

October 2023

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October 2, 2023
Finishing Strong

Readings for today: [Nehemiah 11-13, Psalm 126](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

There's nothing better than accomplishing a great task for God. It could be the planting of a new church. Building a new church building. Launching an evangelistic crusade. Starting a medical clinic in an impoverished area. There's nothing better than stepping out in faith, risking it all for the sake of God's mission, and then seeing your hard work bear Kingdom fruit. I've seen it in the church I am privileged to serve. Every time God challenges us to take on a monumental task, our church family has responded and our faith in Christ has grown. We've planted new churches around the world. We've launched a new local mental health clinic. We paid off all our debt. We launched a highly successful Alpha program to reach new believers. The list goes on and on and every time we hit a milestone, we celebrate. Just like the nation of Israel did when they finally completed the wall.

Completing the wall would have meant so much to the people of Israel. First and foremost, it would have pointed them to the faithfulness of God. God is the one who made this happen. God is the one who laid it on the heart of Nehemiah to build the wall. God is the one who moved the heart of the emperor to provide materials and resources. God is the one who protected them from their enemies along the way. Second, completing the wall would've signified safety and security. Now the people could build their homes and businesses without fear. Now they could begin to plan for their future. Now they could rebuild their city and reclaim their national identity. Thirdly, completing the wall would have sent a signal to all their enemies. No longer would Israel be a doormat. No longer would they be an easy mark. No longer would they be at their mercy. The wall was a powerful symbol in addition to being a physical monument.

Now consider your own life. Consider the great things God has called you to. Consider the great plans God has for you. Consider all God wants to accomplish through you. Does anything come to mind? Can you look back and see some of the milestones you've hit along the way? If not, I encourage you to seek the Lord. Ask Him to show you what He wants you to do for Him. All of us have a calling on our life. All of us have a God-sized plan for our life. Something only God Himself can accomplish in and through us. Perhaps you know what God wants you to do but you've hesitated to take that step of faith. Don't hold back! Don't wait any longer! Step into the future God has for you! Perhaps you find yourself right in the middle of God's plan. Perhaps you're feeling stretched beyond your resources. Perhaps you're coming to the end of your strength. These can be great signs that you are right where God wants you. Keep pressing in. Keep wading in. Keep it going. God is with you! He who began this great work in and through you will bring it to completion!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalm 106, John 1:1-14

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October 3, 2023
The Call of the Christian

Readings for today: [Psalm 106](#), [John 1:4-14](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I love how the Message version of the Bible describes the call of John the Baptist. “There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.” (John 1:6-8 MSG) John was not the Light. He was not the Christ. He was not the Messiah. As he himself will say later on, he isn’t even worthy to untie the Messiah’s sandals. John was simply a man. A man called to point the way to Jesus. A man called to prepare the way for Jesus. And there was no greater man born of a woman, Jesus says, than John the Baptist.

In a very real way, all Christians are called to be like John the Baptist. We inherit his mantle. We are called to point out the way to the Life-Light. We are called to show everyone where to look and who to believe in. We are not the Light. We are the little lights that reflect the greater light. We are like the moon that reflects the light of the sun. We don’t have light in and of ourselves. Our light comes from the presence of Christ living inside us. Our light comes from the treasure of the gospel which is deposited within us. As we live authentically and fully and completely for Jesus, the world catches yet another glimpse of the “Word become flesh” and the “one of a kind glory” which He reveals in and through us.

The Apostle John makes it clear that without the Light, the world is consigned to darkness. Without the Light, the world dwells in deep darkness with no hope of escape. Without the Light, the world is doomed to live in eternal night and this is what makes our calling so important. The world needs us to embrace our calling to be the light of Jesus in the world. To reflect His glory. To live the way He lived. To love the way He loved. To serve the way He served. As I heard a good friend of mine preach this past weekend, “It’s not enough to know what Jesus knows, we must become who He is.” Our hearts must be transformed. The image of God renewed and restored by His grace and power at work within us. We must become living, breathing, flesh and blood reflections of Jesus in the world. Only then will the world find hope. Only then will the unbelieving world find faith.

Only Christ can offer the Light we so desperately need. Listen again to how the Apostle John describes it, “The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light. He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn’t even notice. He came to his own people, but they didn’t want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.” (John 1:9-13 MSG) Friends, we are the “God-begotten!” The Born Again! The New Creation! May we live and move and have our being in Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 1, Luke 1:1-2:38

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October 4, 2023
God's Call

Readings for today: [Matthew 1, Luke 1:1-2:38](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

There's a church in Israel built over the top of Zechariah's home. It's in the hill country of Judah. It commemorates the place where Mary and Elizabeth met after receiving the incredible news that their two boys would change the world. I love the statue pictured above. It's a beautiful depiction of both women, both pregnant, marveling at all God had done for them. They were the most unlikely participants in God's divine drama. One woman, Elizabeth, barren and advanced in years past the point of ever getting pregnant. Another woman, Mary, still very much a teenager, unmarried, and a virgin. Both women receive an angelic visitation from Gabriel who "stands in the presence of God" and is sent to deliver the good news of John and Jesus' births. Both women are overshadowed by the Holy Spirit as their wombs are blessed with the miracle of new life.

And what a life they were given! Their boys would be great before the Lord. One would be filled with the Holy Spirit from conception. His call would be to turn the hearts of the children of Israel back to God. He would preach in the spirit and power of Elijah and he would prepare the way for his cousin who would be called "Son of the Most High." The other child would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and would be given the throne of David in order to reign over the house of Jacob forever. He would be called holy and the Son of God. The first of these two boys would be named John. The second would be named Jesus. One can only imagine the conversations Elizabeth and Mary had during the three months Mary stayed with them.

It's tempting to read these stories and believe that these women were somehow different than us. More holy. More righteous. More special in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. God simply chose them to play a particular role in His great salvation plan. You and I have been called to play particular roles as well. Roles only we can play. Roles specifically suited for our unique mix of personality, passion, and ability. Yes, we may not receive angelic visitations but the call of God comes to us just the same. It comes through His Word and in prayer. It comes to us through our brothers and sisters in Christ. It comes to us as we survey the great needs of the world around us. And those whom God calls, God equips. Those whom God calls, He qualifies. He sends His Holy Spirit to "overshadow" all the work we do in His name. Friends, if you trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you have been called and invited to play a vital role in God's salvation plan! God wants to use YOU to help bring about His Kingdom on this earth! Seek His wisdom so you may know not only what your role may be but how best to fulfill that role in your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

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October 5, 2023
What's Your Response to Jesus?

Readings for today: [Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. Wise men from the east. Probably pagan astrologers who watched the skies over Babylon. Men who possibly had been raised on the stories of their fabled Jewish forebears, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come to Israel following a star. The heavenly sign was so compelling they traveled who knows how many miles over how many weeks to worship and offer gifts to a newborn king.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. The king of Israel. Descendant of Esau through his father who had converted, Herod was raised a Jew. However, he was not of the Davidic line and therefore was considered a pretender at best to the throne. Furthermore, he reigned at the whim of Caesar, his first allegiance being to the Roman Empire rather than Yahweh. He received the news the wise men brought and was troubled. The news of a new king being born would be a threat to his own power. So he marshals his forces and lays waste to the entire region surrounding Bethlehem, killing all the male children under two years of age.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. Joseph and Mary are traveling home from their annual trek to Jerusalem. After they make camp for the night, they realize Jesus is not with them. He has remained behind. So back they go frantic in their search for their now 12 year old son. For three days, they searched high and low throughout the city only to find him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. "Why have you treated us like this?" Why disrespect us? Why not obey us? Why did you not come when it was time to go? Their anger and frustration is palpable. And Jesus humbles himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. The Heavenly Father looks down on His Son. Sees him in danger and sends an angel to warn his parents. Sees him at the Temple listening and learning from the teachers of the Law. Sees him as he grows up under the love and guidance of Joseph and Mary. The Father sees it all and grants the Son favor. Blessing. Wisdom. Strength. Preparing him for the day when he would launch his ministry. Laying the groundwork for what's to come.

What's your reaction to Jesus? How do you receive Him? Is it with a glad heart? Do you feel yourself compelled to seek Him and grow a relationship with Him like the wise men? Is it fear? Do you, like Herod, respond in fear and anxiety to the idea that Jesus would be your Lord and Savior? Is it frustration? Like Joseph and Mary, does Jesus sometimes confound your expectations? Or do you respond with love and devotion? Is Jesus finding greater "favor" with you with each passing year?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

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October 6, 2023
Baptism

Readings for today: [Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Next week, I am taking a group of people to Israel. We will pack a lot in over the course of about eight days. We'll see three to four sites a day and we'll literally walk in the footsteps of Jesus. It promises to be a sacred experience. One of the sites we'll visit is a place called Yardenit. It's located on the Jordan River and it's the traditional site where John the Baptist conducted his ministry. Though the Jordan River is nowhere near as impressive as it used to be due to so much of the water being diverted for agriculture, it's still powerful to wade out into the middle of the river and be immersed and/or baptized. It's one of the highlights of every trip.

I love how Eugene Peterson describes John's ministry in the Message version. "I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned." (Matthew 3:11-12 MSG) The baptism of John was but a foretaste of the baptism to come. His work was a precursor. A prolegomena. The prelude. The prologue to the real story that was to come. John washed people with water as an outward sign of their desire to be clean. Their desire to exchange their old ways for God's ways. What John couldn't do, however, was give them the gift of the Holy Spirit. He simply didn't have the power to ignite the Kingdom life within them.

Sadly, far too many Christians treat their baptism as if it were from John. They treat it as simply an outward sign or symbol of their desire to be faithful to Jesus. And while this has some merit - just as it did in John's day - it is not Christian baptism. To be baptized as a Christian is to be baptized by the "main character in the drama" who comes to ignite new life within us. He comes to baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit to purify us from within. He comes to give us a new heart and a new spirit and a new life that can only be lived in and through Him. He comes to clean house. To crucify the old life so that we might be raised to new life with Him. This is why we only baptize once. There is no need to receive the Holy Spirit a second time because you never lose Him after the first time. There is no need to ignite the fire a second time because the fire Jesus ignites in us never goes out. There is no need to be washed clean a second time because the blood of Jesus washes us clean once and for all.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-51, 2:1-12

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October 7, 2023
Temptation

Readings for today: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-51, 2:1-12 (audio reading)

One of the more powerful experiences when I visited Israel was seeing the Mount of Temptation. Tradition holds this is where the Spirit drove Jesus after His baptism. It's located in the hills outside of Jericho in a desolate region of the country. For centuries, many devout believers have come to this mountain to live as hermits. They come to dedicate their lives to fasting and prayer. You can see some of the original caves in the mountainside. You can even visit a Greek Orthodox Monastery that was built on the slopes overlooking both Jericho and the Jordan River valley. Some of the structures date back to the 6th century and supposedly at its heart lies the very cave where Jesus spent His forty days and forty nights.

I took the journey all the way into the heart of the monastery to see the place where Jesus is said to have been tempted. I stood in front of the stone where He sat and looked out the window. I tried to imagine myself in this dry, deserted place without food or water for forty days. I looked at the stones on the mountainside and thought to myself, "These stones? These are the stones He could have made into bread?" I looked out at Jericho to the place where Herod the Great built his winter palace and thought to myself, "This is the kind of power and authority the devil offered Jesus if He simply would fall down and worship him?" I thought of the Temple complex in Jerusalem where the devil tempted Jesus to make a spectacle of Himself and again was struck by the humility and trust and dependence of Jesus. He truly trusted His Father to provide for all His needs. He truly sought the affirmation of His Father above all earthly praise. He truly believed in His Father's plan for His life.

What about me? Do I trust Jesus in the same way? How do I respond when temptation comes? Am I willing to fast and pray and place myself and my future in my Father's hands? Am I humble enough to admit my brokenness before Him? Trusting enough to let Him guide and direct my steps? Dependent enough to surrender my will and my life and my hopes and my dreams into His hands? All these questions ran through my mind that day. I don't know that I came to any hard and fast answers but I did find comfort in reciting Jesus' words to myself. Claiming His promises and protection for my life. "Do not live by bread alone, Doug, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Do not try to satisfy your every longing but instead let those longings remind you of your even greater longing for God. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, Doug." Do not presume upon His grace. Do not take His love for granted. "Worship the Lord your God, Doug, and serve Him alone." Make God the supreme treasure of your life and prioritize accordingly. In this way, you will find yourself resisting every temptation the enemy might throw your way.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 9, 2023
Slowing Down

Readings for today: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44 (audio reading)

One of the things I admire most about Jesus is His ability to take the time and make the time to be with His Heavenly Father. There has never been anyone more busy with more demands on their plate. Everywhere Jesus went, people came out to see Him. They brought their sick and diseased and demon-possessed. They interrupted Him constantly with their needs. They loved sitting under His teaching day after day after day. There's a great scene from The Chosen when Jesus finishes up a day of healing and comes back to camp utterly exhausted. He can barely stand. Barely eat. Barely say His prayers before laying down to sleep. It paints a very realistic picture of what Jesus had to go through on a daily basis.

At the same time, the Gospels make it clear Jesus also took time away. He didn't let the demands of the ministry drive Him. He didn't let the needs of the people overwhelm Him. He refused to let anything come between Him and His first priority...His Heavenly Father. I love how Mark describes it in his Gospel. "While it was still night, way before dawn, Jesus got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, "Everybody's looking for you." (Mark 1:35-37 MSG) One gets the sense that Jesus often found such moments. He would get up early before anyone else and spend time with His Father. He would let the Spirit minister to His heart and strengthen His body. He would talk to His Father about the plans He had for His Son. And He ultimately obeyed His Father though it led to incredible suffering and death on a cross. In all this, Jesus models for us what a life lived with God looks like even amidst the craziness and busyness of our world.

For years, I've tried to practice what Jesus models and here's what I've discovered. The more the pace of my "external" life picks up, the more my "internal" life needs to slow down. The more demands I take on in my life, the more I need to carve out time for Jesus. Often those moments come in the middle of the night or the early morning hours when no one else in my home is awake. I find myself awake and praying for those I love and those I serve and the responsibilities God has laid on me in this particular season. I love the life I've been given. My life is rich and full. But the pace can be a bit overwhelming at times. I carry responsibilities as a husband and a father and a son. I carry responsibilities as a pastor and adjunct professor. I carry responsibilities as a leader in my denomination and a trainer for church planters internationally. I write blogs and record podcasts. I read voraciously. I work out faithfully. But most importantly, I spend time each day with God. I carve out the time I need to be alone with Him so I can receive His wisdom and be strengthened by His Spirit so I accomplish all the plans He has for me.

Readings for tomorrow: John 3-5

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October 10, 2023
The Worldview of Jesus

Readings for today: [John 3-5](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I was scheduled to lead a trip to Israel beginning this Friday. Obviously, the tragic and horrific events of the past weekend scuttled those plans. I woke up early Saturday morning to my phone buzzing with the update that Hamas had fired thousand of rockets into Israel. Invaded several communities in and around the Gaza border. Raped, kidnapped, and murdered hundreds. I immediately reached out to our contacts in Israel to get a sense of the conditions on the ground. They were not good. This is perhaps the worst attack since the 1973 Yom Kippur War and it has been devastating to the country. As the weekend progressed, the news broke that Hezbollah has opened a second front on the north out of Lebanon. Iran was very likely involved in the operation planning. And anti-Israeli demonstrations are ongoing across the Arab world. So much hatred. So much violence. It's overwhelming and it begs the question...why? What's wrong with our world? Why do these cycles of violence seemingly never end?

Jesus has an answer. It's not one we necessarily like to hear. Listen again to His words from John 3, "This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is." (John 3:19-21 MSG) Ultimately, we are the reason for this crisis. Humanity's inhumanity to other humans knows no bounds. Given the right set of conditions, we are all capable of great evil because the dividing line between good and evil runs though every human heart. Our natural tendency is to run to the darkness. We do this because we don't want to submit to God. We think we know better so we throw off all restraint. And the result is pain. Suffering. Heartache. Tragedy. Evil.

So what's the answer? Once again, Jesus is clear. The answer is a transformed humanity. A humanity that's been born again to a new way of life. This is the answer He gave Nicodemus when he came to see him. "Jesus said, "Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit." (John 3:5-6 MSG) The fundamental truth is that God has given dominion to human beings. We were created to serve as stewards and caregivers over all God has made. God designed us to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with His glory. And though we rejected Him, Jesus came to call us back to our original purpose. He came to tear down the dividing walls of hostility that exist between us and the world around us. Jesus promises a new heart and a new spirit which results in a new humanity. Jesus is ultimately the only hope for a true and lasting peace in the Middle East because He's the only one powerful enough to heal the generational divisions between Israelis and Palestinians. He's done it in places like Rwanda between Hutu's and Tutsi's or in South Africa under Nelson Mandela or India under Gandhi. The Christian way has not been tried and found wanting, it's been found difficult and left untried. (GK Chesterton)

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17. 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-6:19

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October 11, 2023
Hanging out with Jesus

Readings for today: [Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21](#), [Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-3:21](#), [Luke 5:12-6:19](#)
[\(audio reading\)](#)

Who did Jesus spend time with and why? That's a huge question as we read through the Gospels. Jesus often finds Himself at odds with the religious leaders of His day because of the company He keeps. He hangs out with tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, demon-possessed, and a host of other unclean sinners who were outcast from first century Israelite society. He went to their homes. He went to their parties. He loved them and embraced them and welcomed them. Why did Jesus do this? After all, it's not very strategic. They didn't have much to offer His ministry. It wasn't good for His reputation. They were desperately needy and took up a great deal of His time and attention. So what was in it for Jesus? Listen to His own words. They appear in all three of the Synoptic Gospels which means each of the Gospel writers believed them to be vitally important.

“Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually-fit.”
(Mark 2:17 MSG)

We often say things like, “the church should be a hospital for sinners” but that's an extremely difficult vision to live into. People are messy. My mess messes with your mess and your mess messes with my mess. The more real and authentic I become in community, the more challenging it is to be in relationship with me. My ego gets involved and complicates matters. I have a hard time seeing the log in my eye when I'm trying to get the speck out of my brother or sister's eye. I have a hard time resisting the temptation to pass judgment but find it all too easy to give myself a pass. And yet, Jesus didn't come for the self-righteous or the Pharisee or the saint who appears perfect. Jesus didn't come for the overly religious or superficially spiritual or nominal believer. Jesus came for the sick. Jesus came for the broken. Jesus came for the weak and spiritually poor. Jesus came for the hungry and thirsty. Jesus came for the naked and oppressed. Jesus came to invite the sinner into fellowship so he or she might be saved.

I think of some of the places I go and the people I meet. The general manager of a local bar always buys me a round of drinks when I meet people at his establishment. A town council member lets me have a tab at his coffee shop. A lesbian couple continues to dialogue with me over what it means to follow Jesus. A young man in his late twenties meets with me to wrestle with his gender identity. Several young people who are battling significant mental health issues ask me for prayer regularly. I get invited into birthday parties and wedding celebrations and other occasions that mark major milestones in people's lives. I always try to say “yes” to these invitations because they are opportunities for me to do what Jesus did. Minister to the sick and invite them to find healing through a relationship with Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

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October 12, 2023
A Firm Foundation

Readings for today: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13 [\(audio reading\)](#)

As we dive into the devotional for today, let me encourage you to listen to one of my recent favorite songs which speaks directly to what we're looking at today.

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” (Luke 6:46-49)

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. Period. In it, Jesus casts His vision for His Kingdom. He defines what life looks like under His rule and reign. He sets boundaries around human desire and behavior to protect us from self-destruction and to teach us how to build a life that will last forever. Sadly, too many of us believe we can choose our own path. Defiantly, we try to chart our own course into eternity. Foolishly, we attempt to bushwhack our way through the wilderness of this world only to quickly lose our way. The results are tragic and heartbreaking.

I wonder sometimes why we find our culture’s pact with sin and death so enticing. What is it about our culture that draws us in? We all know it’s not good for us. We all know the pace we set isn’t healthy. We all feel the effects of isolation and loneliness. We all struggle under the pressure that’s created and exasperated through social media. So why do we persist? Why can’t we seem to opt out? Are we truly so addicted we cannot stop?

How many families have to break up? How many pills do we have to take? How many children have to suffer before we wake up from the nightmare we find ourselves in? When will we stop believing the lie that life is all about me? All about my wants? All about my desires? The world tells us to “follow your heart” and “be true to yourself.” I can think of nothing more devastating. The world tells us we “can be whoever we want to be” and to do “whatever feels good.” I can think of nothing more heartbreaking. Do we not see the pain we are leaving in our wake? The broken relationships? And for what? So we can selfishly pursue our own happiness at the expense of others? Do we not see the toll this is taking? The high price we are paying? The cost to those around us, especially those we love most? (If you need examples, do a google search on the New York Times and divorce. They have published several articles over the last couple of years extolling the virtues of divorce as an act of “self-actualization.” Ugh.)

I meet them every single day. In coffee shops and bars all over town. Men and women and children who are suffering. Struggling. Wrestling with a deep sense of existential loneliness because they have tried their best to do life on their own. They “believed in themselves” but that belief took them nowhere. Like Sinatra, they did life “my way” only to find themselves at a dead end. They tried to be the captain of their own destiny. The master of their own fate. The ruler of their own domain only to discover their reach far exceeded their grasp. In the words of Jesus, they built their entire lives on sand and their ruin was great.

Perhaps that describes you today. You are looking around at the ruins of your marriage. The ruins of your family. The ruins of your professional career. Your bank account is overdrawn. Your energy levels

are dangerously low. Your emotional reserves are tapped out. Your relationships are broken. Your heart is aching. And you feel so very alone. Depressed. Angry. Frustrated. Anxious. Afraid. Perhaps you've even been tempted to put an end to it all. Don't believe the lie! God is with you! Even in the valley of the shadow! Even in the darkest of nights! His presence is always there to comfort and to guide and to bring us back into the light!

So how do we get from here to there? We start building on the rock. We start by surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and take up residence within us so He may transform us from the inside out. Only God can re-orient the desires of our hearts! Only God can re-prioritize the values of our lives! Only God can redirect our loves. As He does this deep work in us, what comes out of us begins to change. Life on the outside begins to reflect the new life that's emerging on the inside. Regenerate actions flow from a regenerated heart. New wine is poured from new wine-skins as God removes our hearts of stone and gives us new hearts that beat for Him alone!

How do we know if we've received this new heart? Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than treat it as a list of "do's and don'ts" instead consider it more of a diagnostic. Let the words of Jesus dissect your every thought. Your every deed. Your every emotion. Let it stand like a plumb line in your life against which you are constantly measuring yourself. Not because you must earn God's favor but because you long to bring glory to God. Not because you have to follow some law but because you want to chart the progress the Holy Spirit is making in sanctifying you for His Kingdom. Not because you have to clean yourself up before God can love you or accept you but because you trust He has already done so and is hard at work to present you blameless before His throne.

One can spend a lifetime learning from these few chapters and still never arrive. This isn't about perfection, friends. It's about the journey. It's about following the way of Jesus. And if you are like most, you will find yourself stumbling down the road like a drunk man, swaying from one side to the other. That's okay. That's actually quite normal. The key is to keep walking down the road.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

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October 13, 2023
Dinner with Jesus

Readings for today: [Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Imagine you're having Jesus over for dinner. You send out invitations. Line up a caterer. Clean your house. Put out tables and chairs. Light your scented candles. Maybe even spring for some live music. You leave nothing to chance. You want Him to be impressed. The day of the affair arrives. Your home is packed with people. These are your friends. Your colleagues. Your family. All of whom cannot wait to meet Jesus. He walks in. What do you do? Do you greet Him? Offer to take His coat? Get Him a drink? Give Him the seat of honor? Do you make sure to serve Him first as your guest? Introduce Him to all your friends by name? Make sure He feels welcomed and honored? Of course you would. You would be embarrassed if you didn't. Your friends would be ashamed of you.

Let's take it up a notch. Imagine what would happen if a homeless man wandered in to your home that evening. Or a prostitute. Or a drug addict. Imagine them disrupting things. Imagine the crowd parting as people stumble over themselves so they don't have to touch them. Imagine the room going silent and all eyes turning to you to see how you will respond. Now imagine those same eyes shifting to Jesus as the homeless man/prostitute/drug addict falls at His feet. Weeping. Shedding so many tears, Jesus' feet literally become drenched. Now imagine the homeless man taking out a dirty handkerchief to wipe His shoes. The prostitute letting her hair down to dry his feet. The drug addict using his ratty t-shirt. You would probably be uncomfortable with the whole scene. Unsure of what to do or how to respond. Embarrassed by their behavior. After all, this whole affair is supposed to be about impressing Jesus!

Imagine Jesus turns to you and tells you a story. Two people went into deep debt to a loan shark. One for five hundred thousand and the other for fifty. Neither could afford to pay. In a shocking move, the loan shark forgave both their debts. Which would love him more? The one who owed him the greater amount, of course. This homeless man, this woman of the night, this poor addict all struggle with so many things. Their lives are a train wreck. Your life, on the other hand, is good. You live in a nice home. You are surrounded by people who love and respect you. You make a good living. You enjoy some of the finer things of life. Yes, you know you are not perfect. Yes, you have your own struggles. Yes, life is not always easy. But you have been given much whereas this man, this woman, this addict have been given little. And even what little they did have has been squandered away. Who do you think will love Jesus more?

The one who is forgiven much, loves much. The one who is forgiven little, loves little. Friends, ask the Father to show you the full measure of your sin. Ask Him to show you how far you have fallen short of His glory. Not so that you will despair but so you can more deeply appreciate the sacrifice He made to save you! God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it! No! He sent Jesus so the world might be saved through Him! All of us from the richest to the poorest. From the most privileged to the most oppressed. Perpetrators and victims alike need forgiveness. We all need grace. And Jesus stands ready to offer it to us in abundance! Know your sins have been forgiven and let that fan the flames of your devotion to Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

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October 14, 2023
Unforgivable Sin

Readings for today: [Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Forgiveness is one of the core ethical practices of the Christian faith. We forgive others their sins because God first forgave us our sin. We extend grace to others because God first extended grace to us while we were still dead in our sin. We show unconditional love to others because God first loved us and laid down His life for us. We ask God how many times we have to forgive as if there is a limit to His grace. He responds by telling us to forgive “seven times seventy” which doesn’t equal 490! It simply means we forgive and forgive and forgive as many times as is necessary. But then Jesus talks about the “unforgivable sin” and we are confronted with an apparent contradiction. What do we do then?

“There’s nothing done or said that can’t be forgiven. But if you deliberately persist in your slanders against God’s Spirit, you are repudiating the very One who forgives. If you reject the Son of Man out of some misunderstanding, the Holy Spirit can forgive you, but when you reject the Holy Spirit, you’re sawing off the branch on which you’re sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One who forgives.” (Matthew 12:31-32 MSG)

The only unforgivable sin is to reject the One who offers us forgiveness in the first place. God will not forgive those who reject His grace. God will not forgive those who reject His great love. God will not forgive those who refuse to accept His Son Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It’s not that God doesn’t desire to forgive them. It’s not that He’s hurt or angry or gets defensive. He simply honors the choice we have made. He refuses to override our free will. He will not force us to accept His forgiveness. This is what makes unbelief unforgivable.

This week, my community was rocked by a suicide. Some suggest suicide is unforgivable. Not true. This week, our world was rocked by the terrorist attacks in Israel. Some suggest the murders Hamas has committed are unforgivable. Not true. There may be many other sins one could think of that place us seemingly beyond the reach of God’s grace. Not true. There are no atrocities committed by human beings that God cannot and will not forgive if we will but repent and turn to Him. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t consequences for our actions. Those who die by suicide will not rise until Jesus comes again. Those who commit horrific crimes against humanity will have to face justice either in this life or the next. Sin has a destructive effect on every human life it touches. Thankfully, God is faithful. If we bring our brokenness before Him, He is able and willing to forgive us and cleanse us and make us new.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 16, 2023
The Kingdom of God

Readings for today: Matthew 13, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18 [\(audio reading\)](#)

Have you ever wondered what the Kingdom of God is actually like? And how it differs from the kingdoms of this world? In our readings for today, Jesus takes up the subject of the Kingdom and describes it from a number of different angles.

The Kingdom is like a field full of different kinds of soils, some more fruitful than others.

The Kingdom is like a paddock where both wheat and weeds grow up together.

The Kingdom is like the smallest of seeds that blossoms into one of the largest of trees.

The Kingdom is like the little bit of leaven one puts in bread to leaven the whole lump.

The Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field.

The Kingdom is like that one pearl of great price.

The Kingdom is like a net that captures all kinds of fish, some good and some bad.

It is striking how different Jesus' kingdom is from the kingdoms of this world. The world's kingdoms value wealth and power and success. They measure themselves according to their size and influence. Their goal is to achieve as much as possible. To sit atop the rankings. They jockey for position. They compete with one another. They take delight on another's fall even as they scramble for a higher rung on the proverbial ladder.

Sadly, too many churches fall into this trap as well. We value attendance. The size of our annual budgets. The number of people on staff. The beauty and attractiveness of our property and facilities. We jockey for position on Outreach Magazine's Top 100. We seek to expand our brand by planting churches in communities where many other gospel-preaching churches already exist. We define success by the number of new attendees even though statistics show they are often transfers from the churches around us. So our "success" is another church's "failure." The American church is particularly susceptible to this line of thinking. I heard a pastor recently argue that we should pull back from missions around the world so we could focus on planting churches in America. After all, he said, imagine what God could do with all the resources we have in this country? As if God needs our resources to accomplish His mission.

I will confess my own failings here as well. It is so tempting for me to focus on the crowd that gathers on a Sunday morning. To dwell on how they receive the message I preach and whether or not they are putting it into practice. I spend a lot of energy daydreaming over what God could do with the resources in my church family and how that would impact not only Parker but the whole world. If I am not careful, my passion to see God awaken every heart in my congregation spills over into a sinful trust in our strength. Our wealth. Our resources. But the Kingdom of God is measured in much smaller, more subtle ways. It is the man set free from addiction. The abused woman who finds a listening ear. It is a marriage saved by counseling. A child who invites Jesus into their heart. It is a person going on a mission trip for the very first time. It is men and women stepping forth to lead and to serve in all sorts

of ways. This is what the Kingdom is like. It is often hidden. Often under the radar. Often under the surface. It is messy and complex. Never clean or neat or easy. It is often two steps forward, one step back. The people we think have so much potential often are the most resistant and the people we often overlook become the true heroes and heroines of the faith.

In my experience, good soil is always mixed in with concrete, gravel, thorns and thistles. Wheat is always mixed in with weeds. Mustard seeds often get lost in the shuffle. Leaven disappears into the dough. The treasure sometimes stays hidden for years. Finding that one pearl can take decades. Casting a wide net brings in all kinds of fish. Such is life in the Kingdom and thank God it's not up to me to sort it all out.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-5:43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

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October 17, 2023
Calming the Sea

Readings for today: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-5:43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62
(audio reading)

Every year around Christmas or my birthday, my wife and I talk about how notoriously difficult it is to buy a gift for me. I have a few hobbies like hiking or reading or working out but those don't come with a lot of needs. I'm not big into clothes. I don't have a lot of toys. I live a pretty simple life at the end of the day. However, last year something changed. I found an organization that employs artists to reproduce famous artwork in the same medium. I told my wife about it and she asked if I would ever want something from them. I asked for an oil on canvas reproduction of The Storm on the Sea of Galilee painted by Rembrandt in 1633. She agreed. She got our whole family to pitch in. It took fourteen weeks to arrive and it now hangs in my office next to the rocking chair where I spend time with God almost every morning.

I love looking at that painting as I meditate and pray. I often find myself identifying with one or more of the disciples in the boat. Sometimes I'm near the front trying with all my might to keep the sails up in the midst of the storm. Sometimes I'm in the back holding onto the rudder. Sometimes I'm the guy puking over the side. ;-) Through it all, Jesus just sits there calmly letting me know He is with me. I am in no danger because He is in control. The wind and the waves pose no threat to Him or to those who call on His name.

Take a look at the painting below. Let yourself marvel with the disciples at the One who controls every storm. Let yourself rest in His presence. Let His peace flow over you. No matter what you may be going through in your life right now, He is with you. You are in no danger. He can heal every disease. He can cast out every demon. He can even raise the dead! Nothing in this world can snatch you out of His hand!



Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

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October 18, 2023
Commissioning

Readings for today: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6 [\(audio reading\)](#)

I was recently asked to help lead a team to evaluate and potentially revise our ordination standards. For those who may not be familiar with how pastors and/or priests get ordained, there is a fairly rigorous academic process at the end of which you sit for written and oral exams. If you pass those exams, you are formally ordained and installed to your “office” of pastor. Over the years, it’s become fairly cumbersome as more and more requirements get added with little, if any, subtraction. It can take years. It can be very expensive. The curriculum can be narrow and theologically parochial. But one has to run this gauntlet if one is going to serve in our denomination.

Now look at the process Jesus employs. He teaches his disciples over a number of months and then sends them out to preach the same message He’s been preaching. He gives them authority to heal disease and cast out demons. He doesn’t put them through any theological exams. He doesn’t seem all that concerned that they might make mistakes. He knows there will be plenty of time to make those corrections along the way. Furthermore, He doesn’t give them much in the way of resources. He doesn’t set goal for support-raising before they can go. He simply sends them without money and without food and encourages them to trust the Lord to provide along the way.

Let’s be honest. We don’t trust the way of Jesus when it comes to commissioning His people to serve as ministers of the gospel. It’s why we’ve spent hundreds of years developing elaborate educational systems and fundraising methods so that we don’t have to do what Jesus did. We want to eliminate any and all risk. We want to guard against heresy. We want to make sure there are no needs that go unmet. And the result is we never do get around to actually going. The harvest fields Jesus talks about are still out there. Ripe for the harvest. And the workers are still far too few largely because we refuse to let them go until they meet our somewhat arbitrary standards. This is true not only for pastors and priests but for the ordinary Christian as well. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve talked to a brother or sister in Christ about evangelism only to have them tell me they don’t feel equipped. They don’t feel confident. They don’t feel they have what it takes. Many of them have grown up in the church. They’ve been in numerous Bible studies along the way. They’ve been faithful to serve. In some cases, they’ve even been through evangelism training but still they struggle to go.

It’s time for the church to take a good hard look at herself. Rather than spend so much time and effort gate-keeping and guarding against potential heresy, we need to take more risks and send more people out into the harvest field. Sure, they may not have all of their theological “i’s” dotted or “t’s” crossed but what’s most important is that they know they have been commissioned by the Holy Spirit to go and preach the good news. They have been given the authority of the Holy Spirit to confront demons and comfort the hurting and come alongside those who need healing. They will be given all they need by the Holy Spirit to accomplish the ministry He has planned for them. This must become our primary goal! To send God’s people into God’s mission field so He might reap a harvest of souls!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

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October 19, 2023
Follow Your Heart?

Readings for today: [Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I hear it all the time. Do what feels good. Do what feels right. Be true to yourself. Follow your heart. These platitudes sound so promising until one actually decides to act on them. If one chooses to follow one's heart, one quickly ends up in a ditch. Why? Our hearts are broken. Our hearts are corrupt. Our hearts are filled with all kinds of evil thoughts and intentions. Evil? Really? Perhaps you think "evil" is too strong of a word. Okay. Try selfish. I think most of us would agree that our natural way of operating is to take care of ourselves first. Make sure our own needs get met first. Fulfill our own desires before we give or serve others. Our culture reinforces this idea. Put yourself first. Take care of yourself. You deserve a break. Make yourself the first priority. Unfortunately, the American church too often uncritically blesses this mindset. I love what a Korean pastor, Jay Kim, recently wrote, "The uniquely American emphasis of the gospel is seeing faith as a means to personal benefit, rather than a sacrificing of personal benefits for eternal rewards."

Jesus is clear. We are not the center of the universe. Our hearts are not pure. Our hands are not clean. Our desires are oriented inward rather than outward and result in a defilement that affects the whole person. This is why behavior management is no substitute for the gospel. We cannot work from the outside in. We must work from the inside out. Our hearts have to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Renewed and restored by the indwelling presence of God Himself. Only then will our lives begin to reflect His true glory. The reality is too many Christians are working far too hard at cleaning the outside of the cup. Making sure they live morally upright lives. They major in the minors. And it ends up crippling our witness.

Christ wants our hearts. He will not settle for less. It doesn't matter if you are a Pharisee, a disciple, or a Syrophoenician woman. It doesn't matter whether you are sick or well. Free or oppressed. Rich or poor. Christ wants your heart. He wants to transform you from the inside out. He wants your love and devotion far more than your outward obedience to His commands. As good and as holy as His commandments are, they cannot serve as a pathway to righteousness. Only Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And it is only by faith that we can live truly and wholly for Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

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October 20, 2023
Surrendering Our Will

Readings for today: [Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, 9:1, Luke 9:18-27](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

It's one of the hardest things for us to do. Surrender. Submit. Bend the knee. Bow before the Lord. We pride ourselves on being self-sufficient. We focus a significant amount of time and energy and attention on boosting our self-esteem. If we feel down on ourselves, we turn to self-help. If we want to encourage ourselves, we look to self-promotion...especially on social media. If we feel afraid or threatened, we become self-protective. It's the most natural thing in the world to be sure and yet it runs exactly counter to the way God set up life.

God is the most selfless Being in the universe. He gives Himself in love to His creation and especially the creature He made in His own image. He gives Himself in relationship to us. He gives Himself up as a sacrifice for us. He lays down His very life for us. This is who God is and it's who we were created to be as well. God created human beings to be selfless. Sin turned us selfish. God created human beings to be generous. Sin turned us into hoarders and misers. God created us to be compassionate and caring. Sin turned us towards violence and hate. The list is endless. All that God created us to be, sin corrupted and we see the consequences all around us. The most obvious might be the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh with the Armenian people right now. It's brutal.

Jesus offers us a different way. A better way. A return to the original way. Listen to how He describes it again, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?" (Matthew 16:24-26 MSG) We are too obsessed with life in this world. We are too tied to the things of this world. We want it all. We want a good life here and a good life in the world to come. We want a mansion on earth as well as a mansion in heaven. We want to pursue success in the kingdoms of this world and we want success in the Kingdom of God. But one cannot put a foot in both of these worlds. One cannot have it both ways. Jesus is clear. We must choose. We cannot be both selfish and selfless. We cannot be both givers and takers. In order to receive all Jesus has promised, we must surrender to Him. We must submit to Him. We must let Him take the lead and trust Him enough to follow in His footsteps no matter what the cost for the reward is worth it.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

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October 21, 2023
The Importance of Children

Readings for today: [Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I love children. Always have, always will. I love them at every age from baby to teenager. I've loved being a dad to all four of my children. In fact, I still send them texts about once or twice a week just to let them know what an awesome privilege it is to be their father. My son recently told me it's like receiving a note in his lunchbox. Ha! Love it. I love teaching the children at church. It might be during Kid's Time in the worship service or during Kid's Ministry on those Sundays when I'm off the platform and get to serve. There's simply nothing better than being around kids and talking about Jesus.

Jesus loved children. He often used them to illustrate faith. Their simple trust and wide-eyed wonder at the world served as examples for all who followed Him. When His disciples argued over who was the greatest, Jesus pointed to a child. He challenged His disciples to seek to a simple faith. A humble faith. A generous and trusting and accepting faith. When His disciples wanted to correct a man for using the name of Jesus to set people free because he wasn't part of their group and perhaps didn't have his theology quite dialed in, Jesus once again challenged them to take a childlike posture. "If you give one of these simple, childlike believers a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you'll soon wish you hadn't. You'd be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck." (Mark 9:42 MSG) When His disciples lost focus and started talking about fame and fortune and power and authority, Jesus once again used a child to bring them back in line. "Whoever accepts this child as if the child were me, accepts me," he said. "And whoever accepts me, accepts the One who sent me. You become great by accepting, not asserting. Your spirit, not your size, makes the difference." (Luke 9:47-48 MSG)

I love that last line from the Message version. "Your spirit, not your size, makes the difference." Greatness in the Kingdom of God is not determined by influence, power, wealth, success, achievement, possessions, the number of books sold, the number of downloads on Spotify, or the number of followers on Instagram. Greatness in the Kingdom of God is not determined by the social circles you run in or the famous people you may know. It is your condition of your soul that matters most. It is your spiritual maturity that makes the difference. And the key mark of spiritual maturity is not age or station in life. It's not how long you've been attending church or how many leadership positions you've held in your life. It's not connected to a title or a degree or some ordination credential. It's marked by humility. Grace. Peace. Love. Sacrifice. Submission. Trust. All things that mark most children. In fact, one of the best spiritual disciplines you can put into practice is to spend time with a child. Not to teach so much as to learn. Not to discipline so much as to play. Not to guide and correct so much as to simply enjoy the wonder and joy of their life.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 23, 2023
Who is Jesus?

Readings for today: [John 7-9](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

It's a question that has perplexed humanity for centuries. Who was or is Jesus? Is he the Messiah as so many Christians believe? Is he a good ethical teacher in line with many other rabbi's of his day? Is he crazy because of his claims to divinity? Is he evil because of how he deliberately calls his followers to die for him?

It was C.S. Lewis, himself a former atheist, who first crafted the "Lord, Liar, Lunatic" argument in his book, *Mere Christianity*. Lewis argues Jesus' own words preclude him from being accepted as a good ethical teacher. No ethical teacher could ever be called "good" and make the claims Jesus does. So either that means we have to take what he says at face value and accept him as Lord or we accept that he believes himself to be Lord which makes him a lunatic or we have to accept he knows he's lying about himself which makes him evil. Jesus simply doesn't leave us any other options.

We see a similar debate raging in our reading today. The people of the 1st century in Galilee, Jerusalem, heck, even Jesus' own family aren't quite sure what to make of him. Is he the promised Messiah? Is he a miracle-worker? Is he a brilliant, if eccentric, rabbi? Is he a prophet? Is he a charlatan? Everyone wanted to know and everyone had their opinion. His family made it clear they didn't believe in him. The Pharisees made it clear they opposed him. The crowds were all over the map when it came to him. Who is this man?

Jesus makes it very clear who he is. "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me this way, just as the Scripture says." (John 7:37-38 MSG) "I am the world's Light. No one who follows me stumbles around in the darkness. I provide plenty of light to live in." (John 8:12 MSG) "Believe me," said Jesus, "I am who I am long before Abraham was anything." (John 8:58 MSG) Jesus is making clear claims to divinity in these passages which is why the people pick up stones to throw at him. He is making himself known as the Messiah and calling his people to place their faith and trust in him. He leaves no doubt about who he is and what he's come to do and who has sent him. He answers every one of their questions fully and completely and clearly. But still many struggle to believe. They question his background and upbringing. They question his authority. They question his logic and rationale. They question the source of his power. They find so many reasons not to believe rather than simply accept what Jesus says about himself.

I find the same dynamic is true for many people today. No matter how many times you show them the evidence or point them to Jesus' own words or offer up the testimonies of the literally billions of Christians around the world and throughout history; they still refuse to believe. They still try to find reasons not to believe. What about you? Who do you say Jesus is?

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 10, John 10, 11:1-54

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October 24, 2023
The Joy of Serving God

Readings for today: [Luke 10, John 10, 11:1-54](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

There is nothing better than serving God. Nothing better than being out there on the frontiers of God's Kingdom preaching the good news of the gospel and showing people the tangible signs of His amazing grace and love. There's nothing better than bringing clean water to the thirsty. Food to the hungry. Education to those who don't have access. Micro-loans to those who are desperately poor. Healing to the sick and diseased. Visiting those in prison. All in the name of Jesus. Most of all, there is nothing like watching someone hear the gospel for the first time in their own language. Nothing like watching someone respond to the gospel by giving their life to Jesus Christ. Whether it is in my local context of Parker, CO or on the other side of the world in places like Ethiopia, Uganda, or South Sudan; it literally never gets old.

I've been in full-time ministry for over twenty years now. I've shared the gospel with hundreds if not thousands of people during that time. I've worked to raise money and resources for some of the world's poorest and most desperate people. I've seen miracles of healing and even resurrection. I've been blessed beyond all measure and know the truth of the words of Jesus when He says, "Fortunate the eyes that see what you're seeing! There are plenty of prophets and kings who would have given their right arm to see what you are seeing but never got so much as a glimpse, to hear what you are hearing but never got so much as a whisper." (Luke 10:23-24 MSG)

One thing I know to be true...in order to see the miracles of God, you have to leave your comfort zone. You have to intentionally place yourself in situations where you are not in control. You have to be willing to let the Spirit take you to the end of your resources, wisdom, and strength so that you are forced to rely on God. This is what the disciples did in our passage today. Jesus sends them out into the harvest field. They are to travel light. They are to rely on the kindness of strangers. They are to bless those who provide them hospitality. They are to look for the ways God is at work in those places and among those people. And what happens as a result? They see the Kingdom come in power and authority! Demons are cast out! Diseases are healed! Lost and hurting people are restored! It's amazing and they rejoice.

Friends, God wants us to experience the same kind of joy in our lives. He wants us to live with the same kind of power and authority as those early Christians. He wants to do greater things through us than what He did through His Son Jesus. But we have to be willing to step out in faith. We have to be willing to go. We have to be willing to risk. The harvest fields are as ripe as ever. Will we not only pray for God to send out more workers but will we respond ourselves to His call?

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 12, 13:1-30

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October 25, 2023
Generosity

Readings for today: Luke 12, 13:1-30 (audio reading)

I love this line from the Message version this morning... “That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.” (Luke 12:21 MSG) It comes at the end of a story Jesus tells in response to a question he’s asked about dividing up an inheritance. A person in the crowd he’s addressing asks Jesus to become an arbitrator between himself and his brother. Rather than step into that role, Jesus responds by challenging the crowd to protect themselves against the sin of greed. Life is simply not defined by what you have even if you are a person of great wealth. Then he goes on to tell the story of a rich man who experienced a banner harvest. The yield was so great, his barns were not big enough to hold all the excess. So he makes the choice to build bigger barns to store all his grain so he can retire and take it easy. But what the man doesn’t realize is that his time had come and he would die that very night so what good then is all the wealth he’s stored up? This is what happens, Jesus says, when we fill our barns with Self rather than God. When we focus on serving Self rather than God.

What’s the problem in the story? Go back and read it again. It’s not that the man built bigger barns. No, what would have immediately been obvious to everyone listening that day was that the man said to himself, “I know what I shall do...” He didn’t consult the village elders. He didn’t think of the community around him. He didn’t consider giving anything to the poor. Instead, he focused entirely on himself. And though he was rich and had plenty, he didn’t try to share his blessings. In the first century, when a person experienced an unexpected windfall like this man, they would have headed down to the village gate to talk to the elders of the community. They would have asked for advice on what to do with all the extra grain. The elders might suggest giving to the priests, giving to the poor, or throwing a party for the whole community. If the man had done these things and still had some left over, then the whole village would probably come help him build his bigger barns. Sadly, the man let his greed override his responsibility to his community.

We face a similar dilemma today. Only our community is now global. For the first time in human history, we are able to hop on a plane and get anywhere in the world in less than a day. We are able to marshal resources and deliver them to those in need. We have the technological expertise to make sure every human being on the planet has access to clean water and basic food security. We have the ability to provide life-saving medication and treatment to eliminate some of the world’s nastiest diseases like malaria and polio. What stops us? Our greed. We all want more than we actually need. When we receive a windfall like an unexpected bonus or a big salary increase, do we think of how we can give back to God and to those around us? Or do we, as I suspect, start planning our next vacation or home improvement project?

I know I’m as guilty as the next person though my wife and I are committed to giving more and more away and are now giving well above 10% each year. Still, I know down deep it’s not enough. We have plenty if I’m honest. So we keep praying and we keep asking God how we can protect ourselves from greed. The same is true for the church I lead. We keep asking God to show us how we can give more and more away into our community and around the world and God keeps showing us. Last year, we gave over 26% of our church budget to local and global missions and I hope and pray for the day when we hit 50%. ;-)

Wouldn’t that be glorious?

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 14-15

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October 26, 2023
A Life Parable

Readings for today: [Luke 14-15](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I used to be that guy. The one who would elbow his way to the highest place of honor no matter what the occasion. At work, I would weigh in on every matter whether I knew what I was talking about or not. At school, I would try to answer every question. On the athletic field, I did my best to stand out. My god was achievement. My goal was success. My greatest fear was failure. All because I wanted to be known. I wanted to be praised. I wanted to be the center of attention. This was true in my work as a pastor as well. When I went to seminary, I felt like I had something to prove so I did my best to outwork and outshine my classmates. After I graduated and started serving the church, I would look for opportunities to demonstrate I was more effective than my colleagues. I was constantly in competition with those around me. Constantly on the lookout for potential threats. It was exhausting. Then the Lord called me to plant a church in Wisconsin. It was the most painful, heartbreakng experience of my life. He crucified my ego. He broke me of my pride. He stripped my life down to the studs. I had nothing left. I was at the end of myself. I was a complete and utter failure.

Perhaps that's why I resonate so much with the parable Jesus tells in Luke 14. I spent most of my life trying to claim the seat of highest honor only to have the Lord send me back to some of the lowest places over and over again. I was put in my place frequently by those with much more experience at work. My teachers stopped calling on me at school. My athletic career eventually ended as those better than me took my place. Even among my pastoral colleagues, I often made a fool of myself. Then, when things were falling apart in Wisconsin, I remember reading this story and thinking to myself, "Wow, God has sent me to the lowest possible place. Where do I go from here?" The answer comes at the end of the parable. Seek the lowest place. Don't try to raise yourself up. Stop competing with those around you. Stop jockeying for position. Stop trying to prove yourself. Instead, embrace obscurity and anonymity and insignificance and let the Master raise you up.

Honestly, I've not looked back. My life from the fall of 2009 onward has been one grace after another. As soon as I relinquished my need to be successful, my need for achievement, and my need for attention, I became far more open to God. Instead of exhausting myself trying to show everyone how smart and capable I am, I was able to let go. God spoke to me very clearly, commanding me to labor in obscurity, embrace anonymity, and pursue insignificance. These three words have guided my life ever since. Not only that, but He made it clear to me that I am not to seek another position nor ask for another raise. Instead, I am simply to trust Him to take care of me. Every opportunity I've had professionally over the last fifteen years has come from the Lord. I have not pursued a single one. Every financial blessing I've received from my church has come from the Lord. I've not asked for a single raise. In fact, I've turned several down. These are not points of pride for me but rather examples of what it means to live out the parable of Jesus. What about you? Where do you need to relinquish and let go? Where do you need to stop your striving and rest in God? Where do you need to give up control so the Lord can raise you up in His time and according to His will?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16-17, 18:1-30

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October 27, 2023
What Holds You?

Readings for today: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16-17, 18:1-30 (audio reading)

I've often been struck by how Mark tells the story of the Rich Young Ruler. Here's a man who is so earnest in his desire to serve God but he's got a huge blind spot. Rather than look on him with judgment and condemnation, Mark makes it plain that Jesus looks on him with love. For years, I wondered if this was just a detail Mark kind of throws in there to soften Jesus' words a bit. But then Jesus confronted me with something I was holding onto instead of Him. My children. I was so invested in making sure they were successful that I was losing them in the process. I was putting so much pressure on them to succeed at school, at sports, at music, at whatever they put their mind to that I was missing their hearts in the process. That's when Jesus showed up through a counselor I was seeing to remind me of the power of His love.

Jesus looks on the rich young ruler with love. It's so easy to overlook the power of that statement. Jesus is after our hearts and He knows that there are things that have a hold on us. It could be wealth or possessions. It could be achievement or performance or success. It could be our marriage or our children. It could be our career. It could be anything honestly because our hearts are like idol factories. And these idols hold great power over us which is why it is so difficult for us to relinquish them and walk away. That's why the disciples respond in amazement to Jesus and ask if it's impossible to enter the Kingdom of God. They knew the reality of their own sinful condition. Only God's love is powerful enough to displace the idols of our hearts. Only God's love is powerful enough to cast out all fear and bring an end to all anxiety. Only God's love can break the hold the things of this world have on our hearts.

So back to my kids. Their success had become an idol for me. I had transferred my greatest fear onto them...the fear of failure. I was living in fear. And my fear caused me to respond to them primarily with anger. And my anger was destructive and breaking down the trust between us. So my counselor took me to James 1:20 which says, "The anger of man does not bring about the righteousness of God." I was convicted to the core but it left me with a question. If my anger can't bring about the righteousness I desire for my children, what can? Thankfully, my counselor had the answer. He took me to 1 John 4:18 which says, "Perfect love casts out all fear." He then took me to 1 Corinthians 13:7-8 which says, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." That last part was the key. God's love never fails. The very thing I was most afraid of - failure - was no longer in the picture if I would only learn to love my children the way God loves them. So I made the intentional choice - even when they struggled or made mistakes or walked dark roads - to always, always, always "look on them with love." I pushed all my chips to the center on God's love and the results have been amazing. I have watched my children - strengthened by the love of their Father as it flows through me - overcome anxiety and fear and depression. Overcome drug and alcohol abuse. Overcome sexual temptation and sin. Overcome defiance and anger and brokenness and pain. We have the most amazing relationships now and though the journey isn't over and there are still struggles along the way, God's love has proved more than sufficient.

So what holds you? What has a grasp on your heart? What idols are you holding onto? Trust in God's love. Embrace God's love. Let His love flow through you and release you from the bondage of sin and the things of this world.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-43, 19:1-27

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October 28, 2023
The Call to Seek and to Serve

Readings for today: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-43, 19:1-27 [\(audio reading\)](#)

“This is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who are held hostage.” (Matthew 20:28 MSG)

“For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.” (Luke 19:10 MSG)

I often wonder how different the world would look if followers of Jesus would take just these two verses literally. Can you imagine the impact we would make if we had the courage to serve as the Son of Man served and seek as the Son of Man sought? Perhaps that's why I love going to places like Ethiopia or Uganda or South Sudan so much because I get to see such faithfulness in action on a fairly regular basis. At the same time, I also have seen such faithfulness in my own church family in Parker, CO. What God has assured me, even in times when I get discouraged, is that He is at work raising up believers who take the words of Jesus seriously and are changing the world as a result.

I think of Lydia. A 22 year old woman with two babies who ministers in a Muslim village outside of Dire Dawa. Everyday she travels the streets of her town on foot preaching the gospel in the open air. She suffers verbal and sometimes physical abuse. She has put her life and the lives of her family at risk. But she considers it a privilege to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. God has honored her faithfulness! Street women are coming to faith and leaving behind their former lives of prostitution. Her description of their desperation and the hope they find in Jesus is powerful.

I think of Marshall. A middle aged man in my own congregation who helps lead a Bible study every Friday morning for 30-40 guys, many of whom are seeking a relationship with Jesus Christ. He invites them out for lunch. He gets to know them personally. He makes sure to minister to their needs. He meets them where they are and does all he can to talk to them about Jesus. Fundamentally, they all know he loves them and it keeps them coming back week after week.

I think of Yitsgelu. A Somali man who converted to Christ out of Islam. His family publicly shamed him and drove him from their village. He came to Dire Dawa to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. His denomination sent him to a suburb of the city where he ministers among the Muslims, bringing many to Christ. It is not easy work as they suffer just like he suffered. Their families disown them. Their community abandons them. They often lose their jobs. But God is using Yitsgelu's own story to bring redemption in the name of Jesus.

I think of Susan. A mom of teenagers in our church family who has an incredible gift of hospitality. The love and care she showers on students is amazing. She invites them into her home. She feeds them great food. She talks to them about their lives. She loves them so well. I know she's become a second mother to many along the way. Why does she do it? She wants them to know the love of Jesus. She seeks to serve them because she knows that's what Jesus would do.

These are just a few of the stories I could tell and there are so many more to share. One of the greatest gifts God has given me as a pastor is the number of people I've had the privilege to spend time with who love Jesus with all their hearts and seek to serve as He serves. Love as He loves. Reach the lost just like He seeks to reach the lost. God is moving, friends! All over the world! Thousands of churches are being planted in the Horn of Africa. Millions are hearing the gospel for the first time. Hundreds of

thousands are coming to saving faith. All because Christians in that part of the world decided to take Jesus seriously. Like the Son of Man, they go to serve and seek those who are in desperate need. God is moving just as powerfully here at home. Millions hear the gospel for the first time each year as ordinary Christians make it their mission to share Christ with those around them. It happens in homes and neighborhoods, schools and workplaces, soccer fields and concert halls, homeless shelters and addiction recovery centers. All because Christians in our part of the world decided to take Jesus seriously. Like the Son of Man, they too have gone to seek and serve those who are in desperate need. What about you?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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October 30, 2023
Making Room

Readings for today: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36 (audio reading)

One of the things God continues to challenge me on in my life is making room for the hurting, the broken, the wounded, the suffering. Making room for the sinner as well as the saint. Making room for those who are going through all kinds of heartache and pain. Making room for those whom the world casts out. Making room for those the church often shuns. Making room for those who don't have it altogether, don't have it figured out, don't seem to be on the road to success. It's so easy to isolate people in these situations in the name of healthy boundaries and/or putting an end to toxic relationships. It's so easy to justify cutting such folks out of our lives because walking with them is too hard, too awkward, too uncomfortable. It's so easy to forget such people because we get so wrapped up in everything we want to do. But then we read these words from Jesus...

"Jesus went straight to the Temple and threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He quoted this text: My house was designated a house of prayer; You have made it a hangout for thieves. Now there was room for the blind and crippled to get in. They came to Jesus and he healed them." (Matthew 21:12-14 MSG)

At first glance, we cheer Jesus on. Throw those bums out! But when we actually dig into the text, we realize all those money changers served an important purpose. They were making life easier for the Israelites as they came to the Temple to make their sacrifices. Instead of bringing their sacrifices with them and running the risk that they may get hurt or injured or blemished along the way, they could bring money and buy an animal at the Temple. It makes perfect sense except for the fact that the money changers charged exorbitant rates. Not only that but they were so focused on making sure the Temple economy ran smoothly and the "worship" of God went on uninterrupted that they lost sight of the meaning behind the whole enterprise! The whole point of the sacrificial system was to make a relationship with God possible! It opened the door into heaven where God heard their prayers, answered their cries, healed their hurts, and ministered to their every need.

The same purpose remains for us. When the church gathers in worship, it is like a field hospital in the midst of a war zone. People often come in, beaten and bruised and often bloodied, by life in this broken world. They often come in carrying heavy burdens and struggling under the weight of their sin. They often come in with doubts and fears and anxieties and questions. They often come in looking for healing. Looking for hope. Looking for love. And the question for us is...will we make room for them? Will we make room for the blind and crippled and hurting to get in? Will we throw our doors open wide so people could come in and meet Jesus? Will we do this not only at church but also in our personal lives as well?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

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October 31, 2023
By Whose Authority...

Readings for today: Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50
(audio reading)

I raised my kids to be independent thinkers. Strong-willed young men and women who can make their way in the world. I love how each of them is finding their place and it is a privilege to walk the journey with them. One of the many lessons I've tried to teach them is the difference between stewardship and ownership. When we grow up, we don't own much. Everything from food to clothing to a roof over our heads is provided. Our job is to be good stewards. Clean our rooms. Follow the house rules. Take care of what we've been given. Then we get older. We graduate from high school. Become legally responsible. We start to become owners. We get a job. We pay the bills. We buy things like our own cars or cell phones. As a parent, I no longer have much authority over how my child takes care of their home or how much money they spend on gas or the number of apps they download on their phone.

All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. Mark's Gospel, however, contains a very important nugget of information. When Jesus drives out the money-changers and turns over the tables of the loan sharks, the Jews ask Him an important question. "Who authorized you to speak and act like this?" In other words, by whose authority do you do these things? Who gave you the right to disrupt the Passover? Who told you to bring in the blind and the lame and begin healing? Will you not put a stop to the praises of the children? Jesus' reply could not be more clear, My house shall be called a house of prayer but you make it a den of robbers. Jesus is claiming rightful ownership of the Temple. He is making it clear to the religious leaders that their stewardship of the sacred places has come to an end. The rightful owner is now on the scene and He will do with His house as He wills. And what is His will? His house shall be a place of prayer. A hospital for healing. A sanctuary for praise.

Imagine how you would feel if someone lived in your home and trashed the place. I have a good friend who owns a rental house in the Denver area. Several years ago, a tenant used his house to grow weed and cook meth. After going to court to get his tenant evicted, my friend had to gut the house and start over. It cost him thousands of dollars not to mention the time and effort he had to put in to get his house back in working order so it could be rented again. Now put yourself in Jesus' sandals. The people you've entrusted your home to have trashed the place. They have turned it into a den of robbers. Exploiting the pilgrims who come for Passover each year. They make hefty profits by price gouging the people, especially the poor. So He makes a whip of cords and drives them out. He turns over the tables and throws them out. Do you understand now why Jesus is so upset? Zeal for His own home has consumed Him and He will do whatever it takes to restore His house to its former glory.

Now let me give you an even more radical take. Jesus doesn't just assert His authority over His house, He asserts it over all of creation with the fig tree. Not only that but He tells His disciples that if they have faith and embrace the Kingdom life, they will be able to operate with His authority in the world. They will be able to do to the fig tree what Jesus did or throw mountains into the heart of the sea. Most importantly, whatever they ask for in prayer will be given to them. Why? They are no longer tenants in God's Kingdom but sons and daughters! In a sense, we've been given an "ownership" stake in all of creation and God expects us to exercise dominion and authority and responsibility in His name and for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35

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