

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's Wife

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar... Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab...Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth...David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife. -Matthew 1:3, 5, 6

Of all the gospel writers, Matthew has been known as the one who wrote for a Jewish audience—though he is more challenging than sympathetic to the people of his own race. Perhaps it was because as a Jewish tax collector for the Romans, Matthew probably experienced firsthand the hypocrisy of his countrymen. Many Jews would have looked down on “sinners” like Matthew because, after all, they were the keepers of the law and the descendants of the Patriarchs. But throughout his gospel, Matthew makes it abundantly clear that Jesus was the one sent to the lost sheep of Israel (see Matthew 15:24) and that they would have to trust in him, and not their heritage, for their salvation.

A cagey example of how Matthew communicates this message is found in the genealogy of Jesus, with which he begins his narrative. Matthew knew that it would

Not everyone in the Davidic line came off of Sunnybrook Farm

be important to the Jews that any Messianic claims first be supported by evidence of Davidic ancestry, hence the list of forty-two generations leading from Abraham to Jesus. But Matthew, right from the start of the gospel, takes a crack at a common mindset among the Jews of his day that the purity of the Jewish heritage was the basis for justification. Among the forty-two men listed are four women who were “blemishes” on the supposedly pure line of the Messiah.

The first is Tamar who disguised herself as a prostitute and became pregnant when her father-in-law, Judah, hired her services (see Genesis 38). The second is Rahab, a pagan who didn't just pretend to be a prostitute (see Joshua 2:1). The third is Ruth, a foreigner from Moab. And the fourth is Bathsheba, identified here in Matthew only as “Uriah's wife”—and you know the shame of the story here. These women and these four only, are mentioned. None of these women had the pedigree to qualify as progenitors of the Messiah but, lo and behold, here they are.

There can be no coincidence that these four are the ones the Holy Spirit inspires Matthew to mention. The fact is, these are women whom the legalistic and bigoted Jews of Matthew's day would not have chosen to be the forbearers of the Messiah. These four were, in a sense, reminders to any conceited Jews that not everyone in the Davidic line came off of Sunnybrook Farm, that God will choose to use whom he wills, and that faith is more important than race.

Immanuel—which Means, "God with Us."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." -Matthew 1:22, 23

In what sense is Jesus God? There is a wide spectrum of thought on this question from different people and groups who profess to follow Jesus. On one end there are those like the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses who discount the divinity of Christ, holding him to be a created being. On the other end are some “Jesus Only” groups who say that Jesus was so much God that when he came to earth, the throne of heaven was empty. A proper Christology must fall somewhere in between—but where?

In Matthew's account of the birth of Christ, he cites two names that would be given to the son born to the virgin, Mary. The first is the name Jesus.

In what sense is Jesus God?

“Jesus” in Hebrew is “Yeshua” (the same name as “Joshua”), which means “Yahweh saves.” Matthew then quotes Isaiah 7:14 and says, “*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, "God with us.*” These two names, “Jesus” and “Immanuel,” denote the initiative of God to come among his people and bring salvation. Through Jesus, Yahweh would bring salvation. And through Jesus, Yahweh would dwell among us.

Let me say up front that I have never been entirely satisfied with the common understanding of the Trinity (yikes!!). The statement “Jesus is God,” though based on truth, has too many inaccurate implications. It implies, to me at least, that there is no distinction of persons or levels of authority in the Godhead. And the New Testament is very clear that there are such distinctions.

Please don't take me wrong. I affirm the eternal, uncreated divinity of Jesus who is the perfect *image of the invisible God* (Col 1:15), *the exact representation of his being* (Heb 1:3) and who is to be worshiped (see Luke 24:52). In essence, Jesus is the same as the Father, but in person, position and authority, he is not (see John 14:28; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Corinthians 15:27-28; and Matthew 28:18). Jesus is *Immanuel* in the sense that everything the Father is, he is, so when you see Jesus, you have seen the Father—but he is not the Father. He is the *Word...made flesh* (John 1:14), the one through whom everything was made (see John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16), the one in whom all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (see Colossians 2:9). It is in this sense that Jesus is *Immanuel—God with us*.

All This I Will Give You

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." -Matthew 4:8-9

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the Devil (Mt 4:1). Since Jesus taught us to pray that we would not be led into temptation (see Matthew 6:13) it is not likely that the Spirit would lead us in like manner into Satan's den of enticement. Of the three temptations which Satan brought against the Lord, his last and most grandiose came when he took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. The fact that Satan was able to do this is impressive. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." My question is this: "Did Satan actually possess the authority to make this offer to Jesus?"

Notwithstanding his nature as a liar and his role as the father of lies (see John 8:44), there is biblical evidence to support the notion that Satan's offer to Jesus was legitimate. If it is not until the end of the age that *the kingdoms of the world...become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ* (Rev 11:15) then who is running the show until that time? Jesus called Satan "*the prince of this world*" (Jn14:30) and John tells us that "*the whole world is under the control of the evil one*" (1 John 5:19).

This does not change the fact that God is sovereign over the affairs of men and women. What it does mean is that Satan seized dominion over the earth when he was successful in enticing the man and woman in the Garden to sin. God had given that dominion to us but we forfeited it to Satan. This is why when Jesus came on the scene Satan was intent on getting him to sin. He knew that Jesus was the only one who could take back from him *the kingdoms of the world and their splendor*. If he could persuade Jesus to worship him (to prematurely gain his destiny as King of Kings) Satan would have kept his preeminence in the world—but as you know, it didn't work out that way.

Does Satan think more highly of himself than he ought? No question. But he does know his realm of authority. Fortunately, those who have been redeemed from his dominion are no longer under that authority. Moreover, Satan knows that the tenure of his authority is short-lived (see Revelation 12:12) and any offer he makes is for "a limited-time-only" basis.

Satan's authority in the world is real, but the authority of the kingdom of God now supersedes it and will, someday soon, overtake it.

**Satan's offer to Jesus
was legitimate**

You Are the Light of the World

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. -Matthew 5:14-16

The only phrase that Jesus used to describe both himself and his followers is "*the light of the world*" (Mt 5:14; Jn 8:12). Jesus is *the true light that was coming into the world to give light to every man* (Jn 1:9). This fact we accept and upon it base our eternal salvation. But how much and how often do we consider ourselves to be to our world the very thing that Jesus was to his?

We are the light of the world. This is not just a nice religious concept without practical implication. We are that light because what was given to Jesus is given to us. Notice just a few of the ways we are like Jesus: Jesus came preaching the good news, the gospel. We preach the exact same message. Jesus said, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (Mt 28:18). The authority we walk in is the very same authority. In Luke 22:29, Jesus said to his disciples, "*I confer on you a kingdom just as my Father conferred one on me.*" It's the same kingdom. The Holy Spirit that came at Jesus' baptism is the same one that came on the day of Pentecost. The love of God is *shed abroad* in our hearts (Rom 5:5 KJV); the joy of the Lord is our strength (Ne 8:10); and the peace of God which passes all understanding keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Php 4:7).

If all this is true then it should be no surprise that we are God's chosen instruments of light in a dark world. That light, as Jesus taught, is not meant to be hidden. Who is going to light a lamp and then put it under a bowl? That's ludicrous. The purpose of the lamp is to give light. If the lamp is not giving light, it is not fulfilling its purpose. We are *created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Eph 2:10). These good works are produced by the light within us so that everyone in our sphere of influence will take note and praise God because of them.

When your light is truly shining, it is God who receives the praise. Yes it is *your light*, but it doesn't originate with you. It is really his light that the people see. Jesus is the light of the world, and so are we. So, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

**How often do we consider
ourselves to be to our world
the very thing that Jesus
was to his?**

You Have Heard that it was Said...But I Tell You

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." - Matthew 5:21-22

In Jesus' discourse known as "The Sermon on the Mount," he said that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (see Matthew 5:17). Of course, Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law on our behalf through his sinless life, which was imputed to us by his substitutionary death on the cross. But the fulfillment of the law came in a second way. Jesus revealed the law in a way that fulfilled and even went beyond what Moses prescribed.

In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus quotes some well-known precepts based on the Law, prefacing each one with the phrase, "You have heard that it was said." What was it that these multitudes to whom he was speaking had heard from long ago? "Do not murder," "Do not commit adultery," "How to divorce your wife," "Do not break your oath," "Eye for eye," and "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." In each case, after he quotes these familiar themes he says, "But I tell you...."

What was Jesus doing here—contradicting the Law? No, he was going beyond the letter of the Law to the heart of what the law was meant to convey. The law said, "Do not murder" (Ex 20:13). Right. But if you want to fulfill the intent of the law, it's not just about murder; it is about the anger behind the murder. If you go to the root and deal with the anger, it will never get to murder. The same holds true for adultery. The law said, "Do not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14). But you know that the adultery starts somewhere else. If you deal with the place in the heart that opened the door to the affair, you will have prevented the adultery.

Jesus came to fulfill the law by going beyond the requirements of the law to the essence of what those requirements were all about. He was able to interpret issues like divorce and remarriage not according to what the law allowed but according to what was in the heart of God concerning the matter.

Even though Jesus *canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us* (Col 2:14) so that we would no longer be under the sentence of the Law, he fulfilled, not only the requirements of the Law, but the true meaning of it. Jesus was all about going to the heart of the matter. And this is how he fulfilled the Law.

He was going beyond the letter of the Law to the heart of what the law was meant to convey

Where Your Treasure Is, There Your Heart Will Be Also

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. -Matthew 6:19-21

If you want to know what your priorities really are, look at your investments. How do you spend your money? How do you spend your time? Then ask if these are the kinds of investments which will pay eternal dividends.

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." Why? Because, those treasures are liable to corruption and loss. They will not last—perhaps not even a lifetime. *What is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal* (2 Co 4:18). Since value is intrinsically tied to longevity, the smart money is in the things that matter for eternity. These things will never be affected by market fluctuations, economic downturns or unscrupulous management. That which heaven values is where we should invest our time and money.

Since value is intrinsically tied to longevity, the smart money is in the things that matter for eternity

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks frequently of "reward." In other places he speaks of certain "talents" that we have been given to invest. It is not a bad thing to think about what you can get on return for your investment. Jesus actually expects us to seek reward and return from the resources he has given us. But in our hearts, are we looking for our reward in this life or are we looking for it in the next?

The telltale answer lies in where your treasure is. You and I can give lip-service to kingdom priorities, but what do your bank and credit card statements say? What does your day timer say? When I say "kingdom priorities," I am not necessarily speaking of church activities. I am talking about the things Jesus cares about which matter for eternity. Many persons with heavy portfolios in temporal matters have attempted to appease their consciences with the idea that they are good churchgoers. You and I both know that going to church may have nothing to do with heavenly investment.

Paul said, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Col 3:1-2). If we intentionally set our hearts on things above, then our priorities will change. Our investments will change. More and more, our treasurers will be stored in that place of eternal security.

It's time to check your portfolio.

Everyone Who Hears These Words of Mine

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. -Matthew 7:24, 26

There is a Sunday school song that goes, “The wise man built his house upon the rock.” The song is based, as you might know, on the parable of the wise and the foolish builders found in Matthew 7:24-27. The song concludes, “So build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ.” It’s a great little song, but it actually misses the point of Jesus’ parable. Jesus certainly is the rock of our salvation but the direct meaning of the story is that strength and stability in the life of the believer comes not just from hearing the word of God but putting it into practice.

It is reasonable to claim that Jesus’ discourse in Matthew 5-7 is the greatest teaching the world has ever known. How then does Jesus cap it off? The Sermon on the Mount ends with Jesus telling this parable about two men. One heard the words of Jesus and put them into practice. He was like a man who had built a house on a rock. When the storm hit and the waters rose the house *did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock* (7:25). The other man heard the words of Jesus but did not put them into practice. When the storm hit and the waters rose his house *fell with a great crash* (7:27).

***The force of the knowledge
is not in the knowing,
it is in the doing***

Remember that Jesus has just finished pouring out divine revelation to the multitudes. They have heard the most profound and practical instruction ever uttered from the lips of a human being. Now what? Jesus wants them to know that the force of the knowledge is not in the knowing, it is in the doing. They must not *merely listen to the word*, they must *do what it says* (Ja 1:22). The only difference between the man who built his house on the rock and the man who built his house on the sand is that the first put into practice the words of Jesus and the second did not. They had both heard the teaching of Jesus. The man whose life fell apart actually knew the word—he just didn’t do it.

You do realize, don’t you, that merely knowing you should love your enemies (5:44), forgive those who sin against you (6:14) and enter through the narrow gate (7:13) will not make a dog difference in your life? It is the doing that makes you strong. Knowing how to use the treadmill will not make you fit. You have to regularly get on the thing and work out. And the strength to stand the storms of life comes only through doing what Jesus said we should do.

Jesus Reached out His Hand and Touched the Man

A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. -Matthew 8:2-3

Of all the things that attract people to Jesus, perhaps it is his compassion that is most compelling. He showed it to the woman caught in adultery when he said “*Neither do I condemn you*” (Jn 8:11). He extended it to those who crucified him when he said, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Lk 23:34 KJV). And here in Matthew 8, we see Jesus reaching out to touch, and to heal, the untouchable—a leper.

Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 speak of how an outbreak of leprosy in the nomadic camp of the Israelites was to be dealt with: *The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp* (13:45-46). What a dreadful existence.

***It wasn't just about healing
the man's leprosy; it was
about healing his soul***

My wife was telling me how, when she was in elementary school, some of the kids had stigmatized a classmate. “Mary” was said to have fleas and if anyone touched her they were heckled as having caught fleas from Mary. The only way, it was said, that you could prevent yourself from catching Mary’s fleas was to mark an “X” on your hand. So, for literally months, most of the class would come to school with the “X” as a sign that they didn’t want Mary’s fleas. Imagine the trauma and the sense of rejection that that little girl must have felt.

Imagine, as well, the man with leprosy who approached Jesus. Imagine the courage that it would have taken for this social outcast to come among the large crowds that were following Jesus (v.1) and kneel down before him. The one who was required by the Law to shout “unclean, unclean” wherever he went came and said, “*Lord if you are willing you can make me clean.*” Jesus’ response was unthinkable. It was a direct violation of the Levitical commandment. He *reached out his hand and touched the man*. And with a word, the man was cured of his leprosy.

Jesus didn’t have to touch him, you know. But it wasn’t just about healing the man’s leprosy; it was about healing his soul. It was about mercy triumphing over the law. It was about how those who have been rejected by society should be treated. It was about reaching out to touch a man who bore the wound of being untouchable. And every bit as important as the command to heal the leprosy was the touch to heal the man.

New Wine into Old Wineskins

Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved. -Matthew 9:17

In Matthew 9, Jesus was asked why his disciples didn't fast like the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees. Jesus' responded by explaining that, even though a time was coming when his disciples would fast, the disciples of John and of the Pharisees were still operating under an old way of doing things that couldn't contain that which Jesus came to bring. He compared their particular brand of religion, with all their auxiliary rules and regulations, to an old wineskin that would burst due to fermentation if filled with new wine. The old cannot contain the new. What is needed for new wine is a new wineskin. And what was needed to contain the new wine of God's Spirit was a new order.

***The old way of doing things
couldn't contain that which
Jesus came to bring***

What characterizes the new wineskin as opposed to the old? The following is a contrasting list that our church compiled as we spoke about it recently:

<u>Old Wineskin</u>	<u>New Wineskin</u>
-Old Covenant: Law	-New Covenant: Grace
-Legalism	-Liberty
-Rigidity	-Flexibility
-Easily Contained	-Hard to Contain
-Traditions of Men	-Moving of the Spirit
-Status Quo	-New Thing
-Dead Works	-Living Faith
-Carnal	-Spiritual
-Ritualistic, Formal, Static	-Candid, Informal, Dynamic
-Institutional/denominational	-Movemental
-Bunker Mentality	-Ready to Take New Ground
-Man-ruled	-God-ruled
-Exclusive: Closed Clique	-Inclusive: Whosoever Will
-Priesthood of a Few	-Priesthood of Many
-Self-righteousness	-Righteousness of Christ
-Hypocrisy	-Authenticity
-“You Must Come to us”	-“Go Ye Therefore”
-Stay in Comfort Zone	-Willing to be Stretched
-Auxiliary Rules	-Pure Gospel
-Form of Godliness but No Power	-Experiences Power of God

The Tax Collector and the Zealot

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot ... -Matthew 10:2, 4

There is a church growth premise called the "Homogeneous Unit Principle" which says that churches will grow faster if they gather people of the same social, economic, racial and cultural stripe. The theory is, "Birds of a feather flock together." While the idea is pragmatic, Jesus has called his church to defy the normal social patterns and use cultural differences as a witness of our oneness in Christ. As the great apostle proclaimed, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek nor slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Ga 3:28).

Those who promote the homogeneous unit principle cite the example of Jesus' choice of the twelve apostles. All men. All Jews. All Galilean. They were certainly birds of a feather. But were they really?

***Can you imagine the
differences that had to be
laid down between Matthew
and Simon for the cause of
Christ?***

Dr. James Earl Massey, who for many years pastored a culturally diverse congregation in Detroit, points out something interesting about the makeup of the twelve. Included in the group were a pair of men who, for all intents and purposes, would have at one time been mortal enemies: Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot.

Israel was under foreign military occupation, much like France or Holland during World War II. A Zealot was a Jewish insurrectionist who took all means, including violent guerrilla warfare, to overthrow the Roman regime. A tax collector, on the other hand, was a Jew who, for personal monetary profit, became an accessory to Roman domination by collecting and exhorting taxes from their own countrymen under the authority of Rome. Can you imagine the differences that had to be laid down between Matthew and Simon for the cause of Christ? But Jesus wanted them both to follow him and to live and work together. I wouldn't be surprised if when Jesus sent his disciples out two by two, Matthew and Simon would have been paired.

Yes, there may be difficulties which arise in the church that are rooted in cultural differences, as was the case in the Jerusalem church between the Grecian and Hebraic believers (see Acts 6:1-7). But the Pentecost outpouring was a sign that God has ordained many different nations to be part of his one and only church. And the more we are able to worship, fellowship, serve and live together, the greater the witness to a divided world and the more we will know what heaven will really be like.

He Who Receives You Receives Me

He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. -Matthew 10:40-41

When we think about whom we represent, we can see ourselves and our calling as extremely significant. We have a commissioning as *Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us* (2 Co 5:20). Those who receive us are actually receiving Jesus because we do not represent ourselves or carry our own message. We do not speak on our own to gain honor for ourselves, but we work for the honor of the one who sends us (see John 7:18).

When Jesus commissioned and sent out the twelve he told them, "*He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.*" Certainly, this applies to us as well. The Scriptures declare: *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* (Ps 118:26). If we were to come in our own name or on behalf of some organization or denominational church we couldn't claim the blessing that this scripture speaks of. But if we come in the name of the Lord, our message, assignment, and authority is weightier than that of any ambassador, ecclesial or even political. We need to see how significant we are as ambassadors of the God of Heaven. When we do, we will realize a number of things:

-When people receive us they are actually receiving Jesus and in turn the Father himself (v40).
-It is not just our privilege to receive the financial support of those who receive our message; it is their privilege to support us if they are found worthy of us (v41).
-Those who receive us (as prophets, righteous persons or disciples) will receive the same reward as we do. This is true because by receiving us their hearts are being revealed. Their desire to receive us comes from their desire to receive the Lord. Blessing the messenger is, in effect, blessing God, and when you bless God, you certainly will not lose your reward (vs 41-42).

Paul puts it this way, "*For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life*" (2 Co 2:15-16).

What a remarkable calling we have.

Our message, assignment, and authority is weightier than that of any ambassador

And Forceful Men Lay Hold of It

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. -Matthew 11:12

The kingdom of heaven started to "forcefully advance" when John the Baptist came on the scene. He was the one who introduced the world to the Heavenly King who was bringing his kingdom to the earth. John announced the coming of the kingdom. He preached that all should repent because it was at hand. It was at this point that God's kingdom began to advance and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. It was coming, and despite the fact that not everyone could see it or would want it, this kingdom would eventually swallow up the kingdoms of the world (see Revelation 11:15).

At the coming of John the Baptist, the forceful assault against the domain of the Prince of Darkness was officially underway. Unrelentingly and without retreat, the kingdom of God has come to challenge and conquer every philosophical and spiritual force set up against the knowledge of God. Welcomed by some and opposed by others, the kingdom of God is a respecter of neither. It does not wait nor is deterred by any person or any thing. Wherever it manifests itself, the kingdom of God displaces everything opposed to God and enhances everything in harmony with him.

You can't stop the kingdom of God any more than you can stop a tornado

The best way that I have found to describe the advance of the kingdom is to compare it with a tornado. You can't stop the kingdom of God any more than you can stop a tornado. This is what Jesus meant when he said that the kingdom is *forcefully advancing*.

Just as the kingdom of heaven is advancing with forceful determination, anyone who would want to be a part of the kingdom must lay hold of it with the same relentlessness. We are called to press in and seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Jacob would not let go until he received God's blessing. Elisha would not be dissuaded from receiving a double portion of Elijah's anointing. Bartimaeus cried out all the more when he was told to be quiet, calling out to Jesus to heal his blindness.

The kingdom is here. It is on a course that has been set by God and is advancing to its destination. Anyone who wants to go where it is going must lay hold of it with the same kind of forceful determination that marks the nature of the kingdom itself.

The Good Stored Up in Him

“How can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.” -Matthew 12:35

You have probably heard the catchphrase, “garbage in, garbage out.” Whether it is designing computer software, manufacturing widgets or establishing a life, that's the way it works. You get out what you put in.

The Pharisees had just blasphemed the Holy Spirit. They had attributed the activity of the Spirit of God to the work of the devil. After witnessing Jesus deliver a man from a demonic spirit (or spirits) which was robbing him of both his speech and eyesight, they said, *“It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons”* (Mt 12:24). What was coming out of their mouths showed that, in fact, they were the ones under the influence of the evil one. Jesus nailed their problem saying, *“How you who are evil say anything good... the evil man can bring out evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”*

Don't concentrate on making the fruit good, concentrate on making the tree good

But just as the overflow of the heart filled with evil things causes the mouth to speak evil, a heart filled with good things means that goodness will flow from that person. The key to having good things flow from you is to store good things in your inner being. I know a lady who always has a supply of home baked goods in her freezer in case of unexpected company. You should see what she can pull out of that freezer on a moment's notice. You can't bring good things out of the storehouse unless you have an inventory of good things there. The bringing out part is what everyone sees. The storing up part is largely done when there is no one noticing.

Jesus said, *“A tree is recognized by its fruit”*(v33). A good tree will produce good fruit and a bad tree will produce bad fruit. Don't concentrate on making the fruit good, concentrate on making the tree good. If you make the tree good, the good fruit will follow. Likewise, no one can expect to bring good things out of a heart filled up with evil things.

Are you storing up good things or evil things? Are you storing up things that please the Spirit or are you storing up things that cater to the flesh? What you put in is bound to come out. Peter advised: *Add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love* (2 Pt 1:5-7). If this is the kind of stuff that you want flowing out of your life, store it up in your life.

The Parable of the Sower

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means...” -Matthew 13:18

I believe that the Parable of the Sower is the very first place in the Scriptures that we should take a new believer after we have led him or her to Jesus. They need to be taught what to expect after having received the word of God with joy. The Parable of the Sower will do just that.

You probably know the story. If you don't, please take time to read it now in Matthew 13:1-23. Parables were short stories which Jesus used to convey truth about the kingdom of God. Jesus didn't often explain the meaning of his parables—the main point was usually obvious and self-explanatory—but in this case he did.

Jesus equates the seed sown by the farmer to *the message about the kingdom* (v18). In the first of four scenarios that Jesus describes, the person in question *does not understand it* because *the evil one comes and snatches it away* (v19). As Paul points out, *the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel* (2 Cor 4:4). Somehow, somehow, Satan is able to keep people from understanding the gospel—an understanding that must come by spiritual revelation.

The Parable of the Sower is the first place we should take a new believer

In each of the other three scenarios, the message about the kingdom is received. The testimony of Matthew's version of the parable, along with both Mark's and Luke's, indicate that in these other three scenarios, Jesus is talking about what can happen after someone accepts and believes the gospel message: There will be those who fall away, there will be those who struggle to bear fruit, and there will be those who live fruitful lives in Christ.

Some teach that the one who *quickly falls away* (v22) was never saved in the first place. That a believer could “fall away” is in contradiction to their “once saved, always saved” theology. But according to Jesus, this one *hears the word and at once receives it with joy* (v20). This person is saved, but falls away because of persecution. It should be pointed out to the brand-new Christian that they should expect to receive some heat for their new faith in Christ and they should guard against the possibility of falling away. These new babes in Christ should also be taught to guard against the *worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth* (v23) which will divert their energy and affection for Jesus. If they are successful at doing that, having stood the heat of whatever persecution that may come, they will be well on their way to a fruitful Christian life.

Treasure Hidden in a Field

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. -Matthew 13:44-46

It has been said that the kingdom of heaven cannot be bought but unless you are willing to give up everything you have you cannot possess it. In three short verses consisting of sixty-five words, Jesus tells two parables that convey the worth of the kingdom of heaven.

The first parable is about a man who found a treasure hidden in a field. Have you ever dreamed of finding hidden treasure? It would be an exhilarating experience, I'm sure. In Jesus' allegory, this man unexpectedly comes across a hidden treasure and gets more than just a little excited about it. What does he do when he finds it? He hides the treasure again and *in his joy* goes and sells all he had and buys the field. Notice that in the parable, the man did not just steal the treasure away when he found it. There had to be some sort of legitimacy to his possession; otherwise, the treasure could be taken away from him. If he possessed the land then he would possess the treasure, but in order to get the land he had to sell everything he had. No problem, however, for he was glad to do it.

The second parable is about a merchant on the lookout for fine pearls who comes across one of "great value." Knowing his trade, he deems it worth more than all he owned—so he sells everything he had and buys it.

Note the similarities and differences in the two stories. In both, the kingdom represents something of greater value than anything, and everything, you could possess. In the first story, the man is not necessarily searching for treasure, but he finds it. In the second, the merchant is intent on finding that pearl, and he does. Some of us in the kingdom weren't necessarily looking for God when he revealed himself (see Isaiah 65:1). Others of us were on an intentional quest to find God before we discovered the pearl of great price. Whether by accident or by intent, when the reality of the kingdom of God becomes apparent to you, the appropriate response is the same: Complete abandonment to the goal of possessing its value.

No, the kingdom of God cannot be bought. But if you know its true value, nothing will keep you from acquiring it.

The kingdom of God cannot be bought. But if you know its true value, nothing will keep you from acquiring it.

When Jesus Heard What Had Happened

John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place...the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. -Matthew 14:12-14

It is difficult to minister to someone else's needs when you are dealing with your own pain. Jesus knew all about that.

John the Baptist was dead—executed under bizarre circumstances for preaching the truth of the word of God. The first thing that John's disciples did after retrieving the headless body of their mentor for burial was to find Jesus and tell him. There can be little doubt that John had a very special place in the heart of Jesus. Their respective mothers had a close relationship that was made even closer by the unique and miraculous circumstances surrounding their pregnancies—only six months apart. Jesus and John were blood relatives. We don't know if they played together as children, but it was entirely conceivable that they did—establishing a bond at an early age. Even if they hadn't, the fact that John was instrumental in paving the way for Jesus' ministry and that he was the one whom Jesus called the greatest person to ever be born of a woman (see Matthew 11:11) surely indicated that this *voice of one calling in the desert* (Lk 3:4) was eminently valued by the Master.

So how does Jesus react to the news of John's death? Immediately, *he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place*. Can there be any doubt that he wanted to be alone so he could grieve? But his grieving would have to wait. The multitudes headed him off and when the boat landed, the place was anything but solitary. At my best, I probably would have excused myself politely, or more likely, told the crowd to leave me alone. The last thing I want when I am hurting is to have to minister to someone else. However, look at Jesus. The news of John's death is still very fresh, but when he saw the large crowd he *had compassion on them and healed their sick*. Amazing. When evening approached and the disciples urged him to send the people away, he could have taken that as his cue to get away, but he didn't. They were hungry, so it wasn't until he had fed them with the five loaves and two fish that he dismissed them. Then, and only then, did he retreat to where he could be alone to pray and pour out his grief (v23).

Jesus was able to look past his own pain and, with true compassion, enter into another's need. How difficult. How Christ-like. How much like Calvary.

The last thing I want when I am hurting is to have to minister to someone else

Then Peter Walked on the Water

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. -Matthew 14:28-29

The story of Peter walking on the water illustrates how faith is both response and expectation.

First, consider the biblical concept that faith is a response. 1 Timothy 1:4 tells us that *God's work...is by faith*. This means that whenever someone was doing God's work, whether it is Noah building the ark, Moses leading the people out of Egypt, or Paul taking the gospel to Macedonia, the work they were doing was in response to God's leading. Even though it was in Peter's heart to come to Jesus on the water he did not step out until he heard the word of the Lord saying "come." That was all that he needed. Faith is primarily a response to the word that God is speaking. When the Scripture says, *Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God* (Ro 10:17 KJV), it is not really talking about reading the Bible in order to build your faith. Faith, including saving faith, can only come in response to hearing the word of the Lord. If what you have heard is really the voice of the Lord, then nothing should be able to dissuade you. First, we hear the word of the Lord, and then because we believe God has spoken, we respond in the appropriate way. For Peter, and all the other great people of faith, it was that simple. You hear, which leads you to believe, which leads you to do.

Faith is also expectation. Peter would not have stepped out of the boat and onto the water if he did not expect to be able to do it. How foolish it would have been. But faith is *being sure of what we hope for and being convinced of what we do not see* (Heb 11:1) and so Peter's act was not foolish at all—it was inspiring. The woman in Mark 5 who was healed when she touched the hem of Jesus' garment expected to be healed. She thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed" (Mk 5:28). It wasn't "I might be healed," it was "I will be healed." Afterward, Jesus said to her, "Your faith has healed you." *We walk by faith, not by sight* (2 Cor 5:7 KJV). So, only when Peter started walking by sight instead of faith did his expectation change. It was at that point that he began to sink.

Response and expectation: These will please the One whom it is impossible to please without faith (see Hebrews 11:6). And these are the two things which will enable you to walk on water.

Faith is both response and expectation

I Will Build My Church

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church... -Matthew 16:17-18

What was the kind of church that Jesus envisioned when he said, "I will build my church?" What would it look like, how would he build it and where could we find it?

The answer is found in the pages of the New Testament. Even though we know that the first-century church wasn't perfect and that they lived in different cultural contexts than we do, we have to agree that the New Testament church is our model. We have no reliable record or model of what the church should look like other than the church described in the New Testament. If we are to evaluate today whether we are what Jesus envisioned when he said I will build my church, we have to compare our experience with the pristine example given to us in the book of Acts and the epistles. There we find a purity, power and passion that must come closest to that which would be the result of Jesus truly being the head of the church, making it what he wants it to be.

What did Jesus envision when he said, "I will build my church?"

One definitive way that the New Testament indicates that Jesus would build his church is *on the foundation of the apostles and prophets...* (Eph 2:20). I believe that this is what Jesus meant when he told Simon, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." The differing interpretations of the Catholic and Evangelical traditions are both inadequate here. It was not Peter alone or his revelation on which Jesus would build his church. It was the strong foundation of delegated apostolic authority given by Jesus to apostles and prophets who would lead and direct the church until his return.

But we have fallen so short of what we could be if Jesus were to fully be the architect and builder of the church. And herein lies the key to the problem. We have not let him do it his way. Our structures, traditions and unbelief have hindered the ability of the Spirit of Jesus to direct and empower the people of God according to the New Testament example. In the church at Jerusalem we find that fellowship was priority, miracles confirmed the gospel, no needy persons were among them, they were highly regarded and revered by the culture, the Lord added to their numbers daily, and they were devoted to prayer (see Acts 2:42-47). This is the kind of church Jesus must have had in mind as he pictured what his church would become. This is the kind of church Jesus gave his life for. This is the kind of church that he still envisions. And this is the kind of church that he will build if we let him.

Nothing Will Be Impossible for You

Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." -Matthew 17:19-21

We are familiar and comfortable with, "Nothing is impossible with God" (Lk 1:37), "With God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26) and "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14). But how do we feel about, "Nothing will be impossible for you?" In this statement from Matthew 17:21, Jesus puts the mantle of responsibility for the miraculous on us, his disciples.

Jesus makes this statement to his disciples after they were unsuccessful in healing a boy who was demonized. After Jesus came and rebuked the unclean spirit with a word and healed the boy, the disciples were wondering why they couldn't drive out the demon that was causing the boy to have seizures. "Because you have so little faith," was Jesus' answer. He went on to say, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

What is our response to this? Many, hopefully, would say, "Hallelujah Lord, you're going to use me to do the impossible." Some would possibly say, "I sure would like to be a part of that, help me Lord to believe." Others might gulp a little and say, "I'm not sure I can handle this." And still others, "Me, do the impossible? That's impossible."

Yes, we know that nothing is impossible for God but to translate that into "nothing will be impossible for you" is sometimes beyond us—except when we have faith. For it is when we have faith, even as small as a mustard seed, that nothing will be impossible for us.

Why did Jesus use the illustration of moving a mountain? Isn't that too much? Isn't trying to tell a mountain to move more than can be imagined and much more than can be believed? But Jesus uses this illustration, not to deter your faith, but to encourage it. It is for the very reason that this would be such an amazing miracle that Jesus chooses it as his illustration of what faith can do. What could be more "impossible" than telling a mountain to move from here to there and it moving? Nothing. But with faith you can do even that because with faith nothing will be impossible for you.

Believe it

Isn't trying to tell a mountain to move more than can be imagined, and much more than can be believed?

If Your Brother Sins Against You

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them..." -Matthew 18:15-17

This is the model that is to be used when someone personally sins against a fellow Christian. There are four steps in this confrontation process, each one applying increasing social pressure which is meant to lead the offending brother or sister to repentance and restoration.

The first step is a meeting just between the two parties. It is vital to establish how the offending person sees the situation. Do they see the sin? Are they defensive? Are they repentant? Do they deny it? Was it, in fact, a misunderstanding? If the person truly repents, that is the end of it. No one else need, or should, ever know.

It has worked to bring repentance and restoration every time

If the problem remains unresolved, the second step is to go with one or two other persons (ideally, shepherds of the flock) in order to fulfill the biblical injunction that the truth of a matter is established by two or three witnesses. This second step protects both parties. If it is established that there really is sin, then the sinning party will be squarely confronted with that truth and will have the opportunity to repent and be restored to the Lord and to the injured party. If the matter cannot be established that sin has occurred, then the person in question is protected from the fallout from false accusations or, at least, has been confronted if there is wrongdoing.

If the matter has been unequivocally established that there has been sin and that the sinning party is unrepentant, Jesus instructs us to take it to a third step: "Tell it to the church" (v17). It now becomes a family matter. The family must understand the truth of what is going on and make a united stand to confront the sin and encourage repentance and restoration.

The fourth step is removal from the fellowship. You cannot treat someone as a brother who is willfully unrepentant. You may say, "What about love." This is love. The person's soul is likely at stake. There is no need to "shun"—the person needs to know there is an open door to come back. Even this step is meant to be redemptive. But to share fellowship signals a tolerance of known sin and would be inappropriate (see 1 Co 5:1-5).

Four times in my 19 years as a pastor we have had to implement this process and it has worked to bring repentance and restoration every time. Don't forget, this is Jesus' prescription. If followed carefully, it will bring healing and wholeness to all parties involved.

A King Who Wanted to Settle Accounts

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants...” Matthew 18:23

This parable of the “unmerciful servant” (Matthew 18:21-35) is about forgiveness—the main point being that we should be willing to forgive those who have sinned against us because of the great forgiveness that we have received from God. Many assume (the NIV footnote is misleading here) that the amount owed to this man who was not willing to forgive the debt of his fellow servant, was only a few dollars. Not true. It says in verse 28 that he was owed a *hundred denarii*. In the story of the vineyard workers (see Matthew 20:1-16), Jesus equates a denarius to a day’s wage. So, we are probably talking about a hundred days, or four months wages, that was owed to the one who demanded his money. Of course, it doesn’t compare with the millions of dollars that ten thousand talents (750,000 lbs) of gold or silver would be worth, but it was not an insignificant amount. And this makes the parable all the more poignant because Jesus is communicating that it is no small thing to forgive some of the things that have been done to us in this life.

***When creditors want to settle accounts, it’s because they want to get what is owed to them.
Not so with God.***

Forgiveness being the main point, there is a detail in the parable that we wouldn’t want to overlook that gives us a glimpse into the heart of God. As Jesus sets the stage for this kingdom parable about forgiveness, he says, *“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.”* The Heavenly Father is represented in the parable by a King who wants to settle accounts. His heart, his desire, is to settle accounts with and you and I.

Now, we know that a great day of reckoning is coming when all people will have to give an account to the King of Heaven, the Creator and Righteous Judge of all. The settling of accounts is inescapable. But before the great day of reckoning when all accounts must finally be settled, the King is inviting us to come and get things settled now.

When creditors want to settle accounts, it’s because they want to get what is owed to them. Not so with God. He wants to settle accounts with you not to get what is owed him but to forgive what you owe him. He wants you to be free. He doesn’t want you to have to face him with your account unsettled. In fact he’s already made the payment for you. The death of Jesus Christ and the blood that he shed on the cross purchased your pardon.

He wants to settle accounts with you. Do you with him?

You Have Made Them Equal to Us

The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius...those who were hired first...began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ -Matthew 20:9-12

In high school gym class one day, our instructor, Mr. Clifford, was running us through a series of drills designed to increase our strength and stamina. As we were counting out push-ups and while Mr. Clifford’s back was turned some of the guys were not doing their push-ups. When someone snitched and complained about it, Mr. Clifford replied by telling him not to worry about what somebody else was not doing and to keep focused on what he should be doing. Sometimes we are bothered about what others are doing/not doing instead of staying focused on what we are called to do. Sometimes we are fixated on what other people are getting and let it affect our own contentment with what we have been promised.

The heart of God is not to be fair, it is to be more than fair

Jesus gives a biting illustration that no doubt would offend the sensibility of fairness of most (I love this story). A landowner goes out at six in the morning and hires men to work in his vineyard. He agrees to pay them a “denarius” (great story). At nine o’clock he finds others who want to work, hires them, and promises to pay them *whatever is right*. The same thing happens at noon and at three. At five o’clock, one hour before quitting time, he finds still others who couldn’t find work that day and hires them as well (beautiful story). Those hired last get paid first and they get a denarius—a full day’s pay. Naturally(?), those who were hired first expect to get paid more, but that’s not the way it works (I love it). They get the denarius to which they originally agreed. But they think it’s unfair. In the parable, the landowner, who represents God, is quoted as saying, *“Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius...Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”* (vs 13, 15).

Most of us, if this actually happened to us, would indeed think it unfair. But the heart of God is not to be fair; it is to be more than fair. The complaint of the disgruntled workers to the landowner concerning the ones who only worked one hour was, *“You have made them equal to us.”* Exactly. Yes. Indeed. This is the point. There are no second-class citizens in the kingdom; no third-class berths in heaven. If God wants to honor those who came in last and make them equal to those who labored from the start, then so be it. It’s all by grace anyway. And you’ve got to love that.

Not So with You

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...”-Matthew 20:25-26

One of the great symbols of the Christian experience is the towel and basin. In John 13, Jesus gave us an example of what it means to be great. He washed the feet of his disciples. Servanthood is the crux of Christianity. Nothing in the kingdom works without it. And even though there may be those in society with power who like to throw their weight around, even there, those who serve are the ones who will become great.

Jesus has an interesting situation on his hands with his disciples. James and John have just come to him with their mother and she has asked that her sons be granted the honor of flanking Jesus at the consummation of his eternal kingdom. After Jesus asks the Zebedee boys if they are able to *drink the cup* that is required for such an honor he tells them that those places are not for him to give anyway. The other ten disciples are *indignant* with the two brothers. How is Jesus going to deal with the situation?

The path to true greatness is not in wielding power but in practicing servanthood

In reality, James and John (or I should say their stage-door mother), are seeking positions of greatness. So, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach about what it really takes to be great. Notice that Jesus does not deter them in their desire to achieve greatness. He says, *“Whoever wants to become great...”* But they need to know the path to true greatness is not in wielding power but in practicing servanthood. True authority comes, and is exercised, by being a servant. Rulers among the Gentiles were known for lording it over their people, but Jesus says, *“Not so with you.”*

Jesus’ own example was that even though all authority in heaven and on earth was given him, he did not use that authority to be served, but to serve. This is the difference between Jesus and the *rulers of the Gentiles*. Jesus’ disciples are to follow his example, not the example of the world. Even many in the world have learned that the most productive way to exercise authority is to use it to serve. Whether it is in the home, the public sector, business or the church, those who become great are the ones who serve. Yes, it’s a paradox, but it is the way to true greatness.

It is only a matter of time before those who *lord it over* will be deposed from their places of power. But those who serve will be honored by both God and man—and, no doubt, will be the ones who get to sit with Jesus.

There Was a Man Who Had Two Sons

“There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?” -Matthew 21:28-31

Here we have another example, unique to Matthew’s gospel, of Jesus reproving the Jews. Jesus has entered Jerusalem with Hosannas still ringing in the air. The entire city is *stirred* (21:10). Jesus stirs things up even more by going into the temple and overturning the tables of the money changers before healing the blind and the lame (v14). The chief priests and the elders of the people come to Jesus and ask by what authority he can just come into the temple and do these things. Operating in the gift of the word of wisdom, Jesus first asks what they think of the ministry of John the Baptist. They are left speechless so Jesus tells a parable that will be sure to get in their collective craw.

It’s a simple parable. You can read it above. In it, Jesus is comparing the chief priests and the elders to a son who gave lip service to the will of his father. The son honored the father with his lips, even calling him “sir,” but when it came to actually doing what the father wanted—no dice. But the other son, who at first had no intention of doing the bidding of the father but later repented and did it, is equated to, of all people, *the tax collectors and the prostitutes*. Jesus tells the religious elite—now get this—that the tax collectors and the prostitutes *“are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you”* (v31). If that ain’t enough to rile a religious spirit. . . .

It’s not about saying that you will do what God wants. It’s about whether you will actually do it.

The immediate target of the parable is the smugness of the Jewish priests and elders. But what is the application for us? Does it still apply? Yes. The parable means that it’s not about saying that you will do what God wants. It’s about whether you will actually do it. Of course, it is best to both say “yes” and do “yes.” There are scores of such noble responses in the Scriptures. But what is most important is not what you say about doing the will of God. What matters is whether you, like the prostitutes and the tax collectors who repented at the preaching of John the Baptist, end up doing the will of the Lord. And God is gracious. Just because you have refused him in the past doesn’t mean that you have necessarily forgone your opportunity to change your mind and obey. The “tax collectors and the prostitutes” are still entering the kingdom of God today, and, quite often, it is ahead of the religiously smug.

The Kingdom Will be Taken Away from You

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." -Matthew 21:43

There is an emphasis today in some significant segments of the church concerning the role of the Jews in the economy of the kingdom of God. I have observed certain Christian radio programs, para-church ministries, conferences and publications putting Jews and the modern nation of Israel in a special category of saving dispensation on par with the church. We are encouraged to "bless Israel" at the expense of Arab Christians (who happen to be our true brothers and sisters) and return to Old Testament and Jewish cultural traditions of celebrating the feasts, wearing prayer shawls, blowing the shofar, etc...as if these fading shadows could bring us light and anointing.

Some might say to me, "You don't believe in the 'replacement theory' do you—that the church has replaced the Jews as the people of God?" My answer is, "Who do you think Jesus was talking to in Matthew 21:43 if not the Jews? And who was he talking about if not the church?" If you want to find the kingdom of God at work today, where are you going to go, to the synagogue?

If you want to find the kingdom of God at work today, where are you going to go, to the synagogue?

Yes, Jesus was speaking directly to the chief priests and Pharisees when he said that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them. They were the ones who sat in the seat of Moses (see Matthew 23:2) as leaders of the entire nation. When Jesus cursed the fig tree (Matthew 21 & Mark 11) it was a sign that he was looking for fruit from Israel but found none. The fact that the Kingdom was to be taken from the Jews and given to another people did not mean that the Jews couldn't be part of that kingdom but that the kingdom was no longer in the stewardship of the people known as the Jews. It was now in the stewardship of the people called the church.

This truth is illustrated by the fact that the first apostles, who were all Jews, went out and preached that if the Jews were to be saved they had to believe in the Messiah. There would be no other way of salvation—even to the children of Abraham. The church was being established first by Jews, and then by the addition of others, making one new people who would bear the fruit of the kingdom.

What is God's plan for the Jews now? The same as it was on the day of Pentecost: To get them saved in Jesus so that they can have their distinctive part in his church and bear kingdom fruit as the people of God with the revelation of God as Father.

You Are in Error Because...

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." -Matthew 22:29

You might surmise that someone could be in error because they don't know the Scriptures, but do you realize that not knowing the power of God can cause you to be in error as well?

The Sadducees were the liberal theologians of their day. They denied the resurrection (see v23) and the existence of angels and demons (see Acts 23:8). In an attempt to vindicate their position that there is no life after death, they came to Jesus with a hypothetical situation. According to the Law, if a man died without children, his brother was to marry the widow and the first son born to them would carry on the line of the deceased brother (see Deuteronomy 25:5). So, the Sadducees postulated a case where seven brothers were all successively married to the same childless woman. "Whose wife will she be at the resurrection," they wanted to know, thinking that they had made quite a case against this resurrection thing.

If somebody says that they understand the Scriptures but they don't know anything about the power of God, don't believe them

Jesus' answer was blunt. He proved that they were wrong on this issue and then told them the underlying reason for their error: "You do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." The Sadducees didn't know what the Scriptures really said on the subject and they were unfamiliar with the very thing that makes the resurrection possible—the power of God.

Not knowing the power of God causes one to be in error because the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk or ideas or opinion, but it is a matter of power (see 1 Corinthians 4:20). If you don't know the power of God, you will never adequately understand the kingdom of God. The truths of the kingdom of God cannot be fully understood apart from knowing its power. The Sadducees knew nothing of the power of God. They denied the existence of angels, the resurrection and, no doubt, miracles. Their lack of personal and experiential knowledge of God's power led them into error.

There is nothing that will improve your theology like one authentic encounter with the living God. Knowledge of the Scriptures will lead to knowing the power that is spoken of there, and knowing the power of God will lead you to a more adequate understanding of the Scriptures.

There are many who claim to know the word of God but at the same time deny the power thereof—liberals and fundamentalists alike. So, if somebody says that they understand the Scriptures but they don't know anything about the power of God, don't believe them. They don't know what they are talking about.

But You Were Not Willing

How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. -Matthew 23:37-38

In the heart of most sincere Christians there are questions surrounding the issues of divine sovereignty and human free will. Does everything that happens occur because of divine orchestration, or are we sufficiently endowed with enough free will to affect the courses of our lives and the lives of others? God's sovereignty is a given, and yet what latitude does he choose to give us in regard to our moral agency?

As Jesus laments over Jerusalem and the unyielding hearts of the Jews, he makes it clear that the people of Jerusalem had a free will. Did God want them to come into Jesus' care and protection? Yes. Did they? No. Was it because God was not willing to have them or powerful enough to move them? No. They did not come for one reason and one reason only. They were not willing.

Those who stress the sovereignty of God are usually the same ones who deny the miraculous

I have noticed that those who stress the sovereignty of God over and against the principle of free will are more than usually the same ones who deny the miraculous and the ability to live above sin. It seems to me that a theology that insists on the divine orchestration of all events is either the source or the result of a less than victorious Christian experience. It could be the source because believing that everything is predestined paralyzes one's ability to have faith and to change circumstances. Whatever is happening must be God's will and there is nothing the Christian can or should do to attempt to change it. Or, it could be the result because a Christian may want or need to explain away their less than victorious life. "There doesn't seem to be any real power to change so we'll just chalk it up to God's will." Misinterpreting the truth about the sovereignty of God and his eternal purposes can lead to, and be a result of, a life outside the will of God.

Those who experience the miraculous, exercise the gifts of the Spirit, and who assert that the New Testament church is for today are rarely dyed-in-the-wool predestinationalists. They almost always are persons who have a view that God, in his sovereignty, has given us the ability to use reason, seek his kingdom, employ faith and exercise free will.

The people of Jerusalem had the opportunity to come under the care and protection of the Messiah, but they were not willing. As a result, their house would be laid waste by the Romans within a generation. Judgment is just only when there is the exercise of the will to choose. And the choice whether or not to follow the Messiah is the most consequential choice of all.

As Lightning That Comes from the East

So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. -Matthew 24:26-27

Singer/songwriter Bob Farrell was reflecting on a certain religious group that, a number of years ago, had taken out full-page ads in dozens of major newspapers declaring in large bold letters that, "THE CHRIST IS NOW HERE." Bob then referred to what Jesus said in Matthew 24:27 that if anyone says the Christ is here or there do not believe him because his return would be unmistakable. It would be like lightning that *comes from the east is visible even in the west*. Bob pointed out that when Jesus returns, he won't have to take out a full-page ad to let you know about it.

Jesus did, however, let us know that many false Christs would come claiming, "I am he" (Mk 13:6). But we shouldn't be deceived because when Jesus does return there will be no question about it. His clearly visible coming precludes the possible veracity of a claim that "The Christ is now here." But it also precludes the possibility of something else that many Christians believe to be true, something called the secret rapture.

When Jesus returns, he won't have to take out a full-page ad to let you know about it

The coming of the Son of Man is going to be as visible as lightning that flashes across the sky. This means that we shouldn't believe someone who says that he has already come, whether it is to set up camp on earth or to secretly whisk away the church. *The return of the Lord will be with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God (1 Th 4:16)*. Revelation 1:7 says, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him." Just because his coming is likened to a thief in the night (no one knows when he is coming) doesn't mean that he is coming to "steal" his church.

Does this mean that there will be no "rapture?" No—it means that there will be no secret rapture. Lightning from the east. The trumpet of God. Every eye will see. Doesn't sound like a covert operation to me.

When Jesus returns, you won't miss it any more than you could miss a bolt of lightning over your head. There will be nothing secret about it. The implication of this, of course, is that, contrary to the premise of the wildly popular "Left Behind" fiction series, any decisions for Christ must be made before his coming, because when he returns—that's it. You can't count on hanging around awhile after the Christians are taken because about three and half seconds after we are gone, judgment begins on the earth. And that will be no secret either.

A Long Time in Coming

The bridegroom was a long time in coming...After a long time the master of those servants returned -Matthew 25:5, 19

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells two parables that teach about his return. One was about an entourage of bridal attendants who went to meet the Bridegroom and the other about the Master who entrusted "talents" to his servants and went on a journey. In both cases, the persons who represent Jesus—the Bridegroom and the Master—were *a long time in coming*.

As we look through the centuries from our vantage point in history, it seems that, indeed, the return of Jesus has been a long time in coming. Many ask, sometimes sarcastically, *"Where is this 'coming' he promised?" "Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation"* (2 Pt 3:4). So we counter with biblical arguments that *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise...He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance"* (2 Pt 3:9), *"Behold, I am coming soon"* (Rev 22:12) and *"Keep watch because you do not know on what day your Lord will come"* (Mt 24:42).

Jesus wants to know, even if he is a long time coming, will we still be ready?

But didn't Jesus himself indicate in the two parables that his coming would indeed be *after a long time*? Yes, but even if Jesus intended to give us some literal sense of the length of our waiting, he spoke about his return being a long time in coming, not because he wanted to give us some time-line for his return, but, more importantly, to keep us from being lulled into a sense of non-expectancy.

At one point Jesus asked, *"When the Son of man comes will he find faith on the earth?"* (Lk 18:8). Jesus wants to know, even if he is a long time coming, whether we will be ready. Will we have our lamps continually filled with the oil of the Spirit, lacking nothing when he comes to get his bride? Will we be using the "talents" he has given us to faithfully carry out the work he has entrusted to us? Will we keep his coming in mind so that even if he is a long time coming we will not be ashamed at his appearing?

The Father has his reasons that Jesus has not yet returned—and many of us should be thankful. He is not willing that any perish but that everyone has a chance to come to repentance. The return of Christ has certainly been a long time in coming. But it is closer than ever and only a fool would take that as an excuse to be unprepared.

Just be ready.

But Not During the Feast

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people." -Matthew 26:3-5

Jesus Christ was *the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world* (Rev 13:8). This means that even before the world was brought into being, there was a time ordained, yes, even a day and an hour, when the Father would redeem the whole of mankind by the sacrifice of this one known as the Lamb of God. And what God ordains he orchestrates, despite any human intention to the contrary.

It was the Father's design that Jesus be sacrificed as the ultimate Passover lamb (see 1 Corinthians 5:7). Of course, this meant that he would be "offered up" during the Jewish feast of the Passover. The chief priests and the elders of the people didn't know it, but their evil intent to *arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him* was integral to the unfolding of the plan to bring redemption to the entire human race. Neither did they realize that the timing of what they were planning was not in their hands.

They may have surprised themselves by arresting Jesus during the Passover, but they didn't surprise Jesus.

The chief priests and the elders met together at the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, to conspire against Jesus. How they were going to arrest him, they didn't know, other than it had to be *in some sly way*. But one thing they were sure of: Jesus of Nazareth would not be arrested during the upcoming feast of the Jewish Passover. Two days from their meeting, there would be swarms of people everywhere, buzzing with heightened religious ardor. The chief priests and the elders had incredulously observed the sway that Jesus held over the masses. They were not about to chance a riot. That's why they were looking for some sly way to take Jesus into their custody. So, whatever way they would do that, one thing was for certain, it would not be during the feast.

But as you know, the chief priests and the elders ended up doing the very thing that they said that they wouldn't do. They may have surprised themselves by arresting Jesus during the Passover, but they didn't surprise Jesus. He knew all along. His destiny was in the hands of the Father and it was about to be fulfilled. He was the Passover lamb who would give his life as atonement for the sin of all the ages. His was a destiny that had been ordained from before time began and the exact time of his destiny had arrived.

It would, indeed, be during the feast.

May this Cup Be Taken from Me

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." -Matthew 26:39

The humanity of the Lord Jesus can be observed on different occasions, none more conspicuous than Gethsemane. Just two days earlier, Jesus said to his disciples, *"As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified"* (Mt 26:2). Jesus was well aware of this destiny, and now the hour had come. Was he ready? How ready can any person be for torture and excruciating death? But that was not all that Jesus was about to suffer. All the fury of hell was about to be unleashed on the one from heaven, made vulnerable as human. Could he literally bear the weight of the sin of the world? Could he endure the rejection and abandonment that he would experience from the Jews, his own disciples, and even God himself? Surely, he was in earnest when *he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."*

When our souls are troubled, even overwhelmed with sorrow, we can go to the place of prayer and find strength.

Did he really think that it would be possible? Probably not. But he wanted it to be possible—and he needed to go to the Father about it. He brought Peter, James and John with him saying, *"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death"* (v38). This was his hour of trial and he was really up against it. His soul was overwhelmed with sorrow. Is this not part of what it means to be human? Three times Jesus asked the Father if this cup of suffering could be taken from him, yet, each time also saying, *"Not as I will, but as you will."*

Jesus was not omniscient. He was submitted to and dependant on the direction of his Father. He knew how to pray—and now in the garden he was seeking the Father for guidance, comfort and strength. And when he was finished, he had all three. Despite the lack of support from the three disciples whom he had brought to the garden to *keep watch* with him, Jesus left the garden with what he needed to drink the cup that was his, and his only, to drink.

What does Jesus' example mean for us? First, we do not have a Savior who is *unable to sympathize with our weaknesses* (Heb 4:15). He has been there. He knows. Second, when our souls are troubled, even overwhelmed with sorrow, we can go to the place of prayer and find strength. Third, we can make all our requests known to God, yet, always praying, *"Not as I will, but as you will."*