin is, oddly, to edge very close to joy, because any encounter with the truth, even the truth of sin, has some hint of the lightened joy that comes when we allow ourselves to see things not as we wish they were, but as they really are; and a hint of joy that will come when sin is no more.” When our mourning stems from past behaviors, it is something that weighs heavily on us in such a way that we know we are carrying a heavy burden, but we cannot always pinpoint the source of the load.

The main point is that proper mourning is important to our well-being and wholeness. When we are not allowed – by ourselves or others – to fully mourn our losses and regrets adequately, we find ourselves living in an amorphous shadow of gloom. Being sad is an emotion and is not the same as mourning. True mourning names and exposes the source, the pain, and the way forward. It reaches deep within to bring everything associated with the pain into conscious awareness where it can be acknowledged and, in time, healed. When done properly and patiently, mourning is transformative. Clearly, professional assistance is often required.

One reason we tend to rush through our mourning is the sense of vulnerability and insecurity it

brings. To acknowledge our weakness from and powerlessness over our life's circumstances, or even over our own behavior, forces us to rearrange our understanding of life. That same vulnerability, however, is what opens us to comfort, rebirth, and resurrection. Thus, the words of Jesus, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." The

***To acknowledge our weakness from and powerless over life's circumstances forces us to rearrange our understanding of life.***

fact is we cannot be truly comforted until we have actually *mourned*. Further, mourning is not a one-time event, but a process that takes however long it takes – weeks, months, or years.

In his book, The Prophetic Imagination<sup>6</sup>, Walter Brueggemann writes about our nearly pathological resistance to acknowledging or even discussing the certitude of death – our own and that of those we love. In reference to this Beatitude, he says, "Only those who embrace the reality of death will receive new life. Implicit in his (Jesus') statement is that those who do not mourn will not be comforted and those who do not face the endings will not receive the beginnings."

Hidden within our mourning is new life – a fresh beginning – just as the freshness of spring lies hidden within the desolation of winter. There is no way to get to spring, however, except by going through winter. Not only will those who truly mourn be comforted, they will be blessed by the process.

## 11 - Blessed are the Meek

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

Matthew 5:5

Among the modern-day synonyms for *meek* are timid, docile, passive, spineless, resigned, and weak. I suspect the definition of meekness has changed significantly from what it meant in Jesus' day, and here is why: One of Jesus' most frequent instructions was to follow him, presumably even in his meekness. I find no evidence that any of these terms describe Jesus or his nature. Rather, he was assertive, courageous, persistent, and action-oriented. Therefore, as we read this Beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," I think we must look to a meaning for meekness that better reflects the way Jesus lived.

A more accurate, contemporary translation might be to say blessed are the *non-violent*. Jesus passionately challenged injustice, illness, ignorance, and poverty wherever and whenever he found them, but he always did so in a non-violent manner. There were a number of non-violent activists from the last century who modeled Jesus' brand of meekness, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela. None stood idly by in the face of injustice, but they steadfastly refused to answer violence with violence. The inconvenient truth is that Jesus did not allow his followers to react with violence at his arrest

(Matthew 26:51), nor did he raise a finger to avoid his own violent death. There is a price to pay for a non-violent commitment, often a painful one.

Violence is never isolated. It is a reaction to a perceived threat and, as a reaction, *violence is always a choice we make*. In other words, we *choose* whether to respond in a violent manner to a particular situation. We deceive ourselves to think violence is always physical, however. Emotional cruelty, verbal abuse, and economic injustice are much more common and can wound as deeply. Violence in our culture extends beyond gun control debates, abortion, the death penalty, bullying, and military invasions of sovereign nations. Violent reactions, personally and collectively,

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reflect our insecurities and subconscious motivations. When we value others in terms of their usefulness for our own interests, we misuse whatever power we have over them to our advantage and at their expense. We see this manifesting in rape and other types of sexual exploitation. The reach is broader than that, however. When we believe the rest of creation exists only for our benefit, we cause environmental destruction. Further, when we judge others as being of no value to us, as wrong or insignificant, we ignore the higher truth that every person is a child of and loved by God every bit as much as we are. When we see our world (and everything in it) as our playground, as something for our personal exploitation, or even when we expect that others should think and act as we do, we box ourselves into a very small, incomplete

world. Such a limited domain can only be sustained (temporarily) by violence because it is completely contrary to how the world was created.

Far from a cry to timidity, Jesus calls us to courageous and active resistance to the violence of our day, to find creative solutions that do not perpetuate cycles of violence. Such solutions respect and honor life where and as we find it, while also not allowing one immature life to run roughshod over another. Admittedly, it is not an easy undertaking. Jesus' message is clear, however. In Matthew 5:38-39, he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Jesus modeled a higher level of response, one that is effective, but non-vengeful and non-violent.

There is always a moment immediately following a threatening event when we can consciously choose our reaction. Sometimes it is best to hold the tension for a time, acknowledging it for what it is and identifying what within us is threatened by it. This allows the tension to become a source of internal healing instead of a trigger for another round of violence. As we learn to respond in non-violent ways to the world around us, as we learn Jesus' brand of meekness, we find our lives and the lives of those around us increasingly blessed in innumerable ways. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the good things of the earth, which ultimately exist in a web of beautifully diverse, interdependent relationships.

## 12 - Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Matthew 5:6*

I wish to consider three parts of this passage. First, what does it mean to *hunger and thirst* for something? Second, what is *righteousness*? Finally, in what way and with what is one *filled*?

When I think of hungering or thirsting for something, I picture a desire so strong that everything else fades to the background. It is said that a hungry child cannot learn in school because all he or she can think about is food. Indeed, many schools have breakfast and lunch programs to help assure that hunger is not an impediment to learning. The point is that when we hunger and thirst for something, the desire is *all-consuming*. Everything else fades to the background. In Revelation 3:15, the message to the church in Laodicea is: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." I read this as a message about doing what we do with *passion* and not settling for half-hearted efforts. As an even-tempered person, I worry that I too often react in lukewarm ways to the life around me.

It is perhaps overly obvious to say that righteousness is about doing what is right. What is right, however, is often subjective and differs among persons, cultures, and times. Some consider a law-abiding citizen to be righteous, which is probably true as long as the law is righteous. Martin Luther King, Jr., was jailed many times for protesting unrighteous laws. Yet, history has not judged him an unrighteous man. We could say a righteous person is one who follows the mandates of scripture. While I find the

***Based upon my understanding of Jesus' life,  
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justice.***

Bible useful for spiritual discernment and growth, I find it much less helpful as a rule book. Indeed, Jesus frequently criticized the literalist religious authorities of his day for applying scripture by its letter but ignoring its intent. It is far more fruitful, in my opinion, to strive to live as Jesus lived than to squeeze the laws and customs from thousands of years ago into something applicable today.

Based on my understanding of Jesus' life, what Jesus refers to as righteousness is *social justice*. In fact, we can reasonably translate this Beatitude as "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *justice*." Jesus displayed a laser-like focus on the poor, sick, and disenfranchised of society. For much of my life, it has been difficult to recognize my responsibility for issues of injustice. Should I feel guilty because I was born white and male in a resource-rich, first-world nation? I have had a paying job every day of my life since I was 14. I inherited little or nothing from my family



and have worked and paid for everything I have. One can say I earned and deserve my life.

This is a tricky topic because yes, of course, pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps would certainly count for something, if it were ever true. Being honest, however, every move up the social ladder for me has come because someone I knew, often a family acquaintance, opened a door for me to enter through. Consistently throughout my life, I have had opportunities presented that may not have been offered if not for the color of my skin, my country of origin, or the connections I had. What this has to do with justice is the realization that I am not a self-made person – not even close. Everything I have is a gift. A hunger and thirst for righteousness on my part might begin with a passionate commitment to open doors and give a hand up to others who have not had the same opportunities.

The last part of this Beatitude is that we will be filled. We might better understand Jesus' meaning by inverting it – that we will no longer be empty. When we are on the upper rungs of the societal ladder, we often possess an abundance of *stuff*, but we may be void of the love and fulfillment that genuine relationships bring. Our possessions can distract us from what is most important in life. Whenever we choose objects over others, our life experience becomes shallow, unstable, and empty. Perhaps a better contemporary translation of this Beatitude would be to say, "Blessed are those who work passionately on matters of justice, for they will live full and contented lives."

## 13 - Blessed are the Merciful

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

Matthew 5:7

As with a number of the Beatitudes, this one seems almost too trivial for serious discussion: that those who show mercy will receive mercy in return. It is another in a long series of illustrations of the law of sowing and reaping, so common in Jesus' teachings. We reap what we sow. In the current example, when we sow seeds of mercy, we harvest mercy.

Mercy and justice are often used interchangeably. There is a familiar fable that goes "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." The fable distinguishes between short and long-term assistance. Many people consider mercy as addressing immediate needs and justice as targeting longer-term solutions that reduce the immediate needs for mercy. Ultimately, both are important, but the way we approach needs for mercy is often different from how we address issues of justice.

The oft-missed starting point for consideration in being merciful is identifying what a person actually needs. Unfortunately, many of us feel better equipped than we actually are to determine the true needs of another. Until we have established some sort of a relationship with the person, we cannot know. If a person is hungry, a meal may be sufficient. If they are

hungry *and* diabetic, however, taking them to Dairy Queen may not be a merciful solution. If they are hungry and homeless, a meal and shelter for the night will be required. If they are lonely, a merciful person will offer company. The point is that we cannot show deep mercy to another without first becoming vulnerable enough to join him or her in their moment. In fact, according to Richard Rohr, we cannot know anything until we first love it<sup>7</sup>. Love always precedes knowledge. In other words, true acts of mercy go beyond handing money to a homeless person on the street and certainly deeper than donating money to a charity via payroll deduction (not that those types of mercy are not important, too).

***True mercy grows out of love and relationship and requires an interpersonal connection to first be established.***

Acknowledging and assisting with one's immediate need is one thing; acknowledging and knowing her or him as a unique person of value, as a child of God, is quite another. Yet, honoring and bestowing dignity on another, regardless of his or her current circumstance, is foundational to showing mercy. This requires more than money. It requires time and attention, and often is what is most needed. Sometimes, it is all that is needed.

A couple of chapters beyond this Beatitude in the book of Matthew, Jesus gives us the Golden Rule, which could as easily be named the Rule of Mercy: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). When I am in need, help me where I actually hurt, not where you assume I hurt. Knowing

a person well enough to know their need is a mark of love and often leads to the realization that his or her need is my need, too. True mercy grows out of love and relationship and requires an interpersonal connection to first be established. Ultimately, acts of mercy are exercises in self-awareness and, thus, can be unintentionally self-serving. It is God in us reaching out to God in another, becoming one in our mutual need. As such, mercy is not for the faint of heart. If we cannot see God in another, however, how will we ever recognize God in ourselves?

Clearly, mercy requires a heart for others. The most important mercy-skill, however, may be the ability to genuinely listen to another, preferably without interruption. Being heard has become a rare experience because listening is a lost art. Certainly, we should still give money to those who ask (see Matthew 5:42), but to become truly merciful beings, we will need to ask questions and listen carefully to the responses. We must not only become advocates *for* others, but also advocates *with* others, standing side by side with them in their suffering. In this Beatitude, Jesus promises that in the end, lives that are characterized by a deep and sincere commitment to mercy will attract mercy back to themselves.

## 14 - The Pure in Heart

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

Matthew 5:8

This Beatitude raises two questions for me: What does it mean to be pure in heart, and what does it mean to see God? Is it even possible to become pure enough in heart to be able to see God in this life? Certainly, my early training in Christianity led me to believe not. The problem was sin, and sin was so deeply engrained into my human condition that seeing God was out of the question. While I no longer believe this, as taught, the roots of my early education still run deep in the subconscious recesses of my being and occasionally sprout little demons that whisper in my ear, “You will never be good enough...”

The initial question about what purity of heart refers to raises two questions of its own: What is purity, and what is heart? Purity is probably obvious – untainted, in a natural or original state, and virginal come to mind. The heart has a literal meaning, i.e., the organ that pumps blood, and a number of figurative meanings, including love, emotion, and the center of our being. Assuming Jesus is speaking of the heart in a figurative sense, purity of heart refers to a state where the essence of our being is restored to its original state, which for me means when it is consciously in a state of union with God. While I consider the separateness we experience as humans as an illusion, I confess it becomes a powerful, entrenched illusion long before we reach adolescence. This sense of separation, of being on our own and alone, is the foundational source of our earthly encumbrances and the foundational source of our *impurity*.

I suspect what Jesus refers to as purity of heart is what we might call an *unencumbered heart* – a heart free of earthly attachments. Living a life separate from God and others leaves us insecure and grasping onto *things* to define us and give us worth and meaning. Granted, obtaining a freedom from such attachments is completely contrary to how we learn to live our lives on earth. Yet, how can we expect God-in-us to shine through when we are so heavily cloaked in the stuff of our material existence? An onion is often

***In our attempts to improve our own self-image, we often do so by tearing down others.***

used to illustrate the peeling off of outer layers in order to reach the center. Perhaps we must peel away the years of accumulation of attachments, self-doubts, and insecurities in order to reach our pure center, the pure heart of our being. And like peeling an onion, it can cause a lot of weeping.

In the Old Testament, the belief was that to see God would result in death. In Exodus 33:20, God tells Moses, “No one shall see me and live.” Even John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God.” Yet, Jesus says the pure in heart will see God. This Beatitude seems to contradict other teachings and long-held traditions of scripture. In my opinion, our sense of separateness constricts our vision to where we cannot see God’s presence in our lives, and it makes our existence too small for God to manifest freely through. This sense of separation shapes our biases and prejudices and leads us to judge others in hurtful and unhelpful ways. In our attempts to

improve our own self-image and sense of belonging, we often tear down others – at least I’m not as fat as *him*, or I would never gossip like *her*, or we would never raise our children like *they* do. We pit ourselves against others and, in the process, widen the perceived separation between them and us. Ultimately, we feel even more alone and isolated. It is a self-perpetuating cycle that leads to an encumbered heart that has little chance of experiencing God’s love and acceptance, at least not until everything earthly is stripped away at death.

One who is truly pure in heart is able to see as God sees. And what God sees, looking out through us, is a creation that God pronounced *very good*. God sees through our human imperfections and inconsistencies to the center of our being, which forever remains undefiled, pure, and beautiful. When we learn to see that pure essence in others, we attain the purity in heart to see God – in the faces and forms of those around us.

## 15 - Blessed are the Peacemakers

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of  
God. Matthew 5:9*

When I think of a peacemaker, I think of someone with a gift for easing tension, for working through differences, and for finding a way to bring together people with diverse beliefs and goals. When I was a young adult, there was much talk about the United States achieving *peace through strength*. This meant that we would maintain a military force strong enough that no one would dare disturb the peace sufficiently to provoke us to action against them. Such a nation would face certain annihilation. I wondered then, and I wonder today: Is that really *peace*? It is fear-based compliance, which seems to me like a very shallow and tenuous peace. Underneath,

***Peace is much more than the absence of  
violence.***

the weaker party is forever scheming ways to attain their purposes without overly provoking the more powerful party. This type of peace leads to subversion, hatred, and jealousy as people devise subtle ways to rebel and undermine the other. I think peace through strength might be illustrated by the compliant housewife who outwardly stands with her abusive husband, but *only* because of and for as long as it seems to be the best option available to her. Behind the placid face brews hatred and prayers for how she might free herself from the oppression one day. Somehow, I doubt this is the sort of peace of which Jesus refers.

In his book [A Brief History of Everything](#)<sup>8</sup>, Ken Wilber describes the concept of *transcend and include*, which refers to stages of growth and development. For the atom to join a molecule, it must transcend its



atomic state and join other atoms to form a molecule. It still retains its being as an atom, however, only in a larger, integrated context. The same is true of our cells. In order to grow into a higher order of existence, a cell must join together with other cells under a common purpose to form organs and organisms. Each cell continues to exist, both as an individual and as part of a larger community – they transcend to a higher state, yet include their previous being. What does this have to do with peace? When people, corporations, or nations clash, each side is locked in its own small, exclusive reality, refusing to accept the legitimacy of their opponent's small, exclusive reality. In the cellular example, one cell refuses to join with another cell in order to participate in and create a higher being that transcends, yet includes both cells. When this happens, a battle ensues – physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual – until one side beats the other into submission. And our world calls that peace. Peace, however, is much more than the absence of violence.

The only lasting and true peace must include what is important to all sides. What is always required is a transformation to a higher, more inclusive state of being. Some authors refer to it as a *third way*. This way to peace requires each side to expand their conscious awareness enough to reassess their own position, while opening themselves to the position of the other. With persistence and patience, a third way emerges that allows both sides to retain what is truly important to them – traditions, cultures, languages – but they do so in a mutually beneficial, respectful, and transcendent way. This is the peace of Christ, who stood at the crossroads of human nature and spirit, of

government and religion, of heaven and earth, and held himself there as an inclusive uniter. It was not the nails that held Jesus to the cross; it was his love for both sides – his followers *and* his persecutors. Whether the issue is national borders, homophobia, racial or social injustice, Christ stands in the gap, holding the tension, and lovingly welcoming *everyone* to the table.

Those who follow the unifying example of Christ, then, are the peacemakers. They are the ones who stand in the gap between warring factions and, often at their own peril work to expand the vision and experience of *both* sides so everyone can co-exist. Peacemakers are never exclusive but always inclusive of all people and views. This is why they are called *children of God*. They do exactly what Jesus came to earth to do – to make God known to us through a peace demonstrated by an unfailing love and acceptance of *all*.

## 16 - Those Persecuted for Righteousness

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:10-12*

Persecution takes many forms, none of them pleasant. Sometimes it is physical, as in a beating, lynching, or other act of violence. Other times, persecution is emotional, such as being devalued, made to feel insignificant, or misunderstood. Persecution can also be social, as in bullying, gossiping, or otherwise isolating someone from a group. Although we all suffer, not all suffering is persecution. Much of what we suffer from cannot be controlled. For example, if we are genetically disposed to cancer or heart disease, we may suffer a serious physical ailment regardless of how well we attend to our health. Persecution, like suffering, often occurs from things we have little control over. Particularly in bullying, someone may be persecuted because of the way they look. Perhaps a speech impediment or birthmark brings the unwelcome and hurtful ridicule of others. On the other hand, there were kids from my school days who seemed to invite persecution for no obvious reason. They seemed to annoy others for the sole purpose of getting attention, even when the attention they received was negative. Regardless of the cause or motivation, persecution is painful.

Jesus refers to a specific type of persecution in this passage, however; one that is consciously chosen. This is a persecution brought about by the overt practice of one's sincerely held beliefs. In Jesus' words, it is being "persecuted for righteousness sake," meaning suffering condemnation for what one believes is right. In a sense, this type of suffering is self-inflicted, for if one backed away from their expressed beliefs, at least in theory, the persecutors would stop persecuting. This suffering is consciously chosen in service of advocating for a position that is

not in line with those in power. The act of speaking truth to power is an example – standing up to those in authority to point out injustice or the unethical use of authority. This type of suffering requires a dedication to a cause or a position that overrides one's concern for one's own safety and comfort. It is entirely selfless and can be dangerous.

It is wholly consistent with Jesus' teachings and life that we would be encouraged to stand up for the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, and the sick. And when our dedication to these groups comes at a personal cost to us, when our actions on their behalf

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cause us to suffer persecution, Jesus assures us of our reward. In this case, our reward is the kingdom of heaven. As I have expressed elsewhere, receiving the kingdom of heaven may or may not be an after-death experience. I believe Jesus refers to a state of being *here and now*, so the obvious question is this: If persecution is so unpleasant, what sort of compensating reward could make the pain worthwhile?

This question cannot be answered in the same way we answer most questions because, as is typical of spiritual mysteries, words cannot adequately explain the reality. The kingdom of heaven is a real and present reality (for example, see Matthew 4:17), but we cannot experience it at the same level of consciousness where most of us live our lives. In our everyday reality, doing something that invites

persecution is disagreeable, at best. We must experience life at a level deep enough to get beyond the unpleasanties at the surface, however, to the forces at work at a more foundational level. At this level we see and serve Christ by seeing and serving the disenfranchised. If we are persecuted as a result, so be it. In other words, when all we experience is pain from our acts of righteousness, we are likely not present to the state of conscious reality in which Christ exists and works in and on our world. Underneath our surface-level suffering is rejoicing and gladness because the righteous are working *with* God. God is working *through* the righteous to put the world on a more just and honorable path, making all things new, although not necessarily in the persecuted person's lifetime.

As Jesus tells us, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." The prophets knew it, and so can we.

## 17 - First, Be Reconciled

*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

Matthew 5:23-24

We live in increasingly *angry* times, or so it seems to me. Perhaps our expectations of ourselves and others have been set so high that it is impossible for

them to be met. In an age of photo-shopped images and unreal “reality” TV, perfection has seemingly become the new normal. No one measures up to that standard and many of us resent the self-imposed expectation that we could or should. On the rare occasions when I watch the news, I see stories of anger manifesting in families, schools, and workplaces. Whether we are stuck in traffic, annoyed by political commentary, or offended by the thoughtless actions of another, we are quick to become angry and slow to forgive. In many ways our self-righteous anger has morphed into the lifeblood of our society – if we are not angry about something, it seems we are not paying attention.

I am not implying there is nothing *worthy* of our anger. Hunger, homelessness, poverty, child and spousal abuse, injustice and oppression in their many manifestations, all should fill us with fury, and *a commitment to action*. My point is not that we should never be angry, but that it is not helpful to respond to anger with more anger. Becoming angry is a hollow, unhealthy emotion if it goes no further than being an emotional outburst. When we sit in our easy chair, point our finger at the television and scream, “*Someone should do something about that!*” we are correct. Someone *should* do something about it. Unfortunately, we miss the point whenever we think the someone who should do something is someone else.

Where we stray from Jesus’ teachings about anger is when we demand retribution or retaliation when confronted with injustice or inconsiderate behavior. Jesus did not preach retribution or retaliation; Jesus taught *reconciliation*, and the difference is profound. Anger separates us from others and tells

us, in essence, that we are better, more righteous, or more Christian than they. Jesus encourages *unity* with others, honoring and respecting the diverse ways in which each person manifests God's presence in the world. This is especially true in our churches, where Jesus tells us to *first* be reconciled to our brothers and sisters *before* we offer our gifts at the altar. Anyone

***Anger is a gift from God intended to motivate us to action, not a sword to divide us one from another.***

preaching hatred, intolerance, punishment, retribution, or retaliation from the pulpit is, in my opinion, not faithfully relaying the message of Christ. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven times." In a word, *always*.

Anger is a gift from God intended to motivate us to action, not a sword to divide us one from another. It is the energy and passion that empowers our words and actions. We do well to remember, however, that that which upsets us is almost always a reflection of some deeply repressed dissatisfaction within our own being. Therefore, humility is always a wise companion to anger because we are almost certainly also guilty of whatever we are angry about.

In the 1970's movie *Network*<sup>9</sup>, a former news anchor played by Peter Finch goes into an on-air rant, encouraging people to stick their head out the window and yell, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" The movie pans to

scenes throughout the country where people yell, “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore.” Being mad is neither the problem nor the solution, however. The problem comes when we focus outside of ourselves first, blaming and demanding change from others, before assessing our internal motivations and responsibilities. Yes, we should be mad as hell; and yes, we should do something about it. This is *our* world – yours and mine – and it is *our* responsibility to make it better for *everyone*. Our righteous anger can help us do so, but meaningful change begins within.

Once we have lovingly reconciled with our brothers and sisters – and our spouses, parents, children, co-workers, neighbors, strangers-on-the-street, immigrants, and those of different ethnicities and orientations – *then* can we lay our offerings at the altar in peace.

## 18 - Thoughts Matter

*But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Matthew 5:28

For most of us, our parents taught us right from wrong by rewarding the good things we said and did and punishing the not so good. Society does the same by creating laws governing our actions and punishing those who break the law. The focus is on our actions and, occasionally, on the things we say because our



words and actions have a direct impact on those around us. Jesus, however, reminds us that thoughts matter, too.

In his 1902 book As A Man Thinketh<sup>10</sup>, James Allen writes, “A man is literally what he thinks, his character being the complete sum of all his thoughts.” Thought (sometimes, very little thought) precedes our words and actions. In fact, our thoughts *shape* our words and actions. Every act of creation – paintings, songs, poems and other literary works, structures, relationships – begins in thought. Poorly thought out projects inevitably have poor results. In our criminal justice system, a premeditated murder – one consciously planned before the act – is treated more seriously than the accidental killing of another or a murder committed in the heat of the moment.

Jesus’ example of a man lusting after a woman in his heart is an amazingly insightful reference and the main point, in my opinion, goes well beyond lustful thoughts. When a man looks upon a woman with lust, when he not only notices the woman as an attractive being, but also allows his thoughts to explore how he might derive pleasure from that physical body, he has effectively denigrated the woman into an object. There is no recognition of or appreciation for the unique expression of God that occupies that body, for the life she lives or for the ways she impacts others by being who God created her to be. In Jesus’ words, he “has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Focusing for too long and hard on the objectification of another can result in creating ways for one’s thoughts to manifest physically, often with unfortunate and lasting results.

Controlling our thoughts is hard. Our minds naturally wander from thought to thought and, without being consciously aware of it, we can entertain some pretty nasty imagery in our heads about a variety of things we would be appalled to see actually happen. The society around us may not be able to detect our thoughts in the same way it assesses our words and actions, but our inner musings are

***Our thoughts should be our tools, not our master.***

known to us and to God. Psalm 139:1,2b says, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me...You discern *my thoughts* from far away.” While I believe God understands our all-too-human tendency to allow our thoughts to run where they will, and to dwell where they perhaps should not, I also believe it is an expected discipline for us to gain a measure of control over our thoughts, every bit as much as we do our words and actions. Our thoughts should be our tools, not our master. We cannot stop unhealthy thoughts from popping into our heads, but we can certainly find ways to diminish our dwelling on them. Contemplative types of prayer can help.

Because our thoughts are such powerful creative forces, we should always be conscious of them. For example, when we are overly critical of our own shortcomings, we almost certainly increase our likelihood to underachieve in many areas. If we berate ourselves for not being good at one thing, we may extrapolate that we are not good at anything. Positive thinking may have its limits, but negative thinking is almost boundless in its destructive power. While we

need to guard against unhealthy self-talk, we also need to guard against negative thoughts about others. If another person does something that annoys us, it is easy to write off the entire person as annoying. When that happens, our own thoughts may blind us to what should bless us in others.

Our thinking mind is a gift that allows us to co-create with God in awesome and infinite ways. From the way we treat others to the ways we decorate our homes to the legacy we leave for our children, our thoughts birth what manifests in our lives – both beautiful and less than beautiful. In all things, our thoughts matter.

## 19 - Give to Everyone Who Asks

*Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:42*

This is a verse that pops into my head often, but is seldom a welcome addition to whatever I am thinking at the time. There are many things Jesus said that are difficult for me, and this may be chief among them. Seemingly every time I walk through downtown, I encounter panhandlers – people asking for money. They hold signs saying, “Homeless, please help” or “Hungry” or “Need bus money to go home.” I know I should help them, but often I do not. I walk by, pretending I not to notice, like almost

everyone else. At such times, this verse pops into my head.

I used to justify my stinginess by thinking that the beggars might use the money for drugs or booze or cigarettes. How would I be helping them by enabling their unhealthy habits? In addition, by giving panhandlers money, I might be perpetuating their poverty by helping them survive without getting a job. Even if these arguments were true in some cases, Jesus' words still sound in my head, with emphasis on the words *everyone* and *anyone*. Ultimately, I am unable to judge the heart, intention, or life situation of another.

There is another time this verse enters my mind, and it happened recently as I bought a flowering tree for our yard. Mind you, we already have lots of flowering trees in and around our yard. The money I spent on the tree could have provided several decent meals for many of the panhandlers I encounter. And this verse popped into my head. Perhaps Jesus asks us

***This is a social justice issue God challenges  
us to wrestle with and draw our own  
conclusions.***

to not only consider the price we pay for commodities to enhance our lives, but also to weigh the alternative uses for that same money – like, perhaps, feeding the hungry.

If this verse about giving to everyone who asks is not compelling enough, there is a corollary verse that I find every bit as uncomfortable. It is this: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew

25:40). This comes from a parable where Jesus illustrates that how we treat the least in society is how we treat him. If I recognized Jesus on the street and he was hungry, would I refuse to feed him? Yet, if I believe Jesus lives in me, how can I not also believe Jesus lives in the panhandler on the street? For me, it is a dilemma with only one solution – *give*.

It is not my intent to lay a guilt trip on anyone, including myself. Guilt trips accomplish nothing. I believe this is a social justice issue God challenges us to wrestle with and draw our own conclusions. If I truly believe that everything I have is a gift from God, however, then I have not earned *any* of it. It does not belong to me. If everything I have is a gift – from the money in my pocket to my home, car, and possessions – what right do I have to refuse to share it with others?

The second half of the verse continues, “Do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” If nothing in my possession actually *belongs* to me, does not that also make me a borrower? I should absolutely take care of what is entrusted to me, but I have no right to hoard it beyond my need. Do I seriously believe God will cease blessing me because I allow others to share the abundance on loan to me from God?

I do not believe this verse is a call to self-deprivation. Nor do I believe there is a single answer for everyone. There are many non-monetary things we can give, some of which may be needed more than money – attention, encouragement, and a listening ear to name a few. Our challenge is to identify what we can give cheerfully, extravagantly, and without expectation and see where that leads us. We need to

give *something* of ourselves, however; not just for the sake of those who ask, but for our own well-being, too. There are many things Jesus said that are difficult to understand. This is not one of them. Give.

## 20 - Love Your Enemies

*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good; and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? Matthew 5:44-46*

As I ponder these words of Jesus, I find it helpful to distinguish between people I do not like and those I consider an enemy. In general, I choose not to associate with those whom I share little in common. The person I must associate with in the normal course of my days who does not share my core values and understanding of the world, however, is a higher level of annoyance for me. One could say I do not like these people. While I accept that not everyone feels the same way I do about things, I find these people unpleasant to be around for an extended time, and I try to avoid or ignore them as much as possible. The third category of person is one who not only does not share my core values and understanding of the world, but he or she actively works *against* what is important to me. This person fits my definition of an enemy because avoiding or ignoring them is not

sufficient. Rather, I find myself working in direct opposition to them in support of what I believe. Fortunately for me, there are not too many people in either of the latter two categories. They do exist, however, and I struggle with how best to deal with them in a way that is consistent with Christ's teachings.

There is one striking example in the Gospels of Jesus becoming angry and actively working against the interests of another. In Matthew 21:12-13 (also in Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 2). Jesus enters the temple and finds merchants selling sacrificial animals to worshippers. He overturns their tables and orders

***We can act in the best interest of another  
without necessarily agreeing with their life  
choices.***

them to leave, saying, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers." The sellers were actively working against Jesus' vision of the temple as a house of prayer. It was a dramatic clash of values, and Jesus took overt action against them. Based on my definition above, one could say the merchants were enemies to Jesus.

Even so, Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Everyone loves those who love them, Jesus says. For me, it is helpful to remember that to *love* someone does not necessarily mean I have to agree with them, approve of their behavior, or even particularly *like* them. The type of love of which Jesus speaks is an action, not an emotion. We can act in the best interest of another without necessarily agreeing with their life choices. We do not have to become like them, but we

do need to acknowledge their existence, respect their right to feel as they do, and understand that God loves and cares for them every bit as much as God loves and cares for us. God allows us our preferences, but when our preferences lead us to judge others harshly, we tread a thin line between seeking to do what is right on the one hand, and believing that God is exclusively on our side on the other.

With some serious self-reflection, we begin to understand that our views and preferences are fraught with biases and prejudices, just like those of our enemies. With more reflection, we may even discover that what we find so annoying about another is actually a reflection of some deeply repressed tendency in ourselves of which we are ashamed. In other words, our enemies reflect something within us that we are hesitant to acknowledge. In that sense, our enemies are our greatest teachers. When we hate an enemy, we are directing our venom back upon a part of ourselves that needs to be known, loved, and transformed. Many times, our enemies are not even aware of our feelings, so we truly only harm ourselves.

What I actually think Jesus is leading us to through loving our enemies is to persist in finding a *third way* to reconcile our differences – one that includes and honors *both* the position of our enemy as well as our own. In that way, there is no reason to hate our enemies because they are no longer an enemy but a comrade in a shared purpose. Loving others is the mark of a child of God, even and especially when that person seems to be working against us.



## 21 - Humble Worship

*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.* Matthew 6:1

*Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you.*  
Matthew 6:2

*Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door.*  
Matthew 6:6

*Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites.*  
Matthew 6:16

The first half of the sixth chapter of Matthew contains some unsettling instructions for worship. Jesus contrasts the ways hypocrites worship with a methodology more consistent with accessing the kingdom of heaven. Spoiler Alert: humility is required! Jesus does not criticize the religious practices of his day – praying, fasting, and giving; but he does give specific direction for the *way* those practices are carried out. If we are practicing religion in order to look good to others, we are not likely to enter the kingdom of God.

It is easy to get into a comfortable rhythm of worshiping but neglect the one whom we worship. Certainly, we claim God as the focus for worship, but does God really care about how we are dressed or that we sing our songs of praise loudly, in tune, or even if we sing at all? If we are honest, much of how we approach worship is to either impress, or at least avoid the criticism of our brothers and sisters in the

worship space. I wonder about the motivation of folks who post their church attendance on social media – not that that is necessarily bad. If they advertise their church attendance to encourage others to join them, fine. If they do it to show themselves to be holier than their neighbor, shame on them. Jesus says, *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.* Why? He continues, *For then you have no reward from your Father in heaven* (Matthew 6:1). Once we are honest about whose response we are most focused on receiving, we know whom we worship.

It is easy to become obsessed with our appearance to others. Ultimately, this is a form of idol worship, seeking our rewards from someone or something other than God. And this is exactly Jesus' point – that our focus needs to be on God. What is apparently important to God, according to Jesus, is a humble and focused heart. *Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you* (Matthew 6:6). It is safe to assume that this sort of private worship is not only what connects most

***Becoming obsessed with our appearance to others is a form of idol worship.***

effectively with God, but is also the most beneficial form of worship for us. Everything else is window dressing – obstacles and idols we place between God and ourselves that inhibit any sort of a direct connection. Certainly, there is an element of safety in approaching the throne of God with others. And granted, we need to approach God in awe and with reverence, which naturally includes an element of fear.

Our fear of coming face-to-face with God and exposing ourselves in our naked imperfection, however, is a fear we must learn to overcome if we wish to experience the all-inclusive love of our creator. We are loved as we are, where we are, completely and unconditionally, but we cannot fully receive that love when our attention is directed elsewhere.

When we give our offerings, we should not announce it to the world *in order to be praised by others*. Yes, we should be generous according to our ability, but we should give for the furtherance of God's work on earth, not for our own glorification. When we fast, we are not to make a production of how intolerably we are sacrificing. Rather, we are to sacrifice with joy, knowing that fasting is a practice that opens our heart to the presence of God. Giving and fasting bring their own rewards.

Focusing on ourselves or how others perceive us makes our God too small. The purpose of worshiping God is not to make ourselves feel insignificant and sinful, but to acknowledge and know that we are intimately connected to something large, loving, and wonderful. Ultimately, our joy resides within the community of believers, members of the body of Christ. And not only is our joy there, but also our security, for abiding in that body is the only truly safe place to reside. To enter that amazing space of worship, however, we must enter with humility.

## 22 - Pray Then in This Way

*Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*

Matthew 6:9-13

Prayer is a consistent challenge for many of us. How do we do it? What do we say? Does God actually listen – or answer? Must we be on our knees? I understand each of these questions because I have asked them many times myself. In his letter to the Romans (8:26), Paul writes, “...we do not know how to pray as we ought.” Jesus says, “Pray then in this way,” and gives the prayer that forms the basis for what we call *The Lord’s Prayer*. Did he mean for us to pray these *words*, or did he mean for us to pray in this *spirit*? For me, the answer is both. Sometimes, we need to use words because that is the way we learned to communicate. As we age, at least in my case, prayer becomes deeper and richer in the silence before and beyond words.

What trips many of us up is our need to capture what we experience with words. We forget that words are *metaphors*. Words represent something, but they are not the thing, experience, or person. For example, I say the word *tree* and you picture a tall plant with leaves, branches, and a woody trunk. But a description

of a tree, even of a *specific* tree, is not the tree itself. The words tell us nothing about the life history of the tree, how it experiences dormancy in the winter, or how it experiences me as I sit beneath it. The word *tree* is a metaphor pointing to a living reality. In the same way, you cannot know my *essential nature* by knowing my name, age, height, weight, profession, gender or any other *descriptive term* about me. When we think we know or understand someone based on a verbal description, even a description based on our interactions with that person, we remove ourselves from the essence of that person. The description of our interaction with another is *not* the same as the actual interaction. Words, though helpful, are deceptive and incomplete when we substitute them for what they represent.

Rumi, a 13<sup>th</sup> Century poet and mystic, wrote, “Silence is the language of God, all else is a poor translation.”<sup>11</sup> God does not communicate with words. God communicates *heart-to-heart* or *spirit-to-spirit*. I can imperfectly illustrate this by describing

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how I write. I receive an idea or inspiration that I attempt to capture in a song or on paper. The initial inspiration is like an image or an internal “voice,” but it is wordless until my mind latches onto it and begins describing or translating the inspiration, effectively reducing it to words. It happens so quickly that it is easy to believe the inspiration was given in words. Where the initial inspiration and the resulting song or

essay part company is in my inability to find adequate words to capture the inspiration. In fact, it is impossible to perfectly capture an image or interaction in words. Everything I write suffers from my inability to translate the purity and beauty of the inspiration into words. The best I can do is to describe something which is beyond words, with words that point you to a similar place. The words, alone, cannot carry you there.

We know the *words* to the Lord's Prayer, but what would praying silently in the *spirit* of the Lord's Prayer be like? I believe it begins with setting our mind and heart with the intention of *being with* God, as opposed to *talking to* God. Numerous passages in scripture tell us God knows what we are going to say before we say it. Our words are never necessary, except perhaps for our own comfort. In fact, I believe our words get in the way of entering into God's presence because we focus on the words instead of the reality pointed to by the words. Reading a review of a nice restaurant will not give us the *experience* of fine dining.

Three verses prior to providing the foundation for what became the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said, "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matthew 6:6a). Obviously, there is nothing wrong with reciting the Lord's Prayer verbally, and millions do it every week. If God's language is silence, however, might we be talking over God's communication with us if we only pray with words? When Jesus tells us to go into our room and shut the door, he may be hinting at another method of prayer. I picture going into my room and shutting the door to

mean entering my interior *heart-space*, where I can truly be alone with God in a safe and silent place.

One technique of praying the Lord's Prayer without words requires that we enter into the *spirit* of the prayer. When we understand Jesus' instruction to "Pray then in this way" as an instruction to *live then in this way*, we orient ourselves to *become* the prayer, whether or not we recite it verbally. Here is an imperfect illustration:

*Our Father in heaven.* This line sets the context. As *Father*, or as our divine *Parent*, we acknowledge our direct, familial *relationship* to and with God. We are created as children in God's image and likeness. We can relax because we are family. We belong with God, we are loved by God, and so we enter the prayer in a spirit of familiarity.

*Hallowed be your name.* One who is hallowed is holy or sacred. By acknowledging God's name as holy, we affirm the awe and wonder of being in the presence of pure holiness. We enter the prayer in a spirit of reverence.

*Your kingdom come.* We believe God's work is done in the world through us, bringing forth the kingdom of God in time and space. We enter the prayer in a spirit of cooperation. We may not always know what the kingdom of God is, but we trust it is worthy of our efforts.

*Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* We enter this prayer in a spirit of submission. God's will *will* be done. We can resist it, fight it, complain about it, or cooperate with it, but we cannot change it. Life goes smoother for us when we submit.

*Give us this day our daily bread.* We enter the prayer in a spirit of trust, knowing that God always has and always will provide what is required to meet the needs of the day. Our future needs are not a concern for this moment.

*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* We enter the prayer in a spirit of forgiveness. We seek forgiveness from those we have treated poorly, just as we forgive those who have wronged us. Obviously, to enter the prayer in an unblemished spirit of forgiveness requires significant work beforehand for many of us, doing the hard and humbling work of forgiving others and ourselves.

*And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.* Finally, we enter our time of prayer in a spirit of humility. We recognize our personal weaknesses and tendencies toward specific types of unhealthy temptations. We acknowledge and depend upon God's power over our areas of weakness.



Praying in the *spirit* of the Lord's prayer is to find a quiet place where we can enter our *heart-space* in a wordless spirit of familiarity, reverence, cooperation, submission, trust, forgiveness, and humility. These are not qualities we can force upon ourselves, nor can we fake them in a sustained way. They are gifts – signs, if you will – developed naturally as we mature in our relationship to and with God. As this happens, we *become* the Lord's Prayer instead of merely praying it. Jesus said, "Pray then in this way." I think he invites us to *live* in this way. The Lord's Prayer, then, becomes more than words; it becomes a template for the Christian life. As we learn to *live* it and not just *say* it, we pray less *to* God and more *with* God. And *that* is a prayer worth praying!

## 23 - Do Not Judge

*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.*  
Matthew 7:1

When I think of judgment, I remember a scene I witnessed several times growing up. The parents of one of my friends had matching easy chairs in their living room with a small table between them. They would smoke, drink, and comment, usually critically, on whatever they saw on television, in the neighborhood, or standing in front of them. My image was of a self-appointed king and queen meting out judgment on their lowly subjects and rarely granting anything smacking of mercy. As one who

was sometimes the subject of their sharp judgment, the memory is not a pleasant one. Even as I write this, fifty years later, I realize I am judging them in return, albeit posthumously. Interestingly, this is exactly what Jesus tells us will happen when we cast judgement on others – that we, too, will be judged.

I believe most Christians are aware of Jesus' instruction not to judge. What constitutes judgement, however, and whether it is permissible to cast judgement on another out of concern for his or her "salvation" creates a large divide among us. For example, if one truly believes that living outside of the Bible's behavioral guidelines condemns one to an eternity in hell, would not the loving thing be to tell a

***That which we find most worthy of judgement against another is almost certainly a reflection of a similar tendency within our self.***

friend or family member that they need to repent? Of all the issues that turn people away from the Christian faith, however, the sense that we are overly judgmental is one of the most common. When a person sets foot inside a church and is accosted by language about salvation and accusations that make them feel less than welcome or worthy of God's love, it is little wonder so many of our churches are struggling. Personally, I think Jesus tells us to tend to our own house, first.

There is a foundational reason why it is so difficult not to judge: our minds are designed to judge. We constantly categorize what we see, hear, feel, touch, and taste. This is good, that is bad; this is

beautiful, that is ugly; this is worthy of my attention, that is not; this is safe, that is dangerous. These judgments are usually made much too quickly to know anything or anyone at more than the shallowest of levels. Yet, this is what our minds do. In that sense, Jesus is asking us to overcome our natural tendency to judge – both for ourselves and for others. More accurately, Jesus asks us to become more discriminating about when to act on our judgments.

One common and frequently overlooked form of judgment is gossip – saying things about a person in his or her absence that we would not say in their presence. Gossip is often malicious, but not always. I sometimes catch myself saying things about someone in a way I would not say to him or her face to face. Usually, I am not trying to hurt them, but rather to be funny. I attempt to be funny, however, at someone else's expense.

Here is an even more important reason to be careful about casting judgment, however. That which we find most worthy of judgment against another is almost certainly a reflection of a similar trait or tendency within our self. If we are not consciously aware of that particular tendency, we likely have repressed our awareness of it, often out of shame. Bringing those types of issues to light and acknowledging them can be painful. The old saying that when I point a finger at you there are three pointing back at me is often truer than we care to admit.

When it comes to our own shortcomings, we desire mercy for ourselves more readily than we typically grant it to others. When we see something worthy of judgment in another, perhaps our first

thoughts should be, “What within me is reacting so negatively to this behavior? Am I guilty of the same thing?” Once we have those answers, we may not be so quick to judge. No one is perfect, but we seldom improve or grow from the harsh judgments of others. Allowing our repressed memories and immature tendencies to rise to conscious awareness helps us to transform those hidden parts of ourselves into something good. Somehow, that transformation also seems magically to transform others, or at least our perception of others. Because the mercy of withholding judgement is something we desire for ourselves, Jesus suggests we grant the same to others.

## 24 - Lipstick on a Pig

*Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. Matthew 7:6*

When Jesus says, “Do not throw your pearls before swine,” I think of the old proverb, “You can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.” The point of the proverb is that you cannot change the inner essence of something simply by decorating the exterior. Another similar, though perhaps unrelated, saying that comes to my mind is this: “Arguing with an engineer (or insert the profession or person of choice here) is like wrestling in the mud with a pig. After a couple of hours you realize the pig is enjoying it.”

While Jesus' words are less crude than the folk wisdom I cited, I believe the point is similar. *Who* and *what* we are dealing with should determine *how* we proceed. Jesus says if we give what is holy to a dog or pearls to pigs, they will not treat our gifts with a level of reverence that we consider appropriate. Why? Because they do not perceive the inherent beauty and value that we see. Is that a fault in their character? Of course not! It is *our* perception that ascribes the value, and pigs and dogs have a much different perspective of what is valuable or useful for their purposes. Consider the thought of giving a new computer to a person in a third world country who has no access to electricity, let alone to the internet. They might use the computer as yard art, as a doorstop, or as a conversation piece with their neighbors, but it will never open their eyes to the world we know in the way we may have hoped. It cannot do what we wish for that person, no matter how good or honorable our intentions, nor can the other appreciate it in the way we intend. Likewise, if we give a Rolex to a toddler, they will just chew on it.

The lesson in Jesus' words has nothing to do with dogs and pigs, however, but in how we treat others. If someone does not share our appreciation for enlightened readings, why would we share them with that person? They will treat what we value as if it were worthless. Who is likely to be offended? It is us, of course! A better approach to share the joys of spiritual awakening is to find out where the other person is in his or her spiritual journey and meet them there. Who knows, we may find they are enlightened in ways we are not.

The reason Jesus provides for not giving gifts that others cannot appreciate is not only that they will *trample them under foot*, but also that they will *turn and maul you*. They may actually strike out in anger against us. One problem with giving something we think another person needs or wants is the very assumption he or she needs or wants anything from us. It may be more an expression of our well-intentioned, but arrogant assumption than his or her actual need or desire. If, in our sincere effort to help, we offend

***One problem with giving something we think another person needs or wants is the very assumption that he or she needs or wants anything from us.***

instead – we make them feel less a person – we can expect a negative and perhaps aggressive reaction. Particularly in giving advice, we cannot show a person a better way unless and until we know they (1) actually *need* a better way, and (2) desire to receive what we have to offer. Otherwise, we are simply throwing our “pearls” before swine, to paraphrase Jesus.

I hope not to imply that I consider those who have different thoughts about what is holy and valuable than me to be dogs or swine. I must remind myself regularly that what I value is what *I* value – nothing more, nothing less. Further, if I want to give something to others, it is best to give unconditionally, meaning without expectation of whether they use or appreciate the gift in the way I intended. If I cannot give something freely, I am probably still too attached

to it and am likely to feel I have just given pearls to pigs.

Finally, I cannot resist sharing another “pig proverb,” this one from the author, Robert Heinlein: “Never try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and it annoys the pig<sup>11</sup>”.

## 25 - Ask, Search, Knock

*Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Matthew 7:7-8*

These words are among the most quoted and familiar of everything Jesus said. They are also among the most misleading. If they were literally true, we could win the lottery by asking God; the 16<sup>th</sup> Century explorer, Ponce De Leon, would have found the Fountain of Youth; and we could knock on the door of the White House and be granted entry. There is a lot of evidence that Jesus is wrong.

Jesus seems to double-down on these thoughts, however, in the verses that follow. In verse 9, he asks what parent would give a stone to a child asking for bread. In verse 10, he asks what parent would give a snake to a child asking for a fish. In verse 11, he explains that if we know how to give good gifts to our children, “how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” In other words, what sort of parent would not try to give his

or her children the good things they desire? That being the case, why would not God, our divine parent, do the same for us? As with much of what Jesus says, however, we must look deeper than the literal translation of his words in order to understand the life-giving spirit behind them. God is not Santa Claus, and the asking, searching, and knocking Jesus references are not a Christmas list.

If we learn anything from the life and teachings of Jesus it is that he manifested a perfect unity of body and spirit, a unity he invites us also to attain. If we picture our life on a continuum, stretching from completely materialistic on the far left to completely spiritual on the far right, we can imagine this inclusive

***The unsolvable human mystery is how,  
when, or if God grants our requests.***

unity in the middle of that space. Anything that pulls us to the left draws us toward materialism and away from our spiritual nature. Likewise, anything that pulls us to the right draws us toward spiritualism and away from our bodily nature. God gave us both a body *and* a spirit for a reason, and they are both good. The two are not opposed to each other, but complimentary.

When we consider the continuum of our physical and spiritual nature, it goes against our created nature to be drawn overly much to either. The problem with focusing on either end to the exclusion of the other is that we become less and less satisfied, less and less at peace, the farther we go in either direction. Both ends are seductive, but neither without the other is healthy. We think, “If I only had a \_\_\_\_, then I would be happy;” but we learn it is not true. The more *stuff* we



have, the more we desire. Likewise, the more enlightening spiritual experiences we have, the more we desire. There is no satisfaction at either end. It is not that our physical and spiritual natures should not be sufficiently nourished – certainly they should. But they should not be *fed* to where they bloat out of proportion to the other.

The unsolvable human mystery is how, when, or even if God grants requests – providing what we ask for, revealing the object of our search, opening the door upon which we knock. There is evidence that God does grant our wishes, as I have seen people healed whose outlook was dismal. Alternatively, I have seen others waste away and die, in spite of countless, heartfelt prayers. I think the *sweet spot* in gaining what we wish for is in aligning our desires with God's will, with what is. Only then will our petitions be granted as naturally as Jesus implies in these verses. Paradoxically, that requires *us* to change *our* desires. And yet, is that not the point, for us to be drawn closer to God in our humanity? It seems safe to assume God's will is not for us to dwell overly much at either end of life's spectrum, but to deeply experience both body and spirit as one.

Yes, we can and should ask, search, and knock, but we do so with the knowledge that God will not answer, reveal, or open that which is inconsistent with attaining unity within ourselves, with others, and with God. Granting an un-unifying wish would be akin to God giving a child a snake when he or she asked for a fish.

## 26 - The Road is Hard

*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. Matthew 7:13-14*

This teaching calls to mind the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. One or more of these cardinal “sins” come easily to most of us. Jesus says, “...the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction.” Many agree that these sins lead to destruction, at least in the sense of bringing negative consequences. The unfortunate results impact both the person committing them and those with connected lives.

As if succumbing to one or more of the deadly sins is not easy enough, our society encourages and rewards many of these behaviors. We are told to take *pride* in our accomplishments; yet, there is a fine line between feeling proud of something we participated in and displaying an arrogant superiority over others. We are forever tempted to consume beyond our needs or means, leading to the sin of *greed*. “Sex sells” in advertising, but it is not the sort of sex that occurs as a healthy expression of a long-term, loving relationship. *Lust* is what sells products. *Envy*, *gluttony*, and *wrath* are center stage in movies and television. *Sloth*, or laziness, is a constant temptation for me on weekends when I often prefer stretching out for a nap

to doing whatever else may need to be done. Jesus tells us that, easy as these behavioral choices may be, they lead to “destruction.” In the current context, this means they do not put us on “the road that leads to life.”

Most of us who have lived beyond middle age can attest that few things in life worth having come easily, quickly, or without disciplined effort. Often, we must sacrifice a short-term reward in order to receive a greater reward over the longer term. This may be what Jesus refers to when he says, “...the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life.” He adds, “...and there are few who find it.” This means, in my paraphrase, that many people do not apply the

***Few things in life worth having come easily, quickly, or without disciplined effort.***

contemplative intentionality required to build a life worth living throughout its course. The alternative way is simply too easy and enticing. As we grow older, there is often an element of regret for the “sins” of our past. We may wish we had lived more beneath our means, saving more for our later years. On the other hand, we may wish we had enjoyed our resources more freely, instead of being overly miserly. Certainly, we may wish we had spent fewer hours at work and more with family and friends. We make choices about our lives every day, and Jesus’ warning about the wide and narrow gates is encouragement to make our choices consciously.

Am I suggesting that Jesus does not want us to enjoy our lives on earth, that we should always seek

the more restrictive and less pleasurable path, or that we should never just relax? Certainly not! I suspect what Jesus has in mind is to practice a more contemplative approach to our choices in life, gazing beyond the single step in front of us to assess where that particular step is likely to lead. A few chapters after this passage, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28, 30). Following Jesus should not be tortuous, but we may have to exchange certain forms of gratification today for more wholesome rewards tomorrow. As we learn to find joy in the simple pleasures offered in each moment, the road becomes easier.

The road that leads to life is hard, but not because it was created that way. The good road is hard because we so easily fall prey to *get rich quick* schemes, *lose weight without diet or exercise* programs, and *sin without consequence* temptations. The ecological maxim that there is no such thing as a free lunch is as true today as it ever has been, but only because an acceptable lunch today is so expensive in terms of its long-term consequences. Free graces abound in every moment for those with eyes to see the road that leads to life.

## 27 - Deny Yourself

*Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."*

Luke 9:23-24

If there were a "Bottom 10" list of the least popular things Jesus said, Luke 9:23-24 would have to be on it. If Jesus had had a public relations firm back in the day, they certainly would have suggested he massage this message significantly before going public with it. It is bad enough to tell people to deny themselves, but to take up a cross *daily*? As if that were not unappealing enough, he goes on to say that those who wish to save their life will lose it. His words sound more like a call to misery than a path to a new, richer life. Surely, the message is no better received in today's narcissistic, consumer-driven culture than in Jesus' day.

Much is made in the season of Lent of fasting. One of the common practices of fasting is to deny oneself of some routine or cherished part of one's day. As one misses what has been denied, one remembers the sacrifice Jesus made for us. This helps us discover that we can live, and often live much better, without some of the unhealthy habits and superfluous possessions that weigh down our daily existence. Another purpose of the "denying oneself"

type of fasting is to rid ourselves of something in order to make room for Christ to take hold in our lives. A full cup cannot receive more, and a full life stands as a fortress against any newness breaking in, good or bad.

Another type of fasting, perhaps more a matter of semantics than substance, is to add something positive to one's day instead of removing something else. This can be understood as a fasting by blessing instead of fasting by suffering. Of course, the reality is that for most of us to add anything, the removal of something else must occur first. Either way, one purpose is to try to allow a new and positive habit to be born into and take hold within us.

It is interesting and instructive that Jesus follows the command to deny oneself with the command to take up one's cross daily. What is our cross? One way to look at it is that our cross consists of our daily

***It is interesting that Jesus follows the command to deny oneself with the command to take up one's cross daily.***

tasks – the things we do for our jobs or to keep our home running or to fulfil our obligations as parents, children, co-workers, and friends. This is our work, and our world depends on us fulfilling these tasks. Sometimes our work threatens to overwhelm us, although not always because it is overwhelming in and of itself. More often, for me, work becomes a cross to bear because I fill my life with meaningless distractions that compress the time available to complete my work. With this understanding, denying oneself becomes a way to refocus upon and reframe

the context for one's work – for the cross one bears. As new habits of conscious intention take hold, we see our work in an entirely new light, even when our responsibilities have not changed, and even though there are not more hours in a day. It does not matter if we are a doctor, a home-maker, an accountant, a church committee member, or a volunteer in the local Library, our work is important to the world.

Fasting, as a way to grow closer to God, can help us do our work in a more joyous and grateful manner. If the benefit and blessing of fasting accrues to us, where then is the deprivation? The key is in consciously and willingly turning one's life in a new direction. To the extent there is discomfort, it is because change can feel like suffering as we let go of the old and reach for the new. There is a transition period required, but it is only that – a transition. Like everything in life, this too shall pass.

Denying ourselves of something that contributes little to life – ours and others' – is a practice from which we can all benefit. Trying to preserve, or save, the unprofitable aspects of our lives will certainly and eventually fail.

## 28 - Humble Yourself

*Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:4*

In general, I try to build people up and help them to feel good about themselves and their lives. I truly

believe that everyone and everything is an amazing and unique work of creation, unlike anything created before or that will be created in the future. We are literally the *only* one of ourselves out of countless trillions of beings. In that sense, we are special beyond comprehension. Our specific blend of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual traits will never again experience this earth as we do in this moment. Unfortunately, some people interpret this as a reason for arrogance.

While some may agree wholeheartedly with his or her absolute and total uniqueness, others are suspecting there is a catch. And there is. Are you ready? Yes, you are unique in all of creation. BUT

***Jesus said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."***

(make sure you are sitting down for this), here's the catch (take a deep breath now): *Everyone and everything else is a totally unique creation, too!* This includes the pebble in your shoe and the gnat you swatted away from your food at dinner. God expresses absolutely uniquely in and through the specific nature of everything. I once heard a bit of business wisdom that goes, "If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority." The corollary on the topic of uniqueness is this: "If everyone is a unique creation, no one is unique." While this may be overly cynical, it does shed light on why Jesus told us to humble ourselves.

The context for Jesus' words in Matthew 18:4 is that he is sitting with his disciples who ask which of them will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.



Jesus responds by setting a child on his lap and saying, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Indeed, the call for humility is not unique to Jesus in the Bible. The Old Testament prophet Micah (6:8) wrote, “...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to *walk humbly with your God!*”

It is interesting and instructive that Jesus uses children to illustrate humility. Many parents, myself included, put enormous amounts of energy into building our children’s self-esteem and trying to assure they develop a positive self-image. We want our kids to celebrate their distinct place in creation and to know themselves as a beloved child of God. While we do not want them to feel inferior, we also do not want them to believe themselves superior to others either. Uniqueness does not imply preeminence.

In general, children are curious, optimistic, joyful, easily awed, and have short memories. They are not “smart” in the ways of the world, but they learn to shape their unique character into the puzzle of the life around them. Children possess important traits of humility we often forget as we grow up and become “wise.” Children are more likely to be present to the moment, and in that moment to see and appreciate the beauty and joy in the specificity of everything around them. Jesus warns that the childlike traits we shed as we age are the very ones we should most strive to retain.

One might wonder about the purpose for our unique blend of skills, characteristics, and insights if not for us to gain an advantage over others. At least two responses come to mind. First, we are creations *of God*, created in God's image and likeness, so whatever uniqueness we have comes from God and not from anything we have done. Where, then, is our superiority? Secondly, we are given special qualities in order to *make this world a better place for ourselves and others*. For every talent we are given, there is a need nearby that we alone are uniquely gifted to meet. The biggest question is whether we are humble enough to use our talents in service to others (like Jesus did). That, I think, is becoming humble like a child and holds the key to the kingdom.

## 29 - Forgive Seventy-Seven Times

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Matthew 18:21-22*

The context for this passage of scripture is that Jesus is teaching his disciples about sin and the separation it creates. Matthew's chapter 18 begins by Jesus saying we must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. He warns against putting "stumbling block(s)" before others. He goes on to illustrate how important each of us is to God, with

the parable of the lost sheep. Handling members of the community who sin against each other is next, followed by this passage where Peter asks how many times we should forgive a community member who sins against us. Jesus says, in essence, that we should *always* forgive.

What does it mean, exactly, to forgive? Certainly, it does not mean to forget. An abusive spouse may be forgiven, but the abused partner should never forget the warning signs of impending abuse, nor the ways to best protect her or himself in the event of a reoccurrence. When a lender forgives a debt, the principal and interest of the loan are both wiped off the books so nothing is owed. The incurring of the debt still happened, but it no longer impacts life going forward. To forgive does not erase the offending event from our memory or from our past. Rather, to forgive is to release the tyranny the sin holds over us and others. It is a very personal and often difficult decision, and it is not necessarily the act of forgiving another as much as it is giving ourselves permission to let go of our attachment to the lasting physical, emotional, or psychological injury. There are two distinct impacts from sin of which we need to be aware, both very real. The first is the sin itself and what it did to us – the actual physical or emotional injury. The second is the aftermath of the sin, which is primarily our response. This secondary insult is a result of the power we grant the sin over us. It is this, too, that must be forgiven and healed for us to be able to move on with our lives.

Our emotional reaction, the secondary injury, is what tortures us long after the event and keeps it alive as an active, negative influence over our being. We

may need to first forgive our seeming inability to let it go, before we can effectively release it. This may require professional assistance. How can we avoid finding ourselves in a similar situation in the future? How can we better recognize when circumstances are arranging themselves for a possible reoccurrence? What are strategies to minimize the damage of the original sinful act, should it be done to us again, and forgo the tyranny of the emotional aftermath?

The fact that it is for our own benefit that we are encouraged to forgive is one lesson in Jesus' words. Another is that our reaction to a sin against us is sometimes worse and longer lasting than the actual injury from the initial sin. Finally, and most revealing, is that many times, what offends us in or by another is

***It is for our own benefit that we are  
encouraged to forgive.***

something that triggers a deeply repressed, painful memory or feeling in our own self that we are reluctant to acknowledge. This is why our reaction to a perceived sin against us may be disproportionate to the actual sin. It is also why someone may sin against us and never know he or she hurt us. The place needing forgiveness in cases such as these is the place deep within us that longs to be brought to conscious awareness where it can be acknowledged and transformed. Again, this may require professional assistance. Often, these hurting places have their origins in our childhood. In order to develop as whole persons we must "forgive" ourselves over and over again.

None of this is to say we should not forgive the other person, too. Jesus makes that clear. We should make every effort to also release them from the tyranny of the event. Forgiveness must begin within, however, or it will not be a lasting forgiveness. If, when someone sins against us, we discover a hidden and hurting part of ourselves that can now be healed, we will have turned an unfortunate occurrence into a personal blessing. How often should we forgive? Always.

## 30 - *You Give Them Something to Eat*

*When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat."*

Mark 6:35-37b

The feeding of a large crowd is one of the miracle stories of Jesus that appears in all four Gospels, albeit in slightly different variations. The core of the story has Jesus teaching to a crowd of about 5,000 men, plus women and children. The hour is getting late, and the disciples are concerned that the people will need something to eat. They ask around and find only a paltry amount of available food – five loaves of bread and two fish, in Mark's version. It was far too little for so many. Jesus takes the meager

offering, raises it to heaven in blessing, and tells the disciples to distribute it to the crowd. Everyone in the crowd eats their fill, and the disciples collect the leftovers, filling 12 baskets.

God miraculously multiplied the small amount of food into an abundance to feed the hungry crowd. The question is this: How did God do it? Did God take a little, apply the Word, and magically transform it into a lot? Perhaps. I do not question God's ability to accomplish such a feat. My life experience, however, makes me think God may have worked in a different way. Imagine that the disciples had asked people in the crowd what they could contribute to feed the masses, but only a few were willing to

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contribute a small bit of what they had – five loaves and two fish. Once others saw that some people were contributing, however, their hearts opened and more became willing to offer what they had with them. When the little, which was first offered, was combined with the abundance that was actually in the crowd, there was more than enough for everyone to have their fill. Is this telling of the story any less miraculous than if God alone had created the abundance? I think not. In fact, I find it more compelling.

We see this at church with potluck dinners. The church provides a little and everyone else brings something to contribute to the common meal. The amount of food always exceeds the hunger. Perhaps

the feeding of the 5,000 is the biblical version of the story of Stone Soup. In that story, a traveler stops in a town at dinnertime, but can find no one willing to feed him. He takes his pot to the river, fills it with water, and places one round stone in the bottom. He builds a fire in the town square and starts heating the water. Curious townsfolk stop by to see what he is making. He says, "Stone Soup. It's delicious!" He tells one person it would be better if only he had a few carrots. She says, "I have a few carrots I could bring." He tells another that onions would be nice. Another person offers seasoning, and others bring potatoes and meat. In the end, they share a delicious and abundant community meal to which everyone contributed, in spite of their initial reluctance.

Here is why I believe the story seems more plausible along the lines of the Stone Soup legend than that God performed a miracle alone: I believe God works *through* us as much or more than God works *for* us. God provides the inspiration and the nudging for us to perform generous acts we might not otherwise perform. In the current example, one clue lies in Jesus' words: "You give *them* something to eat." It is a directive to personal action. It reminds me of Jesus' parting instructions to Peter in the Gospel of John (21:15-19). Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and Peter assures him he does. Jesus responds, "(You) Feed my sheep." God relies on our hands and hearts to do the physical work of God's will on earth. Very often, as in the case of the feeding of the 5,000, that work requires a handful of people to begin contributing something, inspiring others to follow suit. There is plenty for everyone when faithful

people trust God's abundant provision and share what they have.

Who should feed the hungry? You (and I) should. God reveals the need and gives us the opportunity to take it from there. God, acting through and with us, is the initiator of miracles.

## 31 - Do You Have Eyes?

*“Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember?” Then he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”* Mark 8:18,21

In this story, the disciples complain because they failed to bring enough bread with them. Jesus says, “Do you still not perceive or understand?” Although they have eyes and ears, they can neither see nor hear the reality he models for them. This deeper seeing looks beyond what is visible in any situation to the God-given power and creative possibility inherent in any given moment. He reminds them of the feeding of the 5,000 and the amount of food left over after feeding so many with so little. He says, “Do you not yet understand?” In essence, he says we should not trouble ourselves with issues that are so easily and reliably taken care of by God. With time and experience around Jesus, we should know better than to worry over such things as what we are to eat and what we are to wear.

Jesus uses *blindness* as a way to describe *ignorance*. In spite of accompanying Jesus on his daily travels, in



spite of hearing his teachings and witnessing the miracles he works, the disciples still do not understand. They cannot wrap their heads around the reality Jesus lives for them, which is the uniting of matter and spirit. Because we are physically blind to the spirit, we naturally assume spirit and matter are separate. They are not. The disciples think Jesus' work is like a magic show, that there must be some sort of obscure trickery involved. It is too much to believe that he is manifesting the power and presence of God before their eyes. They believe God's personal presence is only for those specially chosen by God. They cannot believe that degree of love would ever be lavished upon common folk as unworthy as they. They cannot accept the incomprehensible and too-good-to-be-true truth emanating from Jesus. They are blind to the manifestation of unconditional love in their midst; and so are we.

Obviously, our eyes are not the problem. Most of us can see just fine, physically. Our blindness is in our inability to comprehend the depth of what we experience. We grab too quickly for and hold too tightly to limited understandings of a truth that is ungraspable. In the process, we settle for partial truths and misunderstand our lives according to them. In our obsession to feel in control of truth, we hold onto those partial truths long after they have proven themselves inadequate. They are simply stepping-stones on an endless journey that we mistake for the destination. Even as adults, we too often retain narcissistic, immature understandings, believing everything is for and about us. While it is true that everything *is* about us, it is not about us as *individuals*,

but about us as a *collective*, as the entirety of creation, as the Body of Christ.

We find ignorance on display throughout the Bible. Thankfully, God responds differently to ignorance than we typically respond. For example, even while Jesus endured the agony of the cross, he had compassion for the ignorance of his executioners: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). God responds to our ignorance with compassion, not condemnation, inviting us into a deeper understanding that we are a work in progress. Parents know this type of love from the dumb things their young children often do. We find our kids endearing, innocent, and precious, and

***Our eyes are not the problem. Our blindness is in our inability to comprehend the depth of what we experience.***

we respond with love and patience. At some point, however, we can no longer use a childish lack of understanding as an excuse. We can learn to open our spiritual eyes and experience the spiritual world embedded within the physical. Everything that lives and moves and has being has a physical presence that is animated and permeated by Spirit. Furthermore, the Spirit that is in the rock, in the sunrise, and in my neighbor, is the same Spirit that is in me. We are quite literally One in that Spirit. We are not the same, but we are inseparably interconnected. We will know our relatedness to all that is when we have eyes that truly *see*.

This, then, is the vision to which Christ calls us. We love ourselves by loving others. Why? Because we

cannot be well when those around us are suffering. Jesus' words remind us: "*Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? Do you not yet understand?*" Like the disciples, we are a work in progress.

## 32 - The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...

*He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."*

Matthew 13:31-32

Jesus' initial instruction to us is to repent, or to change the direction of our life. The purpose of repentance is to enter the kingdom of heaven. The next logical question is, "What is the kingdom of heaven?" The image I received from my childhood was that heaven was somewhere up in the sky where there were many long-dead relatives, along with angels playing harps while floating on clouds. It made me think of family reunions as a child, minus the angels and harps, and it was hardly a compelling image for me at the time. The thought of spending an eternity there made me ponder my other options.

Jesus paints a completely different picture of heaven, however. In Matthew 13, he tells a number of parables about the kingdom. In 13:18-23 he compares

a planter sowing seeds in different types of soil to different people hearing the word of the kingdom. Some will receive the message as a seed sown in fertile soil and enter the kingdom. In the parable quoted above, Jesus compares the kingdom to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree. In 13:33, he compares the kingdom to yeast added to flour. In 13:44, he compares heaven to “treasure hidden in a field”; in 13:45, the kingdom is like a “pearl of great value.” In 13:47, he compares it to a “net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.” An obvious question is this: “What do these analogies tell us about the kingdom of God?”

My first observation is that *the kingdom of God is not a static point or place in time or space*. In the parables of the sower, the mustard seed, and the leaven, the example used is something that is grown into over time. Like a plant growing to maturity, the kingdom dweller is dynamic, forever changing, and evolving into new versions of itself. Patience is necessary.

A second observation is that *the kingdom is a life-multiplier*. Particularly in the yeast parable, but also in the seed parables, the analogy indicates that accessing the kingdom enhances whatever is happening in life in positive ways. Without yeast, bread may still be bread, but it will not rise or be nearly as appetizing as it would otherwise be. Without yeast, bread is also left sterile, meaning it cannot generate additional loaves of bread from itself. This is further illustrated in the parable of the sower when the seed is sown on fertile soil and the seed multiplies. Likewise, in the story of the net, this *kingdom net* catches many fish of every kind and size. The kingdom of heaven, like yeast, soil,

and a good fishing net, improves the state of, bounty from, and diversity in our lives.

A third observation is that *the kingdom, once experienced, becomes the most valuable part of our lives*. In the parables of the pearl of great value and the hidden treasure, the possessors of the pearl and treasure give up everything else in order to attain this one treasure. Their sole focus becomes the kingdom.

Finally, *the kingdom of God is about the here and now*. It is not some faraway place up in the clouds. Jesus uses everyday examples and explains the impact of the kingdom on regular, daily activities. The kingdom undergirds and supports life, just as the mustard seed transforms into a tree and provides shelter for birds.

Entering the kingdom means experiencing our world in a new way. It does not necessarily change our profession, our health, our finances, or any of the material particulars of our lives. What it changes is our perspective, assuring us of a larger, beneficent life surrounding us, and *that* can lead to astronomical

***The kingdom of God is not a static point or place in time or space.***

changes in the life we experience going forward. Far from being a family-reunion-in-the-sky, *the kingdom is about our lives today!* It takes the life we have and makes it joyful, richer, more productive, more loving, and more fulfilling. The kingdom of God is not a place we go, but a unity we become as we learn to see others through and to be seen by the unfathomably loving gaze of God.

## 33 - Do You Want to be Made Well?

*One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"*  
John 5:5-6

In this scene, Jesus is passing by a series of pools near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. There was a belief that when the water stirred, the first person into the pool would be healed. People with various afflictions surrounded the pools. One man had been there many years but had no one to help him into the water at its stirring, and so he remained on the sideline, unhealed. Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" At first glance, this question is a head-scratcher. The Bible tells us he had been ill for thirty-eight years. Why would he not want to be healed?

As a college student, I worked at a nursery that occasionally hired people just released from prison as laborers. One man, Harold, was in his fifties and seemed like a gentle, good-natured soul. After a couple of weeks, Harold stopped coming to work. I was shocked to find out he had borrowed a gun, held up a liquor store, and returned to prison. Never mind that the gun was not loaded and that he waited outside the store for the police to pick him up. Apparently, Harold did not want his freedom if it meant hard, physical work and low wages in return

for a meager existence. While I could not fathom why anyone would willingly go back to prison, he must have felt life was better there. Sometimes, we gain comfort from what is familiar. Some people, like Harold, may not have the support system required to transition to a different life.

There are numerous examples of people working hard to maintain a status quo that is neither helpful nor forward-moving, let alone one that reaches a fraction of what is possible. For example, our political

***Some people do not have the support system required to transition to a different life.***

system is dominated by two parties seemingly more interested in preserving the issues that define and divide them than in finding solutions for those issues. I suppose the fear is that without abortion, taxes, immigration, a border wall, or the myriad of perpetual issues that divide us, politicians would have no purpose. They might lose not only their identity, but also their jobs.

While that may sound ludicrous, I do not believe it is far from the truth. In fact, my guess is that most of us hold onto certain traits because they have become part of our identity, no matter how painful or limiting those traits might be. Our desire for uniqueness is so strong, we may hold onto whatever sets us apart, ridiculous or not. In this context, Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" is not a crazy question at all. There are many reasons why we may *not* want to be made well. More generally, what is it that we *really* want? Do we want to hold onto our afflictions? Do we prefer imprisonment to freedom?

Are we afraid that letting go of a toxic identity will leave us in anonymity?

I associate these questions with those who have yet to find their identity in the family of God. We have a perfectly unique, never-to-be-duplicated identity at our core, just as we are, without any of our imprisoning afflictions. In fact, the more we hold onto unhealthy, but defining qualities, the more deeply our true self is hidden. On the other hand, the freer we become, the more our true self shines through. Contrary to how it may sound, we do not lose anything worth keeping as our true self emerges; rather, we become more like the person we always imagined ourselves to be – secure, helpful, loving, and loved.

When Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well,” he may really be asking, “Do you want to be made *whole*?” Is not wholeness at the heart of every longing? I think we fear wholeness because we feel safe with what is familiar. We fear change. Wholeness cannot assure a comfortable, predictable life, but wholeness does assure inclusion into what is. Do we *want* to be made well? Are we ready for Christ to transform us into the image of God we were created to manifest? If we wish to reach for our potential, we must risk what is comfortable and familiar and, like the man beside the pool, make a conscious choice to be made well.



## 34 - Your Will Be Done

*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Matthew 6:10

This passage comes from the *Lord's Prayer*. Many of us repeat it, often mindlessly, on Sundays in church. The sentiment for God's will to be done is found throughout the Bible. One memorable usage occurs when Jesus, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, asks God to spare him the agony of the crucifixion. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet *not my will but yours be done*" (Luke 22:42). The traditional understanding of this thought is that circumstances can go either our way or God's way. In this sense, when we say "Your will be done," we affirm that we want God to turn events as God would have them, not necessarily the way we prefer.

There is another way to interpret these words, however, which is to treat them as an acknowledgement that God's will *will* be done, instead of as our willing submission to God's wisdom. In other words, it does not matter what we desire, what we plead for, God's will *will* be done, regardless. If God's will is what *is*, then God's will is playing out all of the time. If God's will is always being done, then what we experience, moment by moment, is the *unfolding* of that will, although not necessarily the *completion* of that will. I do not believe it is God's will that we suffer, whether from cancer, depression, or a

broken heart. Rather, hurting is a natural part of our human condition, as is joy, and we cannot have one without the other. Likewise, death is a natural part of life in an earthly body. *Everything* on earth is born, lives, and dies, and its earth-bound elements are remade into something new. Death must happen to allow new life because the earth is a closed system. Whatever and whomever we have or love that is of the earth will deteriorate and die. Only the spirit that animates life is immortal.

Accepting that pain is a natural part of life, particularly in the context of God's will relentlessly being done, it is helpful to distinguish between pain and suffering. Pain happens to all of us at various times throughout our lives. Physical and emotional wounds are part of our being. Suffering is different, however. How much we *suffer* from our pain is, at

***It is inconceivable that a loving God would  
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ourselves.***

least in part, a choice we make. We often exacerbate our pain by mentally and emotionally focusing on a perceived loss of control because of the pain. We feel someone else is pulling the strings of our lives; we get frustrated, we feel life is not fair, and we suffer. Indeed, someone else *is* pulling the strings. Rather than a fatalistic fact, however, the good news is that God invites us to *co-create* the direction and experience of our lives, but we must first submit to co-creating in a way consistent with the will that we are resisting. Our resistance causes us to suffer.

Discerning God's will in our lives is a challenge for anyone seeking to align their desires to God's. We can discern the unfolding of God's will by what we see happening around us. We cannot, however, so easily discern the direction of the unfolding, nor the specifics of how the course of events will develop. That is where we can step in as co-participants – in the specifics of the unfolding of God's will. A daily prayer practice is vital in aligning our will with God's. A significant portion of that practice may be spent in silence – not petitioning God for what we want, but opening ourselves to God, surrendering to God's purposes, and listening for God's subtle guidance. We may not be in ultimate control, but we can become intimate participants in what is becoming, as opposed to being a helpless victim.

It is inconceivable that a loving God would will us to be miserable – we do that to ourselves. When we can place our painful moments in a larger and meaningful context, trusting that this too is God's will unfolding into something new and beautiful, we can reduce our suffering. As Paul writes in Romans 8:28, "...all things work together for good for those who love God." As we learn to surrender to and recognize God's will working *all* things together for good, we honor and acknowledge the place where God resides within us. We reveal who we truly are in Christ.

God's will *will* be done, with or without our conscious participation.

## 35 - Not Peace, but a Sword

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I  
have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

Matthew 10:34

This passage of scripture is easy to ignore as improbable to have been said by Jesus. Perhaps it was mistranslated. Perhaps a disgruntled biblical scribe with an unhappy home life snuck it into the Bible in one of its later rewritings. As Jesus describes his “sword” in the verses that follow, he says he will set “a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household” (Matthew 10:35-36). With the blessings a loving, supportive family brings, one would expect Jesus to teach peace within families, not division.

Unfortunately, family life was not typically healthy or beneficial in Jesus’ day, nor is it in many cases today. Two thousand years ago, families were more like tribes or clans, not unlike the gangs of today or the mafia of the last century. Families were isolated community units with one common purpose – the survival of the clan. Their primary loyalty was to the family. I suspect it was because of the exclusivity of families that Jesus drew people out of them and into a larger, more inclusive community. He called his disciples away from their families and livelihoods in order to unite them around a larger common purpose

– the Kingdom of God. This calling to an all-inclusive community must have left the disciples feeling vulnerable and insecure, apart from the group they had identified with since birth. Their safety and security could now only be found in God and in each other. We, particularly in the West, have an aversion to the type of communal life Jesus lived, where resources are shared according to need and not necessarily “earned” according to ability.

Today, we criticize gangs for their often-negative impacts on neighborhoods, including violence against others, drug dealing, sex trafficking, and other atrocities some gangs commit. We forget that people join gangs to satisfy a need to be part of something larger than themselves. They seek security and

***People join gangs to be a part of  
something larger than themselves.***

acceptance they cannot find at home, at work, or at school. The realities of certain socio-economic conditions drive people into gangs, and if we wish to positively impact gang culture we must begin by attacking the underlying conditions that create the need for that type of family. Understanding this may help us understand why Jesus called his disciples away from their families.

It is important, and sometimes counter-intuitive, to realize how our families can stunt our growth. From an early age, many of us attempt to imitate our parents and may set a goal to follow in their footsteps. Carrying on the family business or learning the trade of the parent is not necessarily a bad thing. The prejudices of the parents, however, often become

the prejudices of the children, and the sins of one generation pass to the next unchallenged unless and until someone steps out and breaks the cycle. I believe Jesus sought to break that cycle, encouraging people to step out of their comfort zones and into a new life. “Your old life may feel secure,” he seems to say, “but I can show you a life that will open whole new realms of possibility.” He sought to cut us off from the limitations of our past, including its inherited sins, and lead us in a new way. The “sword” of Jesus is not a physical weapon, but a spiritual tool to free us from the old and set us on a new path.

Jesus concludes this difficult passage by saying, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39). I believe the life we will lose, according to Jesus, is the ungrounded and unchallenged life so often followed without question in families, then and now. Because it is a life not grounded in Truth, because it does not put us on a path to the kingdom of God, it cannot last. Jesus calls us to a different family, one that may or may not include others of our household. Prior to our birth, after our death, and *especially* during our life on earth, we are children of God. Only by our willing consent to let go of the old, traditional ways will we rediscover our natural life in Christ.

## 36 - Strain a Gnat, Swallow a Camel

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!*

Matthew 23:24-25

This scripture passage is part of a rant Jesus releases in Matthew 23 upon the religious leaders of his day, the *scribes and Pharisees*. He accuses them of perpetuating ignorance while pretending to be guardians of knowledge. He calls them hypocrites, blind guides, snakes, and a brood of vipers. He says they are full of greed and self-indulgence, hypocrisy and lawlessness. In verse 27, he says, “For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth.” Is it any wonder they had him killed? Jesus may have been physically non-violent, but he could be a verbal assassin when he felt it was justified.

Jesus *knew* the leaders of the Temple were selectively applying scriptural principles for their own benefit. The leaders were not just embarrassed by the accusations, some almost certainly feared Jesus might be right! The common people looked to them for

guidance in understanding the scriptures most had no access to (and could not read if they did). Instead of receiving the larger picture of how the Bible applied to their daily lives, the people were given a bunch of rules to follow that mostly benefitted the leaders. These rules served to perpetuate the Temple institution more than the community it was erected to serve. The rules also served as a means of behavioral control over the people. It is ironic that the same thing continues today in many houses of worship.

***The weightier matters of the law require  
us to change.***

Certain charismatic religious leaders convince followers to empty their pockets for the “work” of the church – never mind that a significant work of some churches appears to be the glorification of the pastor. I remember a joke about a pastor who was asked how he determined what money in the collection plate was his and what was God’s. The pastor replied, “I take the money given each Sunday and throw it all up to God. God grabs whatever He needs and lets my share fall back to me.”

Jesus said, “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” We do the same thing today when we overly focus on a single word or line in scripture and strain out the spirit and the context of the larger work or historical trend. When we focus on minutia, straining gnats, we almost certainly miss the big picture. Father Richard Rohr writes that the lowest level of understanding of scripture is the literal level. In my opinion, we invite the camel when we believe scripture was *dictated* by God, instead of being *inspired*



by God and written by imperfect, human beings. These words of Jesus stand as a warning to all (myself included) who pretend to have more than a vague knowledge about the nature of God. God cannot be known as we know other things of the earth. The things we know are *of* God, but they are not God. We can only observe where God has been. Any attempt to capture or limit God in words is like trying to catch the wind. If someone assures us he or she is serving God for dinner, we can rest assured it is really a camel.

Jesus says we “neglect the weightier matters of the law” like justice, mercy, and faith when we focus on minutia. It is easy to give rules and dole out salvation based on one’s compliance with those rules. The weightier matters of the law require *us* to change. When Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees blind, he accuses them of ignorance. They can only focus on minutia because either they do not understand the bigger picture, or they choose not to acknowledge it. Worse, they encourage others to focus on minutia, and so the ignorance perpetuates itself. Wrestling with the totality of scripture is hard and reveals parts of ourselves we prefer to remain hidden. Jesus tells us not to ignore any part of the scripture, but to apply it in a way that includes the difficult and self-incriminating issues of justice, mercy, and faith. Only such an application of religious practice is consistent with the (unwritten) Word of God from which all of life arises.

## 37 - Love One Another

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34-35*

The “love one another” saying of Jesus is one that appears in each of the Gospels, although in different variations and contexts. In Matthew 22:34-40 and in Mark 12:28-34, a religious leader asks Jesus which of the commandments is the greatest. Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God, and the second is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” In Luke 10:25-28, a lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to love God and to love his neighbor as himself. The lawyer then asks, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), where a man was beaten, robbed, and left by the side of the road. A couple of religious leaders pass him by without offering assistance. A Samaritan (a despised foreigner) stops and bandages his wounds, takes him to a town, and pays for his care.

In John’s telling, Jesus was with his disciples at the Last Supper where he gave them a new commandment: to love one another. Further, Jesus told them they should love one another as *he had loved them*. A few verses earlier, Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, modeling humility and a readiness to serve.

Jesus gave his time and attention to all who came to him. He healed infirmities and fought ignorance by sharing wisdom. He accepted those whom society rejected. The love of Jesus was laser-focused on the needs of others, not personal emotions or feelings.

On a recent trip to New Orleans, I encountered panhandlers throughout the French Quarter, sometimes five or six per block. One haunting example was a young female who looked to be high school or college age. Her sign said, “Homeless and pregnant.” Her gaze was fixed on the sidewalk in front of her, as if in shame and despair. Like the religious leaders in the story of the Good Samaritan, I passed her by. I justified my insensitivity by

***One of the reasons I find myself bypassing opportunities to love and serve others is my tendency to project out of the present moment.***

rationalizing that I could have given thousands of dollars and made no significant dent in the needs of the area, or possibly even in the needs of this one person. It was overwhelming. In retrospect, I know I could have done *something* for a few – at least for this desperate girl – but I chose to keep walking. I failed even to acknowledge these unfortunates as fellow children of God by saying “Hello,” or by sitting to hear their stories. Would Jesus have passed them by? How would I judge those, like me, obliviously passing by if I were in their situation? Perhaps the sorrow I saw in them was their pity for me, a well-to-do middle-classer unwilling to share his abundance.

One of the reasons I find myself bypassing opportunities to love and serve others is my tendency to project out of the present moment. In each of my moments in the French Quarter there was one person in front of me with a need. Had I remained in the moment, I could have loved another by attending to that one person in some way. Instead, I looked at the immensity of the needs of the many *outside of that moment* and ended up not serving any of them. The immensity of the need *outside of the moment* distracted me from what I could have done to help someone *in the moment*. I was reminded recently that we only meet God in the moment. God does not reside in the future or the past, only in the present.

Jesus says, "By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Active love is the mark of a Christian. Using Jesus as a model, and not allowing past failures or future worries to remove us from the needs God places before us in the moment is one way to follow the example of love and service we see in Jesus. While I do not believe we are condemned for passing by those in need without helping, those are God-given opportunities to respond *in kind* to the love and service shown to us in Christ. By loving one another we display the mark of Christ for others to see. At the same time, we relieve a bit of the suffering in our hurting world. And both are desperately needed.

## 38 - Feed My Sheep

*He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." John 21:17*

For me, this is one of the more touching passages in the Bible, occurring after Jesus has been crucified, buried, and resurrected. He meets the disciples on the banks of the Sea of Galilee and makes them breakfast. Jesus turns to (Simon) Peter, his most passionate and zealous follower, and asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep." This exchange repeats itself three times, in slightly different form, with Jesus asking Peter if he loves him, Peter affirming that he does, and Jesus telling him first to feed his *lambs*, then to *tend* his sheep, and finally to feed his *sheep*.. Jesus closes the conversation by repeating the words he had first spoken to his disciples three years earlier, "Follow me."

The need to repeat *three times* his instruction to care for his sheep indicates the importance of the directive. The emphasis could not have been accidental. It was as if Jesus were saying, "If you forget everything else I say or do, at least remember this, 'Watch over my family of believers.'" It is

obvious that Jesus is not referring to livestock, but to his followers – those he had taught, fed, and healed during his earthly ministry. He knows he will not be physically present to care for his people any longer. He needs his followers to take care of each other and to continue the work he began. It does not require much of a leap in understanding to know Jesus was talking to us. This instruction, from 2000 years ago, was also meant for us today.

There are subtle, but important distinctions in Jesus' responses to Peter's assurances about loving him: "Feed my lambs," "Tend my sheep," and "Feed my sheep." First is the distinction between *feeding* and *tending*; second is the difference between *lambs* and

***Jesus needs for his followers to take care of each other and to continue the work he began.***

*sheep*. The latter is the most obvious, since lambs are baby sheep. Lambs are cute, playful, and lovable, not unlike human children. They are often easier to care for and about than many of their adult counterparts. There is an innocence to a lamb that brings out our protective and nurturing instincts. Biblical authors name Jesus as the *Lamb of God*, referring to his untarnished purity and meaning he was unbound by earthly entanglements. In numerous places, Jesus tells us to become like, as well as to take care of the little children. In his telling of Peter to feed his lambs, Jesus is reminding the disciples of the importance of caring for the poor, lowly, and weak, regardless of their age.

The second distinction is between *feeding* and *tending*. Feeding his sheep has the obvious

connotation of making sure the physically hungry have something to eat. Indeed, we cannot turn our lives toward anything but our next meal when we are hungry, nor can we expect others to understand words of wisdom on an empty stomach. Jesus' stories about feeding the crowds are a reference to the importance of attending to physical needs. There is another type of hunger, however, which is spiritual in nature. We are also hungry for the unconditional love of God. When Jesus says in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," he is not referring to food or drink called righteous. Rather, he is referring to an internal hunger, a personal desire to know and do what is right. He says those with such a hunger will be filled, meaning that type of hunger will be satisfied. To tend has a slightly broader meaning than just feeding, which includes protecting, nurturing, and creating a safe place for growth and development.

Finally, the message is for *all* of his disciples, even though his words were directed to Peter. Although Peter became the head of what would become the Christian church – the first Pope – there was no expectation for Peter to do this alone. The entire community of believers was to care for Jesus' flock, including caring for each other. That community extends through space and time to include us today. This final instruction of Jesus to us, repeated three times for emphasis and inarguably tied to our love for him, is to feed his sheep.





## Afterward

While what Jesus said is important, I have attempted to make clear that how Jesus lived and how he related to others is perhaps even more important. We cannot be certain of the actual words and phrasings Jesus utilized because of the decades that passed between his death and the writing of the Gospels, not to mention the many translations of those words prior to their being available to us today. How Jesus lived and related to others is much easier to ascertain with some certainty from the biblical record. The good news is that Jesus told us to *follow* him, and it is more useful for a good follower to have an understanding of how their leader lived. Healing the sick, teaching about what is important in life, reaching out to and including the outcasts and marginalized in society – these were the hallmarks of Jesus’ life, and these are the marching orders a follower of Jesus receives from the Gospels.

My hope and prayer is that the reader will find the inspiration in these pages to follow the example Jesus set to the best of their ability. When enough of us take that challenge seriously, our world will become a better, more loving place for everyone. May it be so.

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## Endnotes

*All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), HarperOne. 1989.*

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## About the Author

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