

What Should We Do Then?

"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same...Don't collect any more [taxes] than you are required to...Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." -Luke 3:10-14

John the Baptist was preaching a message of repentance and it was touching hearts. In response, the people wanted to know what they should do. Even the tax collectors and the Roman soldiers were coming. They all asked the same question: *"What should we do?"*

Three times in five verses Luke records the question being asked: The crowd asked it, the tax collectors asked it, the Roman soldiers asked it. And all three times, John deals with the issue of materialism.

John tells the crowd that if they have two coats, they should share with somebody who doesn't have one—and to do the same with food. The tax collectors, to whom it was second nature to squeeze all the money they could out of their fellow countrymen, were told not to collect any more than they were required. And the Roman soldiers, who could easily use their power to extort money by threat of accusation, were told not to do it and be content with their pay.

John was no hypocrite. A guy who lives in the desert, wears camel hair and eats locusts could never be accused of serving mammon. Nothing, including money, held sway over the heart of the man that Jesus considered the greatest man ever born.

Salvation requires faith in Christ but repentance often requires a change of attitude about money. John knew that. For most of them, and most of us, attitudes toward money impede the entry and progress in the Kingdom of God. John had come to prepare the way for the Lord and the message of the kingdom. Hearts that were free from the love of money and people content with what they had would be more apt to respond to the gospel—the gospel that would make them truly rich.

John knew that if God can get a hold of your money, he can get a hold of you. Jesus said that the test for being able to handle "true riches" would be in the way that you would steward "worldly wealth" (Lk 16:11). When you come before the Lord and ask him what he wants you to do, there is a good chance he will do what he did with the rich young ruler and address what you should do with your money. After all, *where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Lk 12:34).

If God can get a hold of your money, he can get a hold of you

Do Not Put the Lord Your God to the Test

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully..." Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" -Luke 4:9-10, 12

There are times when God says, "Test me in this and see if I will not prove faithful," and there are times when he says, "Do not test me in this, for your testing is foolishness." How are we to know the difference?

Jesus was led by the Spirit to go to the desert to be tempted by the devil. Under normal circumstances, this would constitute a foolish test since we are to always pray that we would be kept from temptation (see Matthew 6:13). But in this case, it was the leading of the Spirit of God; Jesus was meant to have this power encounter with the devil. For forty long days he was tempted by the devil and at the end of it, Satan challenged Jesus to do three foolish things. The last thing the devil tempted Jesus to do was to throw himself off the highest point of the temple and have the angels rescue him on the way down. Jesus countered Satan with Scripture, saying *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test"* (see Deuteronomy 6:16).

The key difference between testing the Lord's promises and putting him to a foolish test is presumption

Satan wanted Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and presume that the angels would catch him. And here is the key difference between testing the Lord's promises and putting him to a foolish test: Presumption. To obey God is not presumption. Our regard for the fulfillment of any promise associated with obedience to a command of God is not presumption, but faith. When Jesus went into the desert to be tempted by the devil it was not presumption but obedience. If he had not been led of the Spirit, however, he would have been putting himself in a compromising situation of his own making—making it a foolish test.

Actions that are expressly contrary to Scripture are always a foolish test of the grace of God, i.e., becoming unequally yoked with an unbeliever. Common sense will dictate that certain actions constitute a foolish test unless one has clear and specific direction to the contrary, i.e., a former alcoholic going into the bar to hang out with friends. And, we often put the Lord to a foolish test when we try to rationalize a course of action that we desire but do not have confirmation from the Spirit of God.

The Lord will be faithful to come through for you as you respond to him in faith and obedience. But don't count on him to bail you out of a presumptive test of your own making. It does not honor him nor is he obligated in the least.

Today this Scripture Is Fulfilled in Your Hearing

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."-Luke 4:20-21

The signature scripture for the life and ministry of Jesus is Isaiah 61. Isaiah 53 describes the passion of his death and the substitutionary atonement that would be made for us as sinners, but it is Isaiah 61 that Jesus uses to describe and announce his ministry. And he does it in dramatic fashion.

Jesus returns to Nazareth, the town of his upbringing. He comes to the synagogue, the same synagogue that he has entered on a thousand previous Sabbaths. They know him here. He is Joseph and Mary's son. But, today, things are somehow different. A reputation that he has gained outside of Nazareth follows him into the synagogue on this particular Sabbath. They know him; but do they really know him? The scroll of the prophet Isaiah is handed to him. He is looking for a particular passage. He finds it and reads it.

It is, in fact, a very well known passage. It is about the ministry of the Messiah. He rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant and as was custom of the rabbis, he sits down to begin to teach. After the thousand times he has attended the synagogue, perhaps it is the first time he sits in the position as rabbi. As a boy, Jesus probably envisioned this day. Maybe others did too. All eyes are fixed on him now. This is the dramatic moment; but he's not about to play it safe. This will not be a nice little sermon that will please the people. His words overshoot their wildest expectations. He says, "*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*" And if this isn't enough to rock their boat, he offends them by intimating that they really don't have the chutzpah to recognize the truth that he really is the Messiah.

More often than not, when a political candidate plans to announce their candidacy they go to their hometown to do it. Whether they are met with scepticism or hearty support depends on how much the people believe, or want to believe, in their candidacy. In the case of Jesus announcing his claim to be Messiah, the people were dumbfounded. At first, *all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips* (v22). But could he really be a candidate for Messiah? Would they honour him as such? No—and Jesus knew it. But the announcement was made, and the messianic scripture which waited seven-hundred years for its fulfilment was realized in their little synagogue in their familiar but non-descript part of the world. And this is why we need ears to really hear—because who knows what things could be fulfilled in our own hearing?

They know him; but do

The Power of the Lord Was Present for Him

One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. - Luke 5:17

How do you understand those times when the power of the Lord is in our midst? I am talking about the manifest presence of God that carries with it the residual power to save, heal and deliver. If you have never experienced such a thing in church, in a small group or in a ministry setting, then you are running in the wrong circles. And yet, the people that I run with who have known this power will tell you that those times when the power of God is truly manifest are fewer and farther between that they would like and need.

There were times in Jesus' ministry when he could not perform many miracles (see Matthew 13:58). But in Luke 5 we find a situation where *the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick*. The power of the Lord was present. What do you make of that? What did that look like and is this phenomenon divinely transferable to our context? Note that it was the power of the Lord that enabled Jesus to heal the sick. It was something that was present and since it was present it was available. It was present for him to heal the sick. Because Jesus had emptied himself of his pre-incarnate deity, the power of God was no longer intrinsic or automatic to him. It is not that the word of Jesus ever failed to heal anyone. But he knew the parameters in which he worked. He was at the Father's beck and call and would only do that which he saw the Father doing. If the Father wasn't doing it, it wasn't going to get done. But for some reason, that day in Capernaum, the Father was doing a great deal. His power was present to heal the sick—so much so that the attendance of the unbelieving Pharisees and teachers of the Law didn't even matter.

When the power of the Lord is present, we are going to see a lot more people healed, saved and

Does all this mean that we just sit back and never try to plow through if we don't sense the presence and power of God in our ministry or our gatherings? Not necessarily. But remember, Moses refused to go anywhere without the presence of God and neither Jesus, the disciples nor Paul stayed very long in a place that would not receive them. All I am saying at this point is that when the power of the Lord is present, we are going to see a lot more people healed, saved and delivered (see 1 Corinthians 2:4-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:5). So when we minister or gather, we need to be looking for the power of God to be manifestly available for us to do what we need to do. How else can we expect the kingdom of God to come?

Whom He Also Designated Apostles

Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles... -Luke 6:12-13

There is a genuine impetus of the Spirit of God towards the restoration and recognition of the office of apostle in the modern church. That the office of apostle would have to be “restored” or, worse yet, “recognized” in the church is regrettable. That it is, is encouraging. Yet with that restoration and recognition of the office of apostle, we need to be careful to avoid the trap of seeking and using the title of “Apostle.”

Jesus went out to a mountainside one day and prayed there all night while his disciples (not just the twelve) waited for him. *When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.* Now picture that. It is almost like being chosen as a Miss America or American Idol finalist—well, not really, but you get my point. The twelve are set apart from the others and they are named as “apostles.” You can see how this could lead to pride on their part. Jesus warns them on another occasion not to be like the Pharisees who *love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’* He says, *“You are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers (Mt 23:7-8).* In the church, *God has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other (1 Co 12:24-25).*

Even though we should heartily receive, recognize and own every calling, gift and office designated by Christ, the New Testament church is to be devoid of titles. Why? Because Jesus said *we are all brothers.* There is empowerment in the designation, but pride in the title. Those with the designation already have the honour and need to lay the title down. Paul referred to himself as “Paul, an apostle,” but never as “Apostle Paul.” Was it “Pastor Timothy,” or “Prophet Agabus,” or “Evangelist Phillip,” or “Teacher Barnabas?” We may criticize the Old Line and Roman Churches for all of their titles but we are following the same course when we use such elevating and separating titles as “Doctor,” “Professor,” “Reverend,” “Apostle” or even “Pastor.” If biblical, the designation is healthy for the church—but the use of the title, most often, is not.

Unfortunately, because of the valid need to foster a paradigm shift in the church, the use of the term “Apostle So-and-so” will be on the rise. I wish it weren’t the case and that we could all address each other simply by the title used in the New Testament church—that of “Brother” or “Sister.”

There is empowerment in the designation, but pride

He Is Kind to the Ungrateful and Wicked

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. -Luke 6:35-36

It is not the most natural thing to be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. I don’t know about you, but I’d much rather not. It goes against my grain. Isn’t that I necessarily will treat with malice those whom I find to be “ungrateful” or “wicked.” However, as much as I try to refrain from doing that, I haven’t always been successful. Because I put a high value on “justice,” I have to overcome my inclination that it’s not right to treat the ungrateful and wicked with kindness because—well...they don’t deserve it.

Of course, Jesus often cut against the grain of our ever reasonable inclinations. He taught us to love our enemies. He said, *“If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that” (v33).* If we want to be different, if we want to show that we are children of the Most High, we are to love our enemies because God is *kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*

I think it is easier for me to love those who oppose me than to be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked—especially the ungrateful. I am not saying that it is easy to *love your enemies*, but since I consider it to be very big of me to love my enemies, I gain a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment by doing so. I don’t seem to gain as much by being kind to the ungrateful. In fact, I feel robbed if I am kind to someone who doesn’t appreciate it. If I do something nice or helpful for someone who does not express the least bit of thanks, I am apt to say, “Well, forget you.”

The ungrateful and the wicked don’t deserve kindness. And that is just the point. To love those who love you and to do good to those who will return the favor is no big deal. It becomes a big deal when you do good to those who don’t deserve it. Jesus said that there is a reward with that type of behavior. Why? Because then you are like God and you are doing something despite your natural inclination to do otherwise. Rewards rarely come by doing the easy thing.

Have I ever been wicked? Have I ever been ungrateful? Did God love me while I was yet a sinner? Did God give me justice—or was it mercy? *He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.* If we want to be considered his children, so must we.

The ungrateful and the wicked don’t deserve kindness. And that is just the point

Young Man, I Say to You, Get Up!

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. –Luke 7:14-15

The most difficult and dramatic of all healings is raising someone from the dead. Five times in the New Testament we see the dead raised: The son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7), the daughter of the synagogue ruler, Jairus (Matthew 9, Mark 5, Luke 8), Lazarus (John 11), Tabitha (Acts 9) and Eutychus (Acts 20). These and other New Testament miracles did not happen because someone asked God to do a miracle, they happened because someone exercised authority and spoke a command.

As Jesus approached the gate of a town called Nain, he had a large crowd following him. Coming out of the gate was another large crowd; the only son of a widow had died, and a funeral procession was coming out the gate to bury the young man outside the city. It's quite a scene. *When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."* Jesus approaches the coffin and stops the procession. Who in their wildest dreams could have imagined that Jesus would not only stop the procession, he would end the funeral. The widow's son comes to life when Jesus says, "*Young man, I say to you, get up!*"

The son of the widow of Nain is raised with the command, "*Young man, I say to you, get up!*" Jairus' daughter was raised when Jesus said, "*My child, get up*" (Lk 8:54). Lazarus was raised at Jesus' order to "*Come out*" (Jn 11:43). Tabitha is raised from the dead when Peter said, "*Tabitha, get up*" (Ac 9:40). In the case with Eutychus, we are not told what words precipitated his return to life.

Familiar biblical phrases like, "*Take your mat and go home*" (Mt 9:6), "*Be clean*" (Mt 8:3), "*Peace be still*" (Mk 4:39), "*In the name of Jesus, walk*" (Ac 3:6) and "*Jesus Christ heals you*" (Ac 9:34) point to the fact that virtually all New Testament healings were brought about by commands of faith that were spoken directly to the person or problem at hand. To lay hands on someone and say something like, "God, we pray that you heal this person" is a prayer of limited effectiveness. It doesn't carry the faith of a direct command that is inspired by the Spirit and uttered with heavenly authority. It may be a safe prayer and God will sometimes answer it. But it does not fit the New Testament pattern and is not the way that Jesus or the apostles operated. Why should we be any different?

Virtually all New Testament healings were brought about by commands of faith

By Persevering Produce a Crop

The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. –Luke 8:15

The parable of the sower appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but only Luke records the Lord telling us how to multiply the crop produced by the word of God: By persevering.

You probably know the story. A farmer's seed fell in four different places: The road, rocks, among thorns and on good soil. These places represent the state of the heart in which the word of God, the gospel, is sown. Only one of those places, of course, was able to produce a good crop. It was the soil of a *noble and good heart*.

The seed is the word of God (v11). The word of God, like the seed sown, requires two things to produce a good crop:

The word of God must have both time and condition to produce fruit in our lives.

Time and condition. The seed along the road did not even germinate; it had neither time nor condition. The seed on the rock didn't persevere; it had little time because of poor condition. The seed among the thorns didn't prevail; it had time, but inadequate condition. But the seed that fell on the good soil had a chance to produce because it had good condition and, given time and care, would grow and multiply.

The word of God must have both time and condition to produce fruit in our lives. It takes time to produce a crop. In due season we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Ga 6:9). If we guard the condition of our hearts like a farmer guards the condition of his fields we will reap a harvest of righteousness. It is the *noble and good heart* that is able to *retain* the word of God and, *by persevering*, produce the fruit of the kingdom of God.

Persistence is the key. Romans 2:7 says, "*To those who by persistence [same Greek word as "persevering"] in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.*" Calvin Coolidge said, "Nothing in the world can take the place of perseverance. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are most powerful."

The word of God is potent. It is meant to produce a crop of righteousness, peace, power and joy in the Holy Spirit (see Ro 14:17 & 1 Co 4:20). If the soil is right and the seed is attended to, it is only a matter of time before the crop comes in.

Whoever Has Will Be Given More

“Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.” -Luke 8:18

The question has been asked by those far more qualified to answer than I why the great experiments in radical socialism have failed. However attractive the figure of Robin Hood may be, a wholesale socialist approach to the distribution of wealth doesn't work. Further to that, and by way of explanation why it doesn't work, is the idea that socialism is not biblical. Some may counter that the early church in Jerusalem practiced a form of socialism. Fair enough, but what they practiced and what Jesus taught was different from modern socialism. Let me try to explain.

Jesus said, *“Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.”* This is a kingdom principle which cuts directly against the grain of twentieth-century socialism. Socialists would decry such a premise as the most outlandish of capitalistic demagoguery. Can you imagine? The rich get richer and the poor not only get poorer, the little they have is taken from them. How are we to understand these words of Jesus?

Socialism is not biblical

The context of these words in Luke does not help us much with their interpretation. In Matthew, however, these words are set in the context of the parable of the talents. Clearly, the principle there is that if you are faithful with what God has given you, you will be entrusted with more. Also, those who do not put what they have to work will be stripped of even the little that they have. So the kingdom of God, as well as his natural order, operates on the principle that those who gain will gain even more and those who don't will lose the little that they have. God will even take the one talent from the *wicked and lazy servant* (Mt 25:26) and give it to the one who already has an abundance. Why is that? Because he or she has already proven that they can be entrusted with it.

This principle obviously has a wider application than the making of money and the distribution of wealth, but it is relevant for the socialism question. The early church did not take from the rich and give to the poor. The rich gave from their hearts without compulsion. Those who could not work were taken care of. Those who could were expected to, or they did not get to eat (see 2 Thessalonians 3:10). Incentive to work was never lost for the rich or the poor—in fact, quite the opposite. As Winkie Pratney has pointed out, the reason for the failure of radical socialism is that the incentive to work was stolen from both the rich and the poor. God's principle of rewarded faithfulness was nullified, guaranteeing the failure of socialism.

Take Nothing for the Journey

He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: “Take nothing for the journey--no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic...” -Luke 9:2-3

Jesus had chosen his twelve and now it was time to send them out. They were to go from village to village and drive out demons, cure diseases, and preach the kingdom of God (see Luke 9:1-2, 6). But as they went, they were to *take nothing for the journey--no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic*. Talk about a stretch. Not only do they have this ponderous ministry assignment, they could take nothing along for their journey. Nothing. Nada. No travel bag. No cash or credit cards. Not even a piece of bread. Matthew's account adds Jesus saying: *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves”* (Mt 10:16). Now think about it. What shepherd would send his sheep out among wolves? That is lunacy. What was Jesus' point in sending out the twelve apostles in such a manner?

What shepherd would send his sheep out among

The point is that they would have no choice but to trust God. They would have to learn total dependence on the Lord. They would have no staff to lean on or to protect them from wild animals. The Lord would have to be their strength and protection. They would have no bag, no extra tunic and not even a little money to bring along. The Lord would be their provision. They were not to take any food. Just as he had done for the children of Israel, so he would give the disciples their daily bread. They were not to worry about their provision or protection. They would be completely dependant on the Lord and have no encumbrances in doing the will of God.

Very early in my Christian life, the Lord showed me that I could depend on him at all times to provide for my needs. Because I learned it early, I have never doubted his provision, nor have I lacked it. When Jesus later spoke to the twelve, just before going to the cross, he asked them, *“When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?”* *“Nothing,” they answered* (Lk 22:35). They had learned to depend on God, and since they had, Jesus now told them that they could take those things, and even a sword. The trust lesson had been learned.

Trust. If God is going to have his way in us then we have to learn it—and the earlier the better. I know of no better modern example of this trust than the story of Bruce Olson, recounted in the book, “Bruchko.” Jesus did not ease the twelve into ministry; he sent them out as sheep among wolves so that they could learn to trust in the presence of the shepherd. If this is so, should we expect to have all our provision accounted for before we go on our “journey?”

Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" -Luke 9:23-25

Jesus' invitation to follow him is not exactly a stroll through the park. It does lead to paradise—but by way of the cross.

Jesus told the twelve, "*The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life*" (v22). He then says, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*" In an article entitled, "The Old Cross and the New" A.W. Tozer observed that the cross could mean only one thing to the people of Jesus' culture: Death. Jesus was calling his disciples to follow him and die. That he would command them and us to do it daily means that he is talking about a death to self. To take up your cross does not mean to bear up under certain burdens that may come your way in life. What Jesus is really saying is that if you want to save your life you must lose it for his sake.

The cross could mean only one thing to the people of

Death to self is a voluntary. Like Jesus, we can choose to take the cross or leave it. He said, "*I lay down my life... of my own accord*" (Jn 10:17-18). It was no stroll in the park for Jesus either. It was a difficult choice—one that he made for you and me. It is one that we have the agency to make as well. And even though it's a hard choice and a difficult road, it is not a lonely one. When Jesus asks us to follow him, he invites us to do just that. He bids us come a way that he has already gone. It is a trail that he has already blazed. It is a road that, though narrow, has been traveled by multitudes of followers of the crucified Lord. Many have gone before us and even now go with us. Not the least of whom is the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Martin Luther would start every day on his knees, taking up his cross and offering himself up as a living sacrifice to Jesus. He showed that his death to self was not mere lip service when refused to recant his teaching at the threat of death by the papal authorities. There is really only one way to save your life and gain real life. That is to take up your cross daily and follow Jesus. Paul, who testified to dying every day (see 1 Corinthians 15:31), said it best, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Ga 2:20).

More Bearable on That Day for Sodom

It will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. -Luke 10:12-14

It is hard to imagine anyone being judged more strictly than Sodom. Fire and brimstone made its debut at Sodom. Of all the examples of godless, abominable sin in the chronicles of Scripture, there is none more notorious than what happened in Sodom (Genesis 19:1-29). And yet for those in Jesus' day who would not receive his ministry or the ministry of his disciples, Jesus said that the final judgment would be more bearable for Sodom than for them.

Jesus' statement raises a couple of questions about how the final judgment will be executed. First, how is it that Sodom will be judged again? Weren't they judged already? Yes, indeed. The entire plain of Sodom and Gomorrah was totally obliterated by burning sulfur which the Lord rained down from the sky. But God's judgments aren't limited to what we might experience in this life. Jesus said, "*A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned*" (Jn 5:28-29). As there is for all of us, there is another judgment awaiting the inhabitants of Sodom.

Second, does Jesus' statement indicate that there will be degrees of judgment? Evidently, but the degree of unbearableness may have more to do with the lost opportunity that the people of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum will realize on the day of judgment than any particular affliction that they might receive from the hand of the Lord. Jesus did refer to the idea of different degrees of final punishment depending on one's prior revelation of the will of God (see Luke 12:47-48), but I imagine the most agonizing part for those contemporaries of Jesus who have to stand before him on the great day of reckoning is the regret of not believing in him when they could have. How terribly ironic—and unbearable—that the one who stood before them in the very flesh as potential savior, they will have to stand before as their final judge.

We need to ask: What regret might we have that we did not recognize our own day of visitation? What repentance might the pagans have gained if they had been given the same opportunity that we rejected? And, how bearable will it be for us on that great day?

Are there degrees of

Mary Has Chosen What Is Better

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." -Luke 10:41-42

Much has been made of the difference between Martha and Mary. Most of the time when I hear teaching on the subject there are generous allowances made for Martha and her concern for the preparations that had to be made as she opened her home to Jesus and his disciples (most of these teachings come from pastors who need plenty of people like Martha to do the things that they want done in their churches). But even though Martha appealed to Jesus to make those same allowances, he did not. His commendation did not go to her for all that she was doing to serve, his commendation went to her sister, Mary, who neglected those preparations for something better. Who usually gets commended in our churches—the Martha's or the Mary's?

There was a higher calling, a better opportunity for her that day, and she missed it.

Of course, we can all relate to why Martha was perturbed. If you have ever been left to fix a meal or do the dishes while others went off to sit around and enjoy themselves, you know what Martha was feeling. Here she was trying to prepare a dinner for at least thirteen house guests and Mary couldn't care less. Mary just sits at Jesus' feet. Who knows how long it took, but Martha's frustration finally leads her to come to Jesus and say, *"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"* (V40).

You know, the funny thing is that the Lord actually didn't care. He was more pleased with Mary, who wanted to sit at his feet and learn, than with Martha, who went to the trouble to make him dinner. He would not go along with Martha's request for help. Mary's choice was better and Jesus would not take that away from her, though Martha would if she had her way. *"Only one thing is needed,"* Jesus said, and Mary was pursuing it.

Wasn't what Martha was doing, "needed?" What was this *one thing* that Jesus spoke of? Jesus taught us that the kingdom of God is paramount. Those who seek it first, please God the most. Jesus promised that if we do that, the Father would be sure to take care of all of our needs. *"Is life not more important than food,"* Jesus said (Mt 6:25). Martha was *"worried and upset about many things."* In so doing, she was neglecting the most important thing. Yes, people have to eat. Yes, to prepare meals is needed. But notice that Martha was *distracted by all the preparations* (v40). There was a higher calling, a better opportunity for her that day, and she missed it.

He Who Is Not with Me Is Against Me

"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters." -Luke 11:23

For those who know Jesus Christ, to be apathetic in allegiance to him or negligent in his work is equal to being aligned against him. The writer of Proverbs puts it this way: *One who is slack in his work is a brother to the one who destroys* (Pr 18:9). The Lord has a role for each of us to fulfill and a work for each of us to do in the kingdom. To not do it may mean that it won't get done, which, of course, is against the will of God and would be a help to the enemy.

If a member of a sports team, for instance, chooses to not fulfill their role or position, they will actually aid the opposing team and severely hurt the cause of the team to which they belong. The same is true for a police officer. Can you imagine the consequences if an officer did not fulfill his or her duty in a crisis situation? Or how about an emergency room staff person who walks off the job? These instances of neglect would be tantamount to aiding the forces that work to destroy. *Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and does not do it sins* (Jam 4:17). This is true not only because of disobedience, but because of consequence.

To be apathetic in allegiance to him is equal to

When Jesus' disciple, John, saw a man driving out demons in the name of the Lord, he tried to stop him because the man wasn't in the circle of the disciples. Jesus told John not to stop him, *"For anyone who is not against you is for you"* (Lk 9:50). Does this not contradict the statement, *"He who is not with me is against me?"* No. In the case of the man casting out the demon, the reference is about those who are not followers of Jesus. For those who are not part of the church, only those who are expressly opposed to us can impede the work of the kingdom. Those who are not against us can be seen as for us since they do not oppose us. It is different, however, for those who are part of the church. They are on the team and if they fail to do their part, they impede the advance of the kingdom of God. As a believer, if you are not actively with the Lord, he considers you at crosscurrents with his purposes. And if you are not actively gathering in his harvest field, as far as Jesus is concerned, you might as well be scattering because the harvest is not coming in.

To put it another way, imagine the council of hell evaluating what threat you pose to their objectives. Satan rises up and says, *"Don't worry about him because he who is not against us is for us."* So, it not only matters what side you are on but how active you are in doing your part. If you do not do your part you actually take a stand with the enemy and against the Lord.

Your Father Has Been Pleased to Give You the Kingdom

“...your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” -Luke 12:30-32

We know that we are to seek the kingdom of God first and foremost, but do we realize how much the Heavenly Father desires that we possess that kingdom? It is one thing to seek after something in the hands of one who is reluctant to give it. It is quite another if the One who possesses what we desire is more than willing to give it to us. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells us, “for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

Jesus was teaching his disciples about priorities. He told them not to worry about their lives—that is, their daily provision. The Father knows that we need to be fed and clothed, so we shouldn’t be frantic running after these things (like most of the world). If the Father takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field he will certainly take care of us. Our priority should be seeking the kingdom of God, for if we do, “These things will be given to you as well.”

Notice that Jesus says, “as well.” What will we be given “as well” as all these things? The kingdom. If we seek the kingdom, it will be given. Why? “For it is your Father’s good pleasure” (KJV). Every other time in the gospels this particular Greek word for “pleased” is found it is used to describe how the Father feels about the Son. “You are my Son, whom I love,” says the Father, “with you I am well pleased.” (Mk 1:11) “You are *the one I love, in whom I delight*” (Mt 12:18). Jesus knows firsthand the good pleasure of the Father and so when he tells us that the Father is pleased to give us the kingdom, he is communicating that it is a very special priority in the heart of the Father to do so.

So, what exactly is it that the Father wants to give us? What is the kingdom? Remember how Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come...” and “yours is the kingdom and the power...” (see Matthew 6:10, 13)? The kingdom of God is the realm of God’s authority and activity established in Christ. The giving of the kingdom is the conferring of heavenly citizenship and authority to those who live on the earth who are in Christ. It is the present reality of the rule and reign of God *in heaven and on earth and under the earth* (Php 2:10).

The Father is delighted to give us this kingdom. He desires that we live as citizens of heaven and walk in his authority. It is his good pleasure for us to possess the kingdom and all its benefits.

The giving of the kingdom is the conferring of heavenly citizenship and authority

You Also Must Be Ready

“Understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” -Luke 12:39-40

I heard an “expert” on Bible prophecy on Christian television say, “We know the Lord is not coming back tomorrow because the temple in Jerusalem has not been rebuilt and we know he will not come back until it is.” My question is, “Why be ready for his return if he is not returning?”

The core message of biblical teaching regarding the return of the Christ is, “Be ready.” In Luke 12 the message is “be dressed and ready for service” (v35), be “watching when he comes” (v37). Our responsibility is not so much to know the times and seasons (see Acts 1:7) but to be about the Father’s business when Jesus comes again. Chances are that Jesus won’t come back tomorrow, but that doesn’t mean he couldn’t. Chances are that you won’t die tomorrow either, but you could. But you *must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*

To be ready does not mean knowing when he is coming; it means being dressed and ready for

Why give assurance to people that Jesus won’t come back tomorrow when he taught us to be ready? All I could imagine as I listened to this brother on television was some precious soul with his eternal welfare hanging in the balance accepting the teacher’s word and deciding he doesn’t have to get serious about God until he sees the Islamic Dome of the Rock being torn down to make way for the Jerusalem temple. One of the best ways to evaluate any doctrine is to ask how it affects a person’s walk with Christ. Does it bring him or her closer to Christ or does it allow for distance and compromise? There is a lot of end-times teaching out there that does not help us to be ready for the coming of the Lord.

I am not saying that we should be ignorant about the Lord’s coming. We need to see the signs of which Jesus spoke and anticipate his return. We need to be *watching when he comes* (v37). But when the Son of Man comes, what will he be looking for? He will be looking for faithful servants who are about the Father’s business. To be ready does not mean knowing when he is coming; it means being *a faithful and wise manager whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time* (v42). It means being *dressed ready for service and [to] keep your lamps burning* (v35). Doing the work of the kingdom will prepare us for Christ’s return vastly more than reading “Left Behind.” This is how we will become truly ready for him who will come at an hour we do not expect.

Are Only a Few People Going to Be Saved?

Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to." -Luke 13:23-24

When someone asked Jesus a question, he would not always answer it directly; depending on what he discerned was behind the question. But when someone came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" he answered forthrightly and seriously. He said, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to."

An acquaintance who owned a funeral home asked if I would be available from time to time to conduct services for

clients who had no church connection. I agreed. My first contact was with a lady who had suddenly and unexpectedly lost her husband. The man was not in Christ, had no interest in the things of God and not a whole lot more in his family—only in his business. As I sat with the wife and her two sons, she cried and said, "I just need to know he is in heaven." As much as I would have liked to give her that assurance, I could not because I take seriously what Jesus said on the subject.

Most would like to believe and some would like to argue that everyone will be saved. "Universalists," who contend that God would not withhold eternal paradise from any of his creation, have been around for a long time. The question has been around for a long time. "Are only a few people going to be saved?"

In his answer to the question, Jesus indicates that many will try to enter and will not be able to. Why is that? Because once the door is closed it's too late to get in. Noah's ark is an illustration of this sober truth. Jesus tells those gathered there that they should *make every effort* to get in now, before it is too late. The door is narrow but that does not mean that it is inaccessible. *Whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life* (Rv 22:17). Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (Jn 6:37). The fact is that anyone who wants to, at this very moment, can enter through the narrow door—for Jesus is that door.

Are only a few people going to be saved? Relatively speaking, yes. *For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it* (Mt 7:13-14).

The door is narrow but that does not mean that it is

Do Not Take the Place of Honor

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited..." -Luke 14:7-8

Soon after I began pastoring, our church was to take part in a city-wide gathering of churches at one of the civic arenas. A pastor friend from one of the larger churches in the city had told me that the pastors were gathering one-half hour before the service and that we were all to sit on the platform. I arrived with someone from my church and, after finding where a delegation from our fellowship was sitting, I excused myself with a noticeable hint of immodesty announcing that I was to sit on the platform. As I approached the platform and the group of pastors who were gathered there, I noticed that there were but a few chairs on the platform, not nearly enough for the pastors of all the participating churches. I also noticed that the pastors who had gathered were exclusively from the larger churches in the city. Putting two and two together I returned to where our people were sitting and humbly asked if there might be place for me.

The place of honor is never for someone to take. It is

When Jesus was at the house of a prominent Pharisee, *he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table*. He told those gathered there a parable and in it he gave two exhortations. The first was something they shouldn't do and the second was something they should do. They were already guilty of the first. Jesus said that they should not take the place of honor when invited to a function. Why? Because they may be dishonored, even humiliated, in front of everyone if someone more distinguished is in attendance and they have to give up their "place of honor" to that person. The thing that Jesus said that they should do is to *take the lowest place* (v10). Then, if it is recognized that they deserve a more prominent place, they will be called forward and honored before those who have gathered. The place of honor is never for someone to take. It is always for others to give.

Having learned my lesson, recently I attended another multi-church function with another person from our church family. We took a seat at the back. As the service began, the man in charge came back and invited me to one of the front seats that had been reserved. I respectfully declined because I did not want to leave my friend alone. When he insisted that we both come, we gathered our belongings and were noticeably escorted to our seats, experiencing the truth of Jesus' words that *everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted* (v11).

Quick! Bring the Best Robe and Put it on Him

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him...’” -Luke 15:21-22

Luke 15 contains three parables that give us insight into the heart of Father God concerning those who are “lost.” Jesus told these parables in response to the muttering of the Pharisees and teachers of the law who said about Jesus, *“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”* (v2). The first parable was about the value of a lost sheep. The second was about the value of a lost coin. And the third, about the value of a lost son. As Malcolm Smith has pointed out, if something is lost, it must be valuable, otherwise it wouldn’t matter that it is missing. To the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, it obviously didn’t matter that the “sinners” whom Jesus welcomed and with whom he ate were “lost.” But to a shepherd who loses his sheep, a woman who loses her money and a father who loses his son, the return of that which is lost would be very important.

There is immediate action on his part to take away the guilt of his son who is clearly repentant

The picture of the lost son is a picture of someone who is lost in sin. Demanding his inheritance and going off to a distant country, he *squandered his wealth in wild living*. When famine hit the land, he found himself in a pigsty longing to eat the pig food. The pigsty is a great place to come to your senses. He came to a realization of his sin. He would return to his father saying, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men”* (Vs18-19).

Returning to the father, he begins to make his confession, but the father will not make him grovel. There is urgency in the father’s voice as he says to his servants. *“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him...”* There is obvious joy for the father in the return of his lost son, but there is also immediate action on his part to take away the guilt of his son who is clearly repentant. The father desires the son to know his love and forgiveness, and know it quickly. Without delay, he wants this “prodigal” to be restored, clothed and honored as a son—not just a hired hand.

In our own repentance, the devil would want to put shame on us and keep it there. We are sometimes reluctant to receive forgiveness and restoration because we know we don’t deserve it. Would such a son in Jesus’ parable deserve forgiveness? No. But that the father would give it, and oh so quickly, shows the heart of our merciful God.

What is Highly Valued Among Men

“You cannot serve both God and Money.” The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.” -Luke 16:13-15

What impresses the people of the world is not likely to bring favor with God. In fact, according to Jesus, *“What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.”* To be justified in the sight of men is a trap. Instead, we should do as Paul advised and *find out what pleases the Lord* (Eph 5:10).

When we think about the Pharisees, we think about many undesirable things: Relentless hypocrisy, strident legalism, condescending pride. Add to these something else that carried disfavor with

The things that impress the world are hardly the things that impress heaven

God: The love of money. The Pharisees were under the guise of living for God but their motivation was really to impress others. They were able to justify their love of money because money means prestige. They cared more about what others thought than what God thought—that is what made them hypocrites. The Pharisees were far less different from the world than they claimed. They valued what impressed people rather than God, and the things that impress the world are hardly the things that impress heaven. In fact, *what is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.*

Anything that is valued more highly than God is idolatry, and I think you know how God feels about idolatry. Money, status, power and fame are some examples of things that are highly valued in this world. These, for the most part, are detestable to God, because, for the most part, they are idols. Jesus said, *“You cannot serve both God and Money.”* The actions of the Pharisees were especially detestable because they claimed to serve God but their hearts were full greed and self-indulgence (see Matthew 23:25). Money, status, power and fame held sway over their lives.

It is possible, albeit improbable, to have these things and still be pleasing to God. You can be entrusted with money, status, power and fame as long as you don’t put your trust in them and as long as you prove faithful in handling them in the fear of God (see 1 Timothy 6:17). There do happen to be some things, like faithfulness in marriage, honesty and diligent work, which are esteemed by both God and men, but be careful about running after what impresses others. Most of what the world values is detestable in God’s sight.

Would He Thank the Servant?

"Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" -Luke 17:7-10

When we come to our heavenly reward and are greeted by the Lord himself, many can expect to hear the words, *"Well done, good and faithful servant"* (Mt 25:21) but none will hear the words "thank you." Search the Scriptures and see if you are able to find any instance where God said, "Thanks" to anyone. Did God thank Moses for leading his people out of captivity? Did he thank Jeremiah for faithfully delivering his word to a stiff-necked people? How about Mary for bearing the Christ child or John the Baptist for preparing the way for Jesus? Did Jesus thank the seventy-two for going out and preaching the kingdom of God? Did Paul ever hear the words "thank you" from the Lord? How about you? Did the Lord ever say, "Thank you, Joe, for obeying my word?"

See if you are able to find any instance where God said, "Thanks" to anyone

If someone asks you to do something and you do it, you rightfully can expect a "thank you" in return. And if you choose not to do it you can say "no" without fear of recrimination. Dealing with God is different. Even though we have a choice to obey or disobey when God communicates his will, God is God, and does not ask us to do anything. He tells us, often lovingly, what he expects and then the choice is ours. The reason God has never said, "Thank you" is because he has never been in a position where he needed to ask anyone to do anything. But he is certainly in a position to require obedience and reward the faithfulness of those who choose to obey.

Parents do their children a disservice by saying "please" and "thank you" when it comes to duties that the children know that they are required to do. "Good job, son," is very appropriate to say to build character and confidence, but when a child knows it is his or her job to pick up their toys, "please" and "thank you" give them the impression that they are doing the parent a favor when they really need to be learning obedience. Of course there are times when we ask our children for favors they are not required to do and should thank them when they respond.

Just because there are many servants in the household of God who are not faithful, we should not expect the Master to think that we are doing him a favor when we obey. When we have done everything we were told to do we should say, as Jesus taught us, *"We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."*

We Have Left All We Had to Follow You

Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." -Luke 18:28-30

Jesus has just had his encounter with the rich young ruler who declined to heed, at least temporarily, Jesus' specific requirement that he sell every thing that he had and give to the poor. In reflection, Jesus declares how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Watching and listening to all this is Peter. Seeing the unwillingness of the rich young ruler to go all the way with Jesus and hearing from the Lord how material things are a stumbling block to entrance into the kingdom, Peter makes an observation about the experience of the disciples: *"We have left all we had to follow you!"*

I don't always think about the sacrifice that the apostles made when they took up the call to follow Jesus. Houses, families, careers, and dreams were all forsaken to follow Jesus. Think about it; jobs, family, friends—the things most dear in life—left behind for the privilege of following Jesus. Jesus talked about counting the cost of following him (see Luke 14:25-33) and the apostles certainly did.

The apostles left all they had to follow Jesus. When it was all said and done, do you think that they

Jump ahead with me to the day Pentecost. Could it be that the reason that those gathered in the upper room were chosen and able to receive power from on high was that they had counted the cost and abandoned all to follow Jesus? Could it be that they were ready to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus because they had already made the choice to be free from their own desires and be sold out for the kingdom of God?

If Jesus calls us to follow him, what does that mean in practical terms? Jill Briscoe, author and conference speaker, tells the story of her hospital roommate who led her to Jesus. This woman told her that to follow Jesus meant she could marry a Christian only and since, by her estimation, there were not many truly Christian men in town, Jill should accept the probability that she would never marry if she became a Christian. She prayed to receive Jesus, fully convinced that she would never get married. She was, in a very real sense, forsaking all for Jesus.

The apostles left all they had to follow Jesus. When it was all said and done, do you think that they regretted it? Not if Jesus words were true. They would *receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.*

Your Faith Has Healed You

"Lord, I want to see," he replied. Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight... -Luke 18:41-43

You cannot discount the role of faith. *Without faith it is impossible to please God* (Heb 11:6). Without faith it is also impossible to be saved. And without faith, it is unlikely that you will be healed.

In Luke 18, the blind man, identified in Mark's gospel as Bartimaeus, calls out to Jesus for mercy. Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" (v41). "Lord, I want to see," is his reply, to which Jesus says, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God.

How many times is it recorded in the gospels that Jesus attributed someone's healing to the exercise of faith? Well, let's see: The centurion's servant (Mt 8; Lk 7), the paralytic let down through the roof (Mt 9; Mk 2; Lk 5), the woman with the issue of blood (Mt 9; Mk 5; Lk 8), the blind man/men by the side of the road (Mt 9; Mk 10; Lk 18), the demonized daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mt 15), and the Samaritan leper (Lk 17). All were said to be healed because of their own or someone else's faith. And don't think that because John's gospel is absent from this list that faith is not an important component of Jesus' teaching there. The Greek word for faith is found seventy-five times in John, more than all the other gospels combined.

The subject of healing faith has polarized some camps within the church. Some won't make any attempt at exercising faith for healing and others eat, breath and sleep faith. Some are afraid to speak of the importance of faith in healing for fear of being insensitive to those who have not been healed or who have lost loved ones to sickness and disease. But Jesus is clear about the efficacy of faith. He even went so far on a number of occasions to directly attribute healing to faith. As he said to the blind man, "Your faith has healed you." Implicit in healing faith is the object of that faith—Jesus—but it is faith itself which is the conduit of the healing.

Is this to say that if the blind man didn't have faith that he wouldn't have been healed? Yes. Is this to say that everyone who is healed is healed through the currency of faith? No, not everyone—but it is the rare exception who isn't. Is this to say that everyone who has faith will be healed and all those who are not healed have unbelief? No. But we can't discount the role of faith to account for the circumstances that we don't understand. Faith healed the blind man. How can we be healed, or saved, without it?

Implicit in healing faith is the object of that faith—Jesus—but it is faith itself which is the conduit

Everyone Who Falls on That Stone Will Be Broken to Pieces

Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." -Luke 20:17-18

Jesus has just told a sobering parable to those gathered at the temple courts. In it, he conveys that the teachers of the law and the chief priests are the rebellious and unfaithful tenants in charge of the vineyard of God. Jesus says that, ultimately, these keepers of the vineyard will be done away with for their rebellion and unfaithfulness; their responsibilities will be given over to others. The crowd gathered at the temple is stunned by the prospect. "May this never be!" they say (v16). Jesus is serious. He *looked directly at them*. "Then what is the meaning of that which is written?" he asks. Then, changing the analogy, he quotes from Psalm 118:22: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone?"

Being crushed would be bad, but being broken would be good

Jesus, of course, equates himself with this stone that the builders—the chief priests and the teachers of the law—have rejected. And this stone has become the head of the corner on which the house of God and its covenant will be measured and on which it will rest. To underscore the absolute eminence of that stone, Jesus says, "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

The Bible commentators that I checked say that Jesus' statement depicts the harm that would come to people who would reject him. Whether they stumble over the rock and are broken to pieces or the rock falls on them and they are crushed, either way they pay the price for rejecting the Lord. According to their interpretation, Jesus is either a stumbling block to those who would not believe in him, or a destructive force to those who would oppose him.

There is something about Jesus' statement, however, which begs for another interpretation. The two statements are joined by the conjunction, "but." "But" always indicates a contrast. The contrast could be in degree, as has been already noted, or in converse, which would mean that instead of both statements reflecting something bad, one would be bad and the other good. In this case, being crushed would be bad, but being broken would be good. The pervasive authority of Christ as creator and eternal judge of all mankind is such that, 1) To try to avoid an encounter with him will be futile and you will just end up being "crushed" by the weight of that authority or, 2) A genuine encounter with the Son of God cannot help but break you of everything the self holds dear and bring you into true submission to his will.

Beautiful Stones and Gifts Dedicated to God

Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down." -Luke 21:5-6

I decided that I wanted to spend some time with a couple of the young guys from the church so I picked them up and we went for a drive. As we were cruising through the downtown core of our city, one of the guys remarked about the unique design and aesthetic appeal of one of the office towers (ok, what he really said was "Hey, what a cool building"). I too was impressed, but being reminded of the biblical doctrine of the return of Jesus and the "day of the Lord," I said, "All this is going to be toast someday. It's all going up in smoke and that'll be it." Obviously, the concept was not something on which they meditated regularly (youth are apt to think of their existence as indefinite). They were startled by the idea. Here we were enjoying the scenery on a nice Saturday afternoon and I am talking about the looming destruction of what we see.

Perhaps the disciples were taken aback at Jesus' response as they were admiring the grandeur of

Perhaps the disciples were taken aback at Jesus' response as they were admiring the grandeur of the temple with its beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. The temple was an impressive place. Known as "Herod's Temple," it took forty-six years (see John 2:20) to complete. According to the NIV Bible Dictionary, the building was made of white marble with its eastern front covered with plates of gold that reflected the rays of the rising sun. "Hey, what a cool building" would probably have been an understatement. Jesus wasn't as impressed as his disciples with the *beautiful stones and...gifts dedicated to God*. He responded by saying, "*As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.*"

I see a couple of lessons here. The first is that the things we see are temporary (see 2 Co 4:18). *Heaven and earth will pass away* (Mt 24:35). That being the case, should you not *set your minds on things above* (Col 3:2) instead of earthly things? The second lesson is that the things that impress people are not necessarily the things which impress God. Being in the temple, they had just witnessed the widow who had given her last two "mites." Jesus was much more impressed with that than the beautiful stones and all the gifts which made up the temple structure. Within a generation God's judgment would come and the temple would no longer impress anyone.

I Will Give You Words and Wisdom

Make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. -Luke 21:15-16

Have you ever been put in a situation where God gave you words and wisdom in the face of adversaries who were not able to resist or contradict what you had to say? My guess is that most of us would say "rarely" or "never." The occasions to need such utterance and the faith to receive it have not often found its way into the realm of our experience.

A look through the pages of the New Testament, however, will uncover many examples how this might work. Jesus certainly found himself in many hostile situations. He didn't get into yelling matches pitting carnal wit for carnal wit. He was given wisdom that saw through hypocrisy and impure motives and words that cut to the far reaches of the quick, revealing the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Jesus foresaw the great need for the disciples to receive such words and wisdom from heaven. He was warning them that they would be persecuted, apprehended and delivered to authorities who would be hostile to his name and kingdom. The disciples would be hated by everybody—even betrayed by family and friends. They would be brought into situations in which they would have to give an account of their faith in Christ. Jesus, having experienced what it was like to face hostile detractors and knowing that he was about to face his murderers, assured them not to worry about what they would say in those situations. In fact, he told them, "*Make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves.*"

Notice how Jesus assures them that he would be the one to give them the words and wisdom that they would need. Time and time again, the disciples had witnessed the words and wisdom that Jesus had been given in the face of opposition. Now it would be Jesus himself giving them the words and wisdom that they would need to face their own set of antagonists.

The more we are like Jesus, the greater the chance we will face hostility and persecutions. Even in the relatively minor inquisitions that I have had in the face of my detractors, I have found that things worked well by not getting uptight and worried about what to say. Somehow, the words and wisdom were there for me. But that shouldn't be surprising. It's the very thing that Jesus promised would happen.

Jesus foresaw the great need for the disciples to receive such words and wisdom from heaven

Then Satan Entered Judas

Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. -Luke 22:3-4

If you were a filmmaker and were given the task of portraying a scene where Satan entered into a person, how would you depict it? The first inclination would be to show a dramatic and extremely ugly transformation of the person's countenance and appearance—like Dr. Jekyll turning into Mr. Hyde. But that might not necessarily be the case when Satan “enters” into a person and takes control.

Jesus spoke of Judas Iscariot as *the son of perdition* (Jn 17:12 KJV) and *a devil* (Jn 6:70). I'm not sure that this was readily discernable to the rest of the disciples but, of course, Jesus knew that Judas was under the influence of Satan. So when *the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching...the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus...Then Satan entered Judas...And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus* (Lk 22:1-4).

It would be very possible for us to encounter a man or woman filled with Satan himself, and not know it.

When I think about Judas making his way to the temple to discuss the proposition of the betrayal of Jesus, I don't have the picture of a stark raving Mr. Hyde. And unless you had spiritual discernment, if Judas happened to pass you on the street you might not recognize him as a man whom Satan had just entered. Yes, the Gadarene demoniac was easily recognized as possessed by devils, but when Satan entered Judas, he was intent on travelling incognito in order to accomplish his hellish purpose.

That Satan gained entrance into Judas' life is for many who read the Scriptures an isolated phenomenon far removed from any relatable experience. In one way, this must be so, for if it was Satan himself who entered into Judas, he can only be at one place at one time. Most of us cannot report an incident where we encountered Satan face to face but ironically and insidiously, it would be very possible for us to encounter a man or woman filled with Satan himself, and not know it.

It is possible for Satan, and more commonly, his underlings, to gain entrance into a person's life—yes, even a Christian's life. If and when this happens, it may not be readily discernable in the natural. No doubt, some demons like to go around as Mr. Hyde but others may be very content to take the form of Dr. Jekyll.

Am I Leading a Rebellion?

Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me.” -Luke 22:52-53

When the delegation sent by the Jewish authority came to arrest Jesus, they came with clubs and swords. They were ready for a fight but, despite Peter's impetuosity, they would not get one. “*Am I leading a rebellion,*” Jesus asked, “*that you have come with swords and clubs?*” No, he was not organizing a rebellion nor was he hiding out: “*Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me.*”

The chief priests and the teachers of the law were the *council of the elders of the people* (Lk 22:66). They carried the authority in the religious affairs of Israel. In their estimation, Jesus of Nazareth was a subversive threat to their jurisdiction and they planned the most extreme measures to deal with him. But they feared the popularity of Jesus so they came by cover of night to arrest him, condemn him and bring him before the governing Roman authority for a sentence of death. In all of this we see various kinds and levels of authority but neither the council of the elders of the people nor the Roman governor realized that when they were dealing with Jesus, they were dealing with an authority higher than their own. And still, Jesus would not rebel against the earthly authority they carried nor would he incite his followers to do so.

If Jesus wanted to start an uprising, he certainly

God hates rebellion. He says it *is like the sin of witchcraft* (1 Sa 15:23 KJV). We are instructed to submit to the governing authorities (see Romans 13:1-7) because all authority ultimately comes from God—as Jesus said to Pilate (see John 19:11). Not all governing authorities are righteous and we should respectfully disobey them if what they require would be a rebellion against God, but the God-ordained purpose of governing authority is to keep order in society. To rebel against authority is to rebel against God. And as the apostles and Martin Luther King Jr. showed us, there is a difference between outright rebellion and disobedience for the sake of conscience.

If Jesus wanted to start an uprising, he certainly could have. Many times he had to quell such rumblings from his followers. He was leading a revolution, but not a rebellion. And because *he humbled himself and became obedient, all authority in heaven and in earth and the name that is above every name* has been given to him (Php 2:8-9; Mt 28:18).

Their Words Seemed to Them Like Nonsense

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. -Luke 24:9-11

Just because something seems like nonsense doesn't mean that it is. Truth is sometimes mistaken for foolishness. What one might consider an idle tale or fabricated story can be the very truth that has the power to affect destiny. Such was the first report of Jesus' rising from the dead.

This report was carried by a group of women who had been very loyal and attached to Jesus. Having traveled with him from Galilee and even supporting him through their own means (see Luke 8:3), they were intent on making sure that the crucified Lord had a proper burial. This meant anointing the body with spices and perfumes. Since there had not been time to do it immediately following his death because of the arrival of the Sabbath, they had come very early in the morning on the third day to do it. But as you know, when they arrived they found an empty tomb and angels announcing that Jesus was risen.

This would be the first of countless times in history that the good news about the resurrection would be

Imagine their excitement as they returned with the news to tell the eleven. *But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.* This would be the first of countless times in history that the good news about the resurrection would be met with skepticism: Stone rolled away; missing body; two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning. Nonsense.

Of all people who should have believed, it was the apostles. But for some reason they couldn't make sense of the report. Maybe the impact of the crucifixion was still too painful to let them believe that the resurrection was real. Maybe the credibility of the women was called into question because of their excitement and bewilderment at their discovery of the empty tomb and encounter with angels. Or perhaps they were trusting too much in their own senses to believe what the women had actually witnessed with theirs.

When something doesn't make sense it doesn't necessarily mean it is nonsense. As incredible as their testimony sounded, it was the truth. There are many today who can't or won't believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ or the truth of the gospel. It doesn't make sense to them so they consider it nonsense. But remember, that's what most people thought when it was first proposed that the earth was round.

Then He Opened Their Minds

"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. -Luke 24:44-45

Scriptural understanding does not come just through study. Yes, you must *study to show yourself approved...* (2 Tim 2:15 KJV) but study alone will not guarantee your grasp of the Spirit-inspired Scriptures. Keep in mind that he cults "study" and the Pharisees had the thing memorized. When Jesus appeared to his disciples the evening of resurrection day, he wanted them to understand all that had taken place. As he spoke to them, he didn't just explain the truth; *he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.* Lest you think that you can get by without a similar experience, consider the following:

-The minds that were being opened that day were not of some cult members. They were of those Jesus had designated apostles and who were with him for more than three years to learn by word and example. If they needed their minds open by Jesus, we do too.

Make sure that doctrinal assumptions, religious traditions or current winds do not cloud your mind

-It is the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. Spiritual things are not naturally discerned. Never were; never will be (see John 16:13 and 1 Corinthians 2:14).

-There is an incredible amount of doctrinal difference among Christians, not to mention all the groups that claim to believe the Bible. The fact that so many differ is not an indication that scriptural truth is relative but that somebody out there isn't getting it right. That somebody could be us.

We have to remain humble when it comes to our theological constructs. Chances are that everybody is wrong about something. God wants to fill us with the true knowledge of his will and of his word, but in his sovereignty and our humanity it's hard to imagine anyone in the world who sees clearly on every point of Scripture and doctrine. No one approaches the Bible from a purely objective vantage point. That there would be persons, much less groups that have complete light to understand the entirety of Scripture is hardly conceivable.

The key to having your mind opened to understand the Scriptures is to make sure that doctrinal assumptions, religious traditions or current winds do not cloud your mind. Pray for the Lord's enlightenment as you study and meditate. Only he can reveal the true meaning as it relates to the rest of his word because only the mind of Christ can correctly reveal, interpret and handle the word of truth.

Among You Stands One You Do Not Know

Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." -John 1:24-27

John the Baptist was sent as a forerunner of Jesus to *make straight the way of the Lord* (Jn 1:23). Many were speculating that he was the Christ. The Jews in Jerusalem sent a delegation to John to ask him who he claimed to be. He told them plainly, "*I am not the Christ*" (v20). They wanted him to say more about himself, but he was preoccupied with another mission: to testify about the one who really was the Christ. When asked why he baptized people he said, "*I baptize with water, "...but among you stands one you do not know."*

How ironic and sad that Jesus could stand among them—and us—and not be recognized

When John said this to the Pharisees, he was not saying it as a condemnation of their unbelief—at least not yet. John had been sent to identify the one who had not yet been identified. But John would know him when he saw him. God told him, "*The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit*" (v33). Those who were truly repentant would recognize him as well, for John said, "*The reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel*" (v31).

The time was very near for Jesus to be revealed, but there still would be many who would not recognize him. *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him* (vs 10-11). Jesus was "standing among" them and his unveiling was near but when it happened could it still be said, "*Among you stands one you do not know?*"

Most of the Pharisees never would recognize him. Their hearts were hard and their minds were blinded. Jesus certainly did not meet their expectation of what Messiah should be. But he would not only stand among them, he would give them signs—the greatest of which would be to come out of the grave. But they would still be clueless concerning his identity.

How ironic and sad that Jesus could stand among them—and us—and not be recognized. It happens all the time—and is the essence of the "unforgivable sin." The Pharisees' downfall was that they did not recognize the time of their visitation (see Luke 19:44). Are we sure that we would recognize ours?