

CROSSWALK

THE NEW NORMAL

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Introduction

Welcome to the New Normal Series Guide. We have all heard the phrase “the New Normal” as it relates to our current and future Covid-related lives. None of us are too excited about what the future holds and how things are changing, but we are learning to lean into whatever the new normal will be. While we don’t know exactly how things will look, we do know that we can never go back to the same life we were leading before. Whether masks are here to stay, social distancing will become the new rule of our social lives, or perhaps working from home will be the norm rather than the exception, things will be different.

But for those of us who call ourselves followers of Christ, we know that there has been a “New Normal” for us for the last two millennia. Jesus came and ushered in a different kind of life, a different kind of worldview, and a different kind of compassion. His Gospel was the good news of love, the salvation for all humankind, and the desire for a new kind of community, one that accepted all, including those who had been marginalized from the greater society. This message still rings true and is still as powerful today as it was in the first century.

While followers of Christ have not always done a great job at living this new normal, every day we have an opportunity to continue the gospel work of Jesus Christ by the way we live our lives, interact with people, seek justice, mercy and compassion, and help those living in the margins. Also, we have the opportunity to speak of the greatest love ever given to humanity through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Our new normal is a privilege to live and experience. While it is easy to get distracted by everything that is happening in the world today, we must maintain a focus on that which transcends, on that which is eternal, and on that which will lift up our eyes beyond the idols and temples of this world and into heaven.

May this series guide be a healing balm to your soul, a bit of wisdom for your life, and a catalyst for your faith.

Grace to you, and Peace.

Pastor Timothy Gillespie

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Gillespie', with a stylized flourish at the end.

WEEK 1

MATTHEW 1:17-25 (NLT)

17 Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. **19** Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,[c] because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: **23** “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”[d] (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. **25** But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

17 All those listed above include fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile, and fourteen from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah.

We can't start here without looking at what went before. But if you are like me, you see those lists of names and you quickly jump ahead to something more interesting. The lists of names and genealogies are usually left for biblical scholars who can make sense and find meaning. Most of us just jump right past them and know they are important, but we are not 100% sure why they are so important. And the genealogy found in Matthew is often no different.

One thing that we all know to be true is that the genealogy found in Matthew is one of the things that makes this gospel account a bit more Jewish in nature. While genealogies were rarely compiled with the concern for biological precision and completeness, as we would look at a family tree today, there was usually a point to each of these lists. They might have been to convey a sense of kinship, to make a hereditary claim to a religious or political office. Others work to tell a story of the history of a particular group of people.

Matthew wanted the world to know how Jesus fits into the story of Israel, and how that story actually belongs to Jesus. He is the apex of this history and the an-

chor point of their future. Therefore, Matthew uses this genealogy to show the world how Jesus is connected to David, to Abraham, and he even used symbolic numbers to make this happen.

As you can see, there is this idea that there were fourteen generations in each of these sections. These lists show a direct connection between Abraham and David, and of course, David and Jesus. However, it seems as if there were only 13 generations in the last section of this genealogy. This has created some concern, to be sure, but it is probably the fact that he assumed the last generation of Mary and Joseph would be put in by each person reading the genealogy. He did, however, use the symbolic number of 7 multiplied by 2 in the use of the 14 generations for each section. As well, the number 3 had significance, so these 3 sections of 14 generations become a way that Matthew is communicating his belief that Jesus was born at just the right time to fulfill God's promises.

One other note that should be discussed. This genealogy relates most closely with the genealogy found in Luke 3:32-38. However, there are some pretty significant differences when we try to harmonize these two accounts. Simply

put, they are different from each other. Again, we need to remind ourselves that compilers of genealogies in the ancient world were less concerned with accuracy than we are when it comes to our family trees. Rather, they sought to make a particular statement about the roots and the fruits of their subjects. Therefore, we don't study these geneal-

ogies to find out who is correct, but to discover what each one, in its own right, is saying about Jesus. Matthew is making a particularly Jewish case for Jesus, beginning with Abraham. Luke begins with Adam in order to make that case that Jesus is connected to the beginning of all humanity, and is therefore the savior of all humanity.

1— What does your family tree look like, and what does it say about your place in it?

2— Have you ever done a 23 and Me in order to find your particular makeup? Did it change the way you thought about yourself?

3 — In this genealogy, it culminates in Jesus. Where would your genealogy culminate? And if it was in you, what would the rest of the story of your life be? One of grace and compassion, of success or failure; would it be one of faithfulness?

18 This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Well, you know this story all too well. Why are spending time on this story if we are not in the Christmas season? When we encounter this story before the end of the year, it often feels out of place, a little strange, and perhaps a bit too fantastic to believe. To hear this story without the accoutrements of Christmas trees, carols, and even the cold just doesn't seem right.

However, this story is pretty important and it also stands as a stumbling block for many people. The story of Jesus does not begin with a reasonable proposition. Rather, it begins with a fulfillment of an age-old promise to an ancient people, and it recognizes the providence of God in every phrase and utterance. You have to begin the story by suspending disbelief in order to be able to continue reading. In some ways, this is a new normal for us. As humans, while we love to believe in the supernatural, we also (at least some of us) have a healthy dose of common sense, and this flies in the face of common sense.

When you go to a movie you know

that the premise is not true, so you suspend your disbelief, just for a while, so you can be brought into the story in a more powerful and palpable way. In some ways, we are asked to do this same thing at the very beginning of the Jesus story. There is not a foundation of "regular" in which we find ourselves. Rather, at the outset, we are asked to believe the impossible, by faith, in order to begin to believe that God is functioning in a very different reality than we are. This has implications for our worldview, for our belief in what CAN happen, and in our ultimate trajectory as human beings with the capacity for eternity through a relationship with Jesus. Because of these six words "while she was still a virgin," we are asked to assume a great deal of the impossible into this story.

Perhaps after 2,000 years, this new normal doesn't seem so fantastic. However, it truly is! It is probably too much to ask of people, but God asks this of us at the very outset of the narrative. There is a grace in this. He doesn't hide the incredible nature of the miracle; rather, he has the gospel author put it front and center

in the experience. There is no “bait and switch,” as they say. Rather, there is a truth that is put forward within the first few words of the story that Matthew is telling us.

Why is this important? Because we are not going to ask you to believe what used to be “normal.” Rather, we are going to ask you, from the very beginning of your encounter with Jesus, to believe what you normally wouldn’t. We are going to ask you to believe in the “super-normal” of Jesus, his life, death, res-

urrection and advocacy for you in heaven with the Father. From the idea of the trinity, or the community of God—three-in-one—to the conquering of death and sin, it is all overwhelming, uncommon, and the new normal. But we will ask you to come along for the ride, nonetheless, and we will not shy away from the fact that it goes beyond normal. In fact, we will lean into this new normal, because that is what Jesus did when he came to earth to save us.

Thanks for coming along for the ride!

1— Do you have any unreasonable superstitions?

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2— How is believing in Jesus different than those?

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3 — What do you hope to gain from this series guide? What are your expectations?

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19 Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

What would you do if you found out the person you were engaged to was pregnant? Or for the women reading/hearing this series guide, if your fiancé seemingly had cheated on you, would you be as concerned for her/his reputation as Joseph seemed to be? Of course, the stakes were a great deal higher for Mary in the first century than they might be for us today. Shaming, exile, and even perhaps violence from her family were all relatively common occurrences in those days for a woman who was found pregnant out of wedlock. So his willingness to move toward compassion as a first response is really the shocking fact of this short verse.

Joseph, for all intents and purposes, is always presented to us as someone who's heart moves toward compassion as a first response. There is a sense that he truly does love Mary and wants what is best for her, while probably being deeply disappointed in her infidelity. However, he does not let that disappointment turn to anger or resentment; rather, he still wants what is best for her, regardless of how she treated him. The registering of his disappointment makes sense, but what doesn't make sense is his willing-

ness to continue to protect her in light of these circumstances.

I have often wondered what my response would be to such infidelity, especially on the eve of such an auspicious occasion as my own marriage. While it would have been much different in the first century, I would probably have been a teenager, and Mary even more so. Our families would have been much more involved, and I would have moved Mary into my home as soon as our engagement was secured. I still wonder if I would have been as gracious as Joseph intended to be. Of course, the gossip in the village would have been profound, and it would have been hard for Mary to endure, but at least Joseph decided not to publicly renounce Mary. I would hope that I could be so gracious in my response.

Joseph is immediately modeling what it means to live in the new normal. To react and respond to things differently than those who do not have a connection to the most high and graceful God. To lean towards grace and compassion, rather than spite and revenge. To speak a kind and gracious word, rather than anger and vitriol. There is a patience in the pause, a hope in the moment, and a

faithfulness that leads the conversation, rather than what follows the words on our tongue. The overflow of our heart exposes our true belief in the graciousness of God as opposed to the rush for anger that is so often exposed through the words on our lips. Joseph decided, before he even knew the greater narrative

of God's grace, that he would deal with Mary in a way that was the best for her in these difficult and even super-normal circumstances.

I wonder if I could have done that. I wonder if I do that in the little decisions that I make every day. I wonder if you do, as well.

1— Do you lean toward grace or anger?

2— Have you ever been in a circumstance where you had to choose grace or revenge?

3 — How can you be an expression of God that shows someone how much He loves them today?

20 As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

Joseph took some time to make this decision. The text says “as he considered this...” which seems to indicate that he wasn’t rushing this decision. Sometimes, in the New Normal, we have to take some time to make a decision. Perhaps this is because we will be going against what we usually do in any given situation. But the New Normal calls us to a different process of discernment—one that is not simply how we “think” things should be, but as we are called to look at them through the greater narrative and better vision that Jesus gives us. It is not something that we do easily; we have to retrain ourselves in order to begin to process differently than we have in the past.

Luckily, as Joseph was cogitating on his course of action, the angel of the Lord showed up to give some explanation and clarity. Had Joseph not been thoughtful and taken his time with his decision about how to treat Mary, he might have missed the opportunity for the visit from the angel of God. But remember, as stated in the previous verse, Joseph was a righteous man, and therefore was deeply connected to God in his decision-making process. God was willing to help him

out here, with a little advice and clarity coming directly from God, through His messenger.

However, the clarity that came was nothing less than fantastic, by which I mean it was super-normal, or beyond what is normal. While the words gave clarity, it took no less belief than before the angel’s appearance for Joseph to believe. We think that these words would have been a relief for Joseph, but can you imagine getting this kind of message? It would have been no less difficult to believe in the first century than it is to believe today. I think we have a tendency to romanticize the message Joseph received as a simple, “Ah, so that’s what happened” sort of answer to his dilemma. However, I wonder if it wasn’t even more difficult to believe. Of course, an angel showing up is really helpful, but the words the angel said are difficult. The angel said: “For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit.” How does this make things easier?

I mean, how does that even work? Is there some sort of simple explanation as to how the Holy Spirit impregnates a woman? Even saying it seems to take it too far. How are we supposed to believe

in something that makes so little sense, and could even, by the most cynical of us, move beyond reality into the silly?

I guess you have to ask yourself whether or not you are willing to suspend disbelief that what we see is what we get in this world.

I used to teach a web-design class and we used a WYSIWYG platform from which to design websites. WYSIWYG

simply stands for “What you see is what you get.” It was much easier to design this way than to understand the coding language HTML. Students made great, if not elementary websites in the class. But do we live our lives in a WYSIWYG way, or do we believe there is more to this story than we can see and even comprehend?

1— How do you live your life? As if there is more than what you can see, or as if what is tangible is all there is?

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2— Do you believe that God is working in realms and realities that are far beyond what we know and understand? If so, what are some of the implications for your life and your decisions?

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3 — If we don't believe in the other realities that God may be working in, what does that mean for your relationship with the story of the gospel?

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21 And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

This directive from the angel is another wrinkle in the story. In the first century, fathers got the prerogative to name their sons, and for sure they would name them with a family name. Often, there would be the prefix “bar” in Hebrew, that means “son of”. But the angel directed Joseph to name this child with a much grander name, and this had to do with fulfilling the prophecy given to us from the book of Isaiah (chapter 7:14, 8:8, and chapter 10). The angel had its eye on both the future and the past in this suggestion, or really, command.

Remember, context is everything, and the angel understood this. Joseph was not to give the child a name that would not recognize Israel's past as well as its future. However, it would become a mark that Joseph had accepted the angel's message, as well as accepted the child as his own. While the gospel of Joseph allows for Mary to name the child, for Matthew and his mostly Hebrew audience, it would have been important for Joseph to name the child. This directive shows God has a hand in all of this. We call this the providence of God. Providence is simply God's intervening in human history and in daily life.

In the previous text, we see that

the angel of the Lord calls Joseph “son of David.” This is to remind Joseph that he comes from a royal lineage, and that the promise of God is that the messiah will come from this line. It is why they end up in Bethlehem, and it is why they, both Mary and Joseph, can come to understand that Jesus is truly the messiah. It is by God's providence these things happen, and specifically, happen to them.

Do you ever feel God's providence working in your life? We often can't see it at the time of occurrence; rather, we see it in hindsight, as things finally come together in ways that we never thought possible. We begin to see that God has had His hand in our lives throughout our experience, and that He is truly invested in the outcome of our choices and our faith. It is humbling to realize that God is at work in our lives everyday, even when it doesn't feel like it. That the God of the universe has some stake in our choices and in our lives should remind us not that the universe revolves around us, but rather, that the universe revolves around God, and we are blessed to have a little bit of His attention. If love is paying attention, then we have the love of the God of everything.

1— What is it like to know the God of the universe pays attention to you?

2— Have you ever experienced God's providence in your life? Explain how and when.

3 — When you look back at your life, can you see how God has continued to guide and help you? What advice do you have for someone who can't seem to see God's hand at work?

22 All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: 23 "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" 24 When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. 25 But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

The author has decided this would be a good time in which to refer back to previous prophecy about the messiah so as to connect the current narrative with that which was promised to Israel a long time ago. There are about 12 of these quotations in Matthew's gospel, four or five of them in the narratives of the baby Jesus.

We know that Matthew is quoting from the Septuagint (LXX) because of the use of the word "virgin" as opposed to "young woman," which was found in earlier Hebrew texts. This is not a problem, as the implication of "young woman" is one that is still a virgin.

But what is more important than the process of conception is the fact that the one conceived will be Emmanuel, or God with us. Why is this important? Because the one who will save them will be one that has the presence of God within them. Interestingly, the text says that "they will call him Emmanuel," not

that Joseph will call him this name. It is a recognition that Jesus was given to all who would believe, rather than to just one family or one couple. His life was always to be greater than the family he was placed in, and in the same way, we are all brought into his family.

Joseph wakes up from the dream and does what the angel told him to do. He took Mary as his wife, and he was respectful of her until the birth of the baby, which he named Jesus. This must have been a time of an incredible test of the faith of Joseph. It is one thing to make the decision to be faithful, but then to wait through the nine months of pregnancy must have been difficult, to say the least. I have always wondered whether or not Joseph second guessed the angel through this period. Of course, he remained faithful, and we don't have any indication he struggled with his faith, but I wonder sometimes...

Have you ever started a faith journey with every intention of being faithful,

but questioned your decision along the way? Perhaps this is why we call it a journey, because there are ups and downs, there are detours and redirections. It is pretty human of us to second guess our decisions and to decide to remain faithful to that which God has called us. I don't think we should beat ourselves up

if we sometimes take a circuitous route in our faithfulness to God's call. I wonder if Joseph took the same sort of route through this time. However, regardless of his questions, his second guessing, or even his stalwart faith, the end result was a messiah who he was able to give a name to. That's pretty amazing.

1— What is it like to know the God of the universe pays attention to you?

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2—Have you ever experienced God's providence in your life? Explain how and when.

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3 – When you look back at your life, can you see how God has continued to guide and help you? What advice do you have for someone who can't seem to see God's hand at work?

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This week we studied a story that we all know very well, one that doesn't really hold any surprises for us. However, it also shows us the New Normal. Through the narrative of Joseph, we see that there are ways to respond to the super-normal things that God is doing in the world, and also, there is a way to respond to others that are more God-breathed than we might have imagined. All this is attained by our willingness to let God lead in our lives, and to recognize where His providence is palpable in our experience. We don't often see this in the present, but often in the past and in the way that God has guided our decisions, whispered into our itchy hearts, and spoken into our lives through others.

Why was Joseph willing to follow the directive of the angel? He certainly had a choice, as we have all had choices, and as Adam and Eve had a choice. The reason he was able to follow the guidance of the angel and the Holy Spirit is simple. He had been following his whole life. Verse 19 reminds us that Joseph was a "righteous" man, meaning he was willing to follow God's directives much earlier than when the angel appeared in his dream. Joseph was a follower of God, and therefore, his de-

cision to follow the commands of the angel were not out of line for him. He was used to following the directives of God in his life.

As well, Joseph must have had a worldview that accounted for the "super-normal." While perhaps never experiencing it before in his life, he was able to recognize when God was deciding to do amazing and unnatural things, and he was willing to be a part of it. He wasn't surprised or afraid of the calling God had placed on his life. Because his natural tendency was to follow God, he was able to continue in this vein of living for God and listening to God, as well. Whether it was through the law of Moses, through his community and culture, or through the direct intervention of God through the angel in the dream, Joseph had attained an inclination to follow God.

Perhaps the questions begin with our ability to follow God, even if a directive from an angel is absent in our experience. Is it possible to live into the New Normal of obedience to God, even when what is asked is super-normal to our experience? Is it possible to live the New Normal now, even as Joseph did 2,000 years ago?

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1 — What is normal to you? Is your normal the same as the people's around you?
- 2 — How does the story of Jesus remind us that the normal we were living before the experience of 2020 is actually 2,000 years old?
- 3 — Our lives have been so disrupted in 2020, and we all want to get back to "normal." Is that something we should really be wanting to get back to?
- 4 — How does the story of Joseph impact your sense of calling and the providence of God in your life?
- 5 — Can you really believe this story?
- 6 — Why do you think God had the story begin with such a super-normal occurrence?
- 7 — How can you live your life in the New Normal? How can you lead toward patience, guidance and grace today?
- 8 — What do you think God has in store for you in the upcoming months and years?
- 9 — Where do you see him leading you?
- 10 — How can you help others live into the New Normal that was established by the coming of Jesus?

Notes

WEEK 2

MATTHEW 2:1-23 (NLT)

The Magi Visit the Messiah

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." **9** After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The Escape to Egypt

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, **15** where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. **17** Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 "A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

The Return to Nazareth

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt **20** and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, **23** and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

1 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 2 “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” 3 King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. 4 He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?

This has always been one of my favorite parts of the story. There is an exotic flavor when we begin to speak about the Magi, or the magoi, as it would have been rendered in the Greek. This word was to become an umbrella word to refer to a wide range of people who exercised religious or occult powers: soothsayers, dream-interpreters, fortune-tellers, magicians and/or sorcerers. While we don't love the idea that these men were involved in these sorts of practices, it is clear they had at least a passing fancy with astrology, as they saw a new star and decided to follow it. Interestingly, there is another story that is relatively similar to this story that dates from 66 A.D, written by the Roman historian Dio Cassius. In it, there is a similar delegation that arrived in Rome and had come to honor Nero, the Roman ruler at the time.

There are two themes here; 1) that Jesus is destined to kingship over his

own people and all nations, and 2) that Jesus will be rejected by his own nation but acclaimed by Gentiles. These two themes carry us through the whole narrative of Jesus found in Matthew.

Now, this text starts by putting a flag on a relative date. It states that Jesus was born during the “reign of King Herod.” This is especially important to me, because Herod was known as a great builder, and he in fact had built Caesarea, where I was lucky enough to spend many summers growing up. It is not a stretch to say that Herod was a real ruler, who was a vassal ruler of Rome from 37BC to 4BC. He built many great projects including Masada and the Herodian. Both of these were homes for himself and his family, although he spent little time in either one.

Herod was also known to be vicious and a bit nervous about his rule. He was always anxious about his status as king, and therefore, the visit by the Magi would have been received with a bit of

antipathy. Therefore, as we see in the text, because he was deeply disturbed, he brought the leading priests and religious law experts together and asked how this was all about to go down. There was a certain suspicious nature to Herod.

People who are insecure about their status have a tendency to peddle in subterfuge in order to keep their status. It is really a common practice, and no level of status is exempt from this sort of behavior. Whether you are a mob boss, a politician, a street sweeper, a pastor or teacher or what have you, the desire to keep your status is pretty profound. This comes

from a sense of scarcity. Most wars have been fought over a sense of “us not them.” And many people will make poor, immoral, and even irrational decisions based on the idea that there might not be enough so they have to protect their status, their treasure, their influence, their importance. Just like Herod, those who think this way will ultimately reject the coming of the New Normal, the New King, because they will simply have too much to lose.

Herod was afraid that Jesus would take away everything. Do you fear the same thing?

1— What might you have to give up to recognize Jesus?

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2— Is following Jesus worth the loss you will ultimately experience?

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3 — Is it possible Jesus will return in abundance what you have lost?

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4 He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” 5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote:

**6 ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’”**

Again, the author brings us to the prophetic word found in his scripture. When he calls together the teachers of religious law and the priests, the word that is used is of sinister origin; in fact, it is used again many times throughout the book of Matthew (26:3; 57:27; 17:62) but it comes from the Septuagint (LXX) in Psalm 2:2, which speaks of rulers who take counsel together against the Lord and His anointed. So we know there is nothing good in this gathering.

The teachers of the religious law knew the scriptures well, and so they chose the text from Micah 5:2 and Samuel 5:2, as well, about where the messiah would come from. It is said in Judea, as there was another Bethlehem in Galilee, where David had come from. So this was said to make sure there was no confusion as to who this new Messiah was. Here, Herod shows that he only has a cursory knowledge of the scriptures of the Hebrews by

having to bring in the priests and the teachers of the law.

There is something interesting, because Matthew adds to the Micah quotation, but including that Bethlehem was “not least among the ruling cities of Judah.” This is not something Micah had included, but it seems Matthew wanted to elevate the status of the city because it was the city that housed the Messiah that Matthew so desperately believed in.

Lastly, there are two designations given to the messiah: 1) ruler, 2) shepherd. There is a difference between a ruler and a shepherd. A ruler gives commands and controls people; a shepherd takes care of his flock. A ruler exerts power; a shepherd exerts compassion. Is it any stretch that Jesus used the parable of the lost sheep to explain what a shepherd is really like to those he has been given stewardship over?

What do you want to be in life? A

shepherd or a ruler? Maybe a little of both? Herod was clearly a ruler, but his desire to maintain his power made him a poor shepherd, as he was more worried about his own power than the caretaking of those God had given him to rule over. We all have been given influence over people in our lives. How do we wield that “power.” Most of us probably don’t see it as power, but it truly can be. We have to always be mindful to be more “shepherdly” than “kingly” in the way we use our influ-

ence and our position. Ultimately, if we are not using those things for the kingdom of God, to show more people the love and grace that Jesus shows us, we are not honoring God in our lives. Of course, there are those that will reject the words of Jesus that come from you, and that is their prerogative, but it is up to us to try and instill a sense of who Jesus is in their lives. We can’t do that when we are worried about our position, our status, and our power.

1— Who has God given you to shepherd?

2— How can you extend a sense of shepherding to them?

3 — Is there anything that you feel like you “rule” over? How can you move “ruling” to “shepherding”?

7 Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. **8** Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” **9** After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! **11** They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

In today's text, Herod does what every person who is trying to be disingenuous will eventually do, he isolates different parties in order to control the narrative. What Herod does is call back the wise men for a meeting in private. I have seen this happen over and over again when someone wants to control other people. By separating them, by isolating them, and by being the only one who speaks to the different people involved, you can control the narrative to a point where you can manipulate people.

Herod knew that his regular advisors would smell something fishy if he were to tell the magi, in their presence, that he wanted to worship the child.

Rather, he brought the magi to a private meeting to show his willing collusion with them in order to worship the child. The truth was much darker than this. While the magi had no reason to be concerned about this meeting with Herod, luckily, God warned them in a dream to no longer allow Herod to have any information about the child and about his whereabouts.

The reaction the magi had upon seeing the baby is worth noting. Scripture says “they were filled with joy!” This is how anyone who studied the scriptures and put them as authority in their lives should be able to feel when they meet Jesus. Pure joy should be our response to meeting the Messiah, wheth-

er for the first time or for the last time in our lives. However, when something else is more important than Jesus, then we recognize that being in his presence is uncomfortable, as we know he knows our hearts.

However, when our hearts are filled with joy, the very next thing we do is give to God the most important and valuable things in our lives. This is true for every person who has encountered Jesus and fallen in love with him.

When I first was called into the ministry, I felt I had to give away the thing that mattered most to me, music. I didn't realize there were many ways that God could bless the desire he had

placed in my heart to write music. I figured that my music days were over, and gave it up willingly to follow Christ. However, Jesus is gracious, and gave me more opportunities than I could have even imagined to play music for people. To write songs that mean something more than a simple love song, and to perform in front of audiences. It was a blessing to give what I held most dear over to God, and his blessing changed my life forever.

We see the magi give the most expensive items they had over to Jesus, and of course, he blessed them. Not because of their gifts, but because of their faith.

1— Have you met Jesus in a way that has filled your heart with joy?

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2— What is the most valuable thing you have ever given to Jesus?

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3 — Have you ever been around someone who manipulates by isolating and controlling the narrative? How did that make you feel? What can you do about it?

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13 After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” **14** That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, **15** and they stayed there until Herod’s death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “I called my Son out of Egypt.” **16** Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance. **17** Herod’s brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

**18 “A cry was heard in Ramah—
weeping and great mourning.
Rachel weeps for her children,
refusing to be comforted,
for they are dead.”**

This is truly the most exciting, yet worst part of the story. We have intrigue, and escape, a prophecy, and worst of all, murder of the innocents. There is a painting by the title “Massacre of the innocents” by Rubens (1611). In it, you see grown men who are fighting through mothers who are fighting to keep their sons from these men who have murder in their eyes. On the floor are the corpses of young boys already killed by these men. It is a tragedy to behold, but is considered one of the great works of art of that pe-

riod. (By the way, it sold in 2002 for 117 million dollars!)

We see a recurring theme pop up again in verses 13-15. Joseph is again approached in a dream by the angel of the Lord and told to leave for Egypt as they are in danger. He tells them not to return until they are given the okay by God himself. Immediately, that night, Joseph and the family leave for Egypt. Again, this was a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy that we find in the book of Numbers 23:22. God’s providence and care for his son is again shown to us. As

well, God is able to move through history in order to have his plans become reality.

Of course, Herod was not happy about this at all. Rather than take a reasoned and thoughtful approach, Herod allowed his anger and anxiety to get the best of him and simply had all the boys around Bethlehem killed if they were two years or younger. Can you imagine the outcry to this behavior? Perhaps that is why another prophecy is referenced (Samuel 10:2). The cry that is heard assumes that Rachel is lamenting the tragic death of these children, and it is heard as far away as Ramah.

This is obviously a literary tool, but the meaning is clear: God is in no way happy about the death of the innocents.

Of course, neither should we be okay with the death of those at the hand of those who seek power, seek to oppress, and seek to keep their status, no matter what the cost. If we are followers of Christ, we realize that the status given to us by the world around us matters nothing compared to the status as citizens of heaven. There is no position and no possession that can compare with the rewards promised to us as faithful followers of Christ. To amass what the world has to offer, while giving a sense of contentment and even safety, is not ordained nor required by God to be faithful. Rather, to lose is to gain in the kingdom of God. That is the new normal. The only status we require is granted to us by the grace of God.

1— What have you acquired that you would have a hard time letting go?

2— How can you maintain a sense of worth when you know that the only status you need comes from God?

3 — Have you ever had a dream when you feel that God was speaking to you? What did he say to you? And did you follow the requests?

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. 20 “Get up!” the angel said. “Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead.”

We continue the narrative and realize that there were a few years between the last verse and this verse. This is one of the things we realize about the life of Jesus. There are huge portions that we simply don't know anything about. There are differing accounts, found in the apocrypha, of what Jesus might have been up to, but none of them made it into the canon, so we don't take those musings to be authoritative like the other books we have in scripture.

What do we do with the times we don't have recorded for the life of Jesus? We can conjecture and we can guess, but the truth is, we simply don't know. I remember watching some documentary with my father that conjectured Jesus had taken some very long trips between his time at the temple when he was 12 and the start of his ministry. They claimed he might have gone so far as to be in India, or even China. I remember being fascinated by the idea. I guess the reason they proposed such journeys was because of the relatively untouched early Christian communities in some of those places. While I don't think that narrative was true, it was interesting to

think about. It also reminded me that the Gospel went East, as well as West. We have a tendency to forget that.

The major theme of this text is the continued care that God shows to this family. God continues to be consistent in people's lives, and what He begins in your life He will continue if you let him. The infancy narrative of Jesus is a stellar example of how following the directives of God in our lives is probably the best thing we can do. Joseph, a righteous man, was willing to listen to the will of God in his life, and in the life of his family. Because of this, he was able to keep his family safe, he was able to continue the work of God, even at his own inconvenience. Sometimes, what God asks of us is not necessarily convenient, but it is in our best interests.

There is some parallel in this story to the story of Moses, being called away from Egypt and ultimately back into Egypt, as those who were wishing Moses harm were no longer living. Biblical authors will often harken back to their foundational stories in order to remind the reader that God has been working for a long time for the salvation of humankind.

1— Have you ever been called somewhere by God and you just got up and went? Write down the whole narrative as a testament to faith in God's prompting.

2— Are there situations you need to get away from in your life happening now, any that God is calling you away from?

3 — Have you ever been called back to a place you thought you were getting away from? How did it make you feel to go back?

21 So Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother. 22 But when he learned that the new ruler of Judea was Herod's son Archelaus, he was afraid to go there. Then, after being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee. 23 So the family went and lived in a town called Nazareth. This fulfilled what the prophets had said: "He will be called a Nazarene."

So, we see that politics are still playing a role in the life of Jesus. When Herod died, he had three sons who were fighting for control. The three sons were Herod Antipas, Philip, and Archelaus. Judea came under the rule of Archelaus, who had apparently inherited his father's violent tendencies, for he was reputed to have murdered 3,000 people at the beginning of his reign. Joseph made the right decision to end up in Nazareth.

The modern town of Nazareth has always been a bit of an enigma to me. It has this amazing Catholic Church there that is in honor of Mary. It is called the Church of the Annunciation. In it, there are mosaics of Mary and the baby Jesus donated from countries all over the world. However, the town of Nazareth itself has always been a bit of a grungy and dirty town. The church stands in stark contrast to the rest of the town. I have often wondered what the town of Nazareth looked like in the time that Jesus moved there.

One thing that is interesting is the

notion that Joseph and Jesus would have worked in a town that was being built a few miles away named Sepphoris. Therefore, each day they would have had to walk together in order to get to work and back each day. It has been posited that this is perhaps where many of the agricultural parables of Jesus come from, as they would have had to transverse local fields in the walk to be day laborers in Sepphoris each day. If this is true, it would make sense that a carpenter or a construction worker would only have agricultural parables to share, rather than parables of builders.

God, again, uses the hand of providence in order to have Jesus become a Nazarene, in order to fulfill the prophecy we find in scripture. The New Normal is living a life that recognizes that when we know what we have learned, we learn what we know. By looking backward we are able to see what God has for us in the future. By following the narrative of the past and God's faithfulness, we are able to chart our way in

the future. The one constant that is true in both the past and the future is that God has always been faithful to see His plans come to fruition. As well, He has constantly been working toward our salvation.

1— When have you doubted that God would remain faithful to you? Write down this story.

2—What can you do to allow the past to inform your future trajectory?

3 — What is the best thing you can say about how God has been faithful in your life?

If there is one constant we can learn from the history of God in the world, or what we like to call “salvation history,” is that God is continuing His work, from creation until today. We are never without a God who is willing to work with us to find our way to a relationship with Him, and to a better understanding of how salvation works in our lives. God is constantly with us, constantly looking out for us, and always seeking what is best for us. Our job is to listen, to react, and to do so with most haste.

The story of the infant Jesus is always a story of intrigue, of politics, of escape, as well as a story of faithfulness. The faithfulness comes from God and it comes from Joseph as well. Both are partnering in their attempts to keep Jesus safe from the politics of the day, from harm, with an eye on the fulfillment of prophecy from the Old Testament. This story is one that seeks to remind us all that to follow God is for sure the best choice that we can make. And while our experience with God may not come in the form of dreams telling us to get to a different country for our own safety, it very well could be a change in life that we hadn't expected, a change in careers we weren't looking for, or simply a change in atti-

tude about something you might have been sure about before you started listening to God.

God's continued faithfulness is a source of comfort for us, at least it should be. Again, sometimes it is not immediately understood, but when we connect with the larger narrative God is creating, we begin to have a new patience that can change the way we view the world. Without connection to this narrative, we are playing in a world we don't truly understand. God is a thematic God, who takes a long view of how things may work out. While today we may feel that things are out of control, God has a long view of history and even what is coming next. When things feel out of control, as they must have for Joseph during those turbulent times, we can turn to Jesus. It may sound cliché, it may be a trope you have heard so many times that it is hard to believe. But we have to have faith in the goodness and longevity of God and His incredible care for us.

Perhaps if we take the same tack that Joseph took, to simply trust in God, then things will get better, our lives will have more peace, and even in the midst of some craziness, we can still see God moving.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1** — When was the last time you felt God move in your life?
- 2** — How can you continue to follow what God is asking of you?
- 3** — How can you know what He is asking of you?
- 4** — Do you ever wonder if God is still there?
- 5** — What gives you peace when you feel God's absence?
- 6** — Is there a specific text that reminds you of God's presence?
- 7** — Does the infant narrative of Jesus give you any sense that God is present in your life?
- 8** — What is your favorite part of this story?
- 9** — How is Joseph living in the new normal?
- 10** — What does the New Normal look like for you?

WEEK 3

MATTHEW 3:1-17 (NLT)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea **2** and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” **3** This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

4 John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. **5** People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. **6** Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **7** But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. **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. **10** The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. **11** “I baptize you with[b] water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The Baptism of Jesus

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. **14** But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” **15** Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. **16** As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17** And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

3 In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, 2 “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

It is hard to overestimate the impact that John the Baptist had on the ministry of Jesus, and Matthew follows Mark's estimate of his significance. John was undoubtedly part of the separatist movement that thrived in Palestine and Syria, especially in and around the Jordan Valley in the centuries before and even after the time of Jesus. The most famous of these communities is the Essene Community at Qumran, which left behind what has come to be known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, some of the earliest manuscripts of the Old Testament that have ever been found.

These communities had a tendency to have their own rites and rituals, often around some practice of washing in the water. As well, they were often apocalyptic communities, with their adherents preaching the “end of the world.” While there has been no certain connection between John and one of these communities, the notion that John went to the “Judean wilderness” makes us think that perhaps he was from one of these separatist groups.

Of course, for Matthew, John the Baptist is much more than an aberration from one of these movements. Rather, he was the second coming of

Elijah, the one who came to “make straight” the way of the Lord. He was the precursor to the Messiah, the hoped for one of Israel. It is possible that for Matthew, he was Elijah, returning to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. (Mal. 3:1-2; Mal. 4:5-6).

But for us, John the Baptist has always been a bit of an enigma. He comes out of the wilderness—although still preaching in the wilderness, dressed like a madman, eating strange food, and super concerned with people repenting of their sins because “the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” What is crazy is that people took him up on his offer to baptize them, and they came from miles around to the Jordan River in order to confess and to be baptized into a messiah that even John had not yet met.

Matthew uses that term “wilderness” to remind us of Israel's time in the desert, and this is perhaps where we can bring it home today. When have you spent time in the wilderness? I am not speaking of that time when you went camping with your friends or family. I mean that time when you felt like you were spiritually lost, and you couldn't find a spiritual home. When you felt as

if you were all alone, wandering, never knowing where you were supposed to be going. Have you ever felt that way? We all go through it, but we have a tendency to try to find our way home by ourselves rather than searching for the help of someone like a John the Baptist in our lives, one who can help bring us

to Christ.

Remember, our spiritual journeys are not to be attempted alone. Rather, we are called to be constantly looking for a community in which we can grow, find wisdom, and seek someone who can lead us to a great understanding of Christ.

1— Do you feel like you need a John the Baptist in your life?

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2— Have you ever done a deeper study on John the Baptist?

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3 – Why do you think God placed him into the narrative of Jesus?

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7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. “You brood of snakes!” he exclaimed. “Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? 8 Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. 9 Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. 10 Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

John was even an enigma to the ruling class of religious leaders in his day. They would come to watch him baptize. However, he would not let them off the hook when they showed up to see what he was really doing. The above paragraph is a good example of how John went about preaching. And everyone loves a provocative preacher. That is, as long as the vitriol of the preacher is not visited on them. I can imagine the crowds listening to the accusations that John hurled at the Pharisees and Sadducees with great relish.

John’s harsh words were targeting the ruling religious classes, but it was also for the common man. In the Jewish communities of the time, there was a sense of superiority due to the fact they had come from a chosen people. Those who could trace their family tree back to the prophets were even more

“chosen.” However, just being part of the community, a birthright by the way, was a marker of the favor God had shown you. Their monotheism, which was primarily tribal, was what put them apart and above the nations and peoples of the area. John is striking at the heart of this kind of thinking.

When John says “God can create children of Abraham from these very stones...” he is throwing out a scathing indictment that struck at the very heart of why they thought they were special. Tying their faith tradition to the patriarch Abraham was a source of pride for them, and again, reminded them of their special place as they were chosen by God, through Abraham. Of course, we see this again in the writings of Paul in the book of Romans, as he makes the connection between Abraham’s faith and the faith of those who believe in Jesus.

But John doesn't pull any punches. He is more than willing to let them know that it is not about the kind of tree they are, but it is about the root that produces the fruit of the tree. And if there is no fruit, John's warning to them is that they might be severed, chopped down, and discarded in the fire. This is not something anyone is interested in hearing. It must not only be shocking

to hear, but paramount to treason in some respects. He was willing to be the one to call out hypocrisy, deceitfulness, and to push back on the religious status quo of the day. This was no small task in the first century, as the political and religious establishments were so intertwined it was hard to decipher the difference between the two.

1— Is there a preacher that you particularly like? Why do you like them? Are they provocative? Do they call out the establishment for their hypocrisy?

2— Does that preaching ever hit a little too close to home?

3 — Why do you think people would travel far and wide to see John preach?

13 Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to talk him out of it. “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” he said, “so why are you coming to me?”

Among the many who came from the cities to the Jordan River to be baptized by John was Jesus of Nazareth. While every gospel records this event, Matthew is particular in its account. From this account, we discover that the baptism that Jesus received was somewhat different in meaning from the countless others that John was doing during that time. While for others it was connected with the confession and repentance of sin, in anticipation of the coming messiah, for Jesus it was a rite of entry into his messianic calling. It was the initiation he needed in order to be fulfilled in order to begin to do the work for which he came to this earth from heaven.

Matthew, unlike Mark's narrative, adds a conversation that takes place between Jesus and John just before the baptism. Through this conversation, and John's seeming objection to baptizing Jesus, Matthew poses a question that might have troubled you at some point, and probably troubled those in the early church; “why was Jesus baptized by John?” This conversation is answered in v. 15, but today we see that John poses the question.

You see, when you finally recognize who Jesus really is in your life, you have the same refrain that we see in the book of John. John 1:27 states “Though his ministry follows mine, I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal.” When you know who Jesus is, you stand in awe of his majesty and glory, and you immediately recognize that you are unworthy to do even the slightest thing for him. We see this in almost every encounter that Jesus has with someone who recognizes who he really is. To know Jesus is to know the God of the universe, for as it says in Colossians 1:19, “For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ.”

Have you ever been speaking to someone and then realized they had some sort of fame? Years ago, I was at a convention and chatting with a guy who seemed really nice. We spoke for like five minutes, and he didn't seem like he had anywhere to go. He was attentive to the conversation and was thoughtful and kind. When he walked away a friend said to me, “Do you know who that was?” I didn't, I said. He told me that it was Michael W. Smith, who

at the time was one of the biggest Christian music artists. While I knew who he was, it hadn't registered with me that was who I was speaking to. We went into the big meeting hall at the convention and sure enough, he was the main artist of the day. I was embarrassed but also deeply impressed with his sense of care that I felt through our conversation.

For many, coming into contact with

the most high God through Jesus is like this.

They can't believe they were talking to the one to whom God had poured out His fullness. When we recognize this, we begin to view ourselves very differently. John recognized who Jesus was, and he deemed himself unworthy to baptize Jesus. Tomorrow we take on the question of why it needed to be done.

1— Have you ever spoken to someone, not knowing who they were, only to find out later how important they really are?

2— What does it feel like to be in contact with the God of the Universe? Does it put you in your place a little?

3 — How can we recognize when we are in the presence of God, and how should we respond?

15 But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.” So John agreed to baptize him.

Jesus gives an interesting answer here. It seems as if he agrees with John’s assessment of their place in the world; however, he still wants John to do it in order to “fulfill all righteousness.” This idea of fulfilling righteousness is important in Matthew’s gospel. Two things are at play here. 1) “Fulfill” is a word used when referring to the OT prophecies. And 2) “Righteousness” is a key term in Matthew’s vocabulary. So to fulfill all righteousness means that this must be done in order to fulfill what has been prophesied in scripture about the coming of the messiah.

As well, it seems that Jesus knows this is a rite of passage that needs to happen before he begins his ministry in earnest. Why? Why would a ritual like this need to take place in order for Jesus to actually do his ministry? There are three answers that come from one of the commentaries.

(1) Baptism is a practice which God ordains or commands; hence, the baptism of Jesus will fulfill God’s righteous requirements.

(2) Baptism is the first step in Jesus’ identification with sinners, by which they in turn will become righteous through Him (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21).

(3) Baptism is the way Jesus assumes his role in God’s plan, which has righteousness as its goal in the community which Jesus gathers (cf. Matt. 5:6, 17–20; 6:33). By baptizing Jesus, John will enable the way of righteousness which his own work initiated (21:32) to move toward fulfillment in the work of his successor.

While each of these interpretations has some validity, Matthew was probably thinking along the lines of the third option. There was, in some respects, a passing of the torch in ministry. We see this more clearly in the discussion that John has with his disciples in the book of John, written much later in the first century. The discussion goes like this. Please excuse the long quote, but it tells the whole story:

John 3:22 Then Jesus and his disciples left Jerusalem and went into the Judean countryside. Jesus spent some time with them there, baptizing people.

23 At this time John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon, near Salim, because there was plenty of water there; and people kept coming to him for baptism. 24 (This was before John was thrown into prison.) 25 A debate broke out between John’s disciples and a certain Jew over ceremonial cleans-

ing. 26 So John's disciples came to him and said, "Rabbi, the man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people. And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us."

27 John replied, "No one can receive anything unless God gives it from heaven. 28 You yourselves know how plainly I told you, 'I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.' 29 It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom's friend is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success. 30 He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.

31 "He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things,

but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else. 32 He testifies about what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them! 33 Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. 34 For he is sent by God. He speaks God's words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit. 35 The Father loves His Son and has put everything into his hands. 36 And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment."

John understood his place in the universe. So when he baptized Jesus in our original pericope, we understand that he was humbled by the role that he played in the life of Jesus, and he had no delusions of grandeur.

1— What role do you play in the salvation history of the world?

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2— How do you expand the kingdom of God?

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3 — How can you recognize when you must decrease and he must increase?

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16 After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him.

This is one of the great passages in scripture, so let's break it up between two days. Verses 16 and 17 are often taken together, as they finish a thought, but we will linger here for a moment. While Matthew does not say anything about the baptism itself, we find ourselves at the tail end, with Jesus coming out of the water.

By the way, this is one of the reasons why a belief in baptism by immersion makes sense. Jesus came out of the water, rather than have water splashed on him. It may seem like a simple and obvious statement, but there have been many theological discussions and varying understandings of how to baptize, and not every church goes about it in the same fashion. The SDA church has always followed the tradition of baptism by immersion, so we put you all the way under the water. We do this in order to take the practice that Jesus was involved in as our own. As well, the metaphor of immersion is connected to the idea of death and resurrection. With this text and the metaphor firmly in place, baptism in a pool and by immersion makes the most sense, both practically and theologically.

But what we are really dealing with here is the Theophany which follows

the baptism. What is a theophany? It is a physical manifestation of God to humanity. While Jesus is the most profound theophany there ever was or ever will be, in this text, Jesus in his humanity experienced the theophany of the heavens opening up and a dove descending upon him. By the way, this is one of the few times in scripture we see the trinity assembled together. The father, who speaks, the Holy Spirit who descends as a dove, and Jesus, the human/god who receives their affirmation. It must have been amazing to see this! Those few followers of John who got a chance to see the messiah both close up and being affirmed by the God of the heavens.

Have you ever had a theophany? Have you ever had a manifestation of God in your life that was undeniable? One of my favorite authors, David Dark, wrote a book called "Everyday Apocalypse" which argues, in broad terms, that we have these theophanies every day if we are open to seeing how God is working through culture, through community and through our relationships. While the theophany in these texts is much more palpable and tangible, we do have the opportunity to see God in so many ways each and every day.

1— When have you had a theophany? Write down what it was all about.

2— Have you ever been a theophany for others?

3 — Do you believe that God is still active today, and sometimes shows himself to us? If so, what are the implications for how we view the world on a daily basis?

17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.”

What son wouldn't want to hear these words from his father? And in the New Testament, or the second testament as some call it, we don't hear the voice of God all that often. In fact, about the only time God does speak is to say these words, and then to add to this phrase in Matthew 17:5, “listen to him...”

While most of us have heard these quotes in the following manner; “this is my son, in whom I am well pleased.” The NLT renders it a bit differently and with a more common tongue. The phrase, “...who brings me great joy” is a really great translation. It conveys the sense of pride and yet contentment that God has with His son, Jesus. Before the ministry of Jesus has begun in earnest, God is already proud and privileged by His son. This shows a grace that God extends even to His son by simply loving him regardless of his action or inaction. Jesus was about to change the world, but before he was able to do this, God deemed it important that Jesus know how much God really loves him and is proud of him.

This is great parenting, and we should take note. The idea that our children have our love regardless of success or failure, helps our children to under-

stand not only what the love of God is, but how they should be loved by others as well. I can remember my parents coming to every basketball game they could over my high school basketball career. I never thought their love was contingent on me winning. They came to support my interest and talent, and they were always supportive of me developing in whatever I put my time and energy to.

But this baptism and this affirmation of the identity and calling of Jesus is important for us to note. Throughout the ministry of Jesus we will see this calling and identity affirmed again and again, whether through the demons at Gadara (8:28-34) or by the voice of God again at the transfiguration (17:1-8), or the disciples (14:28-33) or even by the Roman Centurion (27:51-54). Throughout the ministry of Jesus, as people came into contact with him, they were reminded of his special status, of his incredible power, and of his calling to save the world from sin and death.

It is with this in mind we look at this text and are grateful for a God who loved us so much He gave His only son for us. And in doing this, He did not condemn the world, but He saved the world. In times when things on the

planet are strange, are scary, and are even downright ugly, we can recognize not only the need for a God who loves, but the presence of just such a God in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. May

you be encouraged today that there is a God who loves you, is proud of you, and has accepted you as a son and daughter of His own!

1 — Did you feel accepted by your parents? Why or why not?

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2 — How are you showing your kids how much you love them?

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3 — Do you think that God is proud of you? Why?

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3 — Is it hard to remember that Jesus came to save us and not condemn us?

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In this week's texts we are confronted by a God who is willing to show us what the New Normal is and how we usher that worldview into our lives. Baptism is a vital part of our faith journey, and it declares that we owe our allegiance not to a nation or a country or an ideology, but to a God who ultimately loves us, has adopted us, and is proud of us. We see a son who is willing to go through the steps needed to "fulfill all righteousness" and a God who is willing to affirm and acknowledge His son's identity and calling.

While these texts are not long, they are full of theological truths and theophanies about who God is, how He loves, and the importance of Jesus. It also gives us an example of how we can begin to declare and live in the New Normal, that new normal that isn't really all that new to us who call ourselves followers of Christ. We are not simply those who espouse some sort of ideology; rather, we are followers of the living and breathing Jesus, who died, was resurrected, and now advocates for us with the Father.

The message of the gospel is one that flies in the face of everything else on the planet. There is grace for the undeserving, there is compassion for the oppressed, and there is healing for

the sick. The good news for the poor is found in God's people working diligently to ease their pain and suffering, and there is a sacrificial leaning to the lives of those who follow Christ. Without this, we are missing a major portion of the idea of the Gospel that was given to us by Jesus.

Baptism is an outward expression of an inner decision to follow Christ where he leads, as well as it is a connection to the beginning of the ministry Jesus began 2,000 years ago. Since then, followers have been declaring their desire to be closer to God, through Jesus, and they have been experiencing theophanies of their own. Perhaps these epiphanies and theophanies are not as dramatic as what we saw at the baptism of Jesus, but they are still palpable and remind us that God is still active, still working, and still present in our lives. These words, rituals, and rites continue to remind of the constancy of God in the world throughout history and throughout our lives as well.

- 1** — Do you remember the circumstance of your baptism?
- 2** — What are they and what did it mean to you?
- 3** — What theophanies have you had in your life? Be specific.
- 4** — What can you do to remind yourself of the first love you had that led to your baptism?
- 5** — How can you convey that first love to others?
- 6** — Is there a larger story that God is telling through you?
- 7** — Do you think that God is proud of you?
- 8** — Have you recognized how much God loves you? How can you tell?
- 9** — Is God still active in history and breaking through?
- 10** — How does baptism remind us of the New Normal?

WEEK 4

JAMES 5:13-18 (NLT)

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. **3** The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. **6** “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

7 Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

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

10 Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him..

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. 2 For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

Verse 2 of this story is perhaps the most obvious statement in all of scripture. But let's not get there too quickly.

We all know this story of the temptation of Jesus. But how does this story begin to lead us into the idea of the New Normal? How can this story, that we have heard so many times, be re-envisioned to bring us to a better realization that living for God changes everything and creates in us a new vision of life and people and God? Is living a life for God so different than simply living a life on this planet? I mean, we know that the hope of heaven is something great, but what difference, if any, does it make for us now? If we call ourselves followers of Christ, is there a reality that we live that is in any way different from those who don't follow Christ?

Let's just take the first phrase of this text as a measure of what it means to live in the New Normal. "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit..." There are a few things we should take note of in this phrase. First, Jesus was led. It means there was something that Jesus was allowing to guide him. Now, we know that he is the God of the universe, so why is it that we find him being "led" anywhere? Doesn't

power mean you don't have to submit yourself to anyone else? In this New Normal, power is found in a willingness to submit yourself to the promptings and leadings of the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not feel as if he was above this in his life. Perhaps we shouldn't feel as if this is something we will ever get away from. Submission to the will of God does not make us less "powerful" but more connected to the power of God.

By looking into the life of Jesus, we begin to see that what we thought we knew about power, about wisdom, about strength, and about success has been turned on its head. This last year has taught us that things might not ever go back to "normal" and that we might be living lives very differently than we have in the past. I am more so reminded that Jesus ushered in a New Normal millennia ago by simply being willing to show us a new way to be human, a new way to live, and a New Normal that defies everything that has come before and has come after. Followers of Christ were always meant to be a little different than the rest of the world. We were always meant to be a little "off" because we see the world through different eyes and we interact with different hearts.

When followers of Christ are indiscernible from the rest of the world, we might not be living the lives that resonate with the life of Jesus. We need to think about the implications of this.

Oh, and verse 2, the statement about being hungry, wouldn't you be if you fasted for 40 days? I sure would be!

**1 — When was the last time you were “led” anywhere by the Holy Spirit?
Be specific.**

2 — What was the outcome of following the promptings of the Holy Spirit?

3 — How can you make sure you are living a life, like that of Christ, that is trying?

3 During that time the devil came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.”⁴ But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’

So we begin this week with the sequel to the story of Jesus’ baptism. The account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is a parallel with the story of the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea (Duet. 8:2). In the same way the Israelites were tested at Sinai, Jesus was tested after he comes out of the water of baptism. He is weakened by hunger, and the issue we have at stake is an issue of loyalty. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus is “tested as Israel was, yet without sin.” Of course, that outcome was in no way guaranteed, for this was a real test, a test in which he could have turned away from God and God’s will. This reality makes this particular narrative incredibly important to our understanding of how Jesus went about his life and ministry.

The story of the conversation with Jesus and Satan is shared in Luke as well, with many parallels, to be sure. We will stay with the Matthew account, as this is the book we are studying in this New Normal series.

The devil comes to Jesus and makes an assumption, one that is pretty profound; “If you are the son of God...” It is not

so much a question as an acknowledgement of the identity affirmed through the theophany experienced in the baptism of Jesus. Even the devil knows the power of the position that Jesus holds in the trinity. We should have no less faith in the assumption that Jesus holds a firm position in the God-community we call the trinity. While the trinity is often a difficult concept to understand, we can, at least in brief, take it to mean that Jesus and God are so alike as to be one, and in this way they are in the divine dance of the trinity, fulfilled by the Holy Spirit.

The proposition posed by the devil speaks to the immediacy of the physical needs of Jesus; after all, he was hungry! However, at another level, it poses the question of how Jesus will wield his messianic power throughout his life and ministry. Will he use his power for his own ends, becoming a wonder-worker, or will he withhold his power to use for the edification of God and others? This is a real question and a real temptation, simply because all that power was at his fingertips. While this proposition would not be a temptation to you or me, as we cannot do this sort of wonder work, Jesus had

the power of heaven and earth and the universe within his reach. However, he saw the larger narrative, the bigger picture at play.

When we are tempted, do we see beyond the immediate needs, or do we succumb to that which is most pressing in our lives? Had Jesus given himself over to the physical needs, it would have

meant the end of the kingdom of God on earth. However, he knew that there were greater themes and narratives at play that needed to be recognized and seen to the end. We are so lucky that Jesus believes more in loyalty to God's will than in comfort and ease for himself. Do we feel the same things?

1— What is tempting to you?

2— How do you make sure you are not succumbing to that which the devil puts in front of you?

3 — How can you continually look to the greater narrative that God is building in your life?

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, 6 and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, ‘He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’”

The second proposition takes Jesus from the wilderness to the highest point of the temple, which is sometimes thought to be the outer courtyard parapet. Here, the devil decides he would try to use scripture against Jesus by quoting from Psalm 91:11-12. This is ingenious, and has caught many a follower of Jesus Christ off guard by simply not knowing scripture better than one who has nefarious intentions. Scripture can be used in inappropriate ways in order to manipulate, in order to coerce, and even to justify the worst parts of humanity.

Why is it that we have a book that can be interpreted in so many ways? Wouldn’t it have been easier to have made the scriptures more clear, so they could not be used in any way to manipulate or coerce? Of course, that would be much easier, but Jesus will tomorrow give us a model of how we fight back when scripture is being manipulated for someone’s personal ends.

Today, we need to understand that the devil was testing the confidence that Jesus had in God to protect him, while at the same time, appealing to

his selfishness to show his own power to the world and to the devil himself. Was Jesus interested in a display of power, was he bothered that the devil was using scripture in such a way as to dare Jesus to force God into a miracle, or was the devil simply misunderstanding the very nature of who Jesus was? Regardless of any of these questions, we are left looking out over Jerusalem, on that parapet with Jesus, wondering if he will fall prey to the temptation of the devil.

You see, when the devil decided to use scripture, he was deciding to step into a realm that Jesus knew all too well. The devil dared to try and use these words from God, given through the prophets and the Psalmist, for his own ends. The devil seemed to feel—and probably still does—that the quickest way to tempt a follower of Jesus, someone who takes the scriptures seriously, is to simply distort that which we hold dear. The problem comes when we forget that the devil knows scripture as well as we do, perhaps even better. He has been studying it in order to use it against us.

In the movie, “The Other Guys” with Will Ferrel and Mark Wahlberg, there is a scene where Mark’s character begins to ballet dance. When asked how he got so good at it he basically answers that he learned to dance, ironically, to make fun of a kid who was taking ballet. While I’m not sure I rec-

ommend the movie, the scene always caught me as interesting. Sometimes, to refute something, we have a tendency to learn it better than those who actually believe in it.

If the devil knows the scriptures so well, how well should we know them?

1— What can you do to increase your knowledge of scripture?

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2— Do these study guides lead you to a deeper understanding of scripture? Remember, they are simply a jumping-off point. They are not exhaustive.

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3 — Do you know how the scriptures came to be? What decisions were made to find the canon the way we do today? Would knowing the development process help us with understanding them? Do a little research here to bolster your understanding of how scripture was decided upon all those years ago.

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7 Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’”

Jesus fights fire with fire. He quotes from Duet. 6:16. While the devil had quoted Psalm 91:11-12, Jesus shows himself to be a much more faithful interpreter of biblical texts. Jesus also understood the nature of the “temptation.” While we often think of being “tempted” by things that are attractive or appealing to us, the truth is, what is unfolding in these texts is a “test.”

Have you ever uttered the phrase, “the devil made me do it?” It is a way to misdirect responsibility for things that we do that are wrong or unrighteous. We often use the phrase as a tongue-in-cheek way to shrug off something that we find ourselves doing that we know we shouldn’t.

But here, the temptation or test of Jesus really went to the core of who he was and what he was given to do. What was tested was his willingness to trust God’s larger plan, to trust in God’s deeper purpose for his life, and to commit wholly to the will of God in his life. This is especially hard when we think we are in control, or should be in control. If you have ever heard the phrase “he/she sold their soul to the devil,” it is a reference to this story in some respects. Jesus was

being asked to take into his own hands the will of God, and by forcing God’s hand into a miracle, he would have traded the will and purpose of God in for the power and glory that is fleeting in this world.

When we force God into a miracle to save us or help us, perhaps we are not showing faith, but rather unfaith. What do I mean? I have seen many a person who will pray over the sick rather than seek treatment. I have seen many who have prayed for a miracle to get them out of a situation, rather than have them do the work of unraveling what they put together. Many times, I have seen people who would rather God show up miraculously and supernaturally in order to fix something they created, than actually do what has been laid out before them in Scripture to keep them out of these situations. Remember a few months ago in the book of James (5:12) when he asks us not to take oaths but to let our yes be yes and our no’s be no’s? (This comes up in the next chapter of Matthew as well, by the way.) Perhaps trusting in God and not the machinations of our own minds and hearts would have kept us out of these situations.

Why test God? When we test, we don't have faith; rather, we put our loyalty to his will in our lives on thin ice. Today, seek to trust in the will of God

for your life, rather than leaning into the ways the devil would have us force God's hand.

1— Have you ever been tempted or tested to force God into something? What was that like?

2— How can we continue to study scripture so that we are prepared when the testing comes?

3 — What are your favorite scriptures that help you remember to trust in the will of God?

8 Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 “I will give it all to you,” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.”

It seems that the devil likes to take Jesus to top high points to test his allegiance to God. High points, specifically mountains, a setting for several of the stories in Matthew, all deal with power and authority. (Matthew 4:8; 4:1; 15:29; 17:1; 28:16) This reminds us of the story of Moses ascending to Mount Nebo so God can show him all the land that Israel will eventually possess. (Deuteronomy 34:1-4)

So, we might ask a question here about how it is that the devil can take Jesus anywhere and offer him the power to rule the world. To really appreciate the offer, we need to remember that in the NT it speaks of the devil as the present world ruler. It seems that he might be in a strategic position to give dominion to Jesus, at least the dominion that a lesser or conventional Messiah might seek. However, Jesus has no interest in what the devil is offering. I suppose if you had dominion over the universe, dominion of a speck of dust might not be that enticing to you.

Of course, as we read this story, we already know the ending, but in the time of the temptation/test, it would have been a real choice. That is the key

to temptation, it has to be something that is really and truly a choice to be made. Again, there is a short-sightedness to the nature of the temptation, and Jesus always has one eye on the greater narrative that God is unfolding each and every moment. The devil always seems to forget that.

He assumes that you will forget it, too. You see, that is one of the pillars of the devils' attempts to trip us all up. He wants us to forget there is a greater narrative at play in the world. When we succumb to the temporal story that we are all living, forgetting there is a timeless and universal story being told that is so much greater than each of us, we become cannon fodder for the devil.

I've been reflecting on this a great deal in 2020. This has been a tough year, but it is a relatively short amount of time in the earth's history, and certainly in the story of God it is not even a second of the clock. So why do we become so fearful and so anxious in the midst of this? Perhaps it is because we forget the greater and more universal narrative that God is creating. I don't know how 2020, with all its disasters, upheaval, pandemics and social

unrest, fits into the greater picture God is creating, but I do believe it has a role to play. Am I happy to be living through it? No! But do I still trust that

God is good and he is compassionate and loves us all? Yes, I do believe that with all my heart.

1— What do you think 2020 is teaching you about God's greater narrative?

2— When you feel tempted, is it because you want something more immediate and forget about the long story?

3 — What do you think about the NT thinking of the devil as the ruler of the world? How does that make you feel?

10 “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”
11 Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Here, Jesus demands that the devil depart, much the same way that he did with Peter when Peter was trying to divert Jesus from the way of the cross. (4:10; 16:21-23) Jesus was no longer playing this game, and so his demand that Satan leave him alone was a demand which Satan could not ignore. When Satan leaves, all that was left was for the angels to come and take care of Jesus. This reminds us of Elijah when the angels took care of him before he undertook the journey to Mount Horeb. (1 Kings 19:1-8).

There are a ton of temptation stories in the Old Testament, and this story links Jesus to this larger biblical context. It lets the reader know that Jesus had to also prove his faithfulness in the midst of testing. The difference is that there was a cosmic conflict on display through this story rather than simply a test of loyalty. Remember, the fate of the universe depended on how things would go through these temptations. Never before, and never again will there be so much at stake for all of us. Thank God that Jesus was able to remember the greater

narrative that he was living.

When you begin to live into this greater story, the story of God, a few things happen: **1)** you begin to see others as part of a bigger story, rather than just part of your story. **2)** you want to begin to help other people understand why we can live differently. Our understanding of this greater narrative should, at least, let us take current events, take perceived slights and uncomfortable situations with a grain of salt, as opposed to letting it derail us from what is the greater story God is telling though and with us. Without this understanding, it is easy to be blown back and forth by the wind, going this way and that and forgetting that the anchor point to our lives is not what is happening on any given day, but what has happened through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in the world and beyond.

Jesus was able to overcome the devil by looking beyond his hunger, beyond his hurting body, and into the greater world that God is creating. It is a hard thing today to live into the “not yet,” but at the same time be fully present believers today. Oh, that Jesus

would come! But until he does, let's world that we know God is building in
make sure we are helping to create the heaven at the same time.

1 — Was there a time when you overcame temptation?

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2 — What allowed you to be able to do that?

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3 — How can you approach temptation in your life so that you can be assured of the continued victory of Jesus in your life?

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This week we have looked into the New Normal that Jesus developed as he dealt with the temptation that the devil put forth to him after he had spent 40 days in the desert waiting on the Lord and fasting. In his diminished physical state, the devil thought it appropriate to come and throw some temptations in the way of Jesus before he could even begin his ministry. This is a pattern that we see from the OT and those who would follow God. Temptation will always be a traveling companion for those who will have some impact for the kingdom of God. Satan only bothers with those who are a threat to his perceived dominion in the world.

As we look at the texts, are we willing to recognize the deep knowledge of scripture that both the devil and Jesus had? Of course, Jesus has a better exegesis of the text, but it should be worth noting that the devil was more than willing to use scripture against even God himself. What is fascinating is that Jesus was unfazed and unrelenting in his willingness to be loyal to God. Regardless of what he was being offered, he didn't think that it was worth giving up the kingdom of God that he had been sent to establish. Because of this, the tools the devil had in his pockets

were not enough to entice or in any way attract Jesus to his offers.

What is the devil offering you? What do you think would be worth you succumbing to his offer? For you, does the kingdom of God hold a place so dear to your heart that you would be willing to let everything else go in order to continue your journey with and toward it? For Jesus, there was nothing more beautiful, nothing worth more, nothing that came close to comparing to the great glory of God as seen through the kingdom.

So when it comes to temptation, we have to ask ourselves, "why is this coming to me at this point?" Are you tired, physically drained, emotionally spent, deeply saddened, or are you ready to give up? These are the times when the devil is ready to pounce on you; these are the times it becomes easy to forget the greater narrative that God is establishing in the world. In order for us to be a part of this, we have to continue to repel the devil, as Jesus did, by simply evoking the name of God in our prayers and in our lives.

Here are some questions for this week: :

- 1** — What tempts you?
- 2** — How does it feel to know the first century writers thought of the world as Satan's dominion?
- 3** — Does it ever feel like it still is?
- 4** — Where does the model of Jesus resonate most with you?
- 5** — How can you fight the devil's advances in your life?
- 6** — How can you become focused more on the kingdom of God than on the temptations that come your way?
- 7** — What do you think the kingdom of God is like in the world?
- 8** — How can you help your brothers and sisters in Christ to thwart the advances of the devil as well?
- 9** — What are your go-to scriptures when it comes to dealing with temptation?
- 10** — How can you know when you are being tempted?

WEEK 5

MATTHEW 5:1-10 & 17-48 (NLT)

The Sermon on the Mount

1 One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, **2** and he began to teach them.

The Beatitudes

3 “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

4 God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.

6 God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.

7 God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

9 God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

10 God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Teaching about the Law

17 “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. **18** I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. **19** So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. **20** “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!

Teaching about Anger

21 “You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ **22** But I say, if you are even angry with someone you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell. **23** “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, **24** leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. **25** “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will

be thrown into prison. **26** And if that happens, you surely won't be free again until you have paid the last penny.

Teaching about Adultery

27 "You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' **28** But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **29** So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. **30** And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Teaching about Divorce

31 "You have heard the law that says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.' **32** But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.

Teaching about Vows

33 "You have also heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.' **34** But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, 'By heaven!' because heaven is God's throne. **35** And do not say, 'By the earth!' because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, 'By Jerusalem!' for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. **36** Do not even say, 'By my head!' for you can't turn one hair white or black. **37** Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

Teaching about Revenge

38 "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' **39** But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. **40** If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. **41** If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. **42** Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

Teaching about Love for Enemies

43 "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. **44** But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! **45** In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. **46** If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. **47** If you are kind only to your friends,[s] how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. **48** But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

1 One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him,
2 and he began to teach them. **3** “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
4 God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
5 God blesses those who are humble,
6 God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied.
7 God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
8 God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.
9 God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.
10 God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Well, today we get to take a look at this famous oration called the Sermon on the Mount. Many of us see this first section and assume this is the vast majority of the teaching, but it is really just the prologue. The first verse references the crowds that had come to hear Jesus. If you have ever been to this area where the crowds would have been, you know the look of the area. It is pastoral, somewhat beautiful, and at times ridiculously hot. But it is a great place for a conversation about God, his kingdom, and how he interacts with his people. The Greek calls these Macarisms-(from the Greek word for blessed).

Now I know the word macarisms

sounds like the Macarena, but it could not be further from the silly dance we all did a quite a few years ago. It speaks of those who are blessed for particular reasons, and what we see in this prologue is an outline of kingdom values that need to be recognized. The New Living Translation sounds a little different, beginning with “God blesses” rather than “blessed”. However, it means the same thing, and is actually a bit more specific, because it is truly God who blesses. Taking this all in for only one day does not do this text justice, but there is much we need to go over this week, so I apologize, and hold on, we will go quickly.

Matthew has Jesus on a mountain, where he loves to put Jesus. Jesus also

gives the “great commission (Matthew 28:19-20) from an elevated place. As he jumps into the teaching, we know that Jesus is teaching to two groups, the disciples who are seated in a semi-circle around him, and then the greater multitudes that are back a bit, but surrounding the disciples and Jesus as well. The comments Jesus makes are to the whole of Israel, that they might understand the kingdom of God. In the same way, we are being asked to understand the kingdom a little better than before. Jesus uses alliteration from the greek in a great way to make these statements resonate and be remembered. He is using a format that draws on Isaiah 61. So the language would have been familiar to the crowd.

He begins with the Poor is spirit, who Luke simply calls the “poor.” Matthew’s list has a bit more of a spiritual bent than

that of Luke’s, which is common in their language and emphasis. But those who are poor in spirit will gain the Kingdom of heaven, no small point of reference in all the good things that Jesus promises.

When we talk about the poor in spirit, we don’t just mean those who are having a hard time having a decent attitude, but those who are actually poor. Perhaps the phrase can mean both! This phrase shows up once in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but can hardly be known as a popular phrase. Jesus seems to be setting up this list of those who might be considered “last”, to be those who the Kingdom of God considers to be first.

Have you ever considered yourself to be last? Why would Jesus want to consider you to be first? And how is it that the kingdom of God could be so different from the world we currently inhabit?

1— Do you ever consider yourself to be “poor in spirit?”

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2— What does that mean to you, and does knowing that you are blessed help you each day?

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3 — Why do you think Jesus was saying all that he did at the Sermon on the Mount?

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17 “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. 18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. 19 So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Most of us read the Sermon on the Mountain and find ourselves very familiar with the first 10 verses, yet not as familiar with the following advice and declarations. We must remember that this pericope really goes through Chapter 7:12, so there is a great deal to unpack. Here, in verses 5:17-19, Jesus unpacks why he has come and why it is important. He reminds people that they did not come to get rid of the law and the prophets’ teaching, but rather, to fulfill and accomplish their purpose. What is the purpose of the Law? Perhaps we can say it in a shortened way:

Jesus came to fulfill the law, which means he came to show us a greater and more perfect love.

In fact, in the previous verses Jesus is showing us a greater and more perfect way. The way of the kingdom

shows us that we are in fact blessed when we feel as if we are not, and that the law has a purpose, but it is not what we have originally thought it to be. The Law is not what saves us, or brings us into the kingdom of heaven, rather it is the righteousness that the law exposes, and of course, that righteousness does not come from our human behavior, but from the very God who established the law in the first place.

Through this sermon Jesus seeks to establish the import of the principles of the law, but does not allow the law to exceed his purpose and task while here on earth. Jesus upholds the law, but not as the bellwether of our salvation, rather, it is the outcome of a search for righteousness and a right relationship with God. Rather than allow for us to think that we must keep each iota of the law, the law is put in its

proper place in relationship to Jesus. Jesus is the one who has fulfilled the law, and that does not make the law any less important, in fact, it means that if we are in Jesus, understanding the importance of the ethical practices that the law expresses will become paramount in our lives. However, we also understand the law's rightful place in our understanding. Rather than being a conduit for our salvation, keeping the law becomes the fruit of the new root that Jesus has given us.

It is easy for us to get down on ourselves for our own inability to keep the law. However, when we understand the importance of keeping the law as a result of our own salvation, the law ceases to be a burden and becomes a roadmap to Jesus for others who might be amenable to accepting Jesus by seeing the righteousness that God has placed in us through Jesus.

1— How many times have you tried to keep the law, only to fall short?

2— How has that restoration changed when you began to realize that Jesus has already kept the law for us, and now our call is to accept his righteousness in our lives?

3 – If Jesus came to fulfill the law, does this mean we don't have to?

20 “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”

Now, what are we going to do with this verse today? Because it seems to push back on everything that we were just discussing. How can all the previous assertions be true, when this text says that we must have a better righteousness than all the teachers of the law and the Pharisees if we are to enter into the kingdom of heaven? How does any of this make sense?

I can understand the confusion. Obviously, the teachers of the Law must have a greater understanding of the law than we do; as well, the Pharisees were concerned with scrupulously keeping the law in every aspect of their lives. How is it possible to maintain an understanding of the law when these two groups didn't do a great job with it in the first century. In fact, they did such a bad job of understanding that Jesus actually had to spend a great deal of time reworking everyone's understanding of the Law and our relationship to it.

There is one very simple variable that we have and can understand that they didn't. The variable is Jesus. Not only is he explaining how things should be, he is also explaining what they all

mean. He redefines righteousness to be connected deeply to him, his adherence to the law, and our accepting of his righteousness as our own. As well, he is letting us know that while the law is good and proper, the keeping of the law has been fulfilled, so the law that we keep means something else to us than it did to the Pharisees. For us, the law is the expression of our love for Jesus, rather than a roadmap to salvation.

We keep the law because Jesus did and because he loves us so much as to save us. Rather, the Pharisees kept the law in order to find acceptance from God. Our keeping is because of the acceptance we have already received. The righteousness that we express has been given to us through the grace of Jesus Christ, rather than through our own efforts and expressions. We have found out that we are the recipients of the greatest love and righteousness ever given to humanity.

Through this, our righteousness does exceed that of the experts and the Pharisees, because that righteousness is given to us by Jesus and his grace and love. Righteousness is the expression of a right relationship with God,

not simply our behavior. Our behavior changes according to the relationship, not the other way around. Once we figure that out, these kinds of verses

are not things that create fear, but rather comfort, knowing that we have been saved and given the righteousness that can only come from God.

1— How does God's righteousness come to us/ What do we have to do?

2— Have you ever been afraid that you are not good enough to receive the righteousness of God?

3 — How did Jesus change everything on the Cross?

43 “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. 44 But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!

In today's text, we see a reversal of what we have known to be true from Levitical law. While the Levitical law says that we should love our fellow Israelites, it doesn't say that we should love our enemies. Jesus is explicit in his admonishment that we should “love our enemies”. This is new and goes well beyond what they had experienced before as a nation. These words would have been hard for many to hear.

You see, Jesus was clear on the fact that we should move beyond a tribal idea of God and Nation, and realize that the God we serve is a God who is over all mankind, not just our tribe and our people. Those who claim Jesus as their savior, belong to the same tribe, the human tribe. Paul tells us that there is no Jew, no Gentile, no man or woman, slave or free. (Galatians 3:28) Because of this, the concept of a monotheistic God is now expanded beyond a tribal territory to anyone who believes. This creates a greater understanding of who God is, and how he is interested in being the God of all who would believe, all who would follow, and all who could understand.

So what does this look like in your

life? We all have people that we love, people that are easy to find a good reason to have strong and positive feelings for. However, what does it mean to love your enemies? I don't think we have the same kind of enemies that were perhaps being spoken of in the first century. We don't have an occupying army, nor do we have another country that is seeking to be the enemy of our country. So we have to look beyond any sort of nationalism and realize that our enemies are often ideological enemies and those who would see the name of God sullied in reputation.

Perhaps your enemies are not so obvious. Perhaps those who claim Christ yet seem to have such a different understanding of what living kingdom principles are have become those who seem so far from your understanding of Christ that they seem like they are serving a different Christ than you are. These are very real and disconcerting ideas, that our unity is so fractured that even the Name of Christ seems to be divisive. Can this really be true in our daily experience of following Jesus?

Things are complicated today. Let's just admit it. I see some who are

claiming Christ but seem to hold up values that I would think would be anathema to Christ. However, we are called to love those who differ from us as well. Perhaps love, at this point, can be seen as withholding judgement on those who disagree with us. How can we stay strong to our convictions, while at the same time learn to love those who differ from us?

This will always be a difficult task. But do you think it is any different than what Jesus was asking his contemporaries to do? I don't think this task has gotten any easier, rather, I think it has remained as difficult as it ever was. Why would our call to this be any easier today?

1— Who do you define as your enemy?

2— How can you love them today?

3 — Do you think it's easier now than it was 2000 years ago when this command was given to us?

45 In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

46 If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much.

So, Jesus goes a little deeper into the reasons we should love our enemies. He wants us to identify most clearly with God, but he also wants us to understand he is the God of those who we may find unacceptable to our particular understanding. God is expanding his kingdom to be even greater than we might be comfortable with. This seems to always be the way of the Gospel, it pushes us out of our comfort zone and into a place where love is particularly difficult.

This is both good news and terrible news. It is terrible news for us because it means we have to learn to love in ways we don't want to, and love people we don't identify with or even like. But it is also great news for us as well because it means that we can always be included in those Jesus calls others to love. We won't be excluded because we are part of the enemies. While we might not want to be someone's enemy, we might be an enemy because of what we believe the Gospel to really be about. While it might be hard to believe that this would make you someone else's

enemy, it is very possible that you are thought of in this way.

I know those are not comforting words, but it is important to remember that this is one of the hardest commands we have in scripture. God is not calling us to comfort, but to discomfort, not to ease, but unease. If love is not hard, is it really even love at all? We are admonished in Scripture again and again to find ways to love the unlovable, and sometimes we are the unlovable to someone else.

The good news of the Gospel is that you can be loved for everything that you are by someone else as well. And again, this is such good news for us. Without this, we would be just as lost as those we have a hard time loving. We are pushed to be more gracious, more understanding, more compassionate than we would otherwise be.

Now, the question that really makes it tough is the one that asks "how does this work in your life today?" The good news for me is that I don't have to make that distinction for you, but you will have to do that work. With a little inten-

tion and willingness to listen to the Holy Spirit, you will know what to do when the time comes. Without this intention and listening, however, you will continue

on with only loving those who love you, and as the scripture says; “what reward is there for that?”

1— Who do you think might think of you as an enemy?

2— Do you expect them to love you anyway?

3 — How seriously do you take this command? Are you willing to go where the Holy Spirit takes you with this idea?

47 If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. 48 But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Today's text may seem like a bit of repetition from yesterdays, but we will focus on the final phrase in just a bit. Before that, let us think about the reasons for repetition. If you have kids, you know you have to repeat things all the time for it to get into their little skulls. We tell them again and again because they don't always have the maturity to understand all the time, and repetition allows them to hear it and hear it again.

Jesus is doing the same thing here for us, as we are not yet spiritually mature, nor where his listeners. The case is made that it is easy to love and be kind to your friends, but to love and be kind to those you don't like, and who don't like you, that is the very definition of a greater love. The distinction that this gives us from any other type of love available in the world is pretty profound. We distinguish ourselves from the world by the type of love that we express into the world. Our love has to supersede that which is experienced in the world around us. Pagans have a simple type of love that can be seen anywhere, but Christians are to have a

love that supersedes, and even eclipses what the world has come to expect.

Too often Christians have defined themselves by what they are against. Jesus didn't really do that, he spoke of the kingdom of God as the antithesis of what he was against. When he spoke of this, he was able to vision people into a new world that motivated them to love and react differently than they would have if they just knew what they were against. How can we do that today? How can we show a vision of a world that is not defined as us against them, but as us for them?

Wouldn't you rather live in a world where love was defined by the way we loved those who disagreed with us? By love rather than anger, by hope rather than vitriol, by grace rather than gratuitous anger? I know I would, and I fear that people are stepping away from that kind of interaction.

The last phrase says "be perfect like your father in heaven is perfect..." and that is a powerful statement. However, it is not a statement of behavior, but of maturity. We are to grow into those God would have us be. His perfect love

is to be expressed in us, and that only happens by us growing in his love for us. We grow and mature according to the way we understand God's love for us. So what are you waiting for? How

can you experience his love in a more profound and tangible way? How can you find someone to shower love upon like God has showered his love upon you?

1 — Do you really believe that love is supposed to bring us together with our enemies?

2 — How is your love different than what the world has to offer?

3 — How can you show a different kind of love today?

This week has been all about love, but not the easy kind of love, rather the love that sets us apart from other people in the world. Have you ever wondered if people think of love when they think of Christians? Shouldn't that be what we should first be known for? Can you think of instances where that is true in today's world? How can we be part of the change that creates in people an understanding that Christians are first known for our love?

The words that are given to us by Jesus on the sermon on the mount push back against all our understandings of the Law and the Prophets, and while they in no way undermine the importance of the law, they teach us what it means to supersede the law in all aspects. As well, we begin to learn that being perfect like God is perfect has so much less to do with behavior and so much more to do with learning and going in faith and maturity.

To be mature in our faith means that we are not easily put off-kilter by someone criticizing us or disagreeing with us. It means we maintain our cool when someone is offended, and it means we understand how to get along with others when it is possible. We grow, unimpeded by our own

faults and desires, rather, always seeking to move more closely to what Jesus wants for us.

But the love that Jesus expects and expounds on in these texts is not the easiest kind of love. It requires us to live beyond the kind of love that the world expects, and it means that we often have to humble ourselves in order to live this way. It is not easy, simple, and quite honestly, it requires more of us than we might require of ourselves. By learning to love in this manner, we can truly show the world what God means when he says that we should "love our enemies."

Have you ever thought about the difficult love you have in your life? There is usually someone you find it difficult to love, even though you know you are expected to show love to this person. It is sometimes family, friends, or people you are in contact with at work. How do you show love to them, while at the same time creating healthy boundaries in your life so abuse doesn't take place. I don't believe that this is a call for us to accept abuse in our lives, but I do believe that is a call to find out how to love the most difficult of our relationships.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1** — How do you love your enemies?
- 2** — Who do you think your enemies are? Do they consider you an enemy?
- 3** — How do you learn to love them well?
- 4** — What does this text tell us about how God is perfect?
- 5** — What does it mean to be perfect like God is perfect?
- 6** — How are you working on your faith maturity?
- 7** — What helps your faith grow?
- 8** — How do small groups fit in with how you are growing?
- 9** — Are you accountable to anyone with your spiritual walk?
- 10** — What can you give to those you may not find lovable that will show them you do care, even if you struggle?

WEEK 6

MATTHEW 6:1-21 (NLT)

Giving to the Needy

1 “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. **3** But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Prayer

5 “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. **6** But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. **7** And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. **8** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. **9** “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, **10** your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. **11** Give us today our daily bread. **12** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. **13** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ **14** For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Fasting

16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. **17** But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **18** so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Treasures in Heaven

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. **20** But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

1 “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. 2 When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. 3 But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. 4 Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

The New Normal requires us to think differently about the things we do and say. Our actions are no longer the vehicle to get us somewhere, rather, they are an exposition of what we believe God calls us to be. Perhaps this is why in the first verse we are given the command to do what God is asking you to do not out of a desire to be noticed, but rather out of a sense of simple compassion and duty to forward the love of God that you have received through Jesus Christ. We are asked to go and give, to do good deeds, and to do them not for the reward of recognition, but rather, for the good of those who are in need. While this seems so simple and compassionate, it is often the exception, rather than the rule.

Have you ever had someone do something so nice for you that you could never repay them? One of those gifts that was outlandish, but was relative-

ly quietly given? I have had a few gifts given to me this way, and it was almost unnerving to receive such a great and free gift. Of course, you thank them profusely, but you also realize that the gift was not given out of duty or out of a desire to be noticed. Rather, it was given as a simple act of love and grace. Those are the kinds of gifts that I think God loves to give to his children, and when you give a gift like that, you are referencing the grace you have been given by God. A grace that is not only undeserved, but incredibly valuable. So valuable, that trying to pay it back would actually diminish the gift in the first place.

That’s the thing about grace, to repay it in kind is impossible. It would be like someone giving you the cash to have a \$50,000.00 surgery, and you show up at their house to give them a \$20.00 bill after the fact. It is not only ludicrous, but it is diminishing of the incredible generosity of the giver. We are not asked to

pay Jesus back for the grace we receive, rather, we are asked to “pay it forward” by giving love to those who need the same kind of grace from us.

The New Normal will never make sense, because love is not based on log-

ic, but it is based on an incredible savior who loves you so much he was willing to give you everything he had, even his life, so that you may learn to Lovewell.

1— Have you ever received a gift you could never repay?

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2 — What is the best gift you have ever given?

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3 — How can you “pay forward” the gift that God has given you?

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5 “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. 6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Today’s texts deal with the same concept as yesterday, but they move it from gifts and help given to the prayers that we pray. It is a reminder that our relationship with God is not something to profit from, either financially or from a popularity perspective. To be sure, in Jesus’ day there were celebrities of the faith. Those who were not only popular, but had influence over other believers. While this is not unheard of, Jesus speaks against using one’s faith as a way to gain influence over people.

When people pray publicly, it is often for those who are hearing the prayer, rather than for God. It reminds me of a story my father used to tell of a time when he was eating dinner with a bunch of theologians at a restaurant near a conference they were attending. As there were about 20 people eating, the table was long and the restaurant was a bit noisy. As they began to eat, one theologian said he would pray. He stood up and began to pray, and someone from the other end of the table

shouted out “Can’t hear you!” To which the first theologian replied “I’m not talking to you...”

This is perhaps a truth we can all acknowledge. When we speak to God, we are not doing it for show. We are doing it to maintain the connection that God has asked us for, and we do it without expectation that we will receive some sort of reward for this connection. When I speak with my wife, it is not for public consumption, because that relationship is intimately personal and private. The same can be said of our conversations with God.

This is not to say that public prayer and exhortation has no place. However, we must check our intention to make sure we don’t fall into the trap of making prayer, even public prayer, a public spectacle. Jesus is speaking to a particular problem must have been happening at the temple at the time. As always, there were those who were interested in making a parade of their piety, and in such a way diminished the actual experience of prayer and lever-

aged it to become more influential in their society.

I used to go to a big church when I was growing up, and we knew the pastor pretty well. Sometimes, as a joke, we would hold up our fingers in a rating system for his prayers. I don't think he loved it, but he was my uncle, so he had to take it from us! We would rate his "preachers voice" or "prayer voice" that always seemed a little different from his regular speaking voice. I don't

think he did it on purpose, it was just the way everyone was taught back then. Prayer always seemed like an event in that church. And while there was something great about it, sometimes it would seem more showy than I think was the intention. Even here at Crosswalk, we have to make sure our prayers, corporate or private, are simply for reminding us all that we need to be in deep connection with God.

1— Have you ever prayed so others would be impressed? Have you known anyone who has?

2— What did that make you feel like?

3 — How do you approach prayer in your personal and private life? Is it something you spend time doing, or something you pass by pretty quickly?

**7 “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. 8 Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! 9 Pray like this: Our Father in heaven,
may your name be kept holy.
10 May your Kingdom come soon.
May your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today the food we need,
12 and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.
13 And don’t let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.**

This is a comforting text if there ever was one. Jesus doesn’t always give direct instructions on how to do something, but in these texts we see the beginning of a wonderful model for prayer. We will finish the prayer tomorrow, but today we begin with his admonishment on how we pray.

We are first told not to babble on like the Gentiles. As well, not to be so repetitive that we annoy others, perhaps even God. Volume and quantity does not mean a prayer is more important, more thoughtful, or more answerable than one that is short, heartfelt, and full of truth. In fact, it seems like we are being told that there is a simple way

to pray, with direct language, a simple heart, and clear intention.

One of the reasons for a clear and concise language of prayer is that you don’t need to impress God and you don’t need to convince God of anything. The Father that Jesus spoke of has the best interest of his children in mind, and he always has an ear inclined to hear the prayers of his children. In fact, he knows what they will ask, because he knows them so well. He is not one that is too busy, too distracted, on vacation, or unwilling to listen and hear the prayers of his children.

The sample prayer that Jesus gives to us is testament to simple language, intimate relationship, a willingness to

ask for what we need, and an acknowledgement of the power of God over evil. IT begins with a recognition of where God is (heaven) and his status (our father). As well, it then moves on to our hope that his name will remain holy, his will might be done on earth, and that heaven is not so far away as to be forgotten. Our desire for his will to be done is a constant reminder for us to continue to do and search for his will in our lives, both corporately and individually.

And while this prayer is so familiar to us, we must not disregard it as empty words that should be relegated to rote memorization. Rather, they are a philosophical and theological template for us to use in order to keep our prayers focused on God, and his interaction and will for our lives. May we always keep our prayers this simple, with a focus on Gods desires for his people corporately and his will for us individually.

1— When was the first time you prayed the Lord’s prayer?

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2— Do you return to it as a model for the prayers you pray each day?

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3 – What stands out to you in this prayer? What do you love about it?

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14 “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. 15 But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Every time I read these phrases, I am struck by the simple formula that is expressed. If we forgive others, our sins will be forgiven. But if not, then God has no time for our forgiveness.

Now doesn't this fly in the face of the grace we have received? It would be easy to think so, and I sometimes wonder. However, perhaps there is something more going on here that needs to be recognized. When we receive grace, our understanding of forgiveness should change. There should be a desire to spread that grace far and wide, and our forgiveness does that readily. It is possible to forgive those who are not seeking forgiveness, and that is good for our own hearts. While forgiveness does not always preclude consequences, it does a great deal of good both for the one who forgives as well as for the forgiven.

How often do we see this one-to-one formula in scripture? Not often, and that is what makes this text so important for us to take seriously. Have you ever thought of this text when you were in a situation that needed forgiveness? Whether the forgiveness was needed from you, or whether the forgiveness

was needed for you, this text reminds us that followers of Christ move to forgiveness first.

Now, I mentioned it before that forgiveness does not always preclude consequences. This is an important point to circle back to. Sometimes, what we do does preclude us from a reconciliation that creates a perfect reconstitution of how things were before the transgression. Our actions do have consequences, but our forgiveness should be forthcoming. And while we, at times, have forgiveness that clears the air and reconstitutes a relationship back to its original standing, there are times when that forgiveness allows for a slower reconciliation.

Forgiveness is difficult, and sometimes can be used as leverage in our relationships. This is something that Christians should not do. We cannot withhold forgiveness, unless we are interested in God withholding it from us as well. Since we do not want that, we should be as free with our forgiveness as he is with his.

1 — Have you ever withheld forgiveness?

2 — How can you make sure you are creating a culture of forgiveness in your life?

3 — Is there anyone you need to forgive, who is waiting on your answer in their lives right now?

16 “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. 17 But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. 18 Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.”

Are you sensing a pattern here? It is pretty clear that when we do things for our spiritual improvement—like the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and serving, we are not to be doing them for others, but for our relationship with God and for his edification alone. The spiritual disciplines are broken into two categories, those that are vertical—between us and God; and those that are more horizontal and teach us to love our brothers and sisters in a more profound way.

While our particular faith tradition has not delved into the spiritual disciplines in the way that many others have, we do belong to the great tradition of Christianity that has delved deeply into the spiritual disciplines over the last two millennia. There is much to learn about our relationship with God and how he works in our lives by increasing our engagement with the disciplines. Fasting is a great way to begin to delve into the disciplines.

Fasting doesn't have to be food, although that is often assumed. In today's world there is much we can fast from, and it all does our spiritual journey a kindness. I stepped away from social media a while ago, and it has allowed me more focus, less lost time, and less anxiety. I am able to direct my thoughts toward prayer before directing my thoughts toward what everyone around me is posting. That is just one example, but fasting is done for personal reasons first and foremost. Everyone has a different relationship with a spiritual discipline like this.

Richard Foster, in his seminal work “Celebrating the Disciplines”, says that the disciplines don’t create spiritual health, but they put us on the road to it. In this way, we are doing those exercises that help us understand the spiritual realities of our lives that redirect us toward God. A mature faith sees the importance of growth and discipline, and seeks to engage these things in our spiritual walks.

The New Normal embraces spiritual disciplines, knowing that often we are flailing around in our spiritual lives, not sure of our direction. Engaging in the disciplines, for our own edifica-

tion, rather than as a tool to leverage influence or piety, allows us to take a moment to connect in a greater way with God and his will for our lives.

1— Have you ever fasted? How was it, and did you learn anything?

2— If you were going to fast, what would you take a fast from?

3 — How would you break your fast?

19 “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 21 Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

We are all familiar with this particular text. We have heard it quoted many times, even if we don’t know exactly where it comes from. We are not to store up things here on earth, because they are fleeting. By mentioning the moths and the rust, we see that Jesus is letting us know that the transitory things are not the kind of things that we should be investing in. Rather, the things we can store in heaven are those things that are eternal; our characters, our love, and our God.

Now, this does not mean that what we do here is creating some sort of reward system in heaven. Many of us probably remember when we were growing up and hearing about “stars in your crown” and that would be how we would know who did good deeds on earth by the number of stars that their crown was laden with. This couldn’t be further from the truth, and shame on those who taught us that! It was a silly thing to say. Our reward IS heaven, not something IN heaven. And the reward does not come because we are so good

at what we do here, rather, it is because of the goodness of God both here and in heaven. Grace gives us the reward, not something that we do here on earth.

Our works, while valuable, do not create an easier path to heaven for us. We do them as a response to the grace and love that Christ has given us each and every day. What awaits us in heaven is solely because of how much love and grace we were given by God here on earth. Let us never confuse the graciousness of God with our own works.

What we gather here on earth stays on earth. Truly, this should give us a moment to pause and not be too uptight about what we are gaining or losing. Of course, we want to be able to take care of our families, and we want to be able live lives of relative comfort, and God helps us to provide for our families and our lives. However, I think this is a commentary on the hoarding of material things on this earth. At the end of our lives we only take our reputations and characters and legacy of love with us.

When a pastor leaves a church, it

always seems like it is the end of the world, especially for a pastor that is well loved. Their legacy lasts in the people they loved, but the church moves on,

and someone fills that spot and God is honored again. We should not get too attached to that which is not in our hands and will rot when we go.

1 — What do you own that owns you?

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2 — How can you de-emphasize the things that you own and re-emphasize the things that are not so transitory or temporary?

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3 — How much time do you spend on your things as opposed to your people?

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We began the week with the most famous texts from the sermon on the mount, and we ended it with a reminder that the things of this world are fleeting and will rust and get eaten by moths. The Sermon on the Mount is a masterwork of Jesus' teaching on how we should live our lives and on what is really important in the end. It is easy to take it as a guidebook with checkmarks to check off, but when we do that, we miss the deeper understanding of our lives and the world around us. This world is built as a precursor for the world to come, and what we have thought of as logical is often not kingdom thinking, so Jesus remakes our ideas of what is important, what character aspects we should seek, and how we can reach into the kingdom for a better expression of our lives today.

I am always amazed when I meet someone who follows Christ and seems to hold the values of the world so dear to them. Whole theologies have been created in order to maintain what we believe the order of the world should be. (I am talking about prosperity gospel principles, civil religious principles, and theologies that lead to chauvinism and racism). Unfortunately, these theologies have caught hold of many followers of Christ and has confused

them as to what Jesus held dear. The only way to thwart this kind of aberrant and abhorrent theology is to go back to scripture and simply read the words that Jesus actually said about what we should hold dear and who God will bless. It is not the mighty, the rich, the easy, or the perceived power. Rather, it is those who have been disenfranchised, those who have been marginalized, and those who have been left behind.

This is a problem for many of us, especially in first world churches. We think that the blessing of God comes in the form of success, but Jesus seems to be speaking directly against that in these verses. Why is it that in the Old Testament when things are going well for the people is when the prophets show up. In Amos 4:1-3 the prophet calls the Israelite women in Samaria "cows" in order to help them to recognize that even though they are the influencers and the trendsetters, they care nothing for those who are perceived as less than they are.

Are the influencers and leaders of society today any different? Jesus pushes back on conventional wisdom, because God has never been conventional. He sets the stage for us to be living a kingdom life, not increasing the empire of man.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1** — How are we going to forward the kingdom principles found in these passages?
- 2** — Have you ever been caught up in a value system that is the antithesis of what Jesus is speaking about in the Sermon on the Mount?
- 3** — How did you get out of it?
- 4** — Do you need to get out of it now?
- 5** — How can these kingdom principles become the guiding lights in your life?
- 6** — Do you feel blessed by God, and what does that look like?
- 7** — Does your blessing look like what Jesus says is blessed in this sermon?
- 8** — How does the Sermon on the Mount inform your decisions in life?
- 9** — Why does Jesus always sound like he is against wealth?
- 10** — Is he really against wealth, or against abusive wealth and hoarding wealth?

WEEK 7

MATTHEW 7:1-23 (NLT)

Do Not Judge Others

1 “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. **2** For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. **3** “And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? **4** How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? **5** Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye. **6** “Don’t waste what is holy on people who are unholy. Don’t throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you.

Effective Prayer

7 “Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. **8** For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. **9** “You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? **10** Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! **11** So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.

The Golden Rule

12 “Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.

The Narrow Gate

13 “You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. **14** But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

The Tree and Its Fruit

15 "Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. **16** You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? **17** A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. **18** A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. **19** So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. **20** Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

True Disciples

21 "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. **22** On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' **23** But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'

1 Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. 2 For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. 3 And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? 4 How can you think of saying to your friend, "Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye," when you can't see past the log in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. 6 Don't waste what is holy on people who are unholy. Don't throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you.

These are such great verses! They continue the moral teachings of Jesus, and greet us with some of the most clear directives to not judge others that we have seen yet in Scripture. We begin with a clear statement: "Don't judge others, and you will not be judged." It continues to remind us that love for others is paramount, and the love we give is the love we receive.

Have you ever noticed how it is easy to judge others harshly, but then give yourself a great deal of grace when it comes to how you judge something you have done? Now, that is not to say that we don't have times when we are much too hard on ourselves, but often our judgment of others is quick, fierce, and graceless. It is so much easier to be harsh on another, while at times

ignoring our own faults. Sometimes we do this in order to distract ourselves from the issues we don't want to face in our own lives, and sometimes we do this in order to build ourselves up. Regardless of the reason, it is not the kingdom way of doing things.

This text then moves on to what is the 1st century equivalent of a meme. When Jesus says to not worry about the speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own eye, it means that you are carrying around a much greater issue than the person you are trying to judge. Without the willingness to deal with your own blind spot, are you really qualified to judge someone else's?

Have you ever looked back at your high school yearbook and thought "Man, I made really good fashion choices"? Of course not. When my

kids look at the yearbook and laugh, I always remind them that they will have a different perspective in 20 years (or more...). It is so easy to think we don't fall into the traps that everyone else does, but of course we do. So the best thing we can do for ourselves, our witness, and everyone around us is to simply withhold our judgment on anyone else, lest they judge us by the same measure.

Then the text gives a word of caution that sounds as if it is for us.

However, it could be that the text is telling us to be wary of falling into the trap of being unholy ourselves, lest we become the swine. It is written as a chiasm, which is a Hebrew structure that many sayings in the Old Testament are written as. Perhaps it is so we can remember it without a problem.

The most important thing to remember is the first four words of the text; "Do not judge others." That may be enough for today's thoughts.

1— Have you ever judged someone, only to be judged yourself?

2— Have you ever felt bad about your spirit of judgment?

3 — What log do you believe you have in your eye?

7 Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? 10 Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! 11 So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.

Jesus is now inviting his listeners to take positive action. He is encouraging them to wait on the Lord, to remain, and to be consistent with their requests, their prayers, and their seeking the will of God. There is a promise in this text as well, and to support the promise, he introduces the rhetorical questions found in verses 9-10.

Now, in the text there are some plays on words that need to be explained. Some of their loaves of bread seemed to look like the stones in the area, so when Jesus mentions giving a child a stone instead of a loaf of bread, it could have been something that looked enough like a loaf of bread that it would have been a cruel joke. In the same way, some commentators mention a fish that was eel-like in its structure that could have been mistaken for a snake. This

may have been a stretch, honestly, but commentators like to find the connections to real life, if possible.

But the portion that is really telling is the section where God's love is likened to that of a parent, who gives good gifts to his/her children. The parallel with how much more God loves us is really pertinent and powerful to how we view God. And, in the end, it is a truth that we must keep close to our hearts every day.

So here is a question for you: How much do you think God loves you, and how do you see it each and every day? Do you live in the reality that God is for you and not against you, that he wants to give good and great things to you? Do you understand how much you mean to him?

Think of the most valuable thing you have, what means the most to you,

and then try to understand that God's love for you makes that thing, those people, those emotions almost non-existent. His love for us is unreasonable, it follows us, carries us, grows us, and protects us. There is nothing in the universe that can compare to the quality and quantity of his love for his children.

So when you look at that thing, that person, that you have such great love for, multiply it by millions and understand that is how well you are loved.

1— Do you feel that love? How can you live in that reality?

2— What is the greatest love you have ever experienced?

3 — How can you show others a portion of the love that God has shown you?

12 Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.

One verse today, but that is because this is a whopper of a verse. This is what we call the Golden Rule, and you've heard it before! It is nothing new, and it is nothing surprising, but it is important! Why? Because the second part of the verse is the tectonic declaration that Jesus makes. It is a huge declaration that all of what is taught in the law and the prophets can be expressed by simply saying "love well," at least in essence.

Jesus was a master editor, to condense all of the Old Testament into a few powerful words.

When they teach you to preach, you spend a great deal of time figuring out how to give the "elevator pitch." This is when you condense all the ideas into a few sentences that give everyone a sense of what your sermon is about. This is one of the most difficult tasks a preacher can undertake, and truthfully, I am very bad at it. I usually just tell people what verse I am speaking about and then let them decide what the sermon is about!

But Jesus was able to encapsulate all of the teachings of thousands of years of wisdom, of poetry, of advice, of prophetic voice, and of instruction into one phrase; "Treat others as yourself."

There is so much wisdom in that phrase that it almost defies our ability to exegete it! We are always looking for more explanation, more instruction, but we really don't need much more when it is so simple to understand.

However, it seems to be much harder to put into action! Why is such a simple concept so difficult to employ into our lives? Why is it that treating others in the same fashion that we wish to be treated is such a stumbling block for most of us? Is it a problem we have with empathy? Do we not know ourselves well enough to know how we would like to be treated? Do we simply not value ourselves enough to have an understanding of how valuable we are, and therefore that we should be treated with the same sort of love and care God has shown us?

While there are a myriad of reasons that we can come up with as to why we don't treat others better, perhaps it is better to simply commit to trying a bit more today. Rather than be philosophical or theological, we can just be practical and promise this: Today, I will work harder to treat others how I would like to be treated. That just might be enough.

1— Who do you need to treat in a better way today?

2— How can you let that person know things are going to change?

3 — How do you want to be treated?

13 You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. 14 But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

If you want to know the truth, I have never really liked this text. It has caused me a great deal of consternation over the years. It is one of those texts that make you think God is trying to keep you out of heaven. I have that picture in my head of people falling off of a very narrow path into oblivion. I am sure I saw that painting somewhere growing up, and it has never left my consciousness. The idea of a God who makes it hard for us to come to heaven has always been anathema to me. Perhaps this is due to the grace that was taught in my house growing up, but I just never really liked this idea that heaven is a difficult place to enter.

This is the beginning to the epilogue that ends the Sermon on the Mount. So at this point, Jesus is wrapping things up a bit. So this is a bit of a concluding statement. To hear it on its own it seems to be propounding the dogma of how many will be saved; however, when we remember that there is a greater context, it might just mean something a bit different.

You see, they had been listening to Jesus, and so this statement is truly a

call to action for those who have found the narrow way! In other words, Jesus is letting us know that HE is the narrow way, and since we have found it, we are those that will be saved. So in this way, the opposite is probably true from what I always believed in this text. And I have to tell you, that is really good news. He is not showing them how hard it will be to get into heaven; rather, he is reminding them that they have found the narrow way, through Jesus, and therefore they must move along in that same path.

All of sudden, this text went from being a warning to an invitation. And therefore, it should bolster our desire to show others the narrow way. Jesus did not say the way was hidden. Instead, he showed us what the way actually was. And while it may be narrow, we are being guided by someone who knows the way incredibly well. Have you ever gotten up in the middle of the night, but you know your house so well that you don't stub your toe? In this same way, Jesus knows the way for us to find the door that allows entrance into heaven. We are so blessed to have a savior who saves us with such complete and utter regard!

1— Have you ever felt like the way was lost to you?

2— How has Jesus helped you find it?

3 — What can you do to show the way to someone else today?

15 Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. 16 You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. 18 A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. 19 So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. 20 Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

False prophets seemed to be a problem in the early church, just like they are today. As well, they are often associated with the end of time. Of course, those first century followers always felt as if they were living at the end of time, so false prophets were par for the course. Similarly, we have to take a look at the fruits of those who claim to speak for Christ. If there are no fruits to their words, then we have to hold them suspect. If they sow discord, division, hatred and anger, we should be careful not to listen to the things they say about God or how the world should work. It sometimes takes a while to see the fruit from one's ministry; however, bad fruit has a tendency to show up quite quickly.

Let me tell you a quick story; I was working in one of my previous assignments with young people, and there was a group who began to work with some of our young people. They

came claiming that what we were teaching was not biblical, and they started Bible studies, small groups, and taught in our buildings without our knowledge. As we found out more information, we had to confront these "teachers" of scripture. I was struck by their willingness to lie, to misdirect, and to simply leave things out of the narrative of why they were preying on our students (I don't think I can characterize it any other way).

What was most disconcerting is they had an "ends justifies the means" way of working. They had no problem with being deceitful, as long as they could gain access to the young people. As well, they were incredibly manipulative with what they taught these kids and how they relayed what we, the establishment, was teaching them. It was disingenuous and it was hurtful. It caused a great deal of division, and many kids were tricked

into thinking and believing the way these teachers taught. These kids became very difficult to deal with, and many of them left for self-supporting institutions to continue this type of theological training.

Years later, many of the young people, now not as young, have come back to relay how they felt like they were led astray by these false teachers and wished they had listened to us back when this was all happening. I, of course, have been so blessed to bring them back into the fold and have had the opportunity to help them learn about the grace of Jesus that I had

been trying to teach them about years before. But I am saddened by the loss of time where they didn't get a chance to live in the abundance of God. Thank God they have returned, but the false teachers hurt their spiritual journeys.

In the end, bad fruit is an outcome of bad teaching, of lies, and of deceit, and the effect is often very present and very quickly recognizable. Not all bad fruit has a long gestation period. Be wary, be thoughtful, connect with the whole of scripture, and call out false teachers by their fruit. It always stems from a rotten root.

1— Have you ever been led astray?

2— How do you put safety measures in your life to not be led by false teachers?

3 — How seriously do you take this command? Are you willing to go where the Holy Spirit takes you with this idea?

21 Not everyone who calls out to me, “Lord! Lord!” will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. 22 On judgment day many will say to me, “Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.” 23 But I will reply, “I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws.”

These texts come directly after the comments about false teaching, so there is a tie-in here. Jesus is not just speaking of any random person whom he will not recognize, but of those who used his name to produce rotten fruit. This might be a direct rebuke of those false teachers and false prophets who have tainted the faith of so many, both in the first century and today.

Upon hearing these texts, it is often true that someone will assume that Jesus may not recognize them at the end of time, and that their very salvation may be in jeopardy. However, if you have not been teaching false truths, have not been using the name of Jesus to manipulate people, and have not been profiting off of rotten fruit, you really don’t have anything to worry about. Now, of course God knows your heart, so as mentioned earlier, keep a pure heart, without guile and deceit.

These texts can cause a great deal of fear, but Jesus would rather we not live in fear. He would much rather have us remember that he is for us and not against us, that he is deeply invested in us, and that he believes in us. While it is sometimes hard to believe this, I am convinced that God does not want us to live in fear of his not recognizing us. The truth is, honesty is important to God, so if your heart is pure, and you honestly seek him, he will know who you are. These texts are not meant to scare anyone, but rather, they are meant to comfort those who seek God in their lives.

Have you ever lost something for so long that when you found it you didn’t recognize that it was yours? I have. Sometimes, things get shoved to the back of my closet, and I forget they are there. When I find them again, it is as if I got a gift that I forgot I owned from before. I think God may feel this way when someone comes back to

him, as well. That this gift is brand new and ready for wear. I don't think he relishes the fact that some will abuse his love and grace and therefore forfeit

the kingdom of heaven by their choice and not his. I am sure this pains him deeply every time it happens.

1 — How are you of pure heart?

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2 — Have you been honest with God?

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3 — Do you know how much God loves you?

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This week we have looked at the epilogue to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is wrapping up this powerful oration on the kingdom of God. There are so many ways to look at these texts, but let's take a look at what Matthew would want us to hear and understand about Jesus' ethic.

(1) Jesus' ethic is an ethic of the kingdom. From beginning to end, Jesus' message in Matthew is a message of God's reign. Jesus calls us to reorder our lives in light of the rule of God that will encompass history at the end, and that is already drawing near to us in Jesus' ministry.

(2) Jesus' ethic is an ethic for the community. As Jesus teaches on the mountain, he envisions a community of followers who will embody his word and be a light to the world. To put it another way: Jesus' teaching is an ethic for those who welcome God's rule and who seek to live by its vision.

(3) Jesus' ethic is more than a community code. Because the kingdom is wider than the church, the ethic of the kingdom relates to life outside the church. It both defines the way believers are called to live in society and reveals the will of God for all life throughout the world.

(4) Jesus' ethic holds act and attitude together. As the antitheses indicate, Jesus calls for righteousness in our total being, not merely correct performance. At the same time, Jesus calls us to do what he teaches, and he indicates some of the points at which our righteousness must be concrete.

(5) Jesus' ethic is an ethic of provocation. When Jesus redefines the law, he does not go the route of prescribing detailed legislation. Instead, he sets a new direction—and then uses stories and language that provoke us to discover new and appropriate ways to act.

(6) Jesus' ethic is an ethic of love. Although the word "love" does not occur until 5:43–48, Jesus is teaching what love requires throughout the six antitheses. He calls for love that makes peace, love that honors boundaries, love that keeps commitments, love that speaks the truth, love that endures evil, and love that includes all.

(7) Jesus' ethic is rooted in spirituality. As we discovered at several points, obedience to Jesus' word does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it grows out of a life of trust and prayer. To put it another way: It is those who seek God who will seek first God's kingdom, and who will find the strength and courage to live for its coming.

Here are some questions to get you thinking:

- 1** — How do you see the ethic of Jesus?
- 2** — What does the community of Christ look like to you?
- 3** — Can you tell a Christ community from a secular community? How?
- 4** — How can you hold Act and Attitude together?
- 5** — How is love your highest goal?
- 6** — Are you seeking the kingdom of God? What does that look like in your life?
- 7** — How can you know if God will recognize you at the end of time?
- 8** — Do you want to put Christ first in your life? What choices do you need to make today to make that happen?
- 9** — What is the greatest love you have experienced?

Notes

WEEK 8

MATTHEW 8:1-21 (NLT)

Jesus Heals a Man with Leprosy

1 Large crowds followed Jesus as he came down the mountainside. **2** Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him. “Lord,” the man said, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.” **3** Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” And instantly the leprosy disappeared. **4** Then Jesus said to him, “Don’t tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed.”

The Faith of a Roman Officer

5 When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, **6** “Lord, my young servant[c] lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain.” **7** Jesus said, “I will come and heal him.” **8** But the officer said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. **9** I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, ‘Go,’ and they go, or ‘Come,’ and they come. And if I say to my slaves, ‘Do this,’ they do it.” **10** When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, “I tell you the truth, I haven’t seen faith like this in all Israel! **11** And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. **12** But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” **13** Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, “Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened.” And the young servant was healed that same hour.

Jesus Heals Many People

14 When Jesus arrived at Peter’s house, Peter’s mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. **15** But when Jesus touched her hand, the fever left her. Then she got up and prepared a meal for him. **16** That evening many demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. He cast out the evil spirits with a simple command, and he healed all the sick. **17** This fulfilled the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, who said, “He took our sicknesses and removed our diseases.”

The Cost of Following Jesus

18 When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he instructed his disciples to cross to the other side of the lake. **19** Then one of the teachers of religious law said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” **20** But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.” **21** Another of his disciples said, “Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.”

1 Large crowds followed Jesus as he came down the mountainside. 2 Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him. “Lord,” the man said, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.” 3 Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” And instantly the leprosy disappeared. 4 Then Jesus said to him, “Don’t tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed.”

Jesus was coming down from a high point in his teaching. Every pastor and teacher and public speaker knows the feeling of a job well done and a satiated audience. However, we also know that this is one of the most vulnerable times for anyone as you have worked hard, the adrenaline is beginning to subside, and now people want to connect in a more personal way. For Jesus, this meant that those who thought they might have a moment to catch that divinity would be searching for a way to connect with Jesus.

This first man comes to him and asks if he might be willing to heal him. Jesus answers with a simple, “I am willing.” Beyond that, the only thing Jesus had to do was say that he be healed and he would be. Matthew’s account says that “instantly” the leprosy disappeared.

Then an odd thing happens. Jesus tells the man to not tell anyone, but to

let the priest examine him. This was what the law required, and it would be the public testimony, and therefore would probably not be disputed. But also, Jesus wasn’t interested in making a lot of noise. Chances are that his teaching was doing that for him, and so this is something that could continue on without much fanfare.

There is an important moment that needs to be recognized here. The scriptures say that Jesus reached out and touched him, before he had said that the man should be healed. He reached out and then said, “I am willing.” In this way, Jesus showed his love to the man by reaching out and touching him before he was healed. This is a grace and a move to show how he is accepted back into the community.

These stories of healing lepers are particularly interesting in today’s Covid-19 world. Social distancing is something that has been done

for centuries, and leprosy required significantly more space than just six feet. You could not live in the town, go to temple or even interact with your family. You were anathema. Of course, there was no digital means of communication, so the isolation would have been much more pronounced. But it was still a stigma. Jesus wanted to show that stigma was not more powerful than his love.

Some people have wondered if Jesus would have worn a mask in this

pandemic we are experiencing. I would think that he would, because he cares about people. He did bridge those gaps in social distancing, but it was always to heal. I love the response that Jesus gave to sickness and death, because it was to always heal and resurrect. This is what Jesus does. In our drive to be like Jesus, we should act according to what brings the most healing, the most safety and the most compassion to the world.

1— How can you help people feel safe and healed today?

2 — How can you help people feel included? Perhaps by reaching out digitally to those who are sequestered.

3 — What is the greatest sort of love you can show everyone?

5 When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, 6 “Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain.” 7 Jesus said, “I will come and heal him.” 8 But the officer said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. 9 I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, ‘Go,’ and they go, or ‘Come,’ and they come. And if I say to my slaves, ‘Do this,’ they do it.”

I have always loved this interchange. This is a man who has some clout and importance and is willing to break with protocol in order to take care of one of his servants. Jesus immediately shows his willingness to serve and heal, yet the man knows that Jesus doesn't need to even come, but has the power to heal from wherever he is.

What this man is really doing is acknowledging the power that Jesus really holds in the world. The disciples have seen it when they recognized how Jesus could calm the storm, but this Roman officer knew very well the power that Jesus held in his hands. Rather than asking Jesus to come home with him, he simply asked Jesus to care. He used the example of men under his authority, and in this way, he was acknowledging the power that Jesus had access to. Without reservation, he asked Jesus for help

he knew Jesus was capable of giving. Again, the question was not whether Jesus could help him, but whether he would help the man.

Of course, we see Jesus is willing to heal, even to go out of his way to help the officer.

I wonder how willing we are to go out of our way to help others? Are we willing to inconvenience ourselves to help others? If so, how much are we willing to inconvenience ourselves? These questions can lead to some guilt if we feel we have not done enough, which is not my point. My point is to show how much Jesus was willing to go through to show compassion and mercy. His miracles always did at least two things: 1) They physically healed the person, and 2) they restored the person to a socially acceptable status in the community.

When you think of it, going into the hospital is a break in the flow of your

life, and healing gets us back to that. Jesus did the same thing for those with chronic illnesses, which is powerful. Is there a way that Jesus has healed you back into the community that you might have left? Sometimes we isolate

ourselves from the communities of care that we know because of something that has happened to us there, a misunderstanding, or honest and true trauma. Jesus has a way to heal all of that, without regard to history.

1— How has Jesus healed you?

2— Was your place in the community restored?

3 — How can you help someone else be healed?

10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, “I tell you the truth, I haven’t seen faith like this in all Israel! 11 And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. 12 But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” 13 Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, “Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened.” And the young servant was healed that same hour.

As the story continues, Jesus finds himself at a loss for words, almost, when it comes to the interaction with this man. I don’t think Jesus gets amazed too often, but this man’s faith floored Jesus. In fact, it floored Jesus so much that he had to take a moment to rebuke his disciples, and all those of Hebrew descent who followed him. His rebuke was swift and had elements of the Old Testament banquet table included. His warning is such that people who think they are safe might not have a seat at the table because of their lack of faith.

This Roman officer had a faith that was not tainted by doctrine, not diminished by culture, and was not biased by ancestry. Rather, it was the faith of someone who has just met Jesus and understands that there is something inherently special, powerful, and loving in this God/Man. The Roman

officer did not hesitate to ask for a favor, knowing that this man was for him and not against him. He was willing to look like a fool, something that would have happened had Jesus said “no” to him, because of both his love for his servant and his belief in the goodness of Jesus.

I think the rebuke Jesus gives to his followers is one that we should probably take heed of today. There is no question that we believe in Christ, but do we really have the faith that it takes to change our lives, to see him for who he really is, and to carry us to places that are uncomfortable, unsettling, and even cause us risk? We often don’t, for comfort is a powerful aphrodisiac. But this man had no trouble risking it all for someone he loved and cared for.

And Jesus did not disappoint. Jesus not only healed the man, but told the man to go back home, as this is a done deal! I am sure the man had

many gracious words for Jesus that are not recorded, and I wonder if his trip home was an exercise in excitement, waiting to see if the servant was truly healed, and hoping beyond hope that everything was better. What an

incredible affirmation of his faith when he rounded the corner and probably saw the servant waiting for him outside, ready to run and thank the officer for going out of his way for him.

1— Have you gone out of your way for someone you cared about?

2— Have you gone out of your way for someone you didn't know?

3 — How can you explain how much Jesus cares for someone?

14 When Jesus arrived at Peter's house, Peter's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. 15 But when Jesus touched her hand, the fever left her. Then she got up and prepared a meal for him. 16 That evening many demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. He cast out the evil spirits with a simple command, and he healed all the sick. 17 This fulfilled the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, who said, "He took our sicknesses and removed our diseases."

While this begins to end the pericope, or the section of scripture, there is a much more universal point that is being made, much more than just the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. The ending of the section takes us back to Isaiah and the real reason that Jesus came to earth at all. Sickness, sin, infirmity, Jesus takes it all for us. This is the thing we need to remember when we question whether or not God is for us or if he might be against us. He is always for us, in our weakness, our strength, our purpose and our mission.

While Jesus touched individuals, he also connected with humanity in a much greater way. While his temporal love while here on earth is an incredible model of what love is and how deep love can be, the transcendent nature of his salvation for all who would accept it is just another enduring example of how much he truly does love us. There is no other expression of the divine that

I have found or studied that makes more sense, has a deeper love, and connects more powerfully than that of Jesus Christ.

I always find it amazing that Jesus healed so many, that he exorcised so many demons, and that he cared for so many people with his short time in ministry. The impact he had has obviously changed the world as we know it, and has changed eternity for so many of us as well. We don't have to brag about what Jesus did, because his actions have been proven throughout history to be more compassionate, more grace-filled, and more loving than anything we could ever express. When we tell others about Jesus, we simply need to point them to the stories of Jesus we find in scripture and let those stories tell of the truth of who Jesus is and what he does for us.

1 — What are your favorite stories of Jesus' healing?

2 — Do those words of Isaiah resonate with you today in the pandemic world we live in?

3 — What can you do to relate to the stories of Jesus' healing?

18 When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he instructed his disciples to cross to the other side of the lake. 19 Then one of the teachers of religious law said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” 20 But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.” 21 Another of his disciples said, “Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.” 22 But Jesus told him, “Follow me now. Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead.”

Here, Jesus is speaking of the Cost of Discipleship. And if you haven't read Bonhoeffer's book by the same name, drop this series guide and go buy it and read it!

Jesus is pretty clear in these texts that following him is no picnic. In fact, he did this many times in scripture. He seemed to deter those who would be willing to follow him. And this is not great behavior for one who is trying to create a historic movement. You would think that if Jesus would try to get everyone to follow him, that would be good for his brand. But Jesus seemed to always try to get people not to follow him by letting them know how hard it is to be a follower of his.

Now, maybe this is because Jesus could see right into the hearts of those who wanted to follow him, and therefore could make a decision on whether or not that person had what it takes, or maybe he just wanted them to know the reality of what it takes to be a

follower of Christ. There was no medical plan, no dental plan, no salary to speak of, the fringe benefits seemed like they were just hunger and homelessness a great deal of the time. While it seems romantic to look back 2,000 years ago and assume it would have been easy to follow Jesus, his disciples had jobs, families, businesses, and traditions that they came from. My bet is that it was not any easier to follow Jesus then than it is now.

I think the problem is that we have taken a very lackluster form of following as a substitute for what real discipleship was supposed to be. At times, for many of us, following Jesus is an addendum to an already full life. It is a great bonus, but it is not the center and circumference of our lives. We follow, but haphazardly and without true conviction. I don't say this to make anyone feel bad, but when I look at the texts above, I wonder if my discipleship really has cost me all that much. Has yours? And what would

costly discipleship be in today's world? What would it be in your life?

I had a friend/mentor who was a bit older than me, and I asked him how he had made his money in real estate. His comment to me was "You have to figure out how much you can lose every month, and lose that much, until you aren't losing anymore, then figure out the new number you can lose." I thought it was strange advice,

but realized that as he was a landlord, over the years he had built a significant business by losing just enough to keep going.

However, I think these disciples of Jesus were willing to lose everything so that they could only depend on that which came from Jesus. They had nothing to lose because they had lost it all to follow Jesus. Can we say that about our lives? Should we?

1— What have you lost to follow Jesus?

2— How can you think about what might be lost if you follow Jesus with everything you are?

3 — Why is it so hard to follow Jesus in today's world? What does that even mean?

23 Then Jesus got into the boat and started across the lake with his disciples. 24 Suddenly, a fierce storm struck the lake, with waves breaking into the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. 25 The disciples went and woke him up, shouting, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” 26 Jesus responded, “Why are you afraid? You have so little faith!” Then he got up and rebuked the wind and waves, and suddenly there was a great calm. 27 The disciples were amazed. “Who is this man?” they asked. “Even the winds and waves obey him!”

We end this week with a famous story that we have spoken of many times at Crosswalk. I love this story, and I reference it often, as I find that the disciples’ reaction to Jesus is almost more fascinating than his miracle in the natural world. They were so surprised at this new normal that scripture says they were “amazed” and some translations say “terrified.” When was the last time you were amazed at the grace that Jesus gives us? When was the last time you realized that there was absolutely no normal that you had known before?

This episode shows us that Jesus was not messing around when he was in this world. That he came for a purpose and a mission and he had all the tools at his disposal to make what he set to do happen. However, he chose to often experience the world as we have experienced the world,

and in this way, he identifies with our suffering, understands great calamity, and continues to work as an intercessor for us. This story is one of the times the “curtain is lifted” and we can begin to see the kind of power that Jesus has access to on earth.

To me, this story brings the temptations into a new light. Those temptations, while nothing for us, would have been powerful to him as he had the ability to do all those things that Satan thrust upon him. He could have used his power for his own blessing, but chose not to, and chose to live as us, and die for us as well. This is the sacrifice Jesus made. His divinity was not going to be the thing that carried him through the sacrifice; rather, it was his humanity that saved us. I can’t imagine having access to that much power and being patient, even unto death, for the sake of all of us.

What does this story tell you about Jesus? There are so many different points that can be made, but here are some of my favorites:

(1) The disciples really never understood the power Jesus had at his disposal at all times. This was just a glimpse into what Jesus really could have done at any point in his life.

(2) Jesus cared for his friends and was willing to give them a show of his

power so they could understand him a little better, as well as the physical act of saving them from the storm.

(3) The power Jesus had was never far away, and therefore could have been a great temptation throughout his whole life to simply use in order to finish his mission. He didn't use it, and therefore must have been willing to sacrifice a great deal to show us the New Normal.

1 — What has this story meant to you?

2 — What do you learn about Jesus through this story?

3 — Do you ever forget how powerful Jesus can be in your life?

Over this series we have tried to get you to think about what the New Normal really is. For followers of Christ our New Normal has been happening for the last 2,000 years. Jesus ushered in the New Normal in a way that far exceeds the variations and inconveniences we have had to live with in 2020.

When Jesus came, as we have studied through the book of Matthew, he was willing to redefine love, compassion, mercy, justice, and grace for each and every one of us. We have seen him heal, we have seen him do miracles, we have seen him take on the establishment, and we have seen how he has redefined greatness every step of the way. We are no longer surprised that love requires sacrifice, that compassion means empathy is paramount, and that power is not always supposed to be used, but sometimes it is to be withheld in order to serve a greater purpose.

What we think is success, what we think is power, what we think is the dream of all humanity was radically changed when Jesus came into the world. Instead of looking for wealth, we look for opportunities to serve; instead of showing our power over others, we look for ways to give to others; instead of looking to get ahead, we strive to

be people who can enable those with less. Everything has been turned on its head, and we have the opportunity to live in that New Normal, which we have traditionally called the Kingdom of God.

As we have lived throughout 2020, with all the unprecedented changes, with all the heartache and struggle, with all the divisiveness, we have had to remember that this world is not our home, but we are just visitors. We have been given insight to that which is greater, and stronger, and more infinite than anything this world has to offer. We have been given the opportunity to remember Christ as the founder and father of our faith, and that when we see him, we see the Father more clearly.

Our willingness to go against the grain of what this world expects is our New Normal. As we live out the rest of this year, and as we find ways to serve, to show love, to make peace, to bring unity, we will truly become citizens of the Kingdom of God in much more powerful and palpable ways.

May grace extend to you and your family as we journey through this time of trouble together.

Blessings,

Pastor Tim and the Crosswalk Team.

