

Courageous Faith: Standing Strong in Society

Matthew John Silverman's Reflections on
Navigating Relationships and Society in Faith

Part Three of a Three-Part Series of Christian Sermons and Devotions

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to our sweet and brilliant Matthew John Silverman, with our undying love

From Lara Silverman, your beloved wife, and Joel Silverman and Anna Silverman, your loving and devoted parents

FOREWORD

This book contains Part Three of the beautiful Christian writings of our beloved Matthew Silverman, whose dedication to the Lord and the church shone brightly in all he did. “Part Three” focuses on how Christians should navigate relationships and societal issues on the Christian Walk. Despite facing cancer twice in his life, Matthew stayed grounded in Christ, and provided thoughtful insights into how Christians should live in this world and trust in God’s love and sovereignty in all circumstances, even when placed right in the center of the fiery furnace of suffering.

We encourage you to consider, meditate, and pray over the Biblical wisdom and principles in these works. Matthew’s greatest hope was that these Christian sermons and devotions would bring the listener or reader into a closer, life-giving relationship with the risen Christ. May God bless Matt’s extraordinary legacy through these writings and powerfully impact many lives while advancing God’s Kingdom.

**Matthew’s sermons and devotions listed in this volume are not in chronological order. Some were written before his second cancer, and some during. Where the original date of writing is known, it is included.*

****Special thanks to our loving friends and family, including Ann Karagozian Sarafian, Caroline Sagherian, Sona Bekmezian, Lisa Woolery and Joey Sarafian for invaluable assistance in the final round of the editing process of Matthew’s many works.*

LIFE BIOGRAPHY:

MATTHEW JOHN SILVERMAN'S LIFE AND CHRISTIAN WORK

Matthew John Silverman, a faithful servant of the Lord whose Christian impact was manifested in Armenian Evangelical churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, at Camp Arev, and in missions work in Haiti and Vietnam, passed away at the age of forty on June 10, 2024, after a three-year battle with intestinal cancer.

Matt was born in Mountain View, California, on October 16, 1983, to parents Joel and Anna (Sarafian) Silverman. He was the oldest of three children in the family, which grew to include brother Jeffrey and sister Lauren. Matt was a light in the eyes of his grandmother, Arshalous Sarafian, grandparents Millie and Herman Silverman, and godparents Arpi and George Banerian. Matt attended Bubbs Elementary School, Graham Middle School, and Mountain View High School. He was an exceptional student, excelling in math and science in particular.

As a freshman in high school, Matt was diagnosed with stage 4 non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. He underwent a year of chemotherapy while still attending classes, not willing to give up any of his advanced placement courses. Members of his grandmother Arshalous's church, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church, prayed faithfully for his healing. After a year of surgeries, chemo, and great pain, Matt was said to be cured of this cancer. He excelled in his high school classes, played the flute in the marching band, and even achieved the Eagle Scout rank. He was an amazingly gifted and resilient young man.

Matt began college at UCLA in 2002, majoring in Chemical Engineering and playing flute in the UCLA Marching Band. He began attending the United Armenian Congregational Church (UACC) with his Sarafian cousins and soon participated regularly in Bible Studies and youth activities. Matt was not shy about asking tough questions and delving deeply into Scripture. While his intellectual knowledge of Scripture grew, Matt realized during his second year of college at a Camp Arev retreat that "any plan God had for my life would be a better plan than anything I could come up with on my own, and it was time to face the reality that this God was real and was in control." Then and there, Matt accepted Jesus as his Savior and prayed a prayer of faith.

As Matt later shared in his testimony, everything changed from that moment on. While he continued to pursue his education at UCLA, doing well and eventually earning B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, his real focus was on serving the Lord and sharing the Gospel. He joined Christian groups at UCLA, primarily Chi Alpha, a missions-oriented ministry. At UACC, Matt began teaching Sunday School with his cousin, Joey Sarafian, and was elected to the church's Board of Christian Education. He led an after-school tutoring

program at UACC, outreach activities to serve the homeless on Skid Row, and Christian revival events.

Faithfully, Matt served as a counselor at Camp Arev each summer and winter for over fifteen years. His fruitful ministry in Los Angeles reached countless children and young adults for the Lord. His ministry with Chi Alpha led to his taking numerous mission trips to poverty-stricken Haiti and Vietnam, where he regularly preached to hundreds of people while helping to meet their physical needs.

Matt received his Ph.D. in 2014, publishing his dissertation on PET imaging to detect pancreatic cancer. He returned to the Bay Area and was hired at San Francisco State University to teach Clinical Laboratory Science in the Medical Diagnostics graduate program. He helped train hundreds of graduates working in hospitals all over California. His many gifts in teaching were appreciated by countless students and colleagues over the years.

Upon his return to the Bay Area, Matt joined his beloved grandmother's church, Calvary Armenian Congregational Church (CACC). With the encouragement of then-CACC pastor, Rev. Nerses Balabanian, Matt began serving as the church's volunteer youth pastor. As a direct result of his engaging devotional programs and leadership, Matt drew in scores of teens and their families to the CACC community, growing the youth group from three to forty kids in ten years. The youth of CACC adored Matthew for his caring and compassionate disposition; he was "always just a phone call away" for them.

CACC also regularly called upon Matt to preach, and his enriching sermons encouraged others to grow closer to Christ, with novel and unique examples that were often science-based. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Matt provided online updates on the science behind the disease and its treatment, answering questions and calming fears while encouraging his audience to trust the Lord with their future. He also recorded dozens of Christian devotional messages on YouTube, bringing deep spiritual insights to youth and adults alike.

In May 2021, Matt was diagnosed with a very rare form of intestinal cancer, at stage 4. He immediately began researching experimental treatments and clinical trials while enduring chemotherapy for the second time in his young life. But even amidst his great pain and weakness, Matt continued to serve as CACC youth pastor and periodically preached sermons.

During this time, as a CACC Deacon, Matt started to visit a young lady from church, Lara Palanjian, who was suffering from her own severe illness. The two rapidly fell in love, discussing theological topics for hours and comforting each other about persevering in suffering. The two wed on March 4, 2023, with a wedding theme focusing on the latter part of Isaiah 43:20, "*I provide*

water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen.” Matt and Lara’s story was indeed a God-designed love story.

After they were married, Matt and Lara lived in their Daly City home, where they spent as much time as possible enjoying and encouraging one another amidst their pain. They started a YouTube channel called “The Silverman Show,” which became a platform for sharing spiritual ideas in addition to Lara and Matt’s musical and comedy skits and performances. The couple celebrated their first wedding anniversary at CACC with friends and family, using it to raise support for one of Matt’s favorite charities, Impactful Missions, which is seeking to build a school in Haiti. Matt and Lara also performed for their guests, playing flute and violin. It was a unique and memorable evening, raising \$13,000 for the Haiti mission.

Not long after their anniversary celebration, and after a painful three-year battle with cancer, no hope for successful treatment, and many challenges eating and drinking, Matthew made the brave decision to enter hospice. He and Lara stayed at his parents’ home in Mountain View, under the loving care of his parents and devoted brother and sister, who left their “normal” lives to be with Matt around the clock.

Matt’s last nine weeks of life during hospice were as impactful for the Lord as any before then. He met personally with family and friends, including many who traveled from around the country to be with him one last time. There were songs of praise and comfort that encouraged everyone. He held one last impactful session with his beloved CACC youth group, encouraging them to remain connected to Jesus as the True Vine. Matt told them, “Do not let things like death scare you. Death is the victory and ultimate reward for the Christian.” Despite his great pain, Matt’s last days were dedicated wholly to the Lord and his family.

On June 10, 2024, surrounded by his loving family, Matthew entered eternity with his Savior. Matt is survived by his parents, Anna and Joel Silverman, brother Jeff, sister Lauren and her husband, Simon Margolis, nieces Addison and Emma, and his adoring wife, Lara. A meaningful and emotional memorial service was held for Matt on July 13, 2024, at the Calvary Armenian Congregational Church in San Francisco, and the link to the video can be found here: [Matt's Memorial Service](#). A separate memorial service was held at Camp Arev on July 27, 2024, for close family members.

Matthew’s final wish was to continue to serve God through others’ donations in his memory to any of the following organizations: Calvary Armenian Congregational Church in San Francisco and his two missionary groups: Impactful Missions and Hope Beyond Borders. Contributions in Matt’s memory to the Camp Arev Campership Fund to benefit young campers with financial needs are also much appreciated. Of Matt, we can surely say, “*Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your Master.*” (Matthew 25:21).

MY CHRISTIAN WALK: A TESTIMONY BY MATT SILVERMAN

Written April 27, 2024 (while in Hospice)

Romans 8:38–39:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I was twenty years old, in my second year studying Chemical Engineering at UCLA, when these simple verses changed my life. Up to this point, my education was probably the most significant focus in my life. I was used to being the smart one in the class, used to having the answers to all the questions, and life was pretty good. Even after going through non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma at the age of fifteen, I’d say I had my life pretty well together. A prestigious degree from a prestigious university...what more could someone ask for?

I had started going to church on Sundays with my cousins, not really out of a great interest in God as much as something to do to hang out with my cousins. Yet, as I started attending, I couldn’t help but notice there was something more, something more than good grades and admiration from people. The people at church...they had something...it was something real...something I hadn’t experienced before. I got interested in studying the Bible intellectually; there was wisdom and knowledge that I had never seen. Perhaps I had some glimpses of it, occasionally being taken to church by my grandmother as a kid or going to a week-long bible camp here or there in elementary school, but this was something more...something tangible.

I took advantage of it, joining Bible study groups, asking questions, challenging the teachers, and seeking answers. But the more I asked, the more my curiosity grew. Was this Jesus person real? Did he really perform miracles? Did he really rise from the dead? Then came the opportunity...a weekend college getaway where we could just focus on learning about the Bible and asking questions about it. No shallow, 4th-grade level answers. Instead, real, in-depth discussions. That weekend, he transformed me. I’ll never forget the weekend’s theme: the power of prayer. We looked at the book of James and talked about what it meant to make a genuine prayer of faith, to pray and believe God was going to respond. As we studied these Bible passages, I realized I didn’t have that faith—but if I prayed for it, God would answer and give me the faith. I realized it wasn’t my intellectual doubts getting in my way of true prayer but rather my pride. I had a pretty good life going for me: a great career path and admiration from the people around me. I wasn’t interested in giving up my life to follow some God who might send me halfway around the world to serve some random people I never met before.

But as I read my Bible that night, I came across Romans 8:38-39, and I realized any plan God had for my life would be a better plan than anything I could come up with on my own and that it was time to face the reality that this God was real and was in control. So, in humility, I prayed a simple prayer: “God, give me the faith to make a prayer of faith.”

In that moment, everything changed. It was like a wrecking ball crashed through some unseen wall in my heart, and the very following words I heard was someone in the room behind me reading out loud those very same words in Romans 8:38-39. My life changed coming down from that mountain. My priorities were now about serving this God who rescued me, the God who came down to earth to pay the price for our sins, who died the death of the cross so that we would have eternal life. To top it off, I’ve even traveled to Haiti almost a dozen times, serving the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere, and I wouldn’t change it for anything.

As I find myself now (alongside my beautiful wife) counting down my final days at the age of forty—dying from terminal intestinal cancer—I’m grateful that God has blessed me with twenty years of fruitful ministry, two decades of opportunities to impact lives, countless relationships to encourage me along the way, and most importantly the knowledge that this salvation Jesus offers can never be taken away. No power of hell, no crafty scheme of any human, can ever take away the perfect gifts of God, and I go home now to a rest that is sweeter than the greatest treasures this world has to offer. I have Heaven, where there will be no more sickness, pain, or death, and I can spend all my days with my God, who loved me to death.

WHEN LOVING YOUR ENEMY TURNS INTO HATING YOUR NEIGHBOR

I have been amazed in these last months at the amount of hatred pouring out across the United States. Whether it's directed at other countries, ethnicities, religions, political groups, or even particular occupations, this country seems more polarized than I've ever seen it. On top of that, people seem to feel fully justified in their hatred; even people that quote Jesus on other days of the week. While it's fair to say I can't fully diagnose the problem as to why hatred seems more dominating in our society, part of me can't help but wonder if this kind of hatred infiltrates people that go to church simply because they don't actually know what Jesus taught. In that light, here's a little summary of the things Jesus taught that people in modern day America seem to hate the most:

Matthew 5:38-42:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

We have a very self-centered notion of justice in the United States. We love suing people and counter suing people and making sure we get what we 'deserve' when there's an argument. We convince ourselves that we have to fight for our rights, because if we don't then it will look like we are wrong.

When we examine Jesus' words, however, we get a slightly different instruction. The first part, the strike on the right cheek, was an insult. Rather than respond with more insults and arguments, Jesus calls us to show that we refuse to drop down to someone else's level. Logically, this makes perfect sense (who has ever truly won an insult war anyway?), but emotionally it isn't natural. We have to constantly fight the urge to retaliate.

The tunic and cloak; while both were items of clothing, the cloak was more valuable by far, so much so that Jewish law stated that someone who was holding a cloak in pledge from someone had to return it every night so that person had something warm to sleep in. This is a very difficult teaching to accept; when someone, even an evil person, sues you, give them more than what they ask for. This is even an easier teaching to practice now than 2000 years ago; now we have crowdsourcing and Go Fund Me pages that allow us to take donations from people all over the country when we are unjustly sued or fined.

During Jesus' time, there were very few resources available for someone in a similar situation, yet still he gives this challenge. Granted, suing back then tended to be tied more toward debtors and creditors, rather than the large barrage of topics we sue people over in modern times, but the principle still stands.

In the same light, Jesus goes a step further. In countries under Roman occupation, Roman soldiers were allowed to force people to carry their military equipment for one mile. Jewish people would have marks along the road outside their towns, designating exactly where that one mile ended, and they could drop the equipment and go back home.

Jesus instead teaches his followers to ignore what little rights they had under an oppressive government and go further. We often speak of the idea of “going the extra mile” without really understanding the full implications.

I remember some time ago, a church in Houston was protesting the demands from the city to turn over manuscripts from sermons on topics related to homosexuality. In the end the city dropped the demand, but I recall thinking as I read that story, what a wasted opportunity to go the extra mile. What a wasted opportunity to give the cloak as well as the tunic; particularly in a situation that would never result in any negative consequences. The church could have turned over dozens of sermons, categorized by different topics, for everyone to read, yet instead chose to hide in a little shell. When we spend all our time demanding our rights, we miss the opportunity to really obey what Jesus taught.

Matthew 6:14-15:

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

A step beyond not resisting the insults and demands that Jesus tells us to acquiesce to in the previous passage, is forgiving those who insult us and make those demands. Unfortunately for us, Jesus indicates here and in many other places in his teaching that forgiveness is an inherent requirement in the Kingdom of God. If you can’t forgive your neighbors, and yes, even your enemies, you have no business pretending that you are following Jesus.

This is an extremely difficult thing for us to follow, but at the same time something easy. It is difficult emotionally for us to forgive others when we are wronged, but it is also empowering. It’s discarding bitterness in our hearts and picking up peace instead. I’ve often heard it said that harboring bitterness in your heart is like swallowing poison and hoping someone else dies; logically we understand that it does nothing but hinder us, but emotionally it is a challenge to fight for the strength to forgive.

Once we master forgiveness, though, we find a strength we never believed we could obtain. Granted, forgiveness does not mean we continually allow someone to hurt or exploit us (or others, for that matter), but it does mean we no longer define our future by the pain in our past.

I look at how many in the United States treat people from the Middle East, or Muslims, and am amazed that people who call themselves followers of Jesus not only refuse to forgive people fighting on the other side of the world, they seem intent on holding innocent people culpable for the very violence they are fleeing.

As refugees seek shelter anywhere in the world from the wars that threaten their lives, how many who call themselves followers of Jesus refuse to give them even a second thought? Rather than forgiving those who wrong us, we nonsensically expand our anger to those who haven't even wronged us. Rather than demonstrate the power of compassion and mercy, I see people give in to the same hatred that fuels these wars all over the world, all the while blind to the destruction it brings to their own souls.

Matthew 19:9:

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

This is a little change of topic, but God is pretty clear throughout the Bible.

Malachi 2:16:

"I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the Lord Almighty."

In the debates of Jesus' time, there was a question among Jewish lawyers and teachers about what proper grounds for a divorce were. The most extreme opinions included even a burnt meal prepared by a wife was proper grounds for a divorce. With this mindset, on multiple occasions people came to Jesus asking when it was proper for a man to divorce his wife. In Jewish culture at the time, usually only a man could initiate a divorce, although Roman law allowed for either to initiate. Jesus responded every time equating divorce with adultery. It was never appropriate for a man to divorce his wife, and the only reason God ever allowed it in the first place was because God knew people would never obey such a law (their "hearts were hard," as Jesus said), and divorce simply created a system that would ensure some level of rights for those who were divorced.

Ignoring the discussion on unfaithfulness or abusive spouses, and possible exceptions to this steadfast rule (since that discussion would require a lot more than I have room for here), we can at least focus on the concept of the 'no-fault divorce' that has been legal in California since 1970, and is currently legal in all states (the last state to pass no-fault divorce laws was New York in 2010).

These laws are reflected in divorce rates across the country; while a small portion of the population is responsible for most of the divorces (over 70% of couples currently married in the U.S. are in their first marriage), the fact of the matter is divorce is probably the most ignored area of sexual immorality by churches in the U.S. You can find many churches that will protest laws acknowledging marriages between homosexuals, and many churches that teach abstinence before marriage, but it's very rare to encounter a church that protests laws allowing for no-fault divorce, or even addresses the topic in sermons. On the contrary, many of the most popular Republican presidential candidates in recent elections (the party typically associated with conservative

Christian values) have been through several divorces (some even accompanying various extramarital affairs). While we can spend a great deal of time speculating as to why this is such an ignored topic in the U.S., at the very least it's a strong example of one of Jesus' most consistent teachings that seems to be consistently ignored here in the US.

Matthew 6:19-20:

"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."

In America, success is almost universally measured by the amount of wealth one accumulates. While there may be some backlash against those who have accumulated their wealth at the expense of others, or those who use it for gross self-indulgence, for the most part Americans look quite favorably upon those who have amassed fortunes for themselves, regardless of how those fortunes are used.

Very rarely is there any mention from the more influential religious leaders regarding Jesus' challenge that you cannot love both God and money. On the contrary, some of the most popular preachers in America today have a message that's almost solely focused on prosperity, a message that states if you're wealthy and healthy and famous, that means God has blessed you.

Unfortunately, that's essentially the opposite of what Jesus taught. Luke's account of Jesus' teachings have an even more direct stance

Luke 6:20:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,"

Luke 6:24:

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort."

This contrast is displayed in many places in Jesus' teachings, and while it isn't a disapproval of working hard to support yourself and others, it is a harsh criticism of storing up money simply for your own comfort. Earning money so you can help those in need does have a very important place in the life of every Christians, but when the goal of earning is to simply amass money, we have deviated completely from one of Jesus' most consistent teachings.

Matthew 5:43-48:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the

righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Loving your enemies is probably the number one most rejected teaching of Jesus. To be fair, it is a difficult challenge, particularly when there are innocent lives at stake. What does loving your enemies look like when the Nazis are conquering Europe, or ISIS is beheading civilians? There is a slightly different context, as Jesus is talking to poor farmers and fishermen, and not military soldiers or police officers in charge of protecting the population. There are some applicable principles; however, the basis for the command is the character of God.

Luke 6:27-36:

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. 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.”

There is nothing Jesus taught that forbids us from protecting those in need, but we should be quick to show mercy and compassion, even to our enemies. We can think of the church in Charleston, where the church victims forgave the shooter who attacked their friends and family. Or stories during the American Civil War, where soldiers in the midst of a battle became overwhelmed with the suffering of their opponents, and stopped to provide some water to a dying enemy soldier. We may have an obligation to protect at times, but at some point, the smoke will clear, and the enemy's weapons will be lying on the ground. What then? What will your mindset be? Hurt them as much as they have hurt you? Laugh at their pain, their loss, and suffering? Do you go into battle hoping that your enemy will die, or do you pray that they would see the error of their ways and turn?

I remember four years ago in a Republican debate in South Carolina, one of the candidates was booed when he suggested the United States use the Golden Rule as a policy for international relations: that we not do to other countries what we wouldn't want them to do to us. The room full of conservative Republicans found the notion entirely disgusting.

Rather, in the current political debates, we see calls for carpet bombing of civilians in cities occupied by ISIS met with cheering adoration. People in the United States love to see their enemies killed, and they don't care how many innocent lives are lost in the process. Far from showing any measure of compassion for our enemies, we show a complete lack of compassion for even the victims of our enemies. Here in the U.S., we have gone even further from loving our enemies to actually hating our own neighbors; anyone who belongs to a differing ethnic or political identity is mocked and reviled, and this from people who claim to follow Jesus. The immature insults on Facebook alone are enough to make one cringe.

We often cite Jesus' "Parable of the Good Samaritan" as an example of what it means to love your neighbor, but technically the parable wasn't about teaching what being a good neighbor entailed. The question Jesus was answering was "Who is my neighbor?" in Luke Chapter 10. In Jesus' parable, the Jewish person was the one in need, and the hated foreigner was the one who came to the rescue (and let's be clear, at this time in history, Jews and Samaritans most definitely hated each other). The man questioning Jesus was trying to get some standard from Jesus about who he actually had to worry about when it came to loving his neighbor.

Jesus responded with a parable that concluded that even his hated enemy who lived in an entirely different country could be considered his neighbor. The teaching, if we're willing to accept it in context, is quite clear; you cannot draw lines along nationalities or political ideologies or religious views and pretend that you have no obligation to those on the other side. Yes, the parable gives a challenge as to actions we should take to be good neighbors, but it also goes beyond that to challenge the very excuses we make to avoid showing compassion and mercy to others. If we're looking for a line to draw as to who we help and who we ignore, we've completely missed the message. Why? Because we're supposed to see people as God sees them; we're challenged to be merciful, holy, and yes, even perfect, as God is. It is a frightening thing when some of the most popular leaders today are the furthest from this mindset.

So that's it; a list of some of the most rejected teachings of Jesus in modern day America. On one hand, they are very difficult teachings to follow; it requires a great deal of trust, and willingness to put aside our own pride. But these teachings are not just commands; they are also promises with rewards. Perhaps not all of these rewards will be received while we're here on earth, but the promises stand, nonetheless. The only question is how much we are going to trust these words written down two thousand years ago, and how hard we're willing to work to sow the field for a harvest.

GOVERNANCE, POLITICS, AND CHRIST

Our sermon this Sunday was on a very familiar story in the Bible, Daniel in the lions' den. Daniel is about to be promoted to a very high position in the Persian Empire, and some of his enemies try to stop that from happening. They have a problem though: he's really good at his job and he's really honest, so they can't find anything to get him in trouble for. So, they come up with an idea: they know he prays every day, so they decide to trick the king into making it illegal to pray for the next thirty days. The king passes the law, and Daniel continues to pray every day anyway. So, they bring Daniel in, they tell the king that Daniel is violating the law, and the king is forced to throw Daniel into a pit of lions overnight, even though he likes Daniel and doesn't want to. He doesn't have a choice; he passed a law that he couldn't undo. And we know how the story ends: God protects Daniel throughout the night, and he comes out the next morning unharmed.

Romans 13:1-7:

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."

One of the interesting things about what the Apostle Paul writes in this passage is that he was living in a time when Christians were actively being persecuted by the government. Paul himself was killed by the Roman government for being a Christian. Wait a second, Paul, how can you say that governments are established by God, even when they're going against God? And what are we supposed to do when the government passes an evil law that we're not supposed to obey? How can they be God's servants?

One of the things you notice about the story of Daniel is that Daniel doesn't try to defend his actions before he's thrown to the lions. As near as we can tell, he doesn't try to get out of the punishment. In one sense he rebelled against the law, but in another sense, he also submitted to it by accepting the punishment. Daniel had just seen the Babylonian Empire wiped out and replaced by the Persian Empire, so he knows that God can take down a nation whenever he wants. In this new nation, Daniel had an important government position, but that position wasn't as important as obeying God and continuing to pray.

As we follow God, we always find ourselves subject to some kind of governance, wherever we live. Or maybe we find ourselves in some position of governance, where we're in charge of something important like Daniel was. Governance is the job of keeping society functioning well, so that we're able to live in peace. Some people do it better than others.

That's different from politics. Governance is about leading a society and keeping it working; politics is about allegiance. It's about building followers and support, having allies. As Christians, we may find ourselves under different kinds of governance throughout our lives, but our allegiance is always to God alone. That doesn't mean we can't serve our leaders or communities; Daniel was serving his king very faithfully, but when it came time to choose between following God or following a law, he chose to follow God. He didn't try to build political alliances; he didn't try to get support from other people or get votes in an election to gain power; he simply continued to pray.

I'm sure you've seen in the past year, people obsessed with politics. "I like this leader, I'm going to follow this leader," but someone else says "no, he's bad, we need to follow this leader." Politics often forces people into pledging their allegiance to someone who really isn't that good, someone you normally wouldn't want in charge, but you're convinced you have to support them because of your political allegiance. When that happens, you need to be careful, because you can find yourself very quickly turned away from God, and relying on people who don't have very good motives.

But notice something very interesting about Daniel; even after being thrown into a pit with lions, he continued to serve the Persian king. The next morning Daniel comes out, and he doesn't say, "Oh you're a bad king now, I'm not going to work for you anymore." Despite everything that happened, he continued to faithfully help the king govern the Persian Empire because he knew that was the reason God had him there. And ultimately, the Persian Empire is what allows the nation of Israel to be rebuilt after having been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. Now, we need to be careful and wise about how we serve in a country that passes laws against God, but if we can help keep the peace and keep society functioning without being forced to do or support evil, let's do it whenever we can. And of course, when we vote, we do our best to vote for whoever seems wise or moral to us. Sometimes that's no one, but we try anyway. And sometimes it can get bad enough that the only good choice is to leave.

Proverbs 28:12:

"When the righteous triumph, there is great celebration; but when the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding."

It can be hard to trust God when wicked people come to power. I'm sure a lot of us are worried about Armenia and Artsakh right now. What's going to happen now that Azerbaijan has been able to steal so much and destroy so many lives? Will we ever be safe again? What's going to happen to the Armenians who have to flee their homes to escape? Has God forgotten about us?

I don't know what's going to happen in the future. I do know that wicked people come to power sometimes, and even if they hold on to it their whole lives, one day they're going to die and stand

before God for judgment, and on that day, it doesn't matter how much power they had here on earth. There's no army to hide behind, no political alliance to help them. If we can stop evil, we should, but if we can't, we'll leave things in God's hands and instead do good where we can. Because ultimately, our allegiance is with Jesus, who died for us so we could have eternal life.

Here's a joke to end on: You have to imagine that things were super awkward between Daniel and King Darius after this lion incident. Daniel goes back to the job, the king calls him in for a meeting, and they have to discuss lion cage maintenance or something. Daniel says, "Yeah, you know, when I was down there, I saw there was quite a bit of rust on that lion cage door, I think we're going to have to send someone in to repair it. And I think lion number two needs a haircut, his hair's getting kinda long."

DAVID AND JONATHAN'S FRIENDSHIP

One of the things we saw in Colossians was the importance of the relationships Paul had. It's important to have close, reliable friends in life who we can count on to encourage us and give us wise counsel when we need it.

It reminds me of the story of David and Jonathan in the Bible. Before David was established as king, King Saul was the ruler of the land and had become jealous enough of David that he was constantly looking for opportunities to kill him. Saul's son Jonathan, however, had a righteous heart, and knew that God was preparing David to be the next king. It's an amazing attitude because, in the eyes of everyone in the country, Jonathan would be the more logical person to eventually replace his father as king someday. Jonathan doesn't care about that though. He sees God's purpose and commits himself to being David's friend even during the difficult times.

Eventually, David is forced to go into hiding to escape Saul and starts to get discouraged. David is doing his best to do good and help people, but he has to constantly be on the run from the king he used to serve loyally. In this difficult time, Jonathan comes to visit him.

1 Samuel 23:15-18:

"While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. 'Don't be afraid,' he said. 'My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.' The two of them made a covenant before the LORD. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh."

Jonathan comes to David at great personal risk. If King Saul heard that his son was visiting David to encourage him, he would have flipped out and might have tried to kill Jonathan, as Saul had tried to do earlier. But David and Jonathan had made a promise to each other that they would remain friends no matter what happened.

In life, we need friends like that. We need people to encourage us when we're down—to remind us of the goodness of God, to help us when the situation is too difficult for us. I can tell you, over the last year while I've had this cancer, a lot of friends have stepped up to help me during this time, bringing me food, sending encouraging messages, helping me with simple things. It was the same when I had cancer in high school, with my friends coming over to visit me and help me stay caught up in school. We need friends like that in our lives, and we need to be that kind of friend to others. A friend doesn't just tell us the things we *want* to hear, but they also tell us things we *need* to hear.

Proverbs 27:6:

"Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."

It means that while we do encourage and strengthen each other, we also correct one another as needed. This is an important thing to remember, because our society today teaches that things like affirmation or tolerance need to be the dominant dynamic in relationships. Kindness and compassion are important, but true friends also know when they need to give you hard truths and tell you when you're wrong. So, value those friendships, and the people who are there for you with what you need. And when we go through hard times, we'll be there for each other; to help each other through it.

NOT AS THE WORLD DOES: JOSHUA DEVOTIONAL

Perhaps the most iconic scene in all of “Star Wars” is the moment when Luke blows up the death star. The situation looks desperate. He’s flying closer to the target, and as his targeting computer locks on to the exhaust port, the ghostly spirit of his mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, calls out to him to use the force instead of relying on the computer. After a brief moment of hesitation, Luke switches off the computer and uses the connection he has to the force to hit his target and eliminate the threat of the death star, and there is much rejoicing.

Looking at the fall of Jericho this week in the Book of Joshua, we realize there are times in life when the right thing to do—and the right strategy to use—isn’t always the logical, well-planned-out one. Rather than enact a military strategy for taking the city, the Israelites just march around the city for seven days, and on the seventh day the walls collapse. They’re doing this in obedience to God, and it shows that God is sovereign over this battle. The Israelites won’t be winning these battles on their own strength, but rather under God’s direction.

We may not be conquering cities, but we have our own battles to fight, and we seek God’s guidance for it.

Ephesians 6:12-13:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

2 Corinthians 10:3-5:

“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

We live in a world where we’re commonly given bad ideas for how to be successful in life. You might be told that you need to obtain power, or wealth; that if you have a problem with someone else, you need to attack them and tear them down. You may have heard the message to seek your own pleasure or happiness first, over concern for others. Maybe you’re told to celebrate vices like pride, or greed, or laziness.

Romans 12:

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. . . . Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary:

*‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

These ideas are often ones that the world thinks are foolish. Forgiving your enemies, blessing the people who are mean to you, honoring other people above yourself; these are the ways we fight battles that are different from the way the world fights battles. When we thrive doing these things, we show that God’s power is at work in us.

So, what should we do? We should do our best to read the Bible, to understand what God calls us to do, to train ourselves in wisdom so we can recognize right and wrong. And, maybe more importantly, be praying each day for the wisdom and insight to know what to do. God will lead us if we turn to him, and while we probably won’t be breaking down the walls of cities or blowing up Death Stars, we’ll still have our victories. And in the end, we know God is in control, and that He is with us.

UNITY TALK, CAMP AREV

I mentioned yesterday that I usually go to Haiti once a year with a Christian college ministry called Chi Alpha. When we go, we stay at an orphanage in a small village, in the middle of nowhere. On our team, we have people from all over the world. Uwe there is from Germany. We have Elisha from China. Winston is our leader, and he's actually a refugee from the Vietnam War.

We have diverse skills too; when we go, I'm usually one of the main preachers, and I also tend to fix broken stuff. Bust out my engineering skills. Uwe is a physics genius Ph.D., so he handles a lot of the financial stuff, and is actually pretty good at speaking the native Creole language. Elisha is our business specialist; she tends to focus on creating job opportunities for people who are unemployed and manages our scholarships to help put kids through school. We have some that specialize in working with the kids there, some that specialize in helping families, and some that just do whatever is needed. But the most amazing thing about this team that I've found is the unity. The way we support each other, the way we encourage each other, it's probably the most effective, united team I've ever worked with in my entire life. An incredibly diverse team, but one with amazing unity.

Now, I want to paraphrase a story here, something that happened maybe seventeen years ago or something like that. You know this church? Supposedly it's built over the tomb Jesus was buried in. So, it's a really important place.

Tradition claims that Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over the cave in which Christ is said to have been buried. In July 2002 the church became the scene of ugly fighting between the monks who ran it. The conflict began when a Coptic monk sitting on the rooftop decided to move his chair into the shade. This took him into the part of the rooftop courtyard looked after by the Ethiopian monks.

It turns out that the Ethiopian and Coptic monks have been arguing over the rooftop of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for centuries. In 1752 the Ottoman Sultan issued an edict declaring which parts of the Church belonged to each of six Christian groups: the Latins, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptics, and Ethiopians. Despite the edict, conflict over the church remains.

The rooftop had been controlled by the Ethiopians, but they lost control to the Coptics when hit by a disease epidemic in the 19th century. Then in 1970, the Ethiopians regained control when the Coptic monks were absent for a short period. They have been squatting there ever since, with at least one Ethiopian monk always remaining on the roof to assert their rights. In response, a Coptic monk has been living on the roof also, to maintain the claim of the Coptics.

And so, we get to a Monday in July 2002, when the Coptic monk moves his chair into the shade. Harsh words led to pushes, then shoves, until an all-out brawl got going, including the throwing of chairs and iron bars. At the end of the fight, eleven of the monks were injured, including one monk with a broken arm and another sent unconscious to the hospital.

How tragic that a church that serves as a memorial to Christ is the scene for such bitter conflict among his followers. This is a far cry from Christ's call to love one another, turn the other cheek, and his prayer that his followers might "be one."

And then, just a few years later, again in 2008, this time the Armenian and the Greek monks began fighting over who gets to walk where.

What does the world think when they see that? Christians fighting each other because someone moved his chair into the shade? Is that what your Jesus can do? What a joke. We're supposed to believe we have the words of eternal life but instead, we're fighting over who gets to walk in what room in a church.

When Jesus is praying for everyone who will believe, he's praying for us. He's praying that we would be united, not just united with God but also with each other. How many of you have read the different gospel accounts of this last night of Jesus? What's happening in this scene? Jesus is about to be betrayed, and the next day he's going to be crucified. Each of the four gospels gives us different details of this night, and different perspectives.

It's interesting that the other three gospels focus on Jesus' prayer in the garden; what does he pray there? *If you're willing, let this cup be taken from me, but not my will but yours be done.* John leaves that part out, and instead focuses on this prayer that happens before they get to the garden. This is the last major prayer of Jesus that John records.

Why do you think this prayer is so important to John? John's gospel was probably the last one written, and a lot has happened in the church since the earlier gospels were written. Probably a lot of the other apostles had already been killed, and John might have been the last one left. The leadership of the church has changed, but so has the membership. A greater diversity of people were present in the church, and John wants us to know something. As Jesus was preparing to walk into his darkest hour, he was praying for us, that we would be united.

And it's hard; why is it so hard to have unity in the church?

Now this guy in the tree is short little Zacchaeus, the tax collector. What did people think of him? They hated him. As a tax collector, he was always exploiting them. He was stealing from them. A lot of them were probably living in poverty, starving, because of how Zacchaeus was abusing the system to collect more from them than he was supposed to. How do they react when Jesus invites Zacchaeus down? Seriously Jesus, him? Do you have any idea what he's like? Do you have any idea what he's done to me?

Imagine a church, and over here is Zacchaeus, and right next to him is a person he exploited, and they're trying to worship God together. Sure, after meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus promised to pay everyone back four times what he stole and give half of what he had to the poor, but that doesn't change the fact that people had been suffering for years because of what he did. And now Jesus

expects me to have unity and fellowship with him? Jesus, are you crazy? Do you see what a ridiculous miracle Jesus is praying for here? He's praying for unity between Zacchaeus, who is now a believer, and this other believer whom he had stolen from.

How about the first martyr? Stephen, one of the original deacons in the early church. In Acts Chapter 7, the Jewish leadership, the Sanhedrin, decided they needed to take this guy out, so they brought some false witnesses in to accuse him of stuff he didn't say or do. And they managed to get the crowd angry enough to stone him.

Who's that over there guarding the cloaks? The apostle Paul, before he became an apostle. What was Paul doing before Jesus appeared to him? Getting Christians thrown into jail. In Paul's own words, he was a violent man and a murderer. When he says murderer, maybe he just means Stephen, but it's also possible other Christians died because of him that we don't know about. Imagine that. Paul, a guy responsible for the death of a fellow Christian, maybe your friend, maybe even your family, and now he says he's seen Jesus and wants to come to church. When God caused Paul to go blind, he also called a Christian named Ananias to go heal him. What does Ananias say? Jesus, are you crazy? Do you know what this guy has done? Do you see what a ridiculous miracle Jesus is praying for here? He's praying for unity between the Apostle Paul and the Christians he persecuted, persecuted even to death.

We don't talk about this very much, but do you know the gospel is advancing in Turkey? It's still very dangerous to be a Christian in Turkey, but Turks are coming to know Jesus. Some time ago, there were Turkish pastors that came to Armenian pastors in our churches. They said something just doesn't feel right in their churches in Turkey; they felt they needed to do something to atone for the sins of their ancestors during the genocide. They felt they needed to confess their guilt, acknowledge the genocide to the descendants of the victims, and ask for forgiveness. Of course, they can't confess on behalf of an entire nation, but they can come just as themselves. What do you say to that? How do you respond? Jesus is praying that we, as Christians, would have unity with other Christians, even if they're Turks. Jesus, are you crazy? Do you have any idea what they did to our ancestors? Do you see what a ridiculous miracle Jesus is praying for, as he's preparing to walk into his darkest night? Make no mistake, unity in the church is a miracle, one of the greatest miracles we can have, and it only happens with prayer.

Does anyone know what the biggest division was when John wrote his gospel account? Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians looked down on the Gentiles because they were pagans. Gentile Christians looked down on Jewish Christians, maybe because ultimately it was the Jewish people who rejected Jesus and had him crucified. John is writing to a divided church, reminding them that Jesus prayed that we would be one, even as our enemies repent and accept Jesus as their savior.

And he's praying for unity here, not uniformity. What's the difference between unity and uniformity? All living for the same purpose versus all doing the same thing.

1 Corinthians 12:12-26:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ^{and} the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving 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. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

We’re not all the same. We have different personalities, different skills, different passions, but we’re united in Christ. We can’t do this alone. Any more than an eye can go about floating in the air and seeing alone, any more than a hand can get up and start crawling around on its own. Has anyone ever seen the Adams family? That hand that just goes walking around. Of course it’s silly. Paul wants us to have that image in our minds. It’s as silly for us to think we can make it on our own as it is to think that a hand can crawl around on its own.

What does unity look like for you?

CANCEL CULTURE AND THE TRAP OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

An SDG&E worker is fired from his job after someone takes a picture of him with his hand hanging out the window of his truck as he cracks his knuckles. The person posts the picture on Twitter claiming the man was making a “white power” hand gesture, gathers a large internet mob, and manages to get the man fired. The man who was fired, Emmanuel Cafferty, is not even white.

TV star Stephen Colbert does a satirical segment mocking the Washington Redskins football team for starting a foundation to provide resources and support for Native Americans while at the same time retaining a team name that was considered by many to be an ethnic slur. As part of the satire segment, he announces that he will be starting the “The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever” as atonement for the imagined offense of some of his comedy routines. The announcement is taken seriously by a portion of the internet with no knowledge of the context, and a large push is made to try to get him fired for “racially insensitive comments” or something to that extent. Being a wealthy TV personality with a large, devoted following, he is able to shrug it off as amusing.

A dozen other examples of this phenomenon probably just came to your head as you read those two stories. While strikingly different in the effect they had on the targeted individual, there is a fundamental characteristic they have in common; a large, self-righteous mob with little to no understanding of the situation passing judgment and condemnation on a stranger. Individuals able to hide behind the anonymity of screen names, largely free from any potential repercussions of their actions.

Our church and youth group have been going through the Sermon on the Mount the past two months, and we finally get to one of the most widely cited verses of the Bible by those who aren’t particularly familiar with the teachings of Jesus. If you know nothing else about what Jesus taught, you probably still know Matthew 7:1:

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”

It is a sentiment celebrated by those who despise being told what to do, confidently declaring that any correction they receive can be discarded as judgmental hypocrisy.

After all, certainly Jesus declares in John 8:15:

“You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one.”

And of course, there is John 12:47:

“As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.”

Don’t forget the well-known John 3:17:

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

Yet in their understanding of these quotes, people often miss the context and intention. Jesus was constantly talking about judgment and sin in his sermons. The Sermon on the Mount ends with warnings about heaven and hell. All of Jesus’ parables that end with references to crops that don’t bear fruit being burned, or people ending up in unquenchable fire with a worm that never dies; those are all references to hell (“Gehenna” is the term he uses).

Matthew 23 is an entire chapter devoted to Jesus condemning the hypocritical practices of the self-righteous religious leaders of his time. It’s often labeled as the “Seven Woes” section of the Bible, where he calls the religious leaders a “brood of vipers” who are dragging other people with them on their path to hell (a huge component of the motivation of the religious leaders to have him crucified a few days later). In John 8:44, Jesus declares that his opponents are actually children of the devil. If you add up all of Jesus’ teachings throughout all four gospel accounts, you’ll find that he preaches about hell more often than he preaches about heaven. Yet at the same time, he declares that he isn’t here to judge. Why the discrepancy?

Perhaps it helps, being that I teach in the medical field, to make a medical analogy here. I can make a medical diagnosis of a patient without wanting them to suffer from the disease. I can observe their symptoms, look at some lab values, and tell someone that they have diabetes... then warn them that unless they make some drastic changes in their life, they will face some serious health complications in the future. We all know this intuitively: we can warn someone that they are on a path to pain and destruction while at the same time wanting to rescue them from such a path.

In the same way, we tell others that their actions are immoral or unwise, not out of self-righteousness, but in the hopes that we can help them avoid the harm that comes as a result. The doctor doesn’t diagnose the disease out of a desire to see a patient suffer, but rather in the hopes that a patient can be saved.

Jesus and his followers preach in that same hope to all who will listen. Jesus is giving the diagnosis and offering the cure, rather than sentencing the sick to death.

And this is where our modern society has a problem when it comes to understanding what it means to be judgmental. Being judgmental is not a question of whether or not we tell others that they are wrong, but rather a question of our attitude when we tell them.

Do we start from a position of arrogance, believing ourselves to be better, or a position of humility, acknowledging that we ourselves are just as imperfect and flawed? Jesus’ analogy in Matthew 7 famously compares two people, one with a speck of dust in his eye and the other with a tree in his eye. Surely a speck of dust in the eye is undesirable but attempting to help another deal with sin in their life while living a life consumed with a judgmental attitude would be like trying to remove

that speck while having a tree stuck in your own eye. Such an attempt, while perhaps making for good slapstick comedy, would undoubtedly end poorly.

But there is no harm in attempting such assistance from a point of humility, and in fact such assistance might very well be necessary. We correct others all the time, for a wide range of concerns and offenses, and in fact we need to be corrected as well at times. Show me a person that never receives correction in life, and I will show you a person headed toward a great deal of unnecessary pain and hardships. I say that, not because I enjoy watching the suffering of others, but because I have seen this truth play out in the lives of many, including myself. There is no love in the heart of one who sits by doing nothing as another walks into harm. We speak in the hopes they can avoid some pain.

Proverbs 24:1:

“Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.”

And thus, we get to the self-righteousness of our modern culture. Often Matthew 7:1 is assumed to only apply to the overtly religious, but that is not even remotely true. One does not have to be even the least bit religious to be arrogant and judgmental.

Certainly today, the cults of various political ideologies have replaced a great deal of the role religious practice used to have in our lives. Whether it's golden statues of Trump or young people bowing down in some pseudo-worship as they confess their “white privilege” to interrogators, the chanting of creeds such as “follow the science” or “build the wall” together with fellow worshippers. Even joining into factions siding for or against various celebrities or sports teams, we've found a wide range of idols to turn into our substitute religion.

And each individual thing might have its own kernel of truth, but as we throw ourselves behind a cause we must examine ourselves to see if we are acting from an attitude of superiority or an attitude of love. I could stand and preach the very words of Jesus with total accuracy, but if I did so out of a feeling of superiority rather than love I would accomplish nothing of any real value. Is my goal to help the lost avoid some pain, or is my hope to stand out as a righteous beacon and laugh as another suffers hardships?

A proverb that comes to mind when I think of this modern “cancel culture” or “call-out culture” phenomenon is Proverbs 26:17:

“Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own.”

Often discussions on the cancel culture topic stray to meaningless examples like Dr. Seuss books or Goya beans or chicken sandwiches, but those are largely irrelevant in the grand scheme of our lives.

The true problem is when a large crowd of strangers decide to insert themselves into a conflict or dispute, they know nothing about, simply because they believe it will award them some likes and retweets on their internet posts. The internet today allows individuals to participate in such action from all around the world, and even create computer programs to do the work for them, and those who do so are often declared righteous by their internet pseudo-community. The reality is, however, the probability that you will contribute something positive to the outcome of such a scenario by joining this is essentially zero, no matter how proud you are of your insults after.

This is the pride and judgmental attitude that Jesus is warning us about here in Matthew 7. It is nothing new or modern; the only difference now is the internet allows the entire world to join in the quarrel all at once and destroy lives in ways we couldn't have in the past. We can hide ourselves in an echo chamber, only listening to those we enjoy hearing from, and only emerge to exchange insults with some stranger we will never cross paths within real life. We can doctor images, edit videos, and create enough misleading evidence to fill an entire mob with enough anger to kill someone they've never even met. A child can be targeted with enough hatred to drive them to suicide over an error, rather than gently instructed and corrected in righteousness.

This is why the Bible teaches us not to meddle with the quarrels of others; because most likely we will do nothing but aggravate an already difficult situation with an incomplete picture of the problem... very likely to the detriment of ourselves or another. It's quite ironic; while there are times, we can possibly speak some life into the heart of another who values our perspective, very often those are the times we shy away with the excuse that we "should not judge" our neighbor. People seem to prefer joining the assault on a total stranger who "had it coming" according to them.

This problem is amplified by society that increasingly sees patience and grace as a hindrance. We do not understand how to resolve conflicts. I recall joining an old high school history teacher of mine a few years back for somewhat of a retirement party, a rather forced retirement. In one of his lessons, he apparently pointed out some similarities between current trends in far right-wing ideology in the United States and trends that were seen in the origins of the Nazi party of Germany in the 1930s. A student or parent took offense to the perceived insult and responded with some amount of outrage.

When requesting my former teacher to address the issue, the school administrator was quite shocked by his proposed solution: to sit down with the family that was concerned, open up the history books, and have a little back and forth talking about the history and clarifying his statements. The notion that such a conflict could be resolved through friendly discussion, listening to what each other had to say, was absurd to the administration, and my teacher realized this was probably the right time to retire.

And this highlights the problem perfectly: those in positions of power and authority generally do not care about truth in much of modern society. They do not care about right and wrong. They want to avoid conflict, they want to appease a mob and have no loyalty to those who work for

them. They will toss aside their faithful employees in a heartbeat if it enhances their reputation, rather than fight for them and the truth.

So how does the Christian Walk work when living in such a world? When do we engage in a problem, and when do we stay out of it? There are many principles given in the Bible, and Paul gives some great perspectives as he's helping a church deal with the issue of one of their members engaging in sexual immorality.

1 Corinthians 5:9–13:

"I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave with world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you."

There is an important principle here to follow; the obligations of the Christian to other Christians (or at least, those who claim to be Christian) are different from our obligations to those who aren't following Christ. To those who are in the church, we have an obligation to help each other turn away from the sins that separate us from God; we lovingly encourage and challenge each other to pursue holiness. Again, it's out of love, not self-righteousness. The situation in 1 Corinthians 5 is so bad, Paul's instructions are to forbid the individual from joining the Christian community there until he realizes the severity of what he is doing. To allow him to come would be the equivalent of endorsing the sin he was apparently celebrating. They had an obligation to show him, and the wider community, that such actions were dangerous and unacceptable. In a sense, they "canceled" him.

This advice seems to be successful; in the next letter from Paul, we read, 2 Corinthians, the man seems to have come to his senses and realized the evil of what he had done.

2 Corinthians: 6–8:

"The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him."

The Christian has an obligation to take steps to help another Christian see the error in his ways. We do not have this same obligation to those who are not Christians. There is little point in walking around trying to force strangers to follow the laws of God. Why would someone who hates God want to follow anything God has to say? How could we expect them to even care? Only once they actually have an interest in hearing the words of Jesus will they take anything you say seriously.

And here, I want to make an important clarification that I think is poorly understood in our current culture. I saw a little picture circulating around Facebook lately of Jesus bringing a colorful sheep back to a flock of sheep, and one of the sheep in the flock says “Hold it there! He wasn’t lost, we kicked him out!” And Jesus responds, “I know, and I found her.”

This is a slightly heretical depiction, and a complete misunderstanding of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, parables that are told together as a set in Luke 15 and were probably the inspiration for that picture. These are not parables about someone who was kicked out of a mean religious community and then brought back in; these are about individuals who have completely rebelled against God, took delight in following a path of evil, made themselves enemies of God, yet are brought into repentance and have their relationship with God restored. God is rescuing them from their own sin and rebellion, not as an exile from a community that mistreated them. And this rescue does not involve putting the lost sheep into an abusive environment; it’s about bringing them into a real flock with a real shepherd. The sheep have no ability to kick out other sheep. Jesus was very intentional with his metaphors. There is a reason shepherds and sheep are a common theme in the Bible. Ultimately, we are each that lost sheep at some point, needing to be brought back in.

Now, there are settings where church leaders have the authority to declare that someone cannot be part of the Christian fellowship. Paul gives some guidance on that in 1 Corinthians 5, but Jesus also gives some instructions, for instance in Matthew 18:15–20. Jesus’ instructions to the disciples in this section suggest that there are ramifications for such declarations not just on earth, but also in heaven. The line “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” seems to be a reference to this excommunication process when conducted properly by Godly leaders for the right reasons.

The right moment to “cancel” someone like this isn’t always clear; there are principles given by Jesus and the apostles, but such decisions require a great deal of prayer and wisdom and aren’t made lightly. They certainly are not the kind of decisions you would entrust to an angry mob of strangers. Questions like “Do they pose an immediate risk to those around them?” or “Do they realize what they’re doing is sin and want to change?” are crucial to ask.

And this highlights a foundational problem that prevents our culture from really understanding what Jesus teaches in Matthew 7 or what he means in the parable of the lost sheep. Our culture doesn’t actually understand what sin is, or even believe it is a real thing. We live in a society dominated by subjective truth and morality, surrounded by people that are taught to follow their own personal truth, rather than seek objective truth.

It’s like that Babylon Bee headline from back in 2017: “Culture In Which All Truth Is Relative Suddenly Concerned About Fake News.” A society that does not believe that objective truth exists cannot have objective morality... at least, not an objective moral standard you could compel another person to follow. When there is no objective morality, there can be no offense against God. God becomes more of an imaginary friend who is always happy with us and just wants us to

be happy whatever we're doing... and when that is your perspective there is no such thing as rebelling against God.

Everything is permissible if it feels right to you. And when everything is permissible, when there is no objective moral right or wrong, all that matters is power and oppression. It's like that famous line in the Melian dialogue, as Athens prepares to attack the island of Melos: "you know as well as we do the right, as the world goes, is only in question between equal power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

You do what you do because you can and you want to, and if you can't then you fight to get the power. You rally a large, angry mob around you to tear down those you personally find offensive. There is no repentance because there is no sin to turn from or righteousness to turn to... only a fight for power and control. If all that matters is what I want, then anyone who tells me I'm wrong is an offender and oppressor.

How does the Christian respond to such a society? We think of Paul's reminder to the church in 1 Corinthians.

I Corinthians 2:2:

"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

The Christian response is to preach Christ crucified for our sins. We understand what it means to speak the truth without judging because we know that we ourselves would be found guilty if we were to try to stand on our own righteousness. The Christian is not the person who believes they have earned heaven by their own righteousness; the Christian is the one who knows we have no hope unless we are forgiven by grace.

Our desire is that others would know that same grace. And to those who tell us it is arrogant to make a claim to know truth, we remind them that the very statement that it is arrogant to make a claim to know truth is itself equally a claim of truth. All that remains after that is to argue the evidence for either claim.

We can certainly advocate for righteousness as best we can; speak up for the oppressed and those with no voice, look after widows and orphans in their distress, but do not be surprised when a society that rejects God also rejects the call to repentance.

To the fellow Christian, our hope is to always grow in holiness, challenging each other. Our goal is never to see the other fall, but always to see the other restored. We remind each other of right and wrong, confess when we've fallen short, and strengthen each other in our walks.

And that ultimately is the difference between those who are judgmental and those who speak the truth in love; the words of the message may even be the same, but the goals and heart are entirely different. Both can declare right and wrong, both can warn of the danger to come, but only those

who declare such things out of love do so with the goal to save a soul. A self-righteous, angry mob doesn't want to see restoration; they want to see blood. They got what they wanted, I suppose, as Jesus' blood ran down the cross he was hung on.

Yet unbeknownst to the mob, that blood bought the restoration we all needed. At the end of the day, Jesus was the one canceled so we could be renewed.

POOR IN SPIRIT

Proverbs 29:23:

A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.

We're starting off our series going through the Sermon on the Mount, and this week I want to talk about what it means to be poor in spirit, and to talk about it we're going to look at the young hero Billy Batson, also called Captain Marvel or Shazam depending on which comic you read.

Now, his origin story changes from comic to comic, but it usually involves Billy as an orphan, getting beaten up by some bullies for standing up for a homeless guy who actually turns out to be a magical tiger who works for a wizard. Yeah... um... comics are weird.

The wizard decides that young Billy will be the one to inherit his power. All he has to do is say the word Shazam and he's transformed into a hero filled with the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Hercules, the stamina of Atlas, the power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles, and the speed of Mercury. With these powers he fights to be a protector of the innocent.

What is particularly interesting about Billy is his character. You see, he wasn't the first person to receive this power. Unfortunately, the person who came before him ended up not being such a great guy, and rather than working to protect others, he decided that he wanted to be a god himself.

Billy, meanwhile, is chosen to be the opposite, someone who wouldn't be filled with pride and arrogance. Someone who instead was poor in spirit.

Sometimes it's hard to understand what it means to be poor in spirit. Usually, the thing that comes to mind is someone who is sad or depressed, but that's not actually what Jesus is talking about. Someone who is poor in spirit is someone who doesn't put themselves up on a pedestal above others. You don't look down on them, but rather you acknowledge how small we all are compared to God. According to God, it's those of us who are humble that are the ones that can be brought into his kingdom.

Now let's take a look at Billy. Look how he responds when the wizard tells him that he's looking for someone who is truly good, truly pure in heart, to inherit this power.

What makes Billy the right choice for this power isn't because he's worthy, it's because he knows that he isn't. He knows he isn't perfect. He knows he's weak, and that he'll fail many times. Likewise, we also need to acknowledge before God that we aren't really worthy either. We mess up, we make mistakes, and we fall short. But being humble in admitting our faults is when God is able to lift us up. Poor in spirit means we're also willing to associate with the poor and the weak, or those that society looks down on. Even when he's outnumbered, Billy still stands up for a poor homeless man who is actually a magical tiger but also the other orphans he lives with. In the end,

when he gets the chance, he doesn't even keep his power for himself but shares it with them. He brings together the weak and creates a family. Much in the same way that God brings us together in our weakness, gives us his strength, and makes us a family.

One of the themes we will see from Jesus as we go through the Sermon on the Mount is that it's what's inside of us that is most important, not just what others see on the outside. We're going to look at a lot of really cool superheroes over the next two months, with a lot of really cool powers, but don't forget that the real thing that makes someone a hero isn't what they have on the outside, but what they have on the inside.

OUR ROLE TO PLAY IN GOD'S KINGDOM: JOSHUA DEVOTIONAL

One of the most iconic scenes in “Lord of the Rings” is the moment when the fellowship of the ring is formed. There is a meeting where all the leaders realize that the only way to destroy the evil ring of Sauron is to throw it into the volcano in his territory, a very dangerous mission. The problem is nobody trusts anyone else in this meeting. Everyone is worried that the power of the ring will be too great a temptation, and that the ring will corrupt whoever attempts the mission—or at the very least they'll be killed during such a suicidal quest. As everyone shouts at each other, the young hobbit, Frodo, steps forward and volunteers to take the ring to Mordor. The meeting grows silent, everyone in awe of Frodo's bravery. And, one-by-one, volunteers step forward to help. Nine companions, each with their own skill and expertise to bring. Each one willing to make tremendous sacrifices for the sake of the entire world.

We're continuing through the book of Joshua, and one of the things we were talking about this week is the importance of us each having our own part to play in God's kingdom. No matter your gifts or skills, everyone has something to bring to the table.

As we see Joshua prepare to lead Israel into the land they would inherit, he calls all the twelve tribes of Israel together. Two of the tribes, and half of the tribe of Manasseh, had already settled into their territory east of the Jordan River. But now the time had come to cross over the Jordan and claim the rest of the land. Joshua knows they're going to need everyone together to win these battles; if two-and-a-half tribes stay behind, they'll be much weaker. Look what happens.

Joshua 1:10-16:

“So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: ‘Go through the camp and tell the people, ‘Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.’ But to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said, ‘Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you after he said, ‘The LORD your God will give you rest by giving you this land.’ Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, ready for battle, must cross over ahead of your fellow Israelites. You are to help them until the LORD gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land the LORD your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise.’ Then they answered Joshua, ‘Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go.’”

Each tribe, each individual, has a role to play. Too often in life, you'll see people focused just on what's beneficial to themselves. Once they get their objective, they no longer have a motivation to help others. You might also find people who want to help but feel as though they just don't have enough to bring to the table; they don't know enough; they don't have enough skill. Both these

attitudes can cause us to miss out on the chance to partner with God in the work that He is doing. And we all have a way to partner—a ministry God wants us to contribute to.

Romans 12:3-8:

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

We have different gifts, but never think that one gift is more important than the others: we each have our part to play. Each of Frodo’s companions brought their own gifts, and each played a vital role in making sure their mission was successful. Some brought skill, some magic, some wisdom and cleverness, but the team wouldn’t have been able to save the world had even one of them been missing. Maybe we are not saving the world from a gigantic evil eye tower thing.

We each have our missions. Let’s be faithful in carrying them out.

“EMPOWERING A GENERATION” SERMON

What happens when you put an eight-year-old in charge of a country? For anyone who's been a parent of an eight-year-old, that's probably a terrifying thought. In our minds, we have some qualifications, of what it takes to be the leader of an entire nation. But sometimes God likes to throw us a little curve ball, in terms of who he sets up to be a ruler.

Last month when I preached, I shared how I have a lot of interest in studying how the different kings of the Bible acted from one generation to the next. What caused a generation to turn out differently? Last time I shared a pretty sad story of Jehoshaphat's son who completely turned away from God and sent the nation into a downward spiral. Today, I want to pick up where I left off and look at a king who took things in the opposite direction.

2 Chronicles 34: 1-7:

“Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left. In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols. Under his direction the altars of the Baals were torn down; he cut to pieces the incense altars that were above them and smashed the Asherah poles and the idols. These he broke to pieces and scattered over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. He burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and so he purged Judah and Jerusalem. In the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim and Simeon, as far as Naphtali, and in the ruins around them, he tore down the altars and the Asherah poles and crushed the idols to powder and cut to pieces all the incense altars throughout Israel. Then he went back to Jerusalem.”

So, Josiah, eight years old, becomes king. His father, Amon, was pretty evil, and only lasted two years before he got himself assassinated, pushing Josiah into the role at a very young age. And as Josiah becomes king, we wonder whether he will just take after his father, as so many sons do. Will he keep doing the evil things his father was doing?

Yet, something in Josiah clicks. He recognizes at this young age that he didn't want to follow in the footsteps of a king who only survived for two years, even though this was his father. Even at the age of eight, Josiah understands that there has to be a better path. Then, at the age of sixteen, he finds this better path, following God.

I know a lot of the time people look at teenagers and say, “Ah, teenagers... they can't make good choices. They're immature, self-centered, rebellious.... They're....”

Josiah shows us something though: don't write-off the next generation just because they're young. A young person empowered by God can do extraordinary things. Josiah turns out to be one of the

best kings that the Israelites ever have—on par with kings like Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and even King David. And he makes it his mission to restore proper worship of God in the land.

2 Chronicles 34:8:

“In the eighteenth year of Josiah’s reign, to purify the land and the temple, he sent Shaphan son of Azaliah and Maaseiah the ruler of the city, with Joah son of Joahaz, the recorder, to repair the temple of the Lord his God.”

Josiah realizes it’s not enough to just get rid of the idols and false gods that had infiltrated the country. He needs to replace them with a proper place to worship and sets out to rebuild the temple. And an interesting thing happens when he does this. You see, after over five decades of neglecting proper worship, things had gotten so bad that not only had the temple fallen apart, but people had literally lost God’s law. The Bible. They just lost their last copy. You think of countries where it’s illegal to have a Bible—where governments do anything they can to find copies of the Bible and destroy them. The Israelites had turned away from God for so long that this new generation didn’t know anything about His word. Not until they start repairing the temple! As they start brushing the dust off the old items inside, lo and behold, they find this interesting scroll.

2 Chronicles 34:14-18:

“While they were bringing out the money that had been taken into the temple of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the LORD that had been given through Moses. Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, ‘I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.’ He gave it to Shaphan. Then Shaphan took the book to the king and reported to him: ‘Your officials are doing everything that has been committed to them. They have paid out the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the supervisors and workers.’ Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, ‘Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.’ And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king.”

I just try to imagine that scene: they’re cleaning things up, and look, and say, “Well this is funny, what’s this?” They come to the king saying, “Hey, we’re doing all the work, but we found something and we’re not quite sure what it is.” Our translations say book, but back then it would have probably been written on a scroll. And as Josiah listens to the words of God’s law being read, he realizes they’re in trouble. He might have been reading in Deuteronomy where God describes what will happen in the future when His people turn away from Him.

Deuteronomy 31:17-18

“And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, ‘Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?’ And I will certainly hide my face in that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.”

Or he might have been reading the prophetic song Moses records in Chapter 32, where he describes the events that will take place in that time in the future. Josiah realizes that the nation has been worshiping other gods for so long that they're getting pretty close to seeing this time of judgment and destruction. And Josiah says, OK, maybe that day of judgment and wrath will come in the future, but it won't be on my watch. Rather than giving up and throwing in the towel, Josiah decides to double down and empower a generation to seek after God with their whole hearts. And I can say this: that after years of ministry teaching children, teenagers, and college students—don't underestimate a young person empowered by the Bible.

That word, empowered, is a popular word nowadays. It gets thrown around a lot. Politicians, celebrities... they want to empower people. It pops up in their speeches a lot, doesn't it? I was curious, so I looked it up in Merriam-Webster, to see what the actual definition was: "To give official authority or legal power to," "enable," "to promote the self-actualization or influence of." I tend to like the definition of giving someone the ability to do something they otherwise wouldn't be able to do. Ideally, the ability to do something good or beneficial. Setting someone free from something that holds them captive, or in slavery.

John 8:31-34:

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" They answered him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?'" Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

It's interesting that sin often comes in under the guise of empowering you. Take this fruit, you will be like God. Just cheat this one time, it will put you in a better position in the future. Just tell a little lie; spread a little gossip about that person; maybe you can get that promotion; and make a better salary.

Hey, God is love, right? God wants you to be happy; love is love; get into any relationship you want. Why limit intimacy to just one person when there are so many other options out there? I often tell people that a temptation is a lie that tells you that the way to satisfy a desire you have is to go against God's will. And once you fall for that lie, or once you give in to temptation, it traps you; makes you a slave. And I think that's something that Christians have forgotten over the centuries. We're not here to make people follow rules, or stop having fun, or say funny sentences in old English. We're here to set the captives free; to empower people, by giving them the truth that exposes the lies that lead to death. People today have forgotten that the Bible isn't just old fairy tales and wishful thinking; it's the word that was given to us to help us navigate the maze of lies the world throws at us. And Josiah shows us that even if you give that to a kid, they can make something out of it.

And this, this is more important now than ever. The sheer volume and range of lies that the next generation is being bombarded with—between the internet, social media, schools, the entertainment industry—really is beyond anything we’ve ever seen before.

We saw that definition of empower, and that third definition had that little note about “self-actualization.” Just find your true self. That’s a huge message today, isn’t it? “You need to find your truth. No one else can tell you who you are or what’s right for you.”

In this era of moral relativity, the only thing that’s wrong is the act of telling someone else they’re wrong, unless you’re telling them that telling someone else, they’re wrong is wrong, in which case it’s right, unless it’s wrong. But only on Wednesday and some holidays, unless it’s the Supreme Court, but only if he’s a white male, unless he’s a she, but also a liberal, but not if she’s a black female conservative....

Man’s moral relativism gets confusing when you try to figure it out.

This is not new. Back during Josiah’s time, their version of moral relativism was essentially theological relativism. You can have your god, and I can have my god, and both our gods can be real, even if they’re contradictory and even if they’re just a random carving I made out of wood.

So, the first thing Josiah does is he gets everyone together and just reads the Bible. The elders, the priests, even just ordinary people. He brings them together and says, guys, look, we’ve found the word of God that He gave to our ancestors long ago. We’ve forgotten about it until now, but we’re in trouble, so it’s time to get serious. And they read it, and they make a covenant together that they are going to follow this God: The God that brought them out of Egypt. The God who parted the Red Sea. The God who rescued them time and time again.

When we’re talking about empowerment, that’s the first thing we need. We need the words of God. We have it right here. And we don’t have it just to put it on display, or frame verses on the wall. We have it so that we can internalize it, meditate on it. Be filled with it daily as we read. It’s why we need to have regular reading time, or devotionals, and use them to build on the foundation of our faith.

And we need to read it properly. I was talking with people just this week about this. A lot of people tend to turn to the Bible or to devotionals just when they’re in trouble or seeking something. They want God to speak just the right thing they need to hear, at just the right moment. And sure, sometimes God does that where we get just the verse we need just when we need it. It’s happened to me, I’ll admit it. But we start getting to the point where we’re trying to use the Bible like it’s a fortune cookie or something. Like it’s tarot cards or a Magic Eight Ball. God, should I major in chemical engineering or interpretive dance theory?

2 Samuel 6:14:

“And David danced before the Lord with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod.” Someone might say, “Guys, I’m supposed to major in interpretive dance theory. Praise the Lord, He just revealed His will to me in Samuel.” Uh, I’m not sure if it’s really wise to say, “God spoke to me. He showed me in the Bible. And I’m supposed to wear linen clothing today, also. It was in my daily devotional.”

Of course that’s not how we’re supposed to use the Bible. It’s not a divining rod. It’s truth that’s given to us to establish a theological foundation from which we can make wise and moral decisions. And more important than having that timely word that comes right when we need it, it’s better to have that word *before* we need it, so that when the crisis comes, we have a solid foundation to stand on and navigate with. And, I think you guys know, it doesn’t matter how wealthy you are, how physically fit you are, or how smart you are, the day of crisis will come. The battle comes, the enemy is at the door, and if you aren’t dressed and ready for it, it’s going to be a tough day. Yeah, the victory belongs to the Lord, and He’ll see us through it, but it’s much better if we’re awake and ready for the day the enemy comes knocking.

Ephesians 6:11:

“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

So have Bible verses memorized and ready to go. Keep your prayer life strong, and your connection to God firm. Not because you want God to tell you what job to take or who you should marry, but so that we have the ability to make wise and moral decisions. And on that path, sure, maybe God will throw you a curveball, give you a few more specifics on what you need to do as you pray, or put you in a unique situation that requires supernatural revelation. There are times in the Bible when God speaks to people and tells them exactly what they need to do.

But most of the time, people are just making decisions with the wisdom and information they have, sometimes rebelling against God and sometimes obeying. So, we need the Bible to establish our theological foundation and to help navigate the lies our society tells us. What are the big things today?

I talked about the problem of moral relativism. The problem is, when you don’t have an objective moral standard to use as your basis for discussion and passing laws, all you have is endless conflict and anger. People say we’re more polarized in our society politically than ever before. Why? Because we can’t agree on right and wrong, so we can’t have a real discussion on it.

People have been flipping out for weeks over the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Why? Because people don’t have real discussions on why human life has inherent value, or at what stage in our development we have that inherent right to life. Instead, they replace right and wrong with beneficial or detrimental. I remember at UCLA once; I saw a Christian debating an atheist about the concept of objective morality. The Christian said, “What would be wrong with me stealing money from you right now.” And the atheist said, “Well, that would be right for you, but wrong for me.” But really,

all he was doing was swapping the definitions of the words. What he meant was that it would be detrimental to him. It would be bad for him because he would have less money. And in a world where life doesn't have inherent value, all that matters is who is strongest to take what they want.

Years ago, there was a great story a pastor shared on his blog. He was talking with a girl about morality even though the girl thought he was a bad, misogynistic guy due to his Evangelical Christian beliefs. And as they're discussing, he asks her to explain why it's wrong for a man to beat and abuse his wife. And she struggles to come up with an answer because she believes that morality is relative. So, after she fumbles around with words, all she can say is, "Well, I personally don't like it."

And the pastor responds, "Well, I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that because that wife is created in the image of God and has inherent value, it's evil for her husband to hurt her. Spouses have an inherent, God-given obligation to love and care for each other, and the abusive husband will face God's judgment for his evil ways." And he stops and says, "I can say that without any uncertainty. The best you're saying is that you personally don't like it. Yet, I'm the misogynist?"

The girl didn't have any response to that; just a little tear that came down her cheek. Why did she cry? Because she suddenly found herself face to face with a worldview that ascribed inherent worth to her. A human created in God's image. A human Jesus died for. That'll shake anyone's world.

I remember another evangelist (one who goes around recording videos of himself giving the gospel to people) sharing a video of a discussion he had with a young woman about why she supported abortion. In this video, he asks her, and she says, "Well, what if the baby would have had a terrible life, maybe suffer abuse, maybe be neglected." The evangelist looks at her, and asks her, "Hey, have you suffered some abuse?"

She's quiet, and a little tear comes down her cheek as she just nods a little. He asks her, "Are you feeling depressed; maybe thinking about suicide?" A few more tears, and a little nod. "Hey, can I pray with you right now?" At that point the video stops, because that's when you need to focus on ministering to the person in need. But what's happening in these stories? These girls are realizing, maybe for the first time, that they are truly loved by a God who knows them fully, and values them as true daughters.

I was sharing a few years ago at Christian Camp Arev about love. One of the nights I shared from Isaiah.

Isaiah 49:15:

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

One of the high schoolers at camp that week was adopted and had been struggling with the emotions and questions of whether or not he was really loved. He felt rejected by his biological

family. And one of the counselors who knew this immediately went over to him with this verse and gave it to him. And this boy, for all the tough guy front he put up in front of everyone, came up to me afterwards, telling me that he just read that verse over and over again, crying, as he came face to face with this God who would never forget or reject him. That's power right there.

More than anything, our generation needs to find our inherent worth from God, rather than the things society tries to sell us. Flooded with social media, our young people today—especially our girls—are told that their inherent worth comes from their outer appearance; how they look in front of the camera. They're given completely unrealistic images of what beauty is supposed to be.

Look at the pictures in magazines and on Instagram and movie ads. They're all photo shopped. See the before and after. None of it is real. The goal is to convince you that you aren't good enough the way you are. But buy our product, and then you'll be happy.

1 Peter 3:3-4:

"Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."

Why does Peter say this? Because Proverbs 31:30 says:

"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting."

Because God knows that chasing after outer beauty and worldly image is a trap that will make us a slave. Thousands of dollars are spent on beauty products. Countless hours are spent trying to cover up every imperfection.

Maybe for boys, it's more common for them to be told that their worth is in their physical strength, or in their occupation, or how much wealth they can accumulate.

Jeremiah 9:23-24:

"Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD."

Beauty, strength, wealth, power; none of it matters. It's all chasing after the wind. But unless we arm our kids to recognize this trap, they'll be fighting in a war without a weapon.

One thing that people have noticed in this generation is a shift in what young people aspire to. In the past, if you asked a kid what they want to be when they grow up, they'd say, "A doctor, astronaut, president," things like that. Today? It's pretty common to hear kids want to be social

media stars. They want to be “influencers.” They want to influence other people. That’s part of what our society tells us is empowerment: wielding influence over other people.

But if you look at the lives of these so-called influencers, behind the scenes they’re just so sad and depressed—always worried about what others are thinking about them. The reality is they aren’t really influencing anyone. They’re just stuck in the trap of people pleasing; just giving their fans what they want to see. Then they get sponsors and advertisers, and all they’re doing is parroting out the ideologies they’re being fed. They aren’t the ones who are the real influencers. They’re just being manipulated as tools for others. So much for empowerment, right?

You look at celebrities in the entertainment industry: these women giving performances in revealing and provocative outfits then turning around and saying they’re empowering women by encouraging them to do the same. That’s not empowering. That’s degrading. Maybe it feels great at first. They get their cheers and their attention, but you all know how it ends.

I really want to zero in on this one last point: we are all influenced by things, and in turn we influence others. The things we fill ourselves up with are going to be what overflows from us and impacts other people. Josiah realized that he needed to get rid of the influence that was coming from all these false idols and fill people up with the influence that came from scripture. That’s real empowerment.

And after Josiah was gone, eventually the day of God’s judgment came as the nation again turned away. But his work wasn’t in vain. He gave not only his generation the power of the Bible, but us (today) as well. Without the faith of this young child, we wouldn’t have this example today. When we’re empowered by God’s word—and when we in turn empower others with it—it’s not in vain. So let this be our influence and empowerment. And let’s use that power to do great things.

“NEXT GENERATION” SERMON JULY 3, 2022 CALVARY ARMENIAN CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

There was a book I read a few years ago by Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace called “So the Next Generation Will Know.” It was a really relevant topic, things we need to do to equip the next generation for the challenges we face today. I especially liked that it had sections not just for pastors and teachers, but also for parents and mentors as well, with ideas to reflect on. The opening theme verse of the book is found here:

Psalm 78:5-7:

“He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.”

It’s a topic that you all know is near to my heart, working with so many different young people, and seeing the difficult things we face in society today. Of course, there’s never anything really new, it’s always the same old challenges revisited, just packaged a little differently. So, one of the things I’ve done over the years to understand how to teach and prepare the next generation is actually to study the kings of the Old Testament. In particular, the thing that interested me was what causes one generation to do a complete 180 from the previous one. You’ll have this really awesome king, with just a great mindset, seeking God, and then a son who turns out completely different. Or a wicked king, who is then followed by a righteous king.

When I spoke last December, I shared some thoughts on King Jehoshaphat. As far as kings go, he was one of the best Judah ever had. During a time when the northern kingdom was being driven into evil by Ahab and Jezebel, Jehoshaphat was leading the southern kingdom closer to God and getting rid of idol worship. Like I shared in December, this was a king with so much faith that he was willing to walk into an impossible battle, with faith that God would grant the victory. They didn’t charge into battle with swords and arrows, they went in singing songs of worship. And God granted them the victory.

You’d think that surely after a king like that, the nation would be set for great things. Surely his children would have seen his faith, seen how God rewarded him, and would have wanted the same in their own lives. And Jehoshaphat doesn’t just show favoritism to his first born; he does make Jehoram king, but also gives great gifts to his siblings and sets them up for success as well.

So Jehoram inherits the kingdom, gets himself set up as king, and the first thing he does... is... go on a murder spree and kill his own family. His own siblings. What? Seriously, how do you go from a father who follows God through impossible situations to a son who kills his own brothers without a second thought?

Sometimes it's obvious what causes children to turn out the way they do. I remember a year or two ago, watching a video made by one of those social media moms. And she's crying in this video because she heard her daughter using bad language and realized that the daughter learned that language from her. And it hit her that all the things that were bothering her about her kid, were things that her kid copied from her. And she's crying on this video because she realizes that in order to have a good influence on her daughter, she's going to be the one to have to change, and it terrified her. It's easy to complain about others, but a lot harder to change yourself. And the truth is, kids will follow your example much more than they'll listen to what you say.

There are, of course, other things that influence how kids turn out. Maybe influence from friends, maybe traumatic experiences, maybe it's various role models. One of the things you realize as you're going through these different kings and generations in the Old Testament is that there really is no "one size fits all." It can be really easy to fall into the trap of "oh, if only I had done that one thing differently." Or maybe thinking, "If only that parent, if only that teacher had done x or done y, then the situation would have turned out entirely differently."

I think back to kids that I've taught over the years, college students that I've mentored, some I've seen use the things I've taught them, and some I've seen turn away from them. You think of verses like Proverbs 22:6:

*Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old they will not turn from it.*

And yeah, a lot of the time that's it. And sometimes when things don't turn out the way we hoped, it is in fact our fault. And sometimes not, but we can't always tell.

But as we see church attendance drop, as we see young people lose interest in the Gospel and Jesus, we do have to ask ourselves if we're doing something wrong. And that brings us back to Jehoshaphat. There's a little hint we might find in our passage about what might have gone wrong, and it shows up in verse six. Jehoram walked in the way of the house of Ahab, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. Hold on, wait a second. Ahab and Jezebel, they were bad news, they were about as evil as evil can get, to the point that even today their names tend to be synonymous with evil. Why in the world is their daughter marrying Jehoshaphat's son? And that's where we start to see a little of what's going on here. Let's flip just a few chapters earlier.

2 Chronicles 18:1-3:

Now Jehoshaphat had great riches and honor, and he made a marriage alliance with Ahab. After some years he went down to Ahab in Samaria. And Ahab killed an abundance of sheep and oxen for him and for the people who were with him, and induced him to go up against Ramoth-gilead. Ahab king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, "Will you go with me to Ramoth-gilead?" He answered him, "I am as you are, my people as your people. We will be with you in the war."

Ah ha. Now, Jehoshaphat had some things right here. My people are your people, yeah, they were all Israelites. And God does want to see his people united. Jehoshaphat has that same heart; he doesn't want to see the descendants of Jacob fighting with each other. But he also missed something crucial.

2 Corinthians 6:1:

"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?"

Matthew 3:9:

"And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

Jehoshaphat wanted something good, but he set himself up for some serious problems here. Just because someone is a biological descendant of Abraham doesn't mean we can make an alliance. To truly be a descendant is to be someone of faith. And we need to be careful, because we can make the same mistake.

Ok now, I might get in trouble for saying this in some churches, but I think I can get away with saying it here. Now don't get me wrong, I have friends in all kinds of Christian denominations. I just had my Chi Alpha friends here this week, the team I go to Haiti with. They're all on the Pentecostal, charismatic end of the theology spectrum, and we have a lot of theological differences, but we're all united on what counts, the main theological doctrines our faith is based on. But I think a lot of Christians today, especially in Armenian circles, are willing to compromise on the essential points of the gospel in the name of trying to keep unity among Armenians. Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant... there were reasons these groups split off.

Theological reasons... things that had to do with essential elements of the gospel. There was a reason Martin Luther was excommunicated, and it wasn't because he was a bully. The pope claimed that he had the ability to forgive sins, and he'd forgive the sins of your relatives in purgatory if you just gave him enough money. That's not the gospel; that's evil, greedy manipulation. And when Luther called them out on it, they had to get rid of him.

I'm not saying be mean and pick fights with churches that aren't evangelical. I'm saying be very careful where you make alliances because the next generation is watching, and when they see you compromise, they'll start to wonder if you take any of this seriously at all. And if you're not taking this seriously, why should they?

A huge reason why kids turn away from the gospel is that they see their parents and teachers don't really take it seriously. For a lot of people, especially in our Armenian circles, church becomes more of a social club than a place of worship. People dress nice, show up a few times a month,

maybe just a few times a year, enjoy some coffee, complain that the organ was a little too loud or the sermon went three minutes too long, and go home without thinking about it. All too often, we see people in churches around the United States with the idea that they want just enough Jesus to get into heaven and have all the happy things they want in life, but not so much that they have to really give anything up or change their lives.

There was a funny headline a few years back on a Christian satire website: “After 12 years of quarterly church attendance, parents shocked by daughter’s lack of faith.” It’s not real, this is satire, but the parents in their story say they’re shocked to discover that going to church once every three months, whenever they didn’t have something more important going on, wasn’t enough to keep their children interested in their “strong quarterly commitment to the faith” when they’re older.

It’s a joke, but that can be something that happens when churches become more of a social club than a place where we proclaim salvation. The truth is kids don’t need a social club. They’ll have plenty of social clubs with their friends. What they need is the life that Jesus offers. The power of the one who died on the cross for their sins.

Now look, Jehoshaphat, he had strong faith. He wasn’t letting Ahab dictate his theology. When the time to go into battle comes, Ahab is consulting his own prophets, and Jehoshaphat says “No, we need a prophet of the real God.” Ahab complains, “ah that Micaiah guy, he never says nice things about me.” Jehoshaphat insists, so they bring Micaiah in. Now, here’s the funny thing. Micaiah tells them they’re going to lose, and that Ahab is going to die in this battle. So, what do they do? They go into battle anyway. The plan is for Ahab to disguise himself, and Jehoshaphat would stay dressed in his royal robes. I don’t really understand the logic here, I’ll be honest.

Now look, I’m sure Jehoshaphat had good reasons for going into battle. Maybe he figured, “Hey, maybe Ahab’s going to die, but I’ll be fine.” And that’s true, God did protect him. But if you’re going into battle with a guy who’s doing everything he can to make you the target of the enemy, maybe he’s not the best guy to make an alliance with. Either way, Ahab died, and Jehoshaphat walked away fine. His faith was strong enough to stand through this alliance. Unfortunately, the faith of his son wasn’t. I imagine he’s looking at his dad thinking, “Well, if Dad doesn’t care about what God says, why should I?”

And see, that’s the thing right there. We may have our church practices that work fine for us, “my faith stays strong, I can handle making a temporary deal with someone who doesn’t have my same commitment to God.” Maybe I enjoy a particular ritual that’s lost a lot of its meaning. But the next generation is watching. They’re watching to see if the things you do match the things you say. Paul talks in Romans about Christians who have different levels of faith:

Romans 14:13:

“Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”

He wants Christians to think carefully about how our example impacts other believers. Rather than looking down on other believers who don't have as strong of a faith, we should regulate our actions to make sure we're building up the faith of others. I love how in the book "So the Next Generation Will Know" they mention that parents change a lot of their behaviors for their kids. You don't watch super violent horror movies with your four-year-old, you watch "PAW Patrol," right?

The examples Paul gives are believers who are worried about what they are eating or celebrating certain holidays. Paul says, "Look, these aren't essential things. There are essential things. Things like knowing Jesus died and rose again, paying the price for our sins." But for those who are young in their faith, let's not mess them up by trying to push them through something that's beyond their faith too quickly. There will be a day when kids grow out of "PAW Patrol," but until then, "PAW Patrol" is on a roll!

I remember reading an article, years back, in a Christian magazine. It was written by someone who had been in something like a focus group put on by their church leaders. The church leadership wanted to ask these young people why people their age just didn't seem interested in church these days. And the group brought up some important things.

They saw hypocrisy in the church. They felt the church was more interested in the rituals than the mission of the gospel. They were focused more on putting events on for themselves than serving others. And young people, they just didn't feel included.

For a lot of people, church always seems like it's their parents' church, and never their church, you know what I mean? And of course it's understandable, you don't put a six-year-old on the church council unless you want every Sunday to be ice cream day, but at some point, young people grow in faith and maturity and they're ready for leadership roles.

The sad thing was, at the end of this focus group meeting, after getting all this input, the leaders said, "So what you're saying is you want more modern music and relevant pop culture." And the young people there were just shocked and realized no one had been listening to them. You know, one of the things I tell people who teach Sunday school, who mentor young people, is "Don't expect them to pay attention to you during the lesson when you're not paying attention to them outside of the lesson." There's a real hunger for authentic churches out there, churches that take the gospel seriously. Churches that take the command to go and make disciples seriously. Churches that will listen to the questions and challenges people have. And young people have real questions that they want real answers to.

1 Peter 3:15:

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Why do you believe it? Are you ready to answer the question? I know... a lot of people in our Armenian evangelical circles are really quick with their negative stories. "Oh, things were so bad when I was young. Oh, that one person, I can't believe that thing they said about me fifteen years ago." How many people are ready to tell the stories of how God rescued them? The day they found salvation. The day they learned that God's promises stand true, even in our weakness. Young people are listening; they're hearing your stories. What are the stories they're going to walk away with?

Now, like I said earlier, I don't want you guys to think that I'm saying there's some one-size-fits-all thing to this. There's a lot that goes into raising up the next generation with the gospel as the foundation. It takes the family, and it takes the church. It takes people being willing to invest their time and make sacrifices. And Satan is doing his thing too, looking for opportunities to undercut us and mess up the work we're called to do. I'm not sharing these thoughts, so we'll go around pointing fingers and blaming this or that. "Oh, if they just went to church more often, if they just memorized more Bible verses."

This instead is about self-reflection, and a call to action. To pray and take the time to connect with younger believers and share your walk with them. Of course, I don't have time to go through a whole book in a sermon, but there's a lot of great stuff in here if anyone wants to borrow it and check it out. It hits a lot of very relevant topics for teachers and parents and youth alike, and some great challenges. Things to do, tools to answer questions, traps to watch out for. Because at the end of the day, if we want this church to be around for the next generation, we have to be intentional. We're in a battle, and souls are on the line.

And one last thing. Yeah, sometimes you see the next generation completely fall away in the Old Testament... but sometimes you see the opposite. King Josiah. His dad was pretty evil, didn't even last two years. Josiah is stuck taking over the kingdom at the age of eight years old.

2 Chronicles 1-3:

Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem thirty-one years. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left. In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols.

An eight-year-old kid changes the course of the nation. Don't doubt that children can do incredible things when they're equipped with the power of God. And that's why we're here, because we know God has the power to change lives, to do the impossible.

WORKERS IN THE FIELD

by Matt and Lara Silverman

This Sunday, we looked at Matthew 8 and 9 and saw Jesus doing a lot of work. He's doing miracles, healing people, stopping storms, teaching, and arguing with religious leaders. There just seems to be no end to it. Everywhere he turns, there's need, and I love how Matthew ends chapter 9.

Matthew 9:35-39:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

There was a video I saw last week that I found very interesting; it was a short clip of a shepherd who finds one of his sheep stuck on her back, with no way to roll over onto her feet. She must have been that way for a few hours, and by the time he finds her, she's too weak to stand herself up. It takes a few hours of very gentle care to help the sheep recover and move around again. Without the shepherd, she was completely helpless and would have been attacked by a predator if she had stayed in that state for much longer.

This video really reminded me of Jesus' attitude to these crowds. He looks at them the same way this shepherd looks at his sheep; he sees those who are helpless and in despair, and he has to give them hope. He has to give them the gospel.

But Jesus isn't planning on doing all this work by himself; God set up the church so that we would participate in this work as the body of Christ. Jesus points out to his disciples in verse 37 that there is much work to be done, but not enough people doing it. And here Jesus tells his disciples to pray a very interesting prayer: that God would send out workers to do this work. He doesn't tell them to pray about themselves, or that God would send them, or even explicitly tell them that they're the ones to go out; just pray that God sends someone. And here we see God's plan at work, because later in our story the disciples are the ones who go out and do this work. They become the answer to their own prayers as they continue to walk with Jesus.

One of the lies the culture around tells us is that you should keep your faith to yourself; it's a private thing and people will be offended if you talk to them about God. And, maybe some people will, but by keeping our faith to ourselves we lose out on the chance to give hope to those around us who are hurting. I can tell you from my own life, dealing with cancer a couple times now, dealing with the craziness of the Ph.D., and all kinds of setbacks and difficulties, it's the word of God that has helped me continue to have confidence and hope throughout every struggle. The power of God is real, and it works in our lives. Giving others the chance to feel that is the greatest gift you can give them, and the privilege to do that shouldn't be taken lightly.

Even before my illness, God was similarly challenging me to recognize that the importance of the eternal things far outweighs the importance of the temporary worldly things, and this hope is what has sustained me through my temporary painful circumstances.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18:

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

It’s verses like these that have helped me weather the greatest storms I’ve gone through, and even though I have times of great despair, I still get up and push through, knowing that God has a purpose for all my suffering.

And to have this hope, this power, we needed to have someone willing to share the Gospel with us. We needed a worker who was out in the field, working on the harvest. And now, even though we’ve both faced a lot of suffering, we’re able to be those workers who go out and meet others in their suffering. In fact, one of the things that has helped me share the gospel the most is the suffering that I’ve been through.

Another thing that comes to mind is Genesis 41:52, where Joseph gives his son the name Ephraim because God had made him fruitful in the land of his affliction. Because of my illness, I’ve had unique chances throughout this journey, whether it be friends, former colleagues, or even nurses to share how God has sustained me, and what I put my ultimate hope in.

When I was in the hospital last year, after one of our prayer sessions, a nurse came into my room and looked around and said, “there’s something different in here.” So, let’s not neglect the work we’re called to. The path is difficult, and there will be hardships on the way, but the reward is great, and something that lasts for eternity. So, this week, pray that the Lord would send out workers into the harvest.

You never know, it might be you.

RIOTS AND REVOLUTIONS SERMON

What kind of objections have you encountered to Christianity? When someone tells you, I don't like the Bible because... or I don't like Christianity because... or I don't like Christians or Jesus because... insert excuse here. Maybe you've heard the excuse, "I don't like the Bible because it contradicts science. I don't like Christians because they're judgmental. I don't like Christianity because it teaches that there's a hell, and I don't like that." Back in my days at UCLA, I loved getting into discussions with people about what they believe and why. In a campus filled with brilliant minds from all kinds of backgrounds, there was no shortage of interesting conversations to be had.

But one of the interesting things I've noticed in my conversations over the years, is that often the reason someone gives you for why they reject Jesus or the Bible, isn't the real reason they're objecting. As we would be discussing something, and I would show a few holes in their logic, often the conversation would shift a little, and they'd say something like, "yeah, but my real objection is" and then again, "well really, my issue is." That was when the conversations got really interesting, when they're no longer just regurgitating atheist arguments they found on the internet, but actually digging deeper to see what really motivates them.

The story in Acts we'll look at today is probably my favorite story in the entire Bible. Something about it, I just find it completely hilarious, while at the same time, it gives us tremendous insight into human nature. How do we think, how do we act? To set the stage here, Paul has been in Ephesus for quite a while at this point, over two years. Not only did Paul have a great preaching ministry going on daily in a lecture hall, he was also doing really unusual miracles. Even pieces of cloth that were being brought for him to touch seemed to have healing powers; people would bring... a handkerchief or apron for him to touch, and then bring that back to heal someone. People were so blown away with what he was doing that they were completely abandoning their old pagan ways. At one point, there's a moment when a bunch of people who had been practicing sorcery completely renounced it, brought over all of their sorcery scrolls and items which... modern-day equivalent... together would have been worth millions of dollars. All of a sudden, they're seeing real power... this Paul guy, and the Jesus he preaches about, that's the real deal.

Then, after two years, something interesting happens.

Acts 19:23-41:

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself,

who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.” When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

There are so many things in this scene that I just find completely fascinating. We’re introduced to this silversmith named Demetrius, and he is starting to have some concerns about Paul. Demetrius is seeing what’s happening in the city; people are abandoning paganism and turning to Christ. Paul is growing in influence. This crowd of people just burned an incredibly valuable stockpile of supposedly magic scrolls. This isn’t just a fad. This is a revolution. What might they be abandoning next?

Demetrius puts two and two together. A city that converts to Christianity is a city that’s not buying all these worthless metal idols to pray to. These metal workers made a lot of money selling idols, and when people stop worshipping these gods... well... there goes the business. His reaction tells us so much about human nature. He gets these other craftsmen together, gets a whole crowd together, and says, “Guys, if Paul keeps doing this, people aren’t going to worship our great goddess anymore. Side note... we’ll lose a lot of money, but that’s not the point, the real point is our goddess will be robbed... of her great divine majesty... and we’ll lose a lot of money, but that’s not the real point... the real point is...”

It’s just so human, isn’t it? I think at some level, these metal workers know they’re exploiting people. They’re taking advantage of people’s desperation, selling them worthless trinkets that will supposedly solve their problems. Are you sick? Are you in need of help? You need a god on your side. Just buy this little statue of Artemis and pray to it, and she’ll answer your prayers. It appeals

to an inherent desire people have to have a god they can fit into their pocket that will give them whatever they want. Of course, this is total foolishness, but it's a delusion that comes over people when they reject God.

Paul describes it in Romans 1:21-23:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

One of my favorite passages in Isaiah is where God Himself points out the foolishness of idol worship Isaiah 44:9-20:

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit nothing? People who do that will be put to shame; such craftsmen are only human beings. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and shame. The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is used as fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me! You are my god!" They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

I just love that line. Are you going to bow down to a block of wood that you yourself cut? To a rock you carved? To an inanimate object that can't even talk? And not only does worshipping an idol trap us in foolishness, but it also takes a piece of creation that is worshipping God, because all creation worships God, and takes that piece of creation and distorts it, twists it, into something to be used to worship a figment of our imagination. What a horrible thing to do to the precious things God has created for good.

Now we may say, ha! those ancient, superstitious people, worshiping logs and rocks. We're so much smarter now. Are we though? How quickly are we to turn to foolish things that have no power to save? You want money? Here's the get rich quick scheme, the Ponzi scheme. Life getting you down? Just be more beautiful. Buy our beauty products, buy the latest fashion, then people will really like you. Even within the realm of Christianity, we see the prosperity gospel thriving in our culture. Want a more successful life? God wants to bless you; just send our ministry your money and God will pay you back tenfold. Act now, our phone operators are standing by. Don't like the situation society is in? Vote for me, donate to my political campaign; once I get into office, I'll fix all your problems.

The world knows, though, that when a person turns to Christ, all those lies start to lose their power. As the heart of the sinner is transformed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, it becomes harder for people like Demetrius to exploit them, and Demetrius is seeing that. So, he has to act, before it's too late. I also find it amazing how easy it is for Demetrius to get this riot started. All he has to do is appeal to people's pride. Our great temple, our great goddess, the things we and our city are known for, they're going to lose their glory. We can't stand for this. And as the crowd chants, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" what they're really chanting is, "We're the best! Our team is number one!" For hours, they're mindlessly shouting. I just love that line in verse 32.

Acts 19:32:

"The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there."

I love it because that's just so much like an actual riot; a crowd of angry people who aren't really sure what they're doing or why; they just know they're angry and want to show it.

It was funny. I was watching an interview this week with one of the guys who was in the January 6 riot in DC, who went into the capitol building. Same thing. He's walking around, not really sure what he's doing or why they're there, taking pictures with his phone. The crowd moves one way, and he says, "Oh, ok, I guess we're going that way now." Crowd goes over there, "Ok, I guess I'll follow them and see what happens next."

Or during the Black Lives Matter protests, as rioters who were supposedly protesting for black lives were burning down businesses owned by the very people they were claiming to help. In thousands of years, humanity hasn't changed one bit.

Now Paul of course, he sees a crowd and thinks, "Awesome, I'll go preach to them." Fortunately, he's traveling with some friends who have a little more common sense and explain to him that a violent mob that wants to kill you probably isn't the group you want to walk over to and have a talk with. There's preaching with boldness, and then there's preaching with foolishness, and it's important to know where that line is.

And to understand a little more about this riot, you need to realize how important worship of Artemis would have been to these people. In Roman pagan culture, these gods were the center not just of mythology and religion, but community as well. Pagan rituals worshipping gods like Artemis were filled with a celebration of depravity and... shall we say... inappropriate activities... much like a modern-day Pride parade here in San Francisco, or like... the recent Video Music Awards. And for the people that participate in those, the more people the more fun. With all these people turning to Christ and leaving that lifestyle behind, I imagine a lot of people are concerned they're going to lose out on some of the fun of having an entire city celebrate their depravity with them.

And that brings me back to that observation I shared in the very beginning. When you do a little digging, ask a few questions, you'll often find the real reason people are upset with Christianity or the Bible is not actually the first reason they give you. Demetrius was pretending the issue was all about Artemis, and these mean Christians were taking away Artemis' majesty. Of course, the real reason for his objection was financial; he knew he was going to have a hard time exploiting people if they turned away from his idols. And while the crowd is going ballistic over Paul, how dare he do this or say that most of them don't seem to know who he is or what he did.

This highlights an important thing, and I might make a few people angry with this, but consider these words carefully. You will encounter people who will tell you, "If only Christians acted a little nicer, if only Christians stopped doing this, or started doing that, then people wouldn't complain about them as much." "If you just talked about God's love more, then you won't have to worry about an angry mob coming after you." "If you just acted more like Jesus..." That's just... it's not true.

Sure, you'll make more friends if you're kind and compassionate, but the reality is people will hate the person who follows Christ because Christ Himself is a threat to what they want, and it doesn't matter how much you act like Jesus. Jesus is a threat to the person who wants to keep others in slavery to sin. A Christian who stands for the truth, who doesn't join the pagan crowd on their way to their "celebration" at the temple, who takes the things of God seriously, will be hated, and will be rejected by the world. Yes, you'll have sometimes of favor, when people leave you alone and let you worship in peace, but sooner or later a Demetrius is going to come around and realize that just by calling people to follow Christ, you're a threat to everything he wants. To the one who devotes their life to trapping people in foolishness and exploiting them, the one who sets the captives free is the greatest enemy.

We need to note here, back during this time in ancient Rome, Christians were considered unbelievers. The Christians were the ones going around saying, "You know that god you have a statue of isn't real, right?" "You know that statue doesn't have any real magic powers, right?" And like I shared a few years ago when I preached on Gideon tearing down his idol, any time a Christian turns away from false gods and bad theology, that Christian is publicly declaring to anyone who worships that god, "Your god can't save, I'm going elsewhere." Even if you don't say those words, that's the message you send, and people hate it when their gods are challenged. Even more, they hate it when their schemes to exploit desperate people get messed up.

That being said, we shouldn't just dismiss people when they have questions or objections. Paul was ready to go out to the whole crowd to talk theology with them, and his writings and sermons are filled with logical arguments.

1 Peter 3:15-16:

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

So, whether someone is challenging us for self-centered reasons, or coming to us with real questions from the heart, we should always be ready to answer. Why is it we put this hope in Jesus? You'll get the person who is just asking you questions to see if they can find something you don't know the answer to so they can say, "Ha, see, you can't answer that!"

Well, I can't answer every question about nuclear physics, but that doesn't mean nuclear power plants aren't real. Actually, once, I had a friend who became a hard-core atheist for a while. He started emailing me arguments against the existence of God, and he'd send me one and I'd refute it, then he'd send another, and I refuted it, and after a few I noticed that the wording in the arguments, the sentence structure, this wasn't really the way my friend normally talked. So, I plugged one of the arguments into Google, and sure enough, all of them were from the same website; he was just copying and pasting arguments from there and sending them to me. And so, I pointed that out to him, asked him if he just wanted me to proactively go down the entire list on the website instead of him just sending me them one at a time. And at that point he stopped sending them, because he didn't actually care about my answers, he was just hoping to find something I couldn't respond to so that he could hold it over my head. And many years later, he actually reached out to me apologizing for the way he had treated me during that phase in his life.

Others might say the church is outdated, and we need to get with the times. Old things just don't work in the modern age. Well, the wheel is a pretty old invention, but that still seems to be working for us. Sometimes the reason things stick around for thousands of years is because they actually work. And if we're perfectly honest, the things we're seeing today, the promotion of immorality, the focus on materialism, that's nothing new. It's not "modern times," it's been the same since the fall.

You'll also get the person who is genuinely hurting; they've gone through some traumatic experience, and they're asking the question, "How can God be good with everything I've gone through?" "How can God be good with this cancer you're going through?" I get that. Why is there suffering in the world? And we can talk at the intellectual level, about sin and the fall and that our hope isn't in the things of this world but in heaven, but at the end of the day sometimes just talking about how God has brought us through our own struggles, that Jesus suffered just like the rest of us, can show them that God really does have the power to save, even when the pain seems to be great.

You'll also have people who aren't really rejecting Jesus, but they're rightfully rejecting the false representation of Jesus they've seen in the society around us. Let's be honest, there's a lot of bad theology out there, and I'm not talking Hollywood or social media or things like that; there's a lot of bad theology that's preached from pulpits in churches. On one end, you've got legalism that tries to turn Christianity into a giant set of rules that need to be followed in order for us to be righteous enough to go to heaven.

Then you have the extreme opposite end: "God loves you just the way you are, you don't need to repent." You have prosperity preachers, flying around in multimillion dollar jets, declaring that being a Christian means you'll always be wealthy and prosperous in this life. If you're not wealthy, or you're not being healed, that just means you don't have enough faith. So many people have been hurt by bad churches and bad theology, and we need to be sensitive to that when we speak the truth.

Then there's the foolishness of the modern day new apostolic movement, a lot of them showing up on programs like TBN, claiming to be prophets and making just absurd predictions. Lara and I were actually watching a video just last week of a compilation of all these absurd prophecies, like declaring an end to the pandemic, predicting that Trump would win the 2020 election, predicting weather and storms and stuff, none of which came true. Yet these supposed prophets still have huge crowds following them, still make a huge profit from their teachings... oh... hmm... maybe they're just mixing up the words prophet and profit... they call themselves prophets because they profit... well, never mind, not important.

The important thing is that the world does see this foolishness, and some people will think that's Christianity. So often Christians use this as an excuse to be timid, and not speak up, because they don't want to be associated with these false teachings. The truth is our attitude should be the exact opposite; the existence of all this bad theology should make us even more motivated to speak up and share who Jesus really is. If not us, who else?

Romans 10:14-15:

"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

And one final thought I want to end on. Over the years I've had lots of opportunities to share the gospel, talk theology, debate philosophies all over the place. Discussions with Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and atheists and we've had great discussions. Never once have I had someone that I actually sat down and talked with claim to be offended or say that I was intolerant, or anything like that. Occasionally I've had the folks who were just very... self-righteous, and just waved me off simply because I was a Christian and they already hated Christians, but that was actually pretty rare.

Honestly, the most “offense” I’ve received is from other Christians: people who attend church regularly, complaining that I’ll offend people if I share the gospel. That we need to keep to ourselves, so we don’t upset people. Christians have so internalized this concept of offending others or being worried that we’d be associated with bad examples of Christianity, that they tuck into a shell and try to hide their Christian faith. Maybe they’ve had bad experiences, maybe they’re a little intimidated, maybe they’re worried about starting their own riot, but look how our story in Acts ends.

Demetrius gets this whole crowd into a riot, they storm the theater... and then the city clerk comes over and says, “You’re all being stupid, stop it, go home” and nothing comes out of it. They didn’t get Paul, they didn’t stop the growth of the church, they just all walked away feeling like idiots. When push came to shove, not one of them could bring forward any real accusation against the Christians in Ephesus.

How do we respond to a world filled with guys like Demetrius? Be ready to give a defense for your faith. Know Christ deeply, know the Bible, know good theology, so that we can proclaim to a world in need of hope that there is a savior. The world may come at us with riots, but we’ll respond with a revolution.

PSALM 78 REFLECTIONS

Psalms 78:

My people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their descendants;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
They would not be like their ancestors—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.
The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows,
turned back on the day of battle;
they did not keep God's covenant
and refused to live by his law.
They forgot what he had done,
the wonders he had shown them.
He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors
in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan.
He divided the sea and led them through;
he made the water stand up like a wall.
He guided them with the cloud by day
and with light from the fire all night.
He split the rocks in the wilderness
and gave them water as abundant as the seas;
he brought streams out of a rocky crag
and made water flow down like rivers.

But they continued to sin against him,
 rebelling in the wilderness against the Most High.
They willfully put God to the test
 by demanding the food they craved.
They spoke against God;
 they said, "Can God really
 spread a table in the wilderness?
True, he struck the rock,
 and water gushed out,
 streams flowed abundantly,
but can he also give us bread?
 Can he supply meat for his people?"
When the Lord heard them, he was furious;
 his fire broke out against Jacob,
 and his wrath rose against Israel,
for they did not believe in God
 or trust in his deliverance.
Yet he gave a command to the skies above
 and opened the doors of the heavens;
he rained down manna for the people to eat,
 he gave them the grain of heaven.
Human beings ate the bread of angels;
 he sent them all the food they could eat.
He let loose the east wind from the heavens
 and by his power made the south wind blow.
He rained meat down on them like dust,
 birds like sand on the seashore.
He made them come down inside their camp,
 all around their tents.
They ate till they were gorged—
 he had given them what they craved.
But before they turned from what they craved,
 even while the food was still in their mouths,
God's anger rose against them;
 he put to death the sturdiest among them,
 cutting down the young men of Israel.
In spite of all this, they kept on sinning;
 in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.
So he ended their days in futility
 and their years in terror.
Whenever God slew them, they would seek him;
 they eagerly turned to him again.
They remembered that God was their Rock,
 that God Most High was their Redeemer.

But then they would flatter him with their mouths,
lying to him with their tongues;
their hearts were not loyal to him,
they were not faithful to his covenant.
Yet he was merciful;
he forgave their iniquities
and did not destroy them.
Time after time he restrained his anger
and did not stir up his full wrath.
He remembered that they were but flesh,
a passing breeze that does not return.
How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness
and grieved him in the wasteland!
Again and again they put God to the test;
they vexed the Holy One of Israel.
They did not remember his power—
the day he redeemed them from the oppressor,
the day he displayed his signs in Egypt,
his wonders in the region of Zoan.
He turned their river into blood;
they could not drink from their streams.
He sent swarms of flies that devoured them,
and frogs that devastated them.
He gave their crops to the grasshopper,
their produce to the locust.
He destroyed their vines with hail
and their sycamore-figs with sleet.
He gave over their cattle to the hail,
their livestock to bolts of lightning.
He unleashed against them his hot anger,
his wrath, indignation and hostility—
a band of destroying angels.
He prepared a path for his anger;
he did not spare them from death
but gave them over to the plague.
He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt,
the first fruits of manhood in the tents of Ham.
But he brought his people out like a flock;
he led them like sheep through the wilderness.
He guided them safely, so they were unafraid;
but the sea engulfed their enemies.
And so he brought them to the border of his holy land,
to the hill country his right hand had taken.
He drove out nations before them

and allotted their lands to them as an inheritance;
 he settled the tribes of Israel in their homes.
 But they put God to the test
 and rebelled against the Most High;
 they did not keep his statutes.
 Like their ancestors they were disloyal and faithless,
 as unreliable as a faulty bow.
 They angered him with their high places;
 they aroused his jealousy with their idols.
 When God heard them, he was furious;
 he rejected Israel completely.
 He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh,
 the tent he had set up among humans.
 He sent the ark of his might into captivity,
 his splendor into the hands of the enemy.
 He gave his people over to the sword;
 he was furious with his inheritance.
 Fire consumed their young men,
 and their young women had no wedding songs;
 their priests were put to the sword,
 and their widows could not weep.
 Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
 as a warrior wakes from the stupor of wine.
 He beat back his enemies;
 he put them to everlasting shame.
 Then he rejected the tents of Joseph,
 he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;
 but he chose the tribe of Judah,
 Mount Zion, which he loved.
 He built his sanctuary like the heights,
 like the earth that he established forever.
 He chose David his servant
 and took him from the sheep pens;
 from tending the sheep he brought him
 to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
 of Israel his inheritance.
 And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;
 with skillful hands he led them.

Psalm 78 is a teaching Psalm, both reflecting on the works God has done for the nation of Israel as well as stressing the importance of teaching these stories to the next generation, so they would know the power of God. The Psalm focuses on the miracles of God in bringing Israel out of Egypt,

as well as the Israelites' general tendency to rebel and doubt God throughout the process. We see a mixture of both mercy and judgment, as God stays faithful despite Israel's unfaithfulness.

The Psalm is written after the line of David is established as the royal line of Israel, and one of the points it touches on is how the tribe of Judah was chosen over Ephraim for this honor. Ephraim was Joseph's second born son, while Manasseh was the oldest. Even though traditionally the older son would receive a greater blessing, Jacob blessed Ephraim over Manasseh, and after Israel settled into the promised land, the Tabernacle was set up in the Ephraim city of Shiloh. Joshua himself, the main leader after Moses, was of the tribe of Ephraim, so it would seem like Ephraim would be set up to be the lineage for leaders of the Israelites. Three things: the favored son of Joseph, the tribe of Joshua, and the land in which the Tabernacle was dwelling.

Unfortunately, Ephraim didn't stay true to its start. Along the way, the tribe seems to lose sight of the laws and wonders of God, and as a result lose the special status it has. In fact, when the nation of Israel splits into the northern and southern kingdoms after the time of Solomon, it's the Northern Kingdom that quickly falls into idolatry, rejecting Jerusalem as the place for worship and setting up their own idols. Moving forward in Israel's history, Ephraim tends to be the tribe that represents the Northern Kingdom as a whole, as the leader during the split was an Ephraimite, Jeroboam I. But rather than selecting a leader from the nation of Ephraim, God chooses the lowly shepherd boy of Judah to be the start of the royal line that leads to Jesus.

We see in this psalm two important points. One: we need to always be on guard to be teaching the next generation the things of God. Too often we take it for granted that children will just naturally learn the stories and experiences we were brought up with, but the reality is it takes work. There are a million things competing for our attention, and all of those things are working to pull our focus away from God.

Another important point is that we shouldn't be so focused on the status we had in the past that we forget to maintain the things that brought us that status. It didn't matter that Ephraim had the blessing of Jacob, the legacy of Joshua, and the city of Shiloh; they drifted away and abandoned the things God had given them.

Today you might see churches and ministries so focused on what they used to be, or who their leaders were, that they forget to keep walking in step with the things of God.

JESUS IS KING: POINTING TO CHRIST

This week at church we looked at an interesting passage where Jesus the Son of God goes to John the Baptist to be baptized. This seems strange. Certainly, John found it strange because Jesus seems like the last person who would ever need to be baptized; He was the perfect Son of God. What sin could He possibly need to repent from? But Jesus says this is necessary because part of His assignment here on Earth is to live the righteous life on Earth that we couldn't and go through all the same things we go through.

I want to turn our attention to what happens next though because there's something very significant that happens as Jesus begins His ministry. John Chapter 3 tells us that Jesus and his disciples start baptizing people close to where John is doing his ministry. At some point, some people go to John and point out to him that the crowds are now going to Jesus, and fewer people are interested in what John is saying and doing. What will happen to John if people start ignoring him? Is John going to lose his ministry? John meanwhile has a very important response.

John 3:27-30:

To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

He must become greater. I must become less. This is a very important line. John knows that his purpose was to point people toward Jesus. The more people that are going to Jesus now, the more he knows that he has fulfilled his purpose. His mission given to him by God was a success and now the Messiah is here. This is everything John the Baptist was waiting for.

John is teaching us an important lesson here because we can often be very tempted to connect our success to how many people are following and admiring us. Look at YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram. All these social media platforms are filled with people whose sole goal is to draw attention to themselves. They want the views and the likes and the followers for their own reputation and it's a competition to see who draws in the most people.

This can happen in Christian circles too. A lot of Christians measure the success of their ministry by how many people show up or how many members their church has or how popular they are. Leaders can sometimes act like they're in competition with each other, getting jealous over the success of other people and getting bitter when they feel like they're not as popular as someone else. This then leads to conflict and disunity and the people of God suffer as a result.

The reality is the goal of every Christian ministry should be to point people towards Jesus. If your focus is on being faithful with the assignments God has given you, it doesn't matter if you have ten people or a thousand people listening to you or if the guy next door is more popular or anything

else you might use to compare yourself to someone else. Direct people's attention to God and not yourself and in that focus, you'll find that the things that upset other people don't seem to bother you. You don't get overwhelmed questioning whether or not you're good enough, you don't get distracted by the burdens other people try to put on you.

Instead, your focus is on Christ and his peace is what fills your heart. Let us always remember that Jesus is the King, and we are not in competition with Him: he'll be leading and guiding us so don't get sidetracked by concerns for your own fame and glory.

PARABLE: THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

Matthew 7:24-27:

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. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation 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. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

This is probably one of the most iconic parables Jesus tells: the wise and the foolish builders. One does the work necessary to dig deep and build the right kind of foundation, but the other one doesn't and builds something that can't survive the coming storm.

You need a good foundation for a building: the foundation is what holds it steady and prevents it from shaking or falling apart in the wind or an earthquake. Without a solid foundation, buildings won't stay standing for very long.

What's true for buildings is also true for us. In our lives we need a solid foundation, something that we can completely trust in and know it won't give out on us when things get rough. You will find people pick all kinds of things to use as their foundation in life. Some choose money and think if they just gain enough wealth, they can survive anything. Some choose intelligence and knowledge and all that matters to them is being smarter than everyone else. For some people it's all about being popular; they think if they get the most likes or followers on social media then their lives will be stable.

Others may make celebrities or politicians the center of their lives and all that matters is following them, talking like them, dressing like them, copying them no matter what they do. They don't want to go a day without listening to something they say. They put their entire identity and self-worth in those things and get really angry when they're threatened. You can tell you're using something as your foundation because it's the one thing you can't do without, the one thing that causes you to lose all hope when it stops working.

But the truth is none of those things are foundations we can build our lives on. All of those things will one day let us down. They don't last and haven't we seen that happen this last year with Covid? How many things were we trusting in a year ago—things we thought would never be shaken—and in a few months they all fell apart all over the entire world. But here comes Jesus and he says something radical. His words are the truth that you can live your life by His words as the foundation you can build on both for this life and for eternity. And it's not good enough just to listen to His words and smile and say, "oh that's nice."

We need to actually put them into practice. Jesus is telling us this parable at the end of the Sermon on the Mount which is the most extensive sermon the gospel accounts record. We studied it

together last year and we saw that it was a pretty challenging sermon where Jesus sets the bar for righteousness far above what we're used to seeing. He says it's not good enough to go through life without killing someone because even if you just have anger and hatred in your heart, you've fallen short. He says it's not good enough to just love your friends and family; you need to actually love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. He says to be careful not to do good things just to get attention from people but to do good things even when it's only God watching.

A lot of people hear the sermon and think that sounds nice, but I am not going to do that, it's too much. People like to hear things Jesus said but they aren't willing to follow Him. They don't want to make His words the foundation of their lives. But with this parable Jesus is telling us that there isn't an alternative foundation to build on. Whatever else we try to trust in, whether it's people or power or possessions, they will one day let us down either in this life or in the next in the same way that sand can't support a house in a storm.

These are okay things to have in our lives, just like a house needs other parts and not just a foundation but trying to make them the most important thing in our lives is like taking the roof of a house and putting it on the bottom like a foundation. Whatever you build won't stay standing.

What does it mean to make Jesus our foundation? It means we take Him seriously when he says something, including both the promises he makes as well as the commands He gives. It means we don't want to go a day without hearing at least something He has to say. It means we trust that His death on the cross was enough to forgive our sins. When He said "it is finished" that meant it really was finished, and it means we trust that even if everything else is falling apart He will stay faithful and stay true to us both throughout our lives. It means we don't need to be afraid because He is the reliable foundation that will not let us down.

WHO IS THE GREATEST?

We just finished up a great vacation Bible camp week at church a little over a week ago. I had a really good time teaching some Bible lessons, playing some games, and building some fun things with the kids. Probably the most memorable moment was Thursday after we had finished the lesson on Jesus' death and resurrection. I was talking about how central Jesus' death was to everything, and how trusting in Him is what makes us Christians, when one of the kids speaks up: "My teacher at my Catholic school said that Catholics are the better Christians."

I smiled and chuckled a little. Somewhat amused, but also somewhat disappointed that at this Catholic school that should be teaching the Bible, there is such a drastic misunderstanding of the true teachings of Jesus. Of course I had to respond to this claim, so I went straight to the first story in the Bible that came to mind. An interaction between Jesus and his disciples on this very question... who is the greatest?

To set the stage here: in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9, a lot of crazy things have been happening. Jesus had just taken Peter, John, and James up on a mountain, and they had a bewildering moment when they saw Jesus completely transfigured, and speaking with Moses and Elijah. They don't even know how to process this event, and Jesus tells them to keep it to themselves. They come down from the mountain to find a crowd, with the other disciples arguing with some of the scholars, and a father desperately trying to get a demon exorcized out of his son. Jesus heals the boy, criticizes his disciples for having such little faith, and takes them away privately to start explaining that he would soon be betrayed and killed.

To put it mildly, the disciples are frustrated. They couldn't heal this boy, and were no doubt embarrassed about it. Jesus is talking about dying, and they don't understand anything He's saying. They can't imagine the Messiah dying, so they assume He's speaking in some kind of parable or metaphor and are too embarrassed to ask what He means. Something crazy happened with Peter, James, and John, and they're not talking about it. Frustration leads to bickering, and of course disagreement follows. Whose fault is it that they are having these problems? Who's the better disciple? Who's the best? Are John and James the best, since they're the 'thunder' guys? Is Peter the best, because of the whole "You are the Christ" thing? They keep walking, and arguing, and as they get to the next city, Jesus turns to them and asks them what the debate is about.

Mark 9:33-37:

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be the first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

The argument about who the greatest is has a core, foundational problem: being in the kingdom of God isn't about being the "best" or the "greatest" or anything of the sort. In this world we put so much emphasis on status. Where do we rank among other people? Does she rank higher than me? Do I rank higher than him? Am I smarter? Am I prettier? Do I have a better car? That's not how Jesus' kingdom operates. This is the opposite of how Jesus tells us to think.

Matthew 18:3-4:

"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Of course, this isn't how the disciples are used to thinking. It isn't how we're used to thinking. The person who wants to be best belongs on top, not on bottom. And as the disciples are taken aback by this challenge from Jesus, a troubling incident comes to mind for John. As Jesus is talking about humility and meekness, John brings up a recent interaction he had with someone.

Mark 9:38-41:

"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."
"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."

The disciples had seen this guy and decided he wasn't part of their group. They had their own club, their Jesus club, and they had their own membership. Some random guy doing miracles? Who did he think he was? As the "platinum" members of their club, surely it was their duty to make sure that their club was recognized as the exclusive Jesus club, because that is how people think.

I'd say most religion today in the United States is more about the "organization" you belong to rather than your actual beliefs and lifestyle. Were you baptized in a church when you were five weeks old? Ok, you're a Christian in that church. Show up to church once every two years? Sure, you're on the church membership roster, there you go. Doesn't matter if you don't know a single thing Jesus taught. This is the mistake we make, and the same mistake the disciples were making. It isn't about putting ourselves in an elite group of better people; it's about being connected to God; it's about trusting in the work Jesus did on the cross.

This all reminds me of the issue the Apostle Paul was addressing with the church in Rome. When Paul wrote Romans, there were some divisions going on in the church in Rome, particularly between the Jewish and Greek populations. In the early days of Christianity, most Christians were

actually Jewish. There were Greek converts growing in number, but the relations between Jews and Greeks in churches varied from city to city.

And in Rome, it was starting to become a problem. The Jewish Christians were starting to look down on the Greek Christians, the people that had grown up as pagans worshiping random statues and had almost no understanding of the Jewish scriptures. These people were “unclean” in everything they did. Meanwhile, the Greek converts to Christianity were looking down on the Jewish Christians. After all, wasn’t it the Jewish people that had rejected Jesus’ teachings? Weren’t they the ones who demanded Jesus be crucified?

A huge portion of Paul’s letter seeks to address this division, and he starts in a very interesting way in Romans Chapter 1. He actually starts off by talking about God’s wrath. He points out all the immorality rampant in the society around them. People worshiping bits of wood and metal as their Gods. People filled with lust, indulging in sexual impurity, homosexuality, and whatever else fits their pleasure.

Romans 1:29-32:

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Paul establishes this baseline of a world living in opposition to God (honestly, a baseline that sounds very much like the United States right now), and then moves forward with an unexpected twist.

Romans 2:1:

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”

Paul then warns the church that if they continue to play these ‘who is the greatest’ games, they risk being under God’s judgment.

Romans 2:4:

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?

The argument, at its core, is that everything we have is from God. Our forgiveness, our salvation, our hope; it's all a gift that we couldn't earn by our own merit. We aren't deserving of God's love, yet God gives it anyway. As a result, you have no right to put yourself up on a pedestal, because if God didn't lead you toward repentance, you would be just as lost as the rest of the world.

Romans 5:8:

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

So, Jesus finishes explaining to his disciples that their mindset should shift to humility, like that of a child. That anyone who welcomes a child in his name, so much as gives a cup of water, is welcoming God. Then, he goes into a warning of what happens when the opposite occurs.

Mark 9:42-48:

And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

The warning, and the risk, is real. As someone who teaches children myself, it's something I take very seriously. Jesus' brother, James, warns:

James 3:1:

"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

According to Jesus, you're better off just drowning in the ocean than bringing misleading teachings to kids in His name. The disciples were worried about who was the best, when the thing they really needed to be worrying about was what kind of examples they were setting and what exactly they were teaching the others watching them. They were worried about arguing with a bunch of lawyer nerds, when they really needed to be focused on praying for that kid in need. If you want to be the greatest, put everyone else before you, and be the servant of all. Don't be arrogant or self-centered by trying to put yourself in an elite group. The kingdom of heaven isn't about who's the best; it's about taking your life and investing in the things that are eternal. It's about the God who died for us so that we'd have a chance. It's about realizing that something needs to change in our lives, and that God offers that change.

Jesus concludes with a final challenge to his disciples.

Mark 9:49-50:

“Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

This is one of the more confusing statements we have from Jesus, particularly in verse 49. Some versions may include a line stating “every sacrifice shall be salted with salt” after the part about being salted with fire. Some people think that the salting of fire has to do with the previous section, about the punishment in hell, while others think it has to do with the disciples being filled with fire from the power of the Holy Spirit. Personally, I tend to lean toward the second interpretation, but regardless the overall message is clear: the disciples need to think carefully about their own hearts and attitudes. Rather than bickering over who is best, they needed to be at peace with each other.

I feel this is an important message to dwell on in the current climate in this country. Too often I see people, even Christians, putting themselves up on a pedestal to show the world how much better they are than everyone else. If you disagree with them, well you must be stupid and not worth listening to. Don’t misunderstand; there is truth and there are lies, there is right and there is wrong.

This is not an excuse to treat a lie like truth or pretend that what is immoral is actually moral. We should argue and debate about what is true and what is right and look to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles and prophets as our guidance. What we shouldn’t be arguing about is who is better, pretending that somehow our church or political or educational affiliation somehow makes us superior to someone else. If that continues to be our mindset, we will continue to live in hostility to everyone around us. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are in need of salvation.

WOE TO... WHO?

As we were chatting during my Sunday School class this week, we were sharing different stories. One girl shared an interesting objection she had heard from another kid about Christianity: "If Jesus was such a good person, why was he killed?"

Wow, such a powerful question. It touches on so many themes, and challenges so much of how we view ourselves. I think it's a good question for us to visit, especially during this Easter season: How do people, in the span of less than a week, go from "Hosanna to the Son of David!" to "Crucify him!" with a guy who did nothing but healing and teaching? What causes us to turn on someone who has been nothing but holy and righteous?

I think a lot of us like to focus on the nice things Jesus does for people (healing, feeding, raising the dead) when we read the gospels, and we often skip over the things he teaches that sound really harsh. Jesus actually clashed with a lot of people in his ministry, but they weren't the people you'd normally expect a major religious figure to clash with. The people that were seen as "dirty" and "sinners" were the people Jesus went to the most, and they loved him. When none of the other religious leaders would come close to these rejects, Jesus was there healing and forgiving. Tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers... all the people shunned by society at the time, Jesus was noted most for going to them. On the contrary, the people Jesus clashed with the most were actually the ones that seemed the most religious. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the religious experts; those were the ones he was always attacking, and the ones who ultimately plotted to have him killed.

During his final week before his crucifixion, Jesus had one last round of arguments with these religious leaders. After humiliating them in public debates on topics that were brought up in attempts to trap him, Jesus turns to the crowds and his disciples that were following him, and warns them about these pretenders:

Matthew 23:1-3:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

After highlighting these leaders as nothing but a bunch of frauds, Jesus then turns to the leaders and speaks to them directly, in front of the entire crowd:

Matthew 23:5-7:

"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'"

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Living in a different culture and in a different time, it’s difficult for us to wrap our minds around how shocking these statements really are. These are the most powerful people in the city that Jesus is criticizing. They were the wealthy elite, the people held up as role models, the ones who supposedly had special access to God. And here Jesus is, exposing all their double standards. Their nonsensical standards for when they need to keep their promises and when they don’t. Their absurdity in creating large, fancy, elaborate boxes (phylacteries) to wear that really only contained a small page or so worth of Bible verses, just so they can show off. Their notion that it was more important to measure out a tenth of their mint leaves for their tithing than to be merciful to the poor and weak around them. They put up a front of righteousness, but on the inside, they were only concerned with themselves and their own success.

I think we all have this desire to put up this front claiming to be righteous and good. We want a good reputation; we want people to respect and admire us. The problem with Jesus is he walks right past that front we put up and exposes what’s behind. All the stuff we don’t want other people to see: the stuff that reveals that we really aren’t as good as we pretend to be. When that happens, we can have one of two reactions: anger and denial, or sorrow and repentance. Nothing gets a self-righteous person angrier than being confronted with their own faults, and we see that fully

manifested in these religious leaders Jesus exposes. And so, things play out exactly as you'd expect them to after watching a poor, yet popular, son of a carpenter challenge the authority of the wealthiest, most influential people in a city: the plan is quickly set in motion, the betrayal is set up, and these religious leaders use all the power they have to get Jesus executed. Not to be outdone, Jesus naturally uses his power a few days later to just come back to life, but that's a story for Easter Sunday.

I've been thinking about chapter 23 in Matthew a lot this year, I suppose because lately at my church the question has come up of who the modern-day Pharisees are that Jesus would be going up against. When Jesus says, "Woe to you," who exactly is he talking to? I've seen a lot of strange ideas being proposed, most of which I don't really agree with, and I think tend to miss the point. I've seen people identify Pharisees in right wing Christian fundamentalists, in left wing social justice warriors, in people who like quoting the Bible a lot, or even just a vague "people who aren't loving" standard. Maybe people who know the Bible but don't put it into practice. Ideas all over the place, really.

I think these skate around a Pharisee, but they don't quite hit the core. And it should be noted, there were Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus didn't clash with, people like Nicodemus that went to Jesus in secret to talk with him without the crowds. At their core, a Pharisee was just someone who held to a very strict set of Jewish rituals and laws with the intent to usher in the kingdom of God with their righteous living. Theologically, out of all the Jewish groups at the time, the Pharisees were actually the closest to Jesus in terms of their emphasis on the importance of righteous and holy living.

The clashes were all centered on one key thing: hypocrisy. People who were concerned with their own reputations rather than the truth. The illusion of righteousness rather than a proper understanding and pursuit of righteousness. It's the people who selfishly seek after those places of honor at banquets, the people who want their names listed as big donors for organizations and events, the people who work to surround themselves with others who will tell them how great they are, and work everything they can to discredit the ones who dare criticize them. They find the easiest things they can do that will give them the widest recognition. They prefer empty ritual rather than a transformed life. They want to be at the important meetings where important decisions are made, and they want to make sure that everyone hears their opinions. They may or may not enjoy sermons that point out sin in the world, but they hate even the slightest implication that there is anything wrong with them. They pick and choose the teachings they want based on what is personally convenient for them. God isn't the focus of their theology; the focus always remains on themselves.

Can we fall into these categories at times? Sure, I think these are really easy temptations to fall into, and we do it all the time. Whenever I secretly look for recognition for something I did, whenever my reflex is to justify myself when someone points out when I'm out of line, even when I think that I'm too important for tasks that are considered more menial. But the important thing is to recognize these attitudes as we're studying the Bible and acknowledge the areas in our hearts that don't align with God's will. When we're confronted with our own sinfulness, rather than

covering it up or justifying ourselves, we examine our own hearts and desire the removal of sin from our lives. It requires a greater focus on who we are on the inside, with less focus on what we look like on the outside.

There are two answers to the question of why Jesus was crucified. One side is the perspective of God; Jesus was crucified to pay the punishment for our sins, to earn a salvation that we couldn't earn on our own. But from the perspective of people, Jesus was crucified because he exposed something in ourselves that we didn't want exposed: the fact that we needed salvation in the first place. He exposed our own hypocrisy and selfishness, the fact that we fail at the righteous standard set by God, and rather than confessing to it, the response of humanity was to silence him. The irony always is that the messages we need to hear the most are usually the ones we least want to hear.

Each Easter leaves us with a choice: will we listen to the message that caused Jesus to be crucified and take it to heart, or will we close our ears and push it away?

THE TRUE SHEPHERD

Times were difficult in Israel. The country was heading in the wrong direction. The Israelites were looking for change. They were tired of the Roman government continuing to exert control over the region, tired of their high taxes being paid to a government that didn't represent them, and tired of their hopelessly divided leadership. People were putting their trust in all kinds of different things: money, violence, politics, rituals, laws, everything they were taught would save them from the things they hated. It was a time of would-be messiahs; men coming who gathered armies around them to fight against the Roman Empire, leading many to their deaths as they were quickly killed and their armies crushed. The Sadducees tried to make political alliances, the Zealots engaged in violence and terrorism, and the Pharisees tried to obey every ritual they could come up with to try to usher in the coming of the Christ.

Along came Jesus. Many people in leadership didn't know what to make of him. Some saw Jesus as a threat to their power. Some saw him as insane, or demon possessed. Some listened to him in amazement, others with disdain. Throughout all of this, he continued to gain followers and continued to preach about the Kingdom of God.

During a time when people were putting their trust in all kinds of different things, Jesus was exposing the uselessness of all of it. Money can be squandered or stolen. Metal weapons and shields can rust and break. Leaders will abandon you for their own gain. And as Jesus was continuing to be challenged by the religious leadership after he had healed a blind man, he gave this response, recorded in John.

John 10:7-18:

Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

There are many people who take great pride in pretending they aren't "sheep" that follow others blindly. They are convinced that they can rely only on their own common sense, that they are immune to the persuasions of others. The reality, however, is that we all put our trust in something. We all take some source as our authority for truth or direction; we all have some idol we look up to as our default. In the same way, many Israelites followed these other would-be messiahs to their doom, I see people every day putting their trust in things that fall out right from under them.

One of the most important things we can do for ourselves is truly think and examine our lives to see what we're putting our trust in. What causes you to rejoice? What causes you to despair? What inspires your hope, and what causes you to lose hope? You see, losing hope doesn't mean it's time to give up on life. Contrary to what American society teaches, it can actually be a good thing if you've found that you've completely lost hope; losing hope happens when you realize that the thing you were putting your hope in up to this point wasn't something you could rely on. Only upon that realization can you switch, and truly put your trust in something that won't fail. In that sense, hopelessness doesn't have to be the end, but rather the opportunity for transition to something greater and more secure. Too many people treat hopelessness as a point you can never recover from... the moment to give up. The reality is our lives will find many moments when the things we were counting on prove unreliable; it is a learning process day by day to find out what we can trust in the future.

Jesus taught in this message that the reason he could be trusted as a shepherd was because of his sacrifice. He wasn't just showing up and bossing people around. He was dying to earn us a treasure and home that could never be taken away. He was building a place for us in a Kingdom that would never fall. He wasn't giving empty talking points or campaign promises; he was providing one sacrifice for all.

I think here in America in particular we have lost that understanding. This last election, more than anything, has shown just how misplaced our faith is. Is your faith in people, or in God? Was your faith in politicians and political parties? If you feel like you've lost hope, it's possible you have come to an important realization: you might have been putting your hope in something that never had the power to save you.

On the other hand, if you want to rejoice that America has selected a president who embodies every evil that is celebrated in this country (pride, greed, sexual immorality, deceit, hatred, violence, etc....) watch out, because you're putting your hope in another self-proclaimed messiah who will lead you to the same destruction that all the messiahs in Jesus' time led their followers to. If you rejoice at the pain and frustration of others, the despair, the hatred, the suffering; watch out, because you've already set foot on that path to destruction, and you will reap what you sow.

Galatians 6:7-10:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please

the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

What shepherd are you following? Where do you go for truth? Where do you go for hope? Where do you go to determine what is right or wrong? A politician? A pundit on TV? Some random internet click-bait article that got a million likes? Someone who will abandon the flock they're guarding the moment it is attacked? A thief who is only looking for what they can profit from you? Someone who will flip on a dime the moment the situation changes? How are things going with that? Have you been filled with hope? Anger? Sorrow? Arrogance? Peace? As Jesus finished talking about being the one true shepherd, people in the crowd had two different reactions:

John 10:19-21:

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Jesus was either insane when he spoke these words, or he spoke the truth. He either came back to life after he was crucified, or he remains dead and buried in some unmarked tomb somewhere. He is either watching over us in love in this very moment from a throne in heaven, or his followers were teaching nothing but lies, delusions, and empty promises that will never be filled.

Many people did end up putting their trust in Jesus after his death, but many continued in their own ways. Ultimately, for those who continued their own ways, their path took them exactly where Jesus warned them it would; within one generation, the Jewish temple was destroyed and the people scattered. All the things they were putting their trust in, all their leaders and shepherds, they all proved useless. In the blink of an eye, it was all gone. Meanwhile, the Christian church endured. They continued to grow in spite of terrible persecution. The hope Jesus promised continued to endure, continued to grow, and it continues to this day.

In these times of conflict and uncertainty, don't fall into the trap of relying on the same things that have created these problems in the first place. We live in a world where people fight over money and power and every other thing that can't last. It only leads to more anger and more hatred. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that only three things remain eternal: faith, hope, and love.

The lives that you touch, the people you help, relationships you build, those are the things really worth living for. The power of forgiveness and the power of new life, this is the path Jesus has called us to, and the path he leads us down. Your goal shouldn't be to lead people down the path of pride and conflict; rather, lead people down the path of love and forgiveness that God gives. We have only one faithful shepherd: accept no substitutes.

HE MUST BE GREATER: DEVOTIONAL

This week at church, we looked at an interesting passage where Jesus, the Son of God, goes to John the Baptist to be baptized. This seems strange. Certainly, John found it strange, because Jesus seemed like the last person who would ever need to be baptized. He was the perfect Son of God; what sin could he possibly need to repent from? But Jesus says this is necessary because part of his assignment on earth is to live the righteous life that we couldn't and go through all the same things we go through.

I want to turn our attention to what happens next though, because there's something very significant that happens as Jesus begins his ministry. John Chapter 3 tells us that Jesus and his disciples started baptizing people as well, close to where John was doing his ministry. At some point, some people go to John and point out to him that the crowds are now going to Jesus, and fewer people are interested in what John is saying and doing. What will happen to John if people just start ignoring him? Is John going to lose his ministry? John, meanwhile, has a very important response to this.

John 3:27-30:

To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

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This is a very important line: "He must become greater; I must become less". John knows that his purpose was to point people toward Jesus; the more people that are going to Jesus now, the more he knows that he has fulfilled his purpose. His mission, given to him by God, was a success, and now the Messiah is here. This is everything John the Baptist was waiting for.

John is teaching us an important lesson here, because we can often be very tempted to connect our success to how many people are following and admiring us. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, all these social media platforms, are filled with people whose sole goal is to draw attention to themselves. They want the views and the likes and the followers for their own reputation, and it's a competition to see who draws in the most people.

That can happen in Christian circles too. A lot of Christians measure the success of their ministry by how many people show up, or how many members their church has, or how popular they are.

Leaders can sometimes act like they're in competition with each other, getting jealous over the successes of other people, and getting bitter when they feel like they're not as popular as someone else. This then leads to conflict and disunity, and the people of God suffer as a result.

The reality is that the goal of every Christian ministry should be to point people towards Jesus. If your focus is on being faithful with the assignments God has given you, it doesn't matter if you have ten people or a thousand people listening to you, or if the guy next door is more popular, or anything else you might use to compare yourself to someone else. Direct people's attention to God, and not yourself. And in that focus, you'll find that the things that upset other people don't seem to bother you. You don't get overwhelmed questioning whether or not you're good enough, you don't get distracted by the burdens other people try to put on you. Instead, your focus is on Christ, and his peace is what fills your heart.

As we go through this series in Matthew, let us always remember that Jesus is the King, and we're not in competition with him. He'll be leading and guiding us, so don't get sidetracked by concerns for your own fame and glory.

OLIVER TWIST DEVOTIONAL

by Matt and Lara Silverman

Matthew 18:6-7:

"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!"

The classic story of Oliver Twist follows the journey of a young orphan, Oliver, set during the mid-1800s in England. We follow Oliver as he is mistreated and manipulated through various encounters, from the abusive workhouse run by cruel and selfish managers to the deceitful Fagin who recruits young children to commit crimes, telling them they need to steal from others to get ahead in life.

The important life lesson as Fagin put it:

"In this life, one thing counts
In the bank, large amounts
I'm afraid these don't grow on trees,
You've got to pick-a-pocket or two
You've got to pick-a-pocket or two, boys,
You've got to pick-a-pocket or two."

But at the end of the story, everyone reaps the rewards of the life they lived. The manipulative Fagin ends up losing all the stolen goods he's accumulated over his lifetime, the violent Bill Sikes is shot as he attempts to escape while kidnapping Oliver, and Oliver is eventually connected to some upper-class family members and adopted by the kind Mr. Brownlow. Built into this story is a warning: the wicked who mistreat the helpless and the orphan will face the consequences of their sin, because God cares for the weak and humble.

We see this lesson emphasized heavily in Matthew 18. Jesus warns his disciples not to chase after status and prestige, but rather to care for those who are most in need.

Matthew 18:10:

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

We need to take this challenge seriously because it applies just as much to us as the apostles. There's also a warning in this passage to those who would mislead and corrupt young children; Jesus says it would be better for them to drown in the sea than to be found guilty before God of leading His little ones astray.

So, what does it look like to care for children the way Jesus commands? First, we're committed to raising children in the truth. We want to share wisdom, so children can navigate the various deceptions the world throws at them. Whether it's people like Fagin, who try to lead children down the path of selfish immorality, or people like Bill Sikes who live a life filled with violence, we want to equip the next generation to be on guard against false teachings and ideologies.

Galatians 6:7,8

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

And beyond just teaching and equipping, we also want to imitate the attitudes of people like Mr. Brownlow, who takes Oliver in and cares for him, even after Oliver tried to steal from him with some of the other boys from Fagin's gang. Our lives should be defined by that kind of compassion and grace, being willing to sacrifice for those in need.

Jesus wants us to shine as lights in a dark world, being role models for the next generation. The world is filled with people like Oliver, being pushed here and there by every wave life throws at them, but we know the way to anchor ourselves is by being rooted in the words of Christ. Living our lives as role models for others allows us to demonstrate the power of that anchor. And we'll also find true joy and fulfillment as we're living life that way because that's what God created us for.

I can personally share that Christian mentors have had a huge impact on my spiritual growth when I was a younger woman. At different phases of my Christian Walk, different Christian influences encouraged me to stay the course, trust the Lord's ways and timing, and keep my focus on Christ.

We just had the memorial service for Arpi Haleblan last weekend, and she was the Sunday school teacher who encouraged me to accept Christ when I was in elementary school. She even accompanied me playing piano as I sang for various church events and helped me feel like CACC was my home. Years later during my illness, she sent me a card every sixty days to keep my faith strong amidst my pain. She was literally the body of Christ to me during this time.

And that's what God calls us to do. God puts people in our lives to serve and encourage, so let's take that responsibility seriously. Pray for the opportunities and be ready. Go out each day with your mission in mind.

BE TRANSFORMED: LEAST IN THE KINGDOM DEVOTIONAL

2 Peter 2:

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment. This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority.

Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings; yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not heap abuse on such beings when bringing judgment on them from the Lord. But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish.

They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness. But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—an animal without speech—who spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.

These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for “people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.” If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for

them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud."

I think this passage is such a perfect description of what happens in "The Dark Knight Rises" the third movie of the recent Batman trilogy. In this movie, the villain Bane defeats Batman, cripples the police department, and takes over Gotham, announcing to the population that they would finally be free from tyranny and oppression.

Bane appeals to the desire we all have to reject law and authority: the desire to do whatever feels good to us in the moment. In life, we will encounter many people like this that know exactly how to prey on our desires to turn our hearts away from the truth. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus identifies those who teach such things as the ones who would be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven. They want to convince you that you have the power to take control of the things you want in life, often bringing something dangerous into your life as a result.

In Bane's case, he tells the city that a nuclear bomb will be their source of salvation. With it, they could take control. That's a bit of an extreme example, but maybe someone comes to you offering something dangerous under the guise that it will liberate you. Maybe it's the chance to make money through illegal means, or the chance to cheat to get ahead in life. Maybe it's the hatred of a violent mob, the empty pleasure of illegal drugs, or even the opportunity to abandon your family for the promise of something greater.

Whatever it is, the promise is always the same: liberation. They say that God's laws aren't really to protect us, but rather oppression meant to keep us in slavery.

But you soon realize that you aren't really the one in control. You find yourself more and more dependent on this thing that was supposed to be what was setting you free, and before you know it it's the thing making you a slave. Just like the people who gave Bane the opportunity to seize power thinking they could exploit them; they quickly find there's no way to control him.

The reality is Bane was never interested in setting the city free; his only goal was to destroy it. The same is true of sin in our life; its goal is never actually to give us satisfaction. The real goal is to make us slaves and lead us to destruction. There comes a moment when we realize we need salvation from the thing that has taken control of us, but even as we see it happening, sometimes our pride gets in the way; we think that we can get out on our own, that we don't need saving. Even as Batman returns to finally defeat Bane, he still needs to convince people that they'll all die if they continue to follow this madman.

We need to remember, when we're faced with those offering temptations to turn from what is true and good, that these really are lies intended to destroy us. Jesus wants us to remember that as we go through his teachings on things like hatred, lust, and pride. These are all things that promise to

liberate us with power, but the reality is they'll just leave us trapped in a city with a nuclear bomb, just waiting to go off. So, let's be on guard, so we won't be deceived.

BE TRANSFORMED: PEACEMAKERS

Psalms 34:11-14

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

This week I want to talk about my all-time favorite superhero. And no, the reason he's my favorite is not because we have the same hairstyle (bald!). Professor Charles Xavier, the founder and mentor of the X-Men, is one of the most powerful people in his world, but you wouldn't realize it just by looking at him. A crippled old man in a wheelchair hardly seems like the hero we're all waiting for to save us. But let's see what he has to say: "When an individual acquires great power, the use or misuse of that power is everything. Will it be for the greater good or will it be used for personal or destructive ends? This is a question we must all ask ourselves."

I think there are a lot of things about this character that relate to what we've been seeing this week in the Beatitudes. Professor Xavier lives in a world filled with hatred and conflict. Some people are born with genetic mutations that give them incredible powers. They're mutants. But their power causes society to be afraid of them. That fear turns into hatred, and as a result, innocent mutants find themselves being ostracized and persecuted by the rest of the world, sometimes even by their own families.

In the midst of this comes the professor, paralyzed and in a wheelchair. He has mutant powers too; he's the most powerful psychic in the world, able to control entire armies against their will with just the power of his mind if he wanted to. He can use his mind to take enemies down, or even erase their memories. But one thing you'll notice about him is he doesn't use his full power very often; he really only uses it as a last resort. He could probably conquer the entire world if he wanted to, and rule it like a god, but instead he commits every ounce of his being to bring peace and hope to others. He seeks peace and pursues it. He says: "Violence will solve nothing. We must use our special gifts to save mankind."

Not only that, but Xavier also opens his home to those who have no home. He finds the people that society has rejected, brings them in, and gives them a new family, a new place to belong. He does this for people from all backgrounds, even those with very dangerous powers that pose a risk to everyone around them. He teaches them not only how to control their powers, but also how to use their powers for the right purpose, and by doing so raises up a generation that shares his passion for peace. He helps them overcome their fears and their hatred.

It's very interesting to think about, because society often lifts up those who are powerful and compares them to gods, but in the Beatitudes, Jesus says that it's actually the peacemakers who will be called sons of God. But seeking peace is hard. There are many obstacles in our way, and there

are many in the way of Xavier. His closest friend, Magneto, eventually turns on him and decides that violence is the only way to bring peace.

The professor doesn't give up, however. He continues to reach out to Magneto every chance he gets, and even tries to win over the hearts of those who follow him. We too should remember that it isn't our job to fight people, or to rule over them with strength. Instead, we want to win people over to truth and goodness. Despite the hardships and persecution, we want to pursue peace. That may seem impossible in a land that is increasingly filled with people who believe that violence is the best way to achieve your goals. How can we possibly work for peace when our conflicts seem to increase faster than we can solve them?

And the truth is, it is impossible, this isn't something we can do on our own power. The only way is when we ourselves are connected to God and filled with his power. We can seek to win people over to the side of peace, truth, and hope only because we ourselves are children of God, and we follow where God leads. There will always be obstacles in the way but remember that we follow a God who is greater than all of them.

BE TRANSFORMED: ACTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Acts 8:9-23:

Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Have you ever met someone who just always needed to be the center of attention? No matter what was going on, they always wanted the focus to be on them? Or maybe that's us, sometimes. Maybe we get a little jealous when we see someone else getting recognized or praised. Here in this Samaritan city, we have a magician named Simon. We don't really know what kind of magic tricks he did, but whatever they were, it was enough to become quite famous in his city. He was used to always being a celebrity wherever he went until he encountered these Christians. All of a sudden, with Philip and John and Peter, he sees people who are not just doing magic tricks, they're doing real miracles, and he wants to be a part of it. Imagine all the money you could make if you could do real miracles like these apostles.

It reminds me of a little-known superhero, Booster Gold. You probably have not heard of him, and for good reason. He isn't the usual hero you'd look up to. Unlike most heroes we think of, who are dedicated to helping and protecting people, Booster Gold is really just interested in becoming wealthy and famous. He says: "I want mega-fame! Much more than your level of fame!"

He's actually from the distant future, and travels back in time with a stolen time travel suit and a lot of powerful weapons. He has energy blasters, a force field, and a robot programmed with a

record of all historical events. He says: "I'm from the future and I always know exactly what to do at exactly the right time thanks to my historical data record!" He uses this historical record to find out about crimes and disasters before they happen, then he shows up to save the day. This works well for a while, but things start to go wrong for him when he changes history to the point where his historical records are no longer accurate.

An interesting truth you'll find in life is that things tend to backfire when you only do things for reward or recognition. At some point, this fake mask that you wear to look good for others begins to fall apart, and even if we get that fame and fortune for a while, it doesn't really last. The apostles can see right through that mask Simon is wearing; he isn't really concerned with drawing closer to God, he wants the power and reputation that will come with the ability to perform real miracles with the Holy Spirit.

This is a warning to each of us; we will have people who come to church who are more interested in putting on an outward show than truly serving God with their hearts. We'll have our own Booster Gold's in life. And more than other people, we should carefully examine ourselves to make sure we're not just doing things in the hopes of getting something in return. That's why Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that we shouldn't do our acts of righteousness for others to see, but we should go so far as to do them in secret, so only God sees.

For Booster Gold, eventually, after things go horribly wrong, he realizes that he isn't really a hero. Not the kind he should be, anyway. He says: "I'm a fraud. I came back to the past not for justice but to get rich and famous. I was a failure in the future and past. I'm not a superhero."

As he reflects on his failures and selfish attitude, he starts to have a change of heart. You see him stop focusing on gaining wealth and fame, and he starts helping people just for the sake of doing good. That's what we should strive for in our own lives as well. Some people spend their whole lives constantly obsessing over what other people think of them; they're always worried about their image, and always want to be center stage. But living like that is exhausting, and leaves you empty, ensnared in a net of pride. Instead, walk in humility, so you won't be trapped in that net.

ISAIAH 3: CHILDREN IN CHARGE

It's the eighth century B.C., and Isaiah's ministry is just getting started. The Jewish people have been drifting away from God for quite a while now, and they're starting to suffer for it. As enemy nations get stronger around them, the Jewish people even end up fighting themselves. Things are getting worse, yet they still don't see that their problem is that they've turned away from God. As a result, God's judgment is coming, in a very interesting way. Take a look at Isaiah's warning.

Isaiah 3:1-5:

See now, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah both supply and support: all supplies of food and all supplies of water, the hero and the warrior, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter. I will make mere youths their officials; children will rule over them. People will oppress each other— man against man, neighbor against neighbor. The young will rise up against the old, the nobody against the honored.

God's punishment for the nation is to take away all their intelligent, qualified leaders. Instead, young people (unqualified, immature, irresponsible) are going to be the ones who end up leading the country, and they're going to do a terrible job of it. In some cases, their leaders might literally be children, and maybe for others they're just acting like children. If the Jewish people are going to be foolish and wicked in the things they do, God's going to give them over entirely to their own foolishness and won't be helping them anymore.

This is something we should really think about. When we become arrogant, and turn away from God, we often find ourselves being led by influences that send us in bad directions. And when a whole society does that; they don't want to have righteous leaders with integrity. They want leaders who cater to their desires and tell them things they want to hear, no matter how foolish. Young people turn away from the wisdom of those who are older than them, despising their advice and bringing harm upon themselves. God's punishment for a foolish people is to give them exactly what they want. He takes away his support from the people and allows the fools to be the ones in charge.

We might see a bit of that around us today. Maybe you look at some of our leaders, our celebrities, our important people, and think to yourself, "How in the world could someone so foolish become so important?" If we spend too much time focusing on them, we might get discouraged and wonder what we're supposed to do. Are the foolish leaders going to end up destroying everything?

But take a look at what Isaiah says later in Isaiah 3:10, 11:

"Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done."

Isaiah gives some encouragement to us. Even when a country is falling apart, with fools and children in charge, we can focus on doing what's right, to be righteous in a land that might have a lot of wickedness. And God has a way of bringing his people through such difficult times. It's like the line in the Psalms.

Psalm 91:7-8:

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

Even when disaster strikes, God protects those who have put their trust in him. That was Isaiah's encouragement to those who were wondering if it was worth it to stay loyal to God during his time, and it's his encouragement to us too. So don't be discouraged, even when it feels like foolishness and wickedness is all around. In the end, God will see us through it.

ISAIAH 7

We're continuing to look at the prophet Isaiah, and this week we find the nation of Judah in a difficult situation. Up to this point they've had a pretty good streak of good kings trying to lead the people back to God, but now King Ahaz has risen to power, and he starts undoing all the good progress Uzziah and Jotham made. The people of Judah started turning away from God, started getting weaker, and then the northern kingdom of Israel and the nation of Aram decided to take advantage of their weakness and team up to attack Judah. With two nations against one, the situation looks bad, but God sends Isaiah to King Ahaz to tell him that these two nations won't succeed in defeating Judah. God will protect them. What follows is one of the most famous interactions Isaiah has with any king.

Isaiah 7:10-12:

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."

God is ready to prove through a miraculous sign that He will protect the nation of Judah, but Ahaz doesn't want to have anything to do with it. You see, Ahaz already has a plan in the back of his mind; he's going to reach out to the dangerous and violent nation of Assyria and try to enlist their help in fighting Israel and Aram. With Judah to their south and Assyria to their north, the enemy would be forced to fight on two fronts and wouldn't be strong enough to win.

God, however, does not approve of the plan, and what follows is one of the most famous prophecies in the entire Bible.

Isaiah 7:13-17:

Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."

Ahaz doesn't want to ask God for a sign, so God himself decides on the sign: a virgin will give birth to a son, and before the child is old enough to know the difference between good and bad, both Israel and Aram will be defeated. Unfortunately, it won't stop there; Assyria is going to keep pressing on to attack Judah as well. Ahaz has just kicked a hornets' nest.

We often hear this passage read during the Christmas season, thinking about Mary giving birth to Jesus, but there's a little more to this prophecy than that. If we keep reading, we see Isaiah and his

wife have a baby boy in chapter eight, and God says that before the boy is old enough to talk Assyria will crush both Israel and Aram. There's a connection between Isaiah's child in Chapter 8 and this prophecy in Chapter 7.

However, there's still something more to come. There's nothing particularly miraculous about a husband and wife having another child; it's pretty common, so what is God saying here when He mentions a virgin giving birth? This child Isaiah has and the destruction of the nations trying to attack Judah, these are all foreshadowing something greater yet to come. This prophecy isn't just for Ahaz; he's not even paying attention to it. This prophecy is for us to know that there will be a virgin to come who will have a child who will mark victory for each of us. Just as Judah was saved from Israel and Aram, and eventually from Assyria as well, this child to come means salvation for us, not from a country, but from sin itself.

As we go into this Christmas season, let's reflect on the history that led up to this great moment, the coming of Jesus who would pay the ultimate price for our sins.

ISAIAH 9

In Isaiah Chapter 7, we saw Isaiah give a prophecy about a child to come that would be a sign of God's deliverance. While the son Isaiah has in Chapter 8 seems to be a part of that sign, it doesn't quite seem to be the complete fulfillment of it. Then we get to Chapter 9, where we see more details about this child to come and what he will accomplish.

Isaiah 9:1-7:

*Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—
The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.*

*The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.*

This isn't an ordinary kid. Notice His titles: Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Interestingly, we see all parts of the Trinity here. Jesus often referred to the Holy Spirit as the Counselor. We often call Jesus the Prince of Peace. And then there's the Father God in Heaven. All these titles are given to the same God, three persons, but one God, who will rule over an everlasting Kingdom.

We see Jesus talk about this Kingdom to Pilate after He was arrested, when Pilate asks him if he's a king.

John 18:36:

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

One of the things we need to remember as Christians is that our citizenship ultimately isn't in this world. We'll see countries come and go, and civilizations rise and fall, but we belong to something that will outlast all of it. It can be easy for us to get so caught up in our day-to-day problems that we forget that. Exams coming up, work we need to do, sickness and hardships we face that seem to be more than we can bear. The message of Christmas isn't about a little baby in a manger, it's about a Savior who died so we would have eternal life and a place in this Kingdom that will never end. And it's God's zeal that accomplishes this, not our own righteousness or good works.

I know the last two years have been pretty rough. A lot of people are so focused on the problems of this world that they never look up to see the hope Jesus offers. We need to make a conscious effort not to make that same mistake. I can tell you that going through cancer this year, it is easy for me to get so focused on the pain and the danger that I forget the eternal hope that we have. I don't know everything the future holds, and that's a lot of uncertainty, but I do know that Jesus promises a place in his Kingdom for all who have put their trust in Him, and there's nothing in this world that can take that away. So, let's not forget, no matter what challenges we face, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us, and leads us into life everlasting. This Christmas let's remember that we have an eternal King, and an eternal Kingdom we belong to.

GENESIS 37

Devotional 1 – Deceit

Proverbs 12:20:

*Deceit is in the hearts of those who plot evil,
but those who promote peace have joy.*

Sometimes we wonder if what we're planning to do is right or wrong. Some things look fairly obvious to us. Selling your own brother into slavery would definitely fall into the "wrong" category. Other times it isn't as clear, but this proverb gives us a little insight into how we can examine our actions. Deceit and evil go hand in hand, while joy aligns with peace. If you feel like you need to lie about something (for instance, faking your brother's death with some goat blood and a torn-up robe) it's a sign that you might not be doing the right thing. In contrast, if what you're doing results in joy and peace, if you take joy in sharing what has happened, that's a sign that you're on the right track.

This deceit and evil can hide in each of our hearts, and we really need God's help working in us to help us recognize which of our plans are good and which aren't. In your prayer time today, ask for discernment to know the right thing to do, and the strength to resist the temptation toward evil.

GENESIS 37

Devotional 2 – Correction

Proverbs 13:24:

*Whoever spares the rod hates their children,
but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.*

Let's be honest; we all hate being corrected. Whether it's for serious things or trivial things, we don't like being reminded that we made a mistake. However, receiving correction is extremely important in life, and you could make the case that a lot of the problems Jacob's children run into are a result of him not ever stepping in to discipline them for doing something wrong.

Whether it's Reuben's sexual immorality or Levi and Simeon's murderous rampage on an unsuspecting town, Jacob seems to be looking the other way when his children make evil choices, and that allows things to escalate to the point where they're willing to sell their own brother into slavery.

We need to condition our hearts to be willing to receive correction, maybe even seek it out from those we trust, otherwise we risk the chance of our hearts turning toward evil. In your prayer time today, ask for the grace to not be bitter when you receive discipline, and the wisdom to learn from the discipline you receive.

GENESIS 37: EVIL USED FOR GOOD

One of my favorite proverbs is Proverbs 16:9:

In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.

It's something that we've seen over this last year, right? All the plans we had made we had to change, and we were faced with so many challenges we weren't expecting. For some people, it's very discouraging to realize that we don't know the future. A lot of the anxiety we have comes from realizing that we don't really have control over the vast majority of things that affect our lives. But there's a reminder in this proverb, and a reminder we're going to see in the life of Joseph; our plans may fall apart, but God is still directing things. God still has a plan for us, even if we don't know what it is. Our steps have already been determined before we were even born; nothing is surprising God, nothing is coming as a shock to Him.

And we have an additional promise.

Romans 8:28:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

This is a promise that God uses all the things that happen in our lives, both good and bad, for our ultimate good. He doesn't just drop us and give up during the challenging times, He continues to work in us. Maybe you've seen that work during this last year. Maybe your faith has grown, or your compassion for others has gotten stronger.

Maybe you've picked up a new skill or had a chance to spend more quality time with people you care about. Whatever it is, we can rest in the knowledge that each hardship and challenge we've gone through is part of God's plan for our lives. The hardships are never fun at the time, as I'm sure Joseph was pretty upset about being captured by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. But as we follow his story, we'll see that God is bringing Joseph exactly where he needs to be to do the job he needs to do.

We have two options when faced with the reality that we're not the ones who are ultimately in control of our lives. We can be bitter and resentful that we don't have everything in life that we think we want, or we can trust, trust that God sees a bigger picture than we could ever see and is going to do good things that we might not see for many years to come, or maybe not even see until we're in heaven with him one day.

While we wait, we can use stories like Joseph's to encourage us to stay strong during the difficult times and look forward to the victories that we don't see quite yet. It's no accident that you're

here; you have a purpose, and I think his confidence in that purpose that God had revealed to him is part of what helped Joseph stay strong during all the difficulties he had to go through.

So, let's follow his example, and trust that God is leading us into his purposes.

GENESIS 39

Devotional 1 – False Witness

Proverbs 19:5:

*A false witness will not go unpunished,
and whoever pours out lies will not go free.*

Proverbs 19:9:

*A false witness will not go unpunished,
and whoever pours out lies will perish.*

A false accusation, a lie. It can destroy an entire life in an instant. It can often leave us feeling bitter, being punished for something we didn't do. I'm sure Joseph was tempted to feel that way; to trap himself in self-pity as he sat in jail for a crime he never committed.

These proverbs remind us, however, that the ultimate Judge is God, and He won't be tricked by lies and false accusations. He knows the truth and will bring everyone into account for every lie they tell.

We are never told what happened to the woman who accused Joseph of attacking her. She never appears in the story again. I imagine she found herself in an awkward situation when Joseph was eventually put in charge of the entire country, although Joseph doesn't seem like the kind of guy to seek revenge. Maybe just the knowledge that the guy she tried to destroy was now the most powerful person in the land was enough to keep her humble from that point forward. Either way, we need to remind ourselves that it isn't our job to get even; God will vindicate us, we just need to trust and be faithful.

GENESIS 39

Devotional 2 – Favor

Proverbs 16:7:

*When the Lord takes pleasure in anyone's way,
he causes their enemies to make peace with them.*

Despite his setbacks in life, Joseph always finds favor wherever he goes. As a slave in Potiphar's house, he was eventually put in charge of the whole household. When he lands in prison, he actually gets put in charge of the prison. These seem like bad situations, with people who are in positions to mistreat Joseph however they want, but God rewards Joseph's faithfulness by giving him peaceful relationships with those in power.

The same is sometimes true for us. I remember I was often warned while doing my Ph.D. at UCLA that I wouldn't be able to succeed if I kept making God the priority in my life. My research supervisors wouldn't put up with it. Yet I found that even as I faced setback after setback, God always gave me favor with a few people that allowed me to continue working.

In the end, I completed my Ph.D. working on a project that I loved, and contributed to work that will hopefully save lives one day when the work comes to fruition. God doesn't guarantee that He will always give us peace with our enemies, but don't be surprised if it happens now and then.

GENESIS 39: WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Proverbs 20:6:

Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?

We're looking at the life of Joseph, and this week we've seen a very interesting story. We see him rise up to an important position in his new home, only to have the wife of his master accuse him of attacking her, and Joseph ends up in prison. She's mad at him because he wasn't willing to have an affair with her; she wanted to sleep with him, and he says no way, it wouldn't be right.

Genesis 39 offers us a very powerful challenge when dealing with the temptations of sexual sin. It's particularly important for us to reflect on this now, given our society's increasing disregard the importance of faithfulness in marriage. You'll often hear the notion of "Hey, if it makes you happy, do it." "Why should anyone have the right to tell you not to do something fun?" "Hey, you don't have to tell anyone, just keep it a secret, no one will know you're being unfaithful."

But Joseph knows something; he knows he has a higher responsibility than just doing whatever feels good. What's really fascinating, is when you stop to think about it, Joseph had every reason to give up on honoring the sanctity of marriage and family. His own dad had children with four different women, two of whom he wasn't even married to. Joseph's own family, his own brothers, were the ones to betray him and sell him into slavery. But he decides not to let this pattern of broken families define him. He's going to live his life defined by real love.

That's why I appreciate this proverb. You will encounter many people in life who will tell you they love you. Especially in this culture, because for the most part our current culture doesn't really understand what love is. You'll often see signs proclaiming "Love is love" but what those signs are celebrating usually isn't love. Usually that saying is in the context of, "Have sex with whoever you want" "It doesn't matter whether you're being faithful or not." "It doesn't matter if you're being holy, or honoring God."

We live in a society that wants to equate chasing after sex with chasing after love, but that's not true. What they're really doing is chasing after pleasure. A temporary, shallow pleasure, and once it's done, they'll discard the person and move on to the next person. Many claim to have unfailing love, but often, all they're looking for is self-satisfying pleasure. The Bible teaches us what love is.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love is not the person who says they want to have sex with you. Love is the mother who is changing a dirty diaper at three in the morning, tired and exhausted, while her baby is crying. Love is a father who grabs his son as he reaches for something dangerous and holds him back from hurting himself. Love is the mother who still feeds you dinner after you've spent the day yelling at her, and tucks you into bed kissing you, telling you she forgives you. Love is the husband who refuses the advances of another woman, because he's committed to staying faithful to his wife. Love is Jesus, dying for us while we were still sinners. Many claim to have unfailing love, but man oh man, where are we going to find someone who has love like that? A faithful man, a faithful woman, where in the world are we going to find someone like that?

The story of Joseph reminds us that we can say no to sexual temptations and wait for God to bring the right person into our lives in the right timing; someone who will be faithful to us. And it starts with us challenging ourselves to be that faithful person, who honors family and marriage, because we know that by doing that we're honoring God. But this story also reminds us that we will face hardships as a result of that. Joseph does the right thing, but he's still thrown into prison. He doesn't let that discourage him, however, and he realizes this setback is really just a setup for getting him where he needs to be to save the nation.

So, here's my challenge to you. God created families for a reason. There's a reason we are created male and female. There's a reason God gave us a family structure, husbands and wives, fathers, mothers, and children. And we're living in a society that increasingly wants to throw all that out and will mock and insult us for living lives that honor God's design. But if we're willing to resist the culture, if we're willing to stay faithful like Joseph did, in spite of the opposition, God will be with us and see us through. Take a page out of Joseph's playbook, and if sexual temptation comes your way, just bolt, run out the door, and don't look back. And meanwhile be patient and gentle and loving with those who mock you, insult you, and accuse you of things you didn't do, in the hopes that you can win them over to the truth. We'll love other people, just as Jesus loved us, and died for our sins. Because that is the ultimate love.

GENESIS 41: JOSEPH'S STORY

Devotional 1 - Skilled

Proverbs 22:29:

*Do you see someone skilled in their work?
They will serve before kings;
they will not serve before officials of low rank.*

Joseph is found to be responsible with everything he's left in charge of. Whether a servant in a home or a prisoner in a cage, he always seems to be so successful with his responsibilities that he's given even more opportunities by the people in charge. It would have been easy for Joseph to make the excuse to only do his job halfway; up to this point, he's really been the victim in every part of this story. Yet he demonstrates his skill and work ethic and is eventually recognized by the king of the nation.

While we don't all get a chance to work for the king of a country, you will find more often than not that hard work and integrity is met with great reward, and even better opportunities. We too should try to be responsible with the tasks given to us, even if they seem minor and insignificant. Being responsible with the little things, whether it's chores around the house or simple homework assignments, trains us to be responsible with the big things. As you grow, look for opportunities to take on greater tasks when you're ready, and see what doors God opens for you.

GENESIS 41: JOSEPH'S STORY

Devotional 2 - Nourishing

Proverbs 10:21:

*The lips of the righteous nourish many,
but fools die for lack of sense.*

After much anticipation and many challenges, Joseph is finally brought into the position God has been preparing him for. Joseph has an important assignment, one that affects not only his own family, but all the surrounding nations. Joseph is put in charge of preparing the nation of Egypt for the upcoming famine, and because of his work all the surrounding nations are able to come to Egypt to get the necessary food to last the seven years of famine.

Often people seek positions of power for the sake of power itself. People want fame, wealth, and recognition. God calls us, however, to use our gifts for the sake of others. If God puts you in an important position, or gives you great knowledge or wisdom, He's also giving you the responsibility to use it wisely. We should make it our goal to nourish and support others, both physically and also spiritually. Our words are powerful and can change the course of a life for better or worse. Each day, look for ways to build others up, whether through your words or your actions, and God will use you to save lives.

GENESIS 41: REFINER'S FIRE

Proverbs 17:3:

The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.

The process of refining precious metals like gold and silver is pretty intense. You need a lot of heat to melt the metal down. Different metals melt at different temperatures, so with enough work and just the right temperatures, you're able to get very pure metal by removing the impurities. The end result is something much more valuable than what you started with. It's valuable because of its purity.

In this proverb, God is comparing the refining of gold and silver to the refining of our hearts. In the same way, it takes a lot of work to get pure silver and gold. God is going to do a lot of work in us to make our hearts pure. But the process is difficult, isn't it? Refining something is usually a pretty intense process, and often involves breaking something down and reforming it over and over again, each time removing a little of the impurities. The same thing is true in our lives. The process of refining our hearts, making them purer, is usually pretty difficult. As much as we like the seasons in our lives when things are easy and comfortable, it's usually the difficult challenges we face that cause us to grow the most. The painful times, the days where it seems like the burdens are just too great.

1 Peter 1:3-9:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter reminds us that our faith is refined by the trials we go through in life, and the end result is salvation and joy, something that lasts much longer than gold.

You'll meet a lot of people in life who use their hardships as an excuse to just give up. They lose hope. Maybe that will happen to us sometimes too. I'm sure there were days Joseph was tempted to give up while he was in prison. How is he supposed to rise up to the important position God had promised to him if he's sitting behind bars? When we're tempted to give up, when we're losing

hope, it's important to have other people around us to encourage us and remind us that these difficulties are building something important in us. They're preparing us for a great work, and a universal rule you'll find true everywhere is that the greater the work you're preparing for, the tougher it is to prepare. And Joseph is saving a whole nation, a bunch of nations actually, and after he's been through the trials and difficulties, he's finally ready to be put in charge. His faith, his wisdom, his hope, his compassion, they're all built and it's time to start the work he was created to do.

In my own life, I've had many setbacks. I've faced a lot of sickness, from cancer and other problems. I've faced a lot of struggles in school, especially while finishing my Ph.D. But as I've shared with each of you before, each of those struggles taught me something, equipped me with something, brought me closer to God as I sought God's help to go through them. And often, they showed me things in my life that were holding me back, impurities that I needed to remove.

And you know what, I'm going to face more difficulties in the future, and those will help refine my faith as well. I don't know what work God is preparing me to do in the future, I doubt it's saving a country from a famine, but hey, you never know right? So, while we wait, let's trust that God is refining our hearts through the hard times, removing the impurities, and transforming us more into the person we were created to become. Remember, God created you with a purpose. He knows your name, he knows what your struggles are, and his promise to those of us who have put our trust in Him is that He will see us through to the end and give us a reward greater than anything gold or silver could buy.

Let's pray that God's fire will continue to refine our hearts.

GENESIS 42

Devotional 1 - Avoiding Evil

Proverbs 16:6:

*Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for;
through the fear of the Lord evil is avoided.*

Joseph's brothers have committed a horrible sin against him. One they would never be able to make up for. What kind of price can you pay for selling your own brother into slavery? I find it interesting in the story of Joseph that he seems to know this; he has no expectation that his brothers are ever going to be able to right the wrong they committed. Instead, in this test he's giving them, he's looking for their love and faithfulness. Have their hearts changed?

He's also looking to see if they are starting to acknowledge their guilt from their crimes in the past. As he hears them discussing the severity of their sins against him, Joseph actually starts weeping. Hope is stirring in his heart that there will be a chance for true reconciliation. Hope that a proper fear of the Lord in their hearts will be directing them away from evil.

Like Joseph's brothers, there's nothing we can do to make up for our sins. All we can do is seek the love and faithfulness of God, and allow a healthy, reverent fear in our hearts to keep us on the path of righteousness. Trust in the atoning work of Jesus.

GENESIS 42

Devotional 2 - Discerning

Proverbs 20:5:

*The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters,
but one who has insight draws them out.*

Joseph wants to be reconciled with his family, but he needs to have a good understanding of their motives and hearts. Do they have true remorse for their crimes against him, or are they just upset that they might get in trouble? The test Joseph is constructing is designed to get that information, to find out the purposes in the hearts of his brothers.

It takes great wisdom and understanding to look past the surface of a person and into their heart. People very often put on a show for other people, pretending to be something they're not. It's important for us to be discerning as well, because we don't want to find ourselves trusting in someone who later plans to betray us. We might look to see how they act when they're not around us, or maybe see how they treat us when they don't have anything to gain. For Joseph, he wants to see if they're willing to betray each other, or if they've finally learned to act like a loving family. As you interact with people, pay attention to the signs that they might not be the person they pretend to be, and seek wisdom so you won't be deceived.

GENESIS 42: FORGIVENESS

Proverbs 20:22:

Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.

What would you do if you finally had the chance to get even with the person who hurt you? What would you say? What would you feel? We've seen Joseph go through a lot. He was sold into slavery, thrown into prison, and eventually rose to power as the King of Egypt recruited to save the country from starvation. Yet now he faces a new challenge, perhaps the most difficult of all. He finds himself face to face with his brothers: the ones who hated him, betrayed him, sold him into slavery. They've come to Egypt to buy food during this famine, and they don't realize that the man they're standing in front of now is the brother they cast aside long ago. Now, Joseph has all the power; he's the one who gets to decide what to do.

Imagine, being face-to-face with the people who hurt you. What would you do? Rub it in their faces? Laugh at their hunger? Remind them of all the things they did to hurt you? Just close yourself off, shut the conversation down, and send them away hungry? If we allow bitterness to grow inside of us, to take root and gain control of our entire lives, that's often what happens. The moment we get a chance to get even, we take it. Now that we have the power, we finally get to hurt them back. And if we don't get that chance, we can sometimes carry that bitterness with us our entire lives, never finding peace because we're always worried about getting our revenge.

Yet in Joseph, we don't see any signs of that bitterness. He's made peace with what happened; he's trusted that God brought him here to this moment for a purpose. And that's important for each of us. If we're going to be able to go through life forgiving those who hurt us, moving on from the pain they left us, one of the important pieces of the puzzle we need is an understanding that God is bringing us into a future that He has planned for us. Something good, something to be hopeful for. This proverb reminds us that we don't need to go through life carrying the burden of needing to repay evil for evil. We don't need to let a desire for revenge consume us. Instead, wait for the right moment, the right timing from God, and God will bring about something good from the pain you've gone through. He's a God of hope, healing, and restoration.

Now, don't miss the point of this proverb. God is not saying that we allow the people who hurt us to continue hurting us; he's not saying we don't punish evil in the appropriate way, but rather that we need to respond with reverence first. Joseph sees his brothers here, but he keeps his identity a secret. He decides that he needs to test them before he reveals his identity to them; he wants to see if the condition of their hearts has changed.

If he reveals that he's their brother, will they go back to hating him? Will they try to betray him again? Joseph wants to be reconciled with his brothers, but he needs the answer to that question first. And that's true of us too. We want forgiveness and reconciliation to take place, but we also need to be careful that we don't allow the people who want to hurt us to continue exploiting us.

Joseph tests his brothers by pretending to be angry, accusing them of being spies, and putting them into a crisis. One of them has to stay behind in prison, while the others go back home to bring back their youngest brother, Benjamin. Joseph wants to see if these brothers have really learned to love each other, or if they're going to just keep on betraying their own family members.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that the one who does evil doesn't get punished. A judge can declare that someone is guilty of committing a crime, and the person will have to pay the consequences. But that's justice, not revenge.

Revenge is the desire to see someone else get hurt because of the pain they caused you. Often, if we look deep enough, we can see that it's rooted in hatred and pride, not in righteousness. Justice is different; it's not about hurting someone, it's about paying the appropriate penalty for the crime. Justice can be satisfied when the right price is paid, but you'll often find that revenge is never satisfied, no matter how much of it you get. It always leaves you empty for just a little more, and bit by bit it destroys a little piece of you in the process.

Look, I know forgiveness is a difficult thing, probably the most difficult thing Jesus commands us to do. But we can do it because Jesus died to forgive us. We need to remember that we're also the ones who have sinned against God and need forgiveness. Jesus had to die so that we could be forgiven, and that was a much greater debt than anyone could ever owe us. And now, we have the promise of eternal life, so really what's the worst that anyone can do to us?

Romans 8:31-39:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The key to forgiving others is to know that there is nothing they can say or do that can separate us from God's love and purpose for us. God's plans always win. So don't worry about getting even.

RECONCILIATION

2 Corinthians 5:16-21:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We're continuing through the story of Joseph this week and we finally get to one of my favorite scenes in the book of Genesis. The moment Joseph is reconciled with his brothers who betrayed him twenty-two years ago. Joseph was seventeen years old when he was sold into slavery and now has lived most of his life in Egypt. He's thirty-nine years old and you'd think it's too late for any chance of him reconnecting with his family in any meaningful way, yet the Bible is filled with these kinds of stories of reconciliation, whether it's Jacob reconciling with Esau or Joseph with his brothers or even the Apostle Paul being brought into the church he had once been persecuting. Reconciliation is a common theme throughout and there's a reason for this and we see this in our passage today in 2 Corinthians Chapter 5. The fundamental problem of humanity—the primary cause behind every conflict and issue we have—is our separation from God.

Because of our sin, we've been separated from God who is perfect and cannot tolerate sin. We're in a world that's essentially at war with God and like I have said to you before, anyone who's at war with God is going to be at war with the things God has created. All of our conflicts stem from this ultimate conflict we have with God which started in the Garden of Eden. The situation seemed hopeless just like Joseph's situation with his brothers with no path forward that could bring healing. But because of what Jesus did we can now have reconciliation with God and that reconciliation doesn't just affect our relationship with God, it affects our relationship with each other. During the time of the Apostle Paul, one of the biggest divisions in society was between the Jewish and Gentiles. It was both a racial and religious division but as people started accepting Christ, they found unity with each other where there used to be division.

Ephesians 2:14-22:

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, **and** in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and*

peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

That's a common theme we're seeing in society around us lately. Isn't it racial division and racial hostility and wounds from the past that never seem to heal? Paul reminds the Ephesians that the reason they now have unity with each other after having been hostile for so long was because they now have unity with God and that unity and reconciliation spreads to others we love because God loved us first and now, we have a new life that's no longer controlled by the hostility of our past. So, as you're going through this week, reflect on the reconciliation that God has offered you through the death of Jesus and pray that you will see greater peace and reconciliation with those around you.

MATT SILVERMAN'S FINAL WORDS TO HIS CHURCH YOUTH GROUP IN HOSPICE DYING OF CANCER, APRIL 2024

We weren't meant to live on this Earth for eternity. In fact, eternity on this Earth would be pretty lousy, with war, disease, pain and sickness. We are looking forward to a new Kingdom, a better Kingdom. And for the Christian, that is what our hope should always be in because if our hope is in the things of this world, then we're going to get disappointed time and time again. Here, the moths and vermin destroy, and thieves break in and steal. Nothing on this earth is going to last but the promises we have in Heaven and Eternity can't be taken away and that's a promise that I like to emphasize in my sermons. Salvation is something that can't be taken away from us; there is no mistake you can make and no sin you can commit that's going to cause God to give up on those who put their trust in Him.

Paul encouraged Timothy that even if we're faithless, even during those times when we forget God and when we mess up, God remains faithful because He can't disown himself and that is God's promise for all who have put their hope in His resurrection. He died on the cross for our sins so that we will have Eternal life. We have the promise that God will not leave us, nor forsake us, and He has Heaven in store for us. So, don't let things like death scare you or make you think that God has abandoned you or forgotten you. For the Christian, death is our final reward; it's the moment when we cross the finish line and say we've done it.

We each have a different length of a race. Some of us are longer or shorter than others. My challenge to you is just to run your race well, however long it's going to be. You want to hear "Well done good and faithful servant" at the end.

I did a video on the Parable of the Minas and Talents in one of the series, and everyone was given different things to be in charge of during their life. But some didn't do anything at all; they just buried it in the ground and didn't use it. For those who used what they were given, however, even if they didn't accomplish much and only increased it by a little bit, God said "Well done, come share in your Master's happiness." So don't look down on yourself if you feel like you haven't accomplished as much as someone else.

Watch out for jealousy and don't condemn yourself because you say the other person lived their life better than mine or accomplished way more, because you don't know what's next in your life. You don't know what future things God has in store for you and also because that's not how God sees it. God sees you serving in his Kingdom. And that's all that matters.