

Journey Into Discipleship

Volume 2

Sermon 11 through Sermon 20

Dr. L.D. Thomas

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Volume 2 (Part A)
Sermon 11 through Sermon 14

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The *Journey Into Discipleship* sermon series, based on the so-called “Travel Document” in Luke 9:51-19:27, was originally preached by the late Dr. L.D. Thomas at First United Methodist Church, Tulsa, from 1979-1981. They are presented here in edited form in five volumes of ten sermons each. The introduction and the worksheets which follow each sermon were prepared by Mrs. Harriett Thomas and Mrs. Sandy Heiser.

Unless otherwise noted, scripture references throughout the *Journey Into Discipleship* series are from the Revised Standard Version. At the time of the original sermon series, the Revised Standard Version was the pew bible of the United Methodist Church of Tulsa.

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Foreword

Dear Class Member or Visitor,

Let us be the first to welcome you to your next steps on a continuing *Journey Into Discipleship*.

The Journey Into Discipleship (JID) 2011 curriculum began as a series of sermons preached by Dr. L.D. Thomas from 1979-1981, here at First United. Following Dr. Thomas' untimely death in 1986, his spouse Harriet along with Sandy Heiser re-fashioned these powerful messages into a small group study program. Then for quite a few years, *Journey Into Discipleship* lay dormant on a shelf.

Jerry Toops shares the next chapter in the life of JID:

I arrived at a place in my life of near total burnout in December of 2008. I gave all of myself to Jesus at that point and he led me to these sermons. As I prepared to teach the JID curriculum in 2009, I found new life and God sent just the right persons to walk with me in the process. *Journey Into Discipleship* has been a wonderful experience in my life for the past two years.

We wondered: might God also bless others in the church through JID? In late 2009 we began a "pilot project" with a few Sunday morning classes, using JID as the curriculum. They soon began to share about the transformation that was occurring in their classes, and they encouraged us to consider JID as a resource for the entire church. Over the last several months, we have been hard at work—both physically and spiritually—to make this material ready for our adult Sunday morning classes.

So here we are! *Journey into Discipleship 2011* has the potential to transform us as a church, as we learn once again to follow Jesus' example. This is no small thing.

We look forward to walking this journey with you. Please know that we are praying for you. As disciples ourselves who seek to grow in love, mercy and obedience, we ask for your prayers as well.

Dr. Wade Paschal, Senior Pastor
Dr. Jerry Toops, Director of Healing Ministries
Rev. Thomas Hoffmann, Minister of Adult Learning

From the Original Preface

by Sandi Heiser and Harriet Thomas

L. D. “Bill” Thomas preached this series of fifty sermons on discipleship over a period of eighteen months. Although he laid the discipleship theme aside for important occasions and for special emphases, Bill returned again and again to the personal, intimate lessons Jesus taught His beloved disciples — those who walked with Him then, and those of us who want to walk with Him now.

This sermon series, based on the so-called “Travel Document” in Luke 9:51-19:27, is presented in five volumes of ten sermons each. The introduction and the worksheets which follow each sermon have been prepared for use in personal devotions and/or as a catalyst for small group discussion.

. . . . The LDT Fund (L. D. Thomas memorial), . . . [originally] financed this project. In addition to the publication of *Journey into Discipleship* and *How the Bible Can Help You* (a book of L. D. Thomas’ sermons), LDT Fund allocations during the years have included:

- Canos [Brazil] VIM Trip
- Community Ministry
- Costa Rica Counseling Prayer Seminar
- Finance Ministry
- L.D. Thomas Healing Missions
- Ministry in the Spirit Seminars
- Stephen Ministry
- The Ministry of Counseling Prayer

The LDT Committee, which administers this fund, gave oversight, suggestions, corrections, and encouragement to us as we planned, researched, edited, created, designed, and yes, prayed together in preparing these sermons for you. In the closing words of the first sermon Bill expresses our hopes and our prayer as well as his own —

[May] we begin to rise above the misery, pain, and bitterness around us to experience the love, joy, and excitement that God wants to bestow. God has not left us desolate; through Jesus He has shown us step by step what it means to grow up, get off the bottle, and start eating meat. He has shown us how to become mature Christians so we can do something about this world in which we live. My prayer for you is that you will actually get started today on this exciting, joyful *Journey Into Discipleship*. Bon voyage!

**In memory of
Joe Hammond and Louise Cobb
True Disciples of Jesus Christ who completed the
Journey ahead of us.**

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Sermon 11: The Test of Discipleship

Our text brings us face-to-face with what has been a pressing problem in the Church since the beginning. In my opinion, the problem is bigger today than it has ever been simply because God has poured out His Spirit upon His people as never before since Pentecost, and the average Christian doesn't know how to handle this tremendous phenomena. Consequently, we are witnessing two extremes in the Body of Christ. One extreme we might call *the ecstatic extreme*, composed of Christians who sincerely believe that Christianity is primarily a feeling — an overpowering emotion. These Christians believe that the ultimate in Christian experience is found in their own feelings. These Christians honestly believe they should live out their lives according to the strong impulses and sudden spiritual impressions they receive. The other extreme we might call *the rationalistic extreme* composed of Christians who sincerely believe that Christianity is primarily a set pattern of rules for both worship and life, and feeling has very little to do with it. These Christians honestly believe they should live out their lives according to this set pattern handed down to them through their parents and their church and their own common sense, and there is little place in this pattern for emotion, spiritual impulses, and impressions.

Of course, both extremes have some truth in them; but, both are tragically and extremely wrong! Strange, but John Wesley lumps both kinds of extremism (both the ecstatic extreme and the rationalistic extreme and these are my terms) under the heading *enthusiasts*. By calling them enthusiasts Wesley simply means that each is so enthusiastic about his own position that he is closed to every other position. John Wesley felt that the need to answer this problem was so great that he devoted one of his *Forty-Four Sermons* (his handbook for Methodists) to this subject, calling it "The Nature of Enthusiasm." Likewise, Jesus felt that the need to answer this problem was so great that he devoted one of his fifty discipleship lessons to it — the 11th lesson found in two short verses in chapter 11 of Luke, verses 27- 28.

... a woman in the crowd raised her voice [ecstatically] and said to him [Jesus], "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breast that you sucked!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11:27-28).

In answering this ecstatic woman who has an overpowering desire to substitute feeling for reality, Jesus says that the test of discipleship is not our vague feelings or our limited knowledge and reason; the test of discipleship is hearing God's Word and keeping it!

Scripture

Matthew 1:18-25 and
Luke 11:27-28

Text

... a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him [Jesus], "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

Luke 11:27-28

Discipleship Lesson #11

The test of discipleship is hearing God's Word and keeping it!

The Bible uses one word to characterize a person who passes this test and that word is *obedience*, which simply means hearing God's Word and keeping it. We could actually shorten Discipleship Lesson #11 to these six words: *The test of discipleship is obedience!*

The test of discipleship is neither ecstatic nor rationalistic behavior. It is not how we feel nor how pure our doctrine is. It is not what we say or what we don't say. God calls us out of the crowd of non-believers and extremists to be disciples. He has spoken His perfect Word to us in Jesus. As disciples our part is to hear this Word and to keep it.

Before we can obey God's Word we must first hear it and before we can hear it we must begin listening to the right things in the right ways. Have I heard the Word of God, or have I missed it by listening to the wrong things in the wrong ways by substituting either the ecstatic extreme or the rationalistic extreme for reality? Many Christians have fooled themselves for years by listening to the wrong things in the wrong ways, and honestly thinking it is God speaking to them. Many of us are behaving like Adam in the Garden of Eden, listening to the wrong thing in the wrong way, until we begin using it as our hiding place. Like him, we now listen from our special hiding place to solidify our own position, rather than to hear God's Word so we can keep it. For instance, many sincere people claim they feel closest to God in nature. Nature is their way of listening to God. They can hear God best when fishing on a beautiful lake, or walking over the rolling hills of a golf course, or working in their garden. Now don't misunderstand me, for I love nature, too. I love to fish. I like golf and gardening. I appreciate the beauty of a sunset, a rainbow, some "flower in a crannied wall," a butterfly; but, I don't confuse them with the voice of God. If I do then I must add to that voice a man-eating shark, a voracious tiger, a devastating tornado, a raging flood, deadly cholera, and malignant cancer. Then, I ask you, what is my God like and what is He saying to me as He speaks through nature?

Shakespeare's phrase about "tongues in trees" may be good poetry, but its theology breaks down when the tree falls on you! If you try to read your books in running brooks, as the poet says, or find your sermons in stones then your god's voice will turn to gibberish when you are confronted with an innocent, lifeless child lying face down in the same clear blue water, or read about an entire town being buried beneath the crushing avalanche of those beautiful stones. No, when we look to nature for our Word from God, we are simply looking in the wrong place; we are looking in the place where Adam hid — the place where God's Word was twisted into man's word.

The same is true when we look to our own feelings or our own conscience to be the voice of God to us. It may be the voice of God and it may not be.

How do you know? How about the “voice” which spoke to the Ayatollah Khomeini — the voice which he said was the voice of God telling him to imprison American hostages? But you say, “He’s a mad man, I’m sane. He’s a Muslim, I’m a Christian.” Then, I say, “Your god is too small. The God of the Bible loves the whole world, and He speaks to the whole world.” No! The answer is not in who we are, but it is in the way we are listening to God speak. When we are looking to our own feelings or our conscience to be the voice of God, then we are looking in the wrong place; then we are looking in the exact place where Adam hid and God’s Word was twisted into man’s word.

This is true when we look to other people to be God’s Word to us, be they priests or laymen. That may be God speaking to you from the pulpit or teaching His Word from the lectern, or it just may be a selfish ego trying to glorify itself and get across its pet ideas. The book that meant so much to you, that started you out in a new direction, may actually be God speaking to you; but, again it may not be. How do you know? It may be like Adam hiding behind the voice of Eve. It may be the very place where Adam twisted God’s Word into man’s word.

This brings us to a much more difficult and subtle way many of us hide from God, instead of listening to Him. I’m speaking about the Bible itself — the very book we call “the Word of God!” Over and over I hear people use the Bible to justify the wrong decisions they have already made, or the rigid positions they have already taken, or to prove the inferiority of a specific race, or to sit in judgment of someone with whom they disagree. How sad, for that’s exactly the place where Adam hid and twisted God’s Word into man’s word.

The same can be true even of the most sacred of all things — prayer. Prayer often becomes the place where we hide from God by trying to impose our will upon Him, instead of listening to His Word so we can keep it.

The point is, before we can obey the Word of God we must hear it, and before we can hear it we must begin listening to the right things in the right ways. The Bible says there is only one right way to listen to God and that is with the ears and mind of the Second Adam instead of the first Adam. Adam hid; Jesus heard. Why? The Bible gives us the answer in one word: relationship. Of course, God speaks to us in many ways, always has, always will. Of course, He speaks in nature, in the still small voice within us, through other people and the books they write, through the Bible, through prayer. But whether or not we hear Him speak depends upon one thing: whether or not we are in right relationship with God when we listen!

No man can ever hear the Word of God, until first his broken relationship with God is properly restored. Adam hid! Jesus heard! That tells the whole story. To have ears to hear, it is essential that our broken relationship with God first be properly restored. This is exactly what Jesus came to this earth

to do: Jesus came to restore our broken relationship with God. Two biblical words tell us how.

I. Faith

The first word is **Faith**. God came to us in Jesus to give us an object of our faith that is real, that can be tested — not just a vague feeling, nor an impulse, nor an impression, nor a rigidly set pattern of rules, nor a religious order — but reality itself. God gave us the very Word of God in the flesh of Jesus as the object of our faith. This is why the Word of God can be heard only through faith. Jesus alone restores our relationship with God — not nature, not feeling, not others, not even the Bible and prayer. This is what Jesus means when He says, *“I am the door and all who enter by me will be saved.”* Faith in Jesus is the only entrance into salvation. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to appropriate the redemptive acts of Jesus for ourselves, so that our eyes can see God and our ears can hear God’s Word.

This is why looking to nature or our own feelings, or anything else, even the Bible, as the primary source of the Word of God will always fail. Of course, God speaks to us in all of those ways, but He speaks in them through His Son — His most perfect revelation. Only when we go to nature, to our feelings, our conscience, to others, to religious order, to the Bible, to prayer “with the mind in us that is in Christ Jesus” — that is, with the mind of faith — will we have ears to hear God speak. Only men and women of faith can be in right relationship with Him.

This is what Paul means when he says that faith is a gift of God. Of course, Paul is not saying that God causes us to believe without involving our freedom to choose. No one can do that for us, not even God, without taking away our freedom and destroying our humanity.

Paul is saying that God gives us Jesus Christ His Son, through whom He restores our relationship with Himself; therefore Jesus must be the object of our faith. This is the gift of God to the whole world. When we accept Jesus as the object of our faith we accept God’s gift of faith; only then do we begin listening to God in the right way. This is why we can hear the Word of God only through faith.

II. Obedience

The second biblical word is **Obedience**. Not only is faith a prerequisite to hearing God speak, but so is obedience. Look closely at the first Adam and the Second Adam and you will see why Adam hid and Jesus heard. Adam does not seek God’s will and the strength to do it; rather, he hides from God and seeks to avoid His will. He has the spirit of rebellion, not obedience. On the other hand, Jesus’ one aim in life was to know God’s will and to do it. Even when that will pointed to the Cross, Jesus prayed: *“Father, not my will, but thine be done.”* That’s the spirit of obedience. The difference between

hiding and hearing, the difference between separation from God and communion with God, can be summed up in one word. That one word is obedience — the will to obey, the spirit of obedience.

On the road to Damascus Paul, who as Saul the Pharisee belonged to the rationalistic extreme, discovered the way out of the perplexities of his blindness when he turned with these words in his heart and on his lips: *“Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?”* (Acts 9:6 KJV). Paul began with faith by calling Jesus *“Lord!”* He went on to obedience: *“What wilt Thou have me do?”* This is still the only relevant question when we are seeking to hear God speak.

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of Jesus on the first Easter living totally by feeling. It was Mary who expressed the first ecstatic extreme in the church. Because of this her eyes were blinded to the Resurrected Christ and her ears were closed to His voice, until she fell at His feet exclaiming, *“Rabboni! (which means Teacher)”* and rose with a spirit of obedience, willing to obey His command to go and tell the others the good news that she had “seen the Lord!” This is still the way to hear God speak to us. This is still the way out of our blindness and deafness. Like Paul and Mary Magdalene we must turn to God with these words in our hearts and on our lips: *“Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?”* That’s the spirit of obedience we must have in order to hear God speak.

I am often asked by sincere people, “How can I make God come alive? How can God be real to me?” Many sincere people honestly think that God is not real simply because they’ve missed some ecstatic experience they ought to have had. These people honestly think that this is their main problem — that this is why they have never had a moving experience like others have had. The truth of the matter is they are simply asking the wrong question! According to the Bible, the question is not, “How can I make God come alive and be real to me?”; the question is, “How can God make me come alive and be real for Him?”

That’s the question. What is the Bible’s answer? God makes me come alive and real for Himself by giving me Jesus to restore my lost relationship with Him. Why does restoring my lost relationship with God make me come alive and be real for Him? The Bible’s answer is clear to this question too. This restored relationship enables me to do two things: to hear the Word of God through faith, and to keep the Word of God through obedience.

Faith — which means looking to Jesus, the Word of God in the flesh, as the object of my faith and my only norm for all that God says to me in any way.

Obedience — which begins with a willingness to make God’s Word my way through the power of the living Christ living in me.

Faith and Obedience — hearing the Word of God and keeping it — is God’s answer for man’s biggest problem: lost relationship with God! Faith

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and Obedience — hearing the Word of God and keeping it — is God’s answer for extremism in the church, whether it be the ecstatic extreme or the rationalistic extreme. Only right relationship with God can keep us from trying to hide behind our feelings or our rigidly set rules. These two, Faith and Obedience, make up God’s test of discipleship, not our ecstatic feelings and outbursts, nor our ordered and precise doctrine and behavior. The test of discipleship is one thing and one thing only:

Discipleship Lesson #11

The test of discipleship is hearing God’s Word and keeping it!

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #11?
2. Name and describe the two extreme viewpoints discussed.

Are you inclined toward either of these extremes?

Ask your class members or your small group if their assessment is the same as yours.

Write down any suggestions that are made to help you better hear and obey God.

Search the Scriptures

3. What does Phil 2:5-11 tell us about Jesus' relationship with His Father?

What does it suggest about your part and God's part in your relationship with Him?

4. Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9 as God's Word to you. Note that God gives a specific command in each verse. In your own words state each command and describe how God expects you to obey it. On scale of 1-10, 10 being perfect obedience and 1 being rebellion, what is your "obedience score" for each command?

Internalize God's Word

5. Choose one of the above scriptures (Philippians 2:5-11 or Deuteronomy 6:4-9) to be the basis of prayer — hearing God's Word so you can do it. See Steps for Praying God's Word from the Appendix.

Memory scripture: Philippians 2:5-11 or Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Notes

Sermon 12: Oops! A Second Stumbling Block

Throughout his letters, Paul tells us in many different ways that there are two stumbling blocks to living a life of grace through faith. The first stumbling block Paul calls law or legalism, and says that the Jews are the best example of those who stumble on it. The second stumbling block Paul calls knowledge and says that the Greeks are the best illustration of those who stumble on it. In the first chapter of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul says:

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles”
(I Cor 1:22-23).

What Paul says here and elsewhere in reference to these two stumbling blocks simply expounds and clarifies for us *Journey into Discipleship* Sermons 10 and 12. In sermon #10, *That First Stumbling Block*, we saw that the first stumbling block a disciple must avoid is legalism. That is, to be disciples we must avoid substituting our own religious rules for a life of grace through faith. Jesus tells us about the second stumbling block in Luke 11:29- 32. This is Discipleship Lesson #12:

Discipleship Lesson #12

The second stumbling block a disciple must avoid is his own knowledge.

What a strange warning this is, for we normally think of our knowledge as a means of liberating us instead of causing us to stumble. From childhood we have known that a hunger for knowledge is a natural hunger — something to be desired. Yet Jesus tells us and Paul continually reiterates that knowledge is one of the two stumbling blocks that will keep a would-be disciple from living a life of grace through faith. What does the Bible mean by this? How can knowledge which is so valuable also be a stumbling block to Christians? The Bible makes it clear that our knowledge becomes a stumbling block anytime we put our faith in our own knowledge instead of in Jesus Christ. In this scripture Jesus shows us that putting our faith in our own knowledge causes us to stumble in three different ways.

I. First, it causes us to stumble from lack of power! It makes us all head and no strength!

Putting our faith in our own knowledge instead of in Jesus undermines everything Jesus came to this earth to do, for Jesus came to bring us God. Jesus came because man was ignorant of God; He came to make God known. Jesus came to bring us God through His birth, life, death,

Scripture

Luke 11:29-32 and
I Corinthians 1:18-25

Text

. . . behold, something greater than Solomon is here . . . and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Luke 11:31-32

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

I Corinthians 1:22-25

resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost. But all of these are folly to those who live by knowledge instead of by faith.

Consider the birth of Jesus — the Virgin Birth. This is folly to those who put their faith in their own knowledge, for all of us know how little babies are conceived, and it's not through an agent of God! Thus the Virgin Birth becomes a stone-of-stumbling for those who live by their own knowledge, instead of a stepping-stone of faith. Yet the Virgin Birth is the very key to the power in Jesus, the divine power! It's because the Holy Spirit fathered Jesus that He was unique, that He was the supernatural Son of God, that He was endowed with the very power of God even while He was here on earth as a man.

Consider the Cross of Christ — Jesus' redemptive death for us. The Cross is folly to those who put their faith in their own knowledge. How could the death of any man 2,000 years ago have any bearing at all upon my life today? That's folly. That's contrary to all of our learning. Even a high school graduate knows better than that. Yet the Cross is the key to my power over sin today! It's the key to my entrance into eternal life. Because Jesus was and is God, He can span those 2,000 years and be my Redeemer; He can be my Victor — my Savior.

Consider the Resurrection or the Ascension or Pentecost, and the same principle applies. To the person who puts his faith in his own knowledge, each is beyond the mind of man to understand. When we limit the power of God to our own understanding, "we are of all people the most to be pitied," as Paul says. There is no hope for us and our faith is futile. Yet, in these supernatural events in the life of Jesus lies the key to our experience of the power of God in our own lives today and throughout eternity!

Yes, putting our faith in our own knowledge instead of in Jesus Christ causes us to stumble from lack of power. It makes us all head and no strength. Jesus had to deal with this stumbling block continually in training His disciples. They, like us, were continually substituting their own knowledge for faith in Him. They just naturally wanted to live by knowledge instead of by faith. The more knowledge we acquire, the more likely we are to stumble.

A simple illustration which Jesus used to help Peter and the other disciples see this truth will help us as disciples to understand it better, too. In the 21st chapter of John, Peter and the other disciples are fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Although they have fished hard and long they have caught no fish at all. Jesus comes and says to them, "If you'll drop your net over here on the other side of the boat you'll catch fish." Now, what right does He have to tell these experts where to fish? Peter and his brother and the sons of Zebedee were raised on that lake. Their fathers were fishermen; they know all about fishing. Jesus was a landlubber, a carpenter; what does He know about fishing? If they were going to live by knowledge instead of faith in Jesus

they would simply ignore Him and do what their knowledge tells them to do. But they swallow their pride, drop their net where Jesus tells them, and sure enough it is filled so full of fish they can barely haul it in.

Jesus came to fill our nets, but they can be filled only when we put our faith in Him, not in our own knowledge. Our knowledge is a stumbling block to receiving the grace of God through faith. It causes us to stumble from lack of power! It makes us all head and no strength!

II. When we put our faith in our own knowledge instead of in Jesus, it makes us all head and no heart, and causes us to stumble from lack of love!

In the last discipleship lesson, which was Lesson #11, we heard Jesus warn His disciples about being all feeling and no head, for He says that the test of discipleship is not how you feel, but it is hearing the Word of God and doing it. Now in this scripture He addresses the opposite extreme — being all head and no heart. He is telling us that we can never “know” God simply through the head; we can never experience Him simply through head-knowledge.

Jesus calls those who seek signs “an evil generation.” Why? Because they refuse to live by faith in Him. Faith in Jesus is the only way we can receive the grace of God — the righteousness of God. Without Him all of us are evil. What’s the difference between a sign and faith? A sign is something you can see, but the Bible says that faith “*is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). Jesus says that there will be no signs, except the sign of Jonah, for as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh so will Jesus be to us (Luke 11:29-31).

What was the sign of Jonah? What could the people of Nineveh see in Jonah (for that’s what a sign is — a sign is something you can see)? What could they see in Jonah? In the concluding verse of our scripture Jesus tells us that the sign of Jonah was his preaching. They could see in him the proclamation of God’s Word. The sign of Jonah was God’s revealed Word coming forth from Jonah. That was enough for the people of Nineveh; they repented and accepted this revealed Word proclaimed by Jonah.

But Jesus goes on to say, “*Something greater than Jonah is here!*” Jesus is saying that God’s Word is actually here in the flesh. The only sign the Christian will ever have is the only sign he’ll ever need, which is Jesus Christ — the very Word of God become flesh! Jesus is saying, “Now God’s Word has come to you in the flesh, so you can personally experience Him. Now you can do more than know about Him; you can actually know Him! Now He can be more than just head-knowledge; He can also be a heart-experience.”

Failure to recognize this caused the scribes and Pharisees--the theologians of the first century--to stumble. Read the 23rd chapter of Matthew and

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you will see that seven times Jesus says, “*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites . . .*” each time Jesus calls them hypocrites because they substitute their own head-knowledge for a heart-experience. “*Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*” He says, “*for you tithe mint and dill and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith*” (Matthew 23:23). You substitute your head-knowledge for a warm-heart experience.

John Wesley, the founder of our great church, faced the same problem, as all of us do. What actually happened to Wesley at Aldersgate was simply finding God’s answer for this stumbling block of knowledge. John Wesley was one of the best educated men of the 18th century, but the more he learned the more he stumbled. For ten years before Aldersgate Wesley continually stumbled over his own knowledge. He spent that entire decade seeking God through his head-knowledge, only to fail miserably. He was all head and no heart. One thing and one thing only happened to Wesley at Aldersgate: Wesley gave Christ his heart, and Christ warmed that heart! Wesley personally experienced Jesus Christ in his heart. Before Aldersgate Wesley lived by signs, what he could “see,” that is, what he knew for certain through his learning, but at Aldersgate he found “the conviction of things not seen!”

He found that conviction in Jesus. From that moment on for the next fifty years, he lived by faith instead of by knowledge, no longer stumbling from lack of love.

III. When we put our faith in our own knowledge instead of in Jesus, it makes

us all head and no heart; it causes us to stumble from lack of faith!

The Bible says that as Christians we can have only one object of our faith — Jesus Christ. To live by knowledge instead of by faith is to shift the object of our faith from Jesus to ourselves. The object of our faith becomes our own learning — what we know. It puffs us up. It causes us to worship a false idol instead of Jesus. It causes us to worship *what* we know instead of *Whom* we know.

The Bible says Jesus is truth; Jesus Himself is truth, not what we know about Him. The Bible says Solomon was the wisest man in the Old Testament, and he was able to know much of God’s truth about how to live. Solomon was so knowledgeable and so wise that, according to Jesus in this scripture, the Queen of Sheba came all the way to Jerusalem to learn from him. Sheba was in the southern part of what is now called Saudi Arabia, hundreds of miles away; and she traveled all this distance by camel train just to hear the wisdom of Solomon. But Jesus says, “*Behold, something greater than Solomon is here!*” The Truth Himself has been given to us by God in Jesus Christ. He is the object of our faith, not what we know about

Him. Paul asks, “Where is the wise man?” That’s the question we’re all asking today. “Where is the wise man?”

- Where is the wise man who can tell us how to bring peace in the Middle East?
- Where is the wise man who can give us the answer for our uncertain economy in America?
- Where is the wise man who can answer our world’s energy crises?
- Where is the wise man who can avoid a nuclear holocaust?
- Where is the wise man who can bring moral stability to our degenerated nation?

Where is the wise man? That’s the question, for something greater than Solomon is needed today. Solomon was the wisest of all the world rulers, yet he didn’t have the wisdom to keep his great kingdom from breaking up. The wisest of all men who ever lived could not save a faithless and evil generation from destruction. Yes, something greater than Solomon is needed.

The good news is: God has given us something greater than Solomon, something greater than man’s wisdom in Jesus Christ our Lord. In Jesus God has given us His truth and His power personified. God has given us something greater than Solomon to deliver us from our ignorance and our grave predicament. God has given us Jesus Christ to sanctify our knowledge so it can be transformed into His truth. God has given us Jesus Christ to sanctify our learning so it can become His power. Something greater than Solomon is here. That’s the good news. Truth Himself is here, Power Himself is here, the Spirit of our living God Himself is here. That’s the good news!

This doesn’t mean that now we can throw away all of our books, stop studying, and sit around shouting “Hallelujah!” God forbid! It does mean that God has given us the secret of making a stepping-stone out of our stone-of-stumbling. God has given us the secret of using our knowledge right. He has shown us how to stop stumbling over our knowledge — how to begin using it as a means for a deeper walk with Him in faith. That is our discipleship lesson.

Discipleship Lesson #12

The second stumbling block a disciple must avoid is his own knowledge.

It all comes down to where your heart is. It all comes down to where you start. For if you start with your head — with your own knowledge — and try to get to God, you are doomed to failure. There is only one stepping-stone to God and that is the stone of faith in Jesus Christ. If you don’t start with this stone of faith in Jesus, then the more knowledge you acquire, the more you will stumble. You start at the wrong place and thus travel the

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wrong road. If you start with your heart — with living by faith instead of by knowledge — then the more knowledge and learning you acquire, the better. Then your knowledge and learning will be subject to Him and can be sanctified by Him and used by Him to lead you into a deeper walk with Him in faith.

What the world needs now is not the wisdom of Solomon. Rather, our world needs the sanctified knowledge of people who truly love Jesus, so God can use that knowledge for peace and reconciliation. What America needs now are not just smarter economists. Rather, what America needs now are citizens who dare to begin with Christ instead of beginning with their own money, so He can sanctify the use of the money we have. What the world needs now is not just more know-how about energy. Rather, we need more energy from Him who knows all and supplies all, so the knowledge we now have can be used right. What our country needs now is not a more enlightened, updated moral code to justify the state of degradation to which we have sunk as a nation. Rather, our country needs men and women of God who will dare to permit Jesus Christ to be their righteousness.

What we all need now as individuals, as Americans, as human beings, is not more knowledge to puff us up and cause us to stumble. Rather, what we need now is to let Jesus Christ sanctify the knowledge we already have so it can be transformed into a stepping-stone of faith instead of a stone-of-stumbling. In the final analysis the problem is not knowledge and the problem is not law, the problem is us. Do we start with a transformed heart or a puffed-up head?

Take time right now to sit quietly and honestly meditate upon this question: Is my own knowledge a sanctified stepping-stone to a deeper walk with God, or is my knowledge a proud stone-of-stumbling that keeps me from knowing God? It all comes down to where my heart is. Where is my heart?

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #12?
2. List three ways we stumble when we put our faith in our own knowledge instead of in Jesus Christ.
3. Who or what is the object of my faith — Christ or my own knowledge?

Search the Scriptures

4. What does the Bible tell us about the right use of our minds in each of the following scriptures?

Mt 22:37 | Rom 12:2 | Eph 4:23 | Eph 5:10 | Col 1:9

Internalize God's Word

5. In what ways has my own knowledge been a “stone of stumbling”?

How can it become a stepping-stone to faith for me?

6. Ephesians 1:16-23 is Paul's prayer for you. Pray this prayer for yourself. Rewrite and expand it verse by verse in the light of this lesson about our use of knowledge. Use the language you ordinarily use with your friends and family. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to apply Paul's prayer to your own current needs. The first verse is rewritten as an example; change it to suit yourself. (The New International Version is printed for you to use, because it breaks Paul's long, one-sentence prayer into shorter sentences.)

Ephesians 1:16-23

I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. (16)

Lord, I am grateful that you created me and gave me life. Sometimes I get so busy praying for those you put on my heart, that I forget to pray for myself. Today I'm reminded that I need help more than anyone I know.

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. (17)

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, (18)

and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength, (19)

which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, (20)

far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (21)

And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, (22)

which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way. (23)

Memory scripture: Hebrews 11:6

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Sermon 13: How to Walk in the Light

As Jesus walked with His disciples on His last journey to Jerusalem, He used the metaphor of light to drive home His 13th discipleship lesson. This lesson is found in Luke 11:33-36, where Jesus says:

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a bushel, but on a stand, that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light; but when it is not sound, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light.”

To read this passage by itself like this, without proper introduction and explanation, can be rather confusing. But when you preface it with the other things Jesus says about light and other truths the Bible reveals to us using this metaphor, then what Jesus is saying begins to clear up. For example, the Bible opens by telling us that light was the first of God’s creations:

“And God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness” (Gen 1:3-4).

John also opens his Gospel by telling us that Jesus came to earth to be our light:

“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5).

Jesus often spoke of light. He explains to His disciples who He is:

“I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

And at another time He says to them:

“I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to His disciples:

“You are the light of the world . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5: 14-16).

When Jesus uses this metaphor of light in His 13th discipleship lesson, His disciples are prepared for it. They know that Jesus is telling them how to

Scripture

Luke 11:33-36

Text

Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light; but when your eye is not sound, your body is full of darkness. Therefore, be careful lest the light in you be darkness . . .

Luke 11:34-35

continue to walk in the light so they can be His disciples. They know what He means when He says it all depends upon having “a sound eye.”

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a bushel, but on a stand, that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light; but when it is not sound, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness.” (Luke 11:34-35).

What is a sound eye? A sound eye is an eye that sees right — that functions right. Jesus is simply saying that to be disciples they must first see right. What must they see right? They must see Him right. They must see Jesus as the light of life. This is our discipleship lesson:

Discipleship Lesson #13

To be a disciple we must see Jesus as the light of life.

Incidentally, this is exactly what Paul means by the word *faith*. Christian faith is seeing Jesus right — seeing Jesus as the light of life. What does it mean to see Jesus as the light of life? It means basically three things:

I. Jesus is essential for life just as light is essential for life.

God created light first because light is essential for all life. In the first sentence of a long article on “light” in the Encyclopedia Britannica, the author says that it is impossible to say exactly what light is, because light “is essentially more primitive than any of the things in terms of which we might try to explain it.” Scientists who adhere to the Solar Hypothesis of creation must begin with light. They must start with something, and like Genesis and the Gospel of John, they start with light. No matter how you approach life — from the biblical sense, from the scientific sense, or just from a practical view of life around you — one thing is clear: light is essential for life.

Every school child soon learns that “radiation from the sun is the ultimate source of nearly all energy that is essential for the maintenance of plant and animal life on earth.” (Ency. Brit., Vol. 21, p.569). Without light, flowers don’t bloom, children grow pale and weak, our gardens refuse to produce fruit, and animals get rickets and die. Yes, light is essential to life as we know it here on earth.

When Jesus says, “*I am the light of the world,*” He is saying: “I am essential for life!” He is saying, “Without Me you cannot fully blossom. Without Me you will grow pale and weak. Without Me your lives cannot produce good fruit. Without Me your only destiny is death. But I came to give you life as it’s meant to be — healthy, full, productive life. Just as all life began with the creation of light, so must your new life begin with seeing Me as the light of life!”

In our text, Jesus is telling us that to have life and have it abundantly we must begin with a sound eye. We must first see right. We must first see Jesus, not just as a good man, or a good teacher, or a miracle worker, or even as the best man who ever lived. We must see Him as the light of life. We must see Him as essential for our life. We must see Jesus as the ultimate source of all life. We must see Him as the Light of the world — the one who makes it possible for life to exist as it is meant to be. That's one thing it means to have a sound eye and to walk in the light. That's one thing it means to have faith. It means to see Jesus right — to see Jesus as the light of life.

II. Jesus is our illumination for life.

Since Jesus is the light of the world and our light for life then we must look to Him for the illumination we need to see right. Light doesn't exist just to be looked at; light exists to illuminate other things. No sane person stands gazing at the sun; he looks at the beauty which the sun illuminates. No sensible person walks or drives by looking at the sun; he travels by looking at the path or the road the sun illuminates. No sound person walks into a room, flips on a light switch and stands staring at a bare light bulb; he uses the light to walk through the house without stumbling, or to read a book, or to find an object. The point is: light is meant to be used to see by, not to just stare at. Our eye can be sound only when we see what the light illuminates. The quickest way to misuse and destroy our eyes is to just sit and stare at the light. As disciples we are called to let Jesus illuminate all of life for us, which means basically three things.

First, we let Him illuminate God for us. The Bible says that we can see God right only when we see Him by the illumination of Jesus. Our eye is sound in looking at God only when we let Jesus illuminate God for us. This is what Paul means by faith. He means that our faith is in the God illuminated by Jesus. When we let Jesus illuminate God for us, we are delivered from the fear of darkness; for then we know we have a God who cares. We know we have a God who is Spirit and will never leave us desolate. We know we have a God who is Love and will never give up on us. The reason some of us don't walk in the light is simply because we try to see God through the darkness of man's philosophy and learning, rather than in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. If we are to see God right we must look at Him by the illumination of Jesus.

Second, we let Jesus illuminate ourselves for us. All of us have blind spots when it comes to looking at ourselves. Some of us are too hard on ourselves, causing depression and all kinds of fears and weaknesses. Others of us are too high on ourselves, resulting in egotism, pride, and hateful, overbearing ways. We can see our true selves only when we let Jesus illuminate our lives. Let me illustrate.

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One of the blackest nights in my life happened some thirty-five years ago, but it still lives on to haunt me now and then, both psychologically and physically. It happened at midnight between July 31st and August 1st, 1944, about seven weeks after we had landed on the beaches in Normandy in World War II. The advance guard of our battalion column was creeping down a road in France to get in position for an attack at daylight — the attack that came to be called “The Saint Lo Breakthrough.” The battalion commander, all the senior staff officers, all the battery commanders and senior noncoms in the battalion were together at the head of the column. Just as we came to a prominent crossroads we got word over our radio that enemy aircraft were approaching, to pull off the road and take cover. We got our vehicles off the road and under cover, but didn’t dig foxholes or prepare any protective cover, since it was only a temporary halt. Then came the enemy planes. I flopped on the ground with one side up against a hedgerow, and about that time the flares came. Like a bright noonday sun they hung above us from their little parachutes, lighting up the whole countryside, while the planes circled — looking, looking. I’ll never forget how naked I felt lying there on the ground without any cover at all. In the light of those flares I could suddenly see all the mistakes I had made — if I had just done this or that, maybe we wouldn’t be in this terrible situation. If I had just used my time better! Then down came the bombs on top of us, killing a number of our officers and non-coms and wounding practically all of us. I still carry a piece of steel in my chest and a deep scar on my leg to remind me.

The point is that it took the lights shining there above me for me to see my own blemishes. Jesus came to illuminate our fallen natures, so we can see that we’re all sinners. He came so we would think neither too highly of ourselves nor too lowly of ourselves, but so that we could see ourselves honestly. When we look at ourselves in the light of Jesus we can see all of the blemishes. In the light of His purity, we can see our dirtiness. In the light of His love, we can see our selfishness. In the light of His holiness, we can see that we all fall short of the glory of God. We can see that we are all sinners. But that is not all a sound eye sees in the light of Jesus. That’s only the beginning!

In the light of the Cross, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost, we can see that we are redeemed sinners. That’s the good news! Yes, we are all sinners and we are all fallen creatures, but by His blood Jesus has redeemed us and given us new life. Now we can hold up our heads, because we are children of God, heirs of Christ. By His grace we have been saved from sin. By His grace we have been given eternal life — His life. By His grace we can now see ourselves honestly. In the light of His grace we cannot think too lowly of ourselves, for He has given His own life that we might not perish but have eternal life. He is our strength and our salvation. But we can’t think too highly of ourselves either, for we’ve done nothing to deserve this special position with God. God has saved us in spite of

ourselves; without Christ we would sink right back down into that pit!

Third, not only did Jesus come to illuminate God and ourselves for us; He also came so we can see other people by His illumination. He came so that we can see the value of each human life. We cannot be a disciple for Jesus until we begin to see others by His illumination. Jesus calls us to be disciples so we can continue His ministry of proclaiming the good news to the impoverished who have not heard, of saving those who are lost, of explaining the good news of God's love to the nominal Christians who are uninformed, and of healing those who are sick of mind, body, and spirit. Exactly how we are to do this brings us to the third thing it means to see Jesus right — to see Jesus as the light of life.

III. We are called as disciples to reflect the Light of the World to our world.

We are not the light, but we are called to be a reflection of the light to our own world. Only when we see ourselves in this light do we have a sound eye, so we can walk in the light. It wasn't until seventeen centuries after Jesus used this metaphor of light in the 13th discipleship lesson that science uncovered the real depth of what He was telling us. It was in the 17th century that Sir Isaac Newton discovered the theory of the spectrum, and showed us that the real value of light is determined by the object on which it shines. He passed a fine beam of sunlight through a glass prism, and discovered it didn't come out one white light as when it entered; instead it was broken down into seven different colors — all the colors of the rainbow. How it came out depended entirely upon the color of the object on which it shone.

About the same time that Newton made this discovery, another scientist by the name of Grimaldi made an equally important discovery about the diffraction of light, which is simply this: light going through a fine slit cannot be prevented from spreading out on the other side of the slit. From these two discoveries have come most of the great advancements in optics: eyeglasses, binoculars, telescopes, and the like. Also from these discoveries we can get great insight into the message of our scripture.

“Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light; but when it is not sound, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness” (Lk 11:34-35).

Although Jesus is the pure white light coming from heaven, many of us resemble a black object which reflects absolutely none of that light. Others of us are like just one of the colors and reflect only part of that light, while all of the rest of the light is wasted on us. The sin in our lives — our self-centeredness, our selfishness, our bitterness, our rebellion — absorbs all the rest of the light and prevents it from passing through us to others.

But now and then along comes a person like Peter or Paul or John Wesley, or St. Theresa, or a person, such as some of us know even today, who gives

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himself completely to Christ, and the discoveries of Grimaldi and Newton are made all over again. The pure light of Christ passes through that person as through Grimaldi's tiny slit and comes out diffused in every direction. Absolutely nothing can prevent it from spreading out on the other side. Like Newton's prism he is able to reflect every different hue of this wonderful light. A perfect prism for the "light of the world," he too becomes light to a dark, disillusioned world, and people begin to walk from darkness into light. Sinners are saved from damnation, church members mature and begin to reach out in service, the blind see, the sick are healed, captives are released, the oppressed are set at liberty, and God is praised, worshipped and glorified by His people again!

Jesus not only said, "*I am the light of the world*"; He also said "*You are the light of the world!*" You see, the two statements go together, and today scientific knowledge shows us how. Although the light originates in Him, when we actually begin to see Him with the sound eye of faith, we can become a reflection of the light and begin to illuminate the world around us. Without Him, of course, we are total darkness; but with Him we can become an entire spectrum of light. That is the good news! That's our discipleship lesson.

Discipleship Lesson #13

To be a disciple we must see Jesus as the light of life.

That is what it means to be a disciple. It means becoming an entire spectrum of light to a darkened world. Jesus says that the key to fulfilling this calling is a sound eye. By this He means an eye that sees Jesus as the light of life in every sense of that truth. Let him who has eyes to see, see, and he will be His disciple!

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #13?
2. Describe what Jesus means by a “sound eye”.
3. What three things does it mean to see Jesus as the “light of life”?

Search the Scriptures

4. How does each of the following scriptures expand your understanding of Jesus as the Light of your personal world?

Genesis 1:1-4 | Psalm 139: 11, 12 | Luke 11:34-35 | Col 1:13-14 | 1 Peter 2:9 | John 1:4-5, 9-12 | 1 John 1:5-9 | 1 John 2:9-11 | Rev 21:23-25

5. In John 8:12 Jesus says, *“I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* What does He mean? What kinds of darkness does Jesus dispel? Blindness — purely physical darkness? Intellectual darkness — lack of knowledge and understanding? Moral darkness — the darkness of sin or of evil? Emotional darkness — depression and despair?

In chapters 8 and 9 of John we are given several examples of people in the dark. Identify the kind of darkness each person experienced.

Woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11)

Scribes and Pharisees (John 8:2-11)

Man born blind (John 9:1-5)

The Psalmist (Psalm 69:1-3)

How could they get into the light? (The scriptures in question #4 may help you.)

What about me? In what ways am I in the dark?

Physically | Intellectually | Morally | Sins of the flesh | Sins of the disposition | Emotionally

How can I get into the light?

Internalize God's Word

6. Read Psalm 139:11-12. Holding in your heart the concept of Jesus as life-generating, life-sustaining light, let this Psalm become your prayer. (See Steps in Praying God's Word, Appendix)
7. Memory scripture: Memorize the scripture in this study through which God spoke a personal word to you. You may want to tell your group the reason for your choice.

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Sermon 14: A Disciple's Constant Temptation

In our next discipleship lesson Jesus is telling us about the constant temptation that faces every would-be disciple and the way to handle that temptation. The temptation is this: to substitute religious form for the power of God in Christ, to go through the motions of being religious, instead of being born into a new life.

Use your imagination and put yourself in the place of the devil who is out to undermine the work of Christ. Can you think of a better way to do it than by getting Christians to yield to this temptation? If you can get professing Christians to go through the outer form of being “religious” instead of becoming new persons in Christ — to use the right words but the wrong rhythm — then you’ve really got it made. You have Christians thinking they are working for Christ, while in reality they are furthering your cause. They belong to you and don’t even know it! The most enticing temptations are seldom black or white; the most dangerous temptations are always those that are glossed over with a tasty frosting that makes them look good and desirable. And so it is with this temptation, which Jesus says is the constant temptation of all who would be His disciples — the temptation to be “religious” instead of real! Our 14th discipleship lesson is simply the opposite of this.

Discipleship Lesson #14

To be disciples we must be real instead of religious.

Fortunately Jesus tells us exactly what this means in our passage of scripture, Luke 11:37-54. Jesus says this temptation falls into two parts, and uses the Pharisees and the scribes as examples. First, Jesus points to the Pharisees and uses three illustrations out of their lives to show how they have given in to this temptation. Then, He does the same thing with the scribes. In our search, let’s follow His pattern.

I. The Pharisees

Jesus wants us to see that all of us are constantly tempted like the Pharisees to substitute outer form for an inner experience. It’s so easy to adopt religious jargon as a pattern of speech, so that we’re always saying the right words to the wrong beat. It’s so easy to feel religious just because we’re in church going through the form without anything really happening. It’s so easy to go through the motions of preaching, teaching, singing in the choir, reading the liturgical responses, singing hymns, and bowing in prayer, without anything ever happening inside of us. It’s so easy to substitute outer form for an inner experience. But what really

Scripture

Luke 11:37-54

Text

But woe to you . . . for you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

Luke 11:42

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matters is the inner experience, not the outer form. What makes us real disciples for Jesus is not the observable practice; it is the transforming power of the living Christ living in us!

In the first half of our Scripture lesson, verses 37 through 44 of chapter 11 of Luke, Jesus points up the three common ways that the Pharisees give in to the temptation to be religious instead of real. These three ways are (1) ceremonial washing, (2) tithing, and (3) religious structure. Although the outward form has changed somewhat in our day, the basic truth is still exactly the same. Let's look at what Jesus says and see how we are tempted to make the same substitutions and thus miss the real thing just as the Pharisees did.

In verses 37-40 we're told that the Pharisees were indignant because Jesus did not follow their religious practice of washing hands and food utensils in the prescribed way before eating. Jesus replies: "You fools! You cleanse the outside of the cup and leave the inside filthy and dirty. Cleanse the inside and you will be clean all over!" (Paraphrased).

One of the most popular musical plays in America has been *Fiddler on the Roof*, a story about a Jewish community in the far-off Russian village of Anatevka. Although the cultural setting is totally foreign to most of us, we have thoroughly enjoyed it and projected ourselves into these unfamiliar characters again and again. Why? The Narrator tells us in one word in the opening sentence of the opening scene: "Tradition!" That's it: "Tradition!" He says it like this:

"Tradition, Tradition, Tradition. In Anatevka, we have our traditions for everything . . . How to eat, how to sleep, how to work, how to wear our clothes, how to show our devotion . . . most important of all, the tradition of the Matchmaker — the one who finds husbands for the girls!"

One of the most delightful tunes in this musical emphasizes the Jewish tradition in Anatevka, as they sing:

*"O Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make me a match,
Find me a find, Catch me a catch."*

Tradition is valuable because it gives us a handle we can hold onto. It helps us feel safe and comfortable. Yet, the one thing which made *Fiddler on the Roof* a success instead of a failure, and caused you and me to be so touched that we reached for our handkerchiefs to wipe our eyes, was Poppa Tevya's courage. You will remember Tevya had the courage to break with tradition and follow the experience of his heart. Tradition is important, yes; but genuine life-changing experience is much more important. Tevya saw that. This is exactly what Jesus is saying to us as His disciples: "Don't let religious tradition, form, and ritual become so important that it becomes an end in itself. Don't substitute ceremony, form, and tradition for a living, life-changing experience with Me!"

That's what Jesus is saying! O, dear friend, hear this: Christianity is meant to be an exciting, on-going experience with our living Lord, not a staid, dry, inflexible ritual and tradition! I think this would be a good time to publicly praise the long-time members in our church for recognizing this important truth — for having, like Tevya, the courage and wisdom to say that in the final analysis the inside of the cup is much more important than the outside.

When I was first appointed pastor of this church in 1967, I was the only ordained minister on the staff, so I asked a retired Methodist minister living in Tulsa to come out of retirement and help me — Brother J.O. Whitworth, a dear saint, now reaping his reward in heaven. J.O. was from the “old school” and when he heard the preacher say something with which he agreed, he would respond with a loud, vocal “Amen!” After a few weeks a delegation came to me and said: “Ahem. Ahem. We don't know exactly how to say this, but could you do something about Brother J.O.'s vocal 'Amens!' That's just not our tradition. It just doesn't seem to fit in with our great Gothic Cathedral.” I did something about it. I asked a few other people to join Brother J.O., so he wouldn't be all alone in praising our Lord!

Do you know what is the most frequent remark I now hear from visitors and new members in our church today? It is something like this: “How great it is to be in a church where the people know that God is alive and they are not afraid to open their lives to Him and personally experience His living presence!” I think we ought to give our long-time members a hand of appreciation for leading the way.

Jesus says that the first deadly temptation every would-be disciple must face is the temptation to substitute outer form for a genuine inner experience. He gives two additional quick illustrations of the way we fall into this deadly trap. In those days money was scarce, and much of the trade was done in commodities, so the people brought their tithes to the storehouse in kind: grain, animals, fowl, goods, and so forth. Jesus says, in effect, “You follow outward form by weighing out your tithe to the exact fraction of an ounce, but your heart's not in it! You are being ‘religious’ instead of real!”

Isn't the same still true for many of us today? God intends for our tithing and giving to be an outer response of an inner experience of gratitude for what God has already done for us in Christ Jesus! This is why in our church we have sometimes called our Pledge Sunday “Thanks-Sharing Sunday” and why we have sometimes held it on Thanksgiving Sunday. Out of an inner experience of gratitude and thanks for what God has done for us in Christ, we now outwardly share what we have with Him for the work of Christ on earth.

This is why we don't have door-to-door finance campaigns in this church, but rather we continually emphasize our personal relationship with our

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living Lord. I believe with all of my heart that any person who has had a genuine life-changing experience with Christ just can't give enough to Him. But trying to get money out of a person who has not had such a personal experience is a total waste of time. I know that was true with me, and it is true with every Christian I have ever known.

Jesus says that to be disciples the important thing is not to emphasize the outer form of tithing; instead, it is to emphasize the inner experience of gratitude which exemplifies itself in all forms of giving, such as giving justice, love, and mercy, as well as money! He says, "Woe to you, Pharisees, for you use your positions of authority for personal recognition and gain, instead of a means for serving God and His people on earth." In other words, Jesus is saying, that the more responsible position we are given in the church the more power we should have, yes, but that power should be inner power, not outer power. It should be God- power, not man-power.

Pastors are not appointed "to run a church" with autocratic power; they are appointed to serve a church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Bishops are not elected to be ecclesiastical despots who are feared by those under them; they are elected to lead God's people with divine power and guidance into a deeper and more meaningful walk with Christ. Church boards and agencies are not founded to be powerful bureaucratic manipulators; they are meant to be humble human dispensers of God's revealed truth and power in a specific area to the whole Body of Christ.

In a local church, teachers are not selected to indoctrinate a captive audience each week with their own learning; they are selected to share God's Holy Word with their seeking fellow Christians. Church officers are not elected to push their own pet programs onto others; they are elected to lead God's people in finding the inner relationship and the inner power that they need for outer service.

To be a disciple we must never seek our power in church structure as the world does, but we must find our power in the living Christ living in us. When we look to Church structure for our power, we yield to the temptation to substitute outer form for an inner experience. We miss Discipleship Lesson #14 and fall into the trap of becoming religious instead of real.

II. The Scribes

Jesus turns for His second illustration to the scribes who were the lawyers of that day. Like the scribes, Jesus wants us to see that all of us are constantly tempted to substitute a life of rules for a life of grace — to substitute a man-made life for a God-empowered life. Jesus uses three illustrations to show us how the scribes substitute rules for grace. These three illustrations are found in verses 45-54.

First, Jesus says that rule-making heaps burdens upon people instead

of lifting burdens from them. In other words, living by rule instead of by grace becomes “a burden to bear, instead of a life to share.” The Bible says that “Jesus came into this world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” Jesus came to bear our burdens not to increase them.

The second illustration concerns the attitude of the scribes toward God’s prophets. Jesus says that rule-making pays lip service to God’s spokesmen, but it bleeds God’s Word of all of its vitality, strength, and power. Jesus tells the scribes that they continue to build monuments to the ancient prophets whom their fathers killed, and they go to great lengths to preserve the names of these prophets, but they have lost the power of the Word that these prophets proclaimed. Why? Because they have changed it into man’s rules instead of God’s living Word living in them. Jesus tells us that rule-making keeps us from truly knowing God. He says it like this:

*“Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering”
(Lk 11:52).*

The Bible says that Jesus was sent to this earth by God as our key to knowledge. He came as God’s divine revelation of truth. The important thing is not what we know about Jesus, but, rather, it is how well we know Jesus — how well He is assimilated into our lives! The truth Jesus came to reveal is not something we learn through our own erudition and study about Jesus and God; it is something we experience as we get to know Jesus better and better.

The danger in all organized religion is simply “knowing about God” instead of “knowing God.” We try to substitute our knowledge for God’s power! Anytime we try to condense our great Christian faith into a religion of rules that’s exactly what happens: we simply substitute our knowledge for God’s power.

The good news is that Jesus came to bring us God, so we can get away from a religion of rules once and for all, and begin to live a dynamic life of grace. To be a disciple we must resist the temptation to substitute a life of rules for a life of grace. Likewise, we must resist the other part of this temptation — to substitute outer form for an inner experience. These are the culprits that keep us anemic as Christians. Anytime we substitute outer form and rules for the life-giving blood of the living Christ we are simply coming down with pernicious spiritual anemia. According to the Bible, the only way we can resist these temptations is the way Jesus shows us our discipleship lesson.

Discipleship Lesson #14

To be disciples we must be real instead of religious.

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How are we to do this? How can we be real instead of religious?

- We open our lives honestly and sincerely to the reality of God's saving power in the blood of Jesus.
- We open our lives honestly and sincerely to the reality of God's Word as our Word for life.
- We open our lives honestly and sincerely to the reality of God's Holy Spirit living in us and giving us all the fruit and all the gifts we need to be His disciples.

If we are to be disciples for Jesus Christ, we must begin by being real instead of religious. The only way we can do this is by making Jesus Christ our real Savior from sin and our real Lord of life, the Bible our real Word to live by, and the Holy Spirit our real equipper, sanctifier, and power for life!

To be real instead of religious we must recognize that we need the actual presence of the Lord in our life, not some substitute for Him. We must be done with substituting outer form for inner experience once and for all. We must discard rules as a substitute for grace. We must make certain that all outer form and ritual are a means for an inner experience with our living Lord. Finally, we must make sure that all the rules we formulate for life are tempered with the love, mercy, and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, will we be worthy of the name *disciple*, for only then will we be real instead of religious!

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #14?
2. All of us are tempted to make the same substitutions the Pharisees and scribes made. What did the Pharisees try to substitute for an inner experience?

What did the scribes try to substitute for a life of grace?
3. Describe some ways these particular temptations are manifested in your own local Church.
4. Where in your own life are you being religious instead of real? Perhaps the following questions will help you.
 - Do I praise God according to my traditions while feeling critical of those who express their praise differently?
 - Do I use pious language with my Christian friends, and vulgarities elsewhere?
 - Do I declare my love for God while holding hate and bitterness against another person?
 - Do I rush to attend Bible study and scream at my children on the way?

Search the Scriptures

5. In the following Scriptures, what did Jesus say to the scribes and Pharisees concerning

Tradition — Mark 7:6-8

Outer Form — Matthew 23:25-28
6. What happens when we try to establish our own righteousness and live a life of law?
(See Rom 9:31-32, 10:3-4.)

Internalize God's Word

7. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13 in two or three different translations. Personalize this Scripture regarding a specific temptation you are experiencing. Allow the Holy Spirit to show you the way of escape provided by God. Ask the Lord to lead you into His victory over this temptation.

Memory scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:13

Notes

Journey Into Discipleship

Appendix

Steps in Praying God's Word

Choose a time and place where you can be alone and uninterrupted for at least 15 minutes. Take the phone off the hook. You have an appointment with God. Read through the following steps thoughtfully. The seven underlined verbs may help you remember how to proceed, but treat them as guideposts to help you find your way, not as rigid rules!

1. **Read** a passage of scripture. Read slowly; your objective is not to finish a chapter, nor even a sentence, but to enter an experience.

2. **Pray**, focusing your attention on Jesus. You want no spirit but His Holy Spirit in control!

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

3. **Relax** your body. Turn loose one muscle group at a time, starting with your toes. Physical relaxation helps your spirit become quiet and at rest. Breathe slowly and deeply, breathing in the Holy Spirit, breathing out tension. Let go and trust God.

*"In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Is 30:15).*

4. **Recall** the scripture passage. Picture the scene vividly. Use as many of your five senses as possible. For example, if you are meditating on John 8:1-11 about the woman caught in adultery, the scripture has told you that it is early in the morning. Jesus is seated in the temple teaching the people. Probably His disciples are with Him as usual. They are interrupted by the scribes and Pharisees bringing the woman into their midst. What do you see, hear, smell, feel, taste? Experience the color and movement, hear the noise of the crowds and perhaps the sounds and odors from the sacrificial animals being sold nearby. Sense the mood of the crowd, the condemnation of the accusers.

5. **Enter** the scene as one of the participants. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you which one you are: the accused woman, one of the scribes or a Pharisee, one of the people who had been listening to Jesus teach, or one of the disciples. Perhaps Jesus had been teaching on forgiveness. Live the entire event within yourself.

6. **Experience** whatever the Lord brings. Let Him apply this to your present life situation. Are you experiencing shame or fear over some sin in your life? Are you feeling self-righteous as you judge someone else? Are you having difficulty accepting Jesus' teaching that you are to not judge others? Are you questioning His compassion for someone you know? Is He expecting you to be compassionate? Are you slipping quietly away like the others? Allow the Risen Christ to lead you. Don't try to figure it out; don't write your own script. Just wait on the Lord. Allow Him to supply your need: comfort, forgiveness, conviction, guidance, compassionate understanding.

"...my word ...shall accomplish that which I purpose..." (Is 55:11)

7. **Express** to God your gratitude or your disappointment. If you use a Prayer Journal, you may want to record this experience and write down your insights. Continue to practice the presence of God. Be persistent in learning to pray God's Word.

Seven verbs: Read Pray Relax Recall Enter Experience Express

Journey Into Discipleship

Dr. L.D. Thomas

Volume 2 (Part B)

Sermon 15 through 20

May 1 - June 5, 2011

The *Journey Into Discipleship* sermon series, based on the so-called “Travel Document” in Luke 9:51-19:27, was originally preached by the late Dr. L.D. Thomas at First United Methodist Church, Tulsa, from 1979-1981. They are presented here in edited form in five volumes of ten sermons each. The introduction and the worksheets which follow each sermon were prepared by Mrs. Harriett Thomas and Mrs. Sandy Heiser.

Unless otherwise noted, scripture references throughout the *Journey Into Discipleship* series are from the Revised Standard Version. At the time of the original sermon series, the Revised Standard Version was the pew bible of the United Methodist Church of Tulsa.

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Foreword

Dear Class Member or Visitor,

Let us be the first to welcome you to your next steps on a continuing *Journey Into Discipleship*.

The Journey Into Discipleship (JID) 2011 curriculum began as a series of sermons preached by Dr. L.D. Thomas from 1979-1981, here at First United. Following Dr. Thomas' untimely death in 1986, his spouse Harriet along with Sandy Heiser re-fashioned these powerful messages into a small group study program. Then for quite a few years, *Journey Into Discipleship* lay dormant on a shelf.

Jerry Toops shares the next chapter in the life of JID:

I arrived at a place in my life of near total burnout in December of 2008. I gave all of myself to Jesus at that point and he led me to these sermons. As I prepared to teach the JID curriculum in 2009, I found new life and God sent just the right persons to walk with me in the process. *Journey Into Discipleship* has been a wonderful experience in my life for the past two years.

We wondered: might God also bless others in the church through JID? In late 2009 we began a "pilot project" with a few Sunday morning classes, using JID as the curriculum. They soon began to share about the transformation that was occurring in their classes, and they encouraged us to consider JID as a resource for the entire church. Over the last several months, we have been hard at work—both physically and spiritually—to make this material ready for our adult Sunday morning classes.

So here we are! *Journey into Discipleship 2011* has the potential to transform us as a church, as we learn once again to follow Jesus' example. This is no small thing.

We look forward to walking this journey with you. Please know that we are praying for you. As disciples ourselves who seek to grow in love, mercy and obedience, we ask for your prayers as well.

Dr. Wade Paschal, Senior Pastor
Dr. Jerry Toops, Director of Healing Ministries
Rev. Thomas Hoffmann, Minister of Adult Learning

From the Original Preface

by Sandi Heiser and Harriet Thomas

L. D. “Bill” Thomas preached this series of fifty sermons on discipleship over a period of eighteen months. Although he laid the discipleship theme aside for important occasions and for special emphases, Bill returned again and again to the personal, intimate lessons Jesus taught His beloved disciples — those who walked with Him then, and those of us who want to walk with Him now.

This sermon series, based on the so-called “Travel Document” in Luke 9:51-19:27, is presented in five volumes of ten sermons each. The introduction and the worksheets which follow each sermon have been prepared for use in personal devotions and/or as a catalyst for small group discussion.

. . . . The LDT Fund (L. D. Thomas memorial), . . . [originally] financed this project. In addition to the publication of *Journey into Discipleship* and *How the Bible Can Help You* (a book of L. D. Thomas’ sermons), LDT Fund allocations during the years have included:

- Canos [Brazil] VIM Trip
- Community Ministry
- Costa Rica Counseling Prayer Seminar
- Finance Ministry
- L.D. Thomas Healing Missions
- Ministry in the Spirit Seminars
- Stephen Ministry
- The Ministry of Counseling Prayer

The LDT Committee, which administers this fund, gave oversight, suggestions, corrections, and encouragement to us as we planned, researched, edited, created, designed, and yes, prayed together in preparing these sermons for you. In the closing words of the first sermon Bill expresses our hopes and our prayer as well as his own —

[May] we begin to rise above the misery, pain, and bitterness around us to experience the love, joy, and excitement that God wants to bestow. God has not left us desolate; through Jesus He has shown us step by step what it means to grow up, get off the bottle, and start eating meat. He has shown us how to become mature Christians so we can do something about this world in which we live. My prayer for you is that you will actually get started today on this exciting, joyful *Journey Into Discipleship*. Bon voyage!

In memory of
Joe Hammond and Louise Cobb
True Disciples of Jesus Christ who completed the
Journey ahead of us.

Journey Into Discipleship

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Sermon 15: Disciples--Beware!

As we continue our Journey into Discipleship, we come to a sudden stop sign. Abruptly Jesus stops and issues a grim prophetic warning to His disciples, which we now recognize as His Discipleship Lesson #15. We find it in the first three verses of chapter 12 of Luke, where Jesus says:

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy!”

In effect, Jesus is saying, “Before going any farther, you must stop and make sure you are traveling the right road to discipleship, for you’ve come to a crucial crossroads that every would-be disciple must encounter.” He is reminding us that when the Pharisees came to the crossroads they took the wrong road. He is saying, “Now look at them and you can see what will happen to you if you take the wrong turn! The Pharisees say one thing and do another. They are deluding themselves. They are living a lie.”

“So,” says Jesus, “Stop! I want to show you the road that the Pharisees took, this road that leads to destruction, this dead-end road called hypocrisy. I want you to be able to recognize it so you can avoid it. Then we will continue our journey down the Glory Road!”

Next, I believe that Jesus told them something like this: “The dead-end road called hypocrisy has one outstanding characteristic: it is always covered over with self! It is always surfaced with self!” Then, to drive home this important discipleship lesson, perhaps He reminded them of the pictures He had drawn in the Sermon on the Mount contrasting this dead-end road with the Glory Road. Jesus’ warning is our discipleship lesson.

Discipleship Lesson #15

Disciples, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy!

When Jesus stops in this important journey and issues this terse, grim, prophetic admonition, He is warning us about the six things which keep us from following Him — the six ingredients that make up that false, misleading covering called “self” that leads to hypocrisy.

I. Self-centeredness or Selfishness

“The leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy,” consists first of all of self-centeredness. I’m not talking about the desires of our life, so much as the focus of our life. All of us, including the Pharisees, desire basically the same things:

Scripture

Luke 12:1-3 and
Matthew 7:1-5,
15-28

Text

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.”

Luke 12:1b-2

- We desire to be saved from damnation to eternal life.
- We desire to be forgiven and cleansed of sin and guilt.
- We desire to be delivered from fear and find real peace within.
- We all long for a victory and consolation from life's pains and hard knocks. All of us desire to find the right way out of our troubles and difficulties.
- We all long for infallible guidance, so we can make right choices.
- Down deep we all desire to live the good life both physically and morally.
- We all desire to have the power we need for life.
- We all desire heaven rather than hell, both in this life and in the life to come.
- We all desire to live life and to live it abundantly!

This is not self-centeredness or selfishness; this is self-realization! This is exactly what God desires for us, too, and what He promises us in the Bible. What makes us self-centered and selfish is not so much our desires as it is the focus of our lives! Look at the different pictures which Jesus paints at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in the 7th chapter of Matthew, and you will see what I mean. In these pictures, He shows us some people who are traveling this dead-end road, and all of them have the same focus. For example:

- They focus on the faults of others to make themselves look better.
- They focus on outer appearance, instead of on their inner selves.
- They focus on the words they utter, instead of the deeds they do.
- They focus on the superstructure of their house of life, instead of its foundation.

They all focus on the false covering of self instead of the real self, and that adds up to self-centeredness. As disciples, if we are to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy,” we must first make certain that our lives are focused right to meet our basic desires. We must make certain we are focused on the real self as found in God's Word, instead of on the superficial covering of self as seen by the world.

II. Self-deception

The Pharisees honestly believed that they were right. They had convinced themselves that their way was the only way. They were not traveling this dead-end road called hypocrisy because they wanted to be hypocrites — no one ever does! They were traveling it because they really believed it was the right road. They were traveling it because they had deceived themselves.

That's why we travel it, too! Look again at the pictures Jesus paints at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount and you will see this same self-deception in those traveling this dead-end road.

- The man who can see the speck in his brother's eye but cannot see the log in his own eye really believes his hard, judgmental spirit is right.
- The false prophet, who is a ravenous wolf in sheep's clothing, really believes in what he is doing.
- The man who built his house on sand really believes that is the quickest and best way to get his basic desires met. As he nonchalantly sits there rocking in his ill-conceived house, soaking up all of the blessings of the pleasant weather, little does he realize the danger around the corner when the rain, wind and floods come. Why? Because he has deceived himself!

We all do, who build our lives on anything except on the rock of God's Word! Only a solid foundation built on God's Word in the Bible and His Word in Christ can keep us from deceiving ourselves and honestly believing that half-truths are whole truths. At this very hour many Christians are nonchalantly rocking in their ill-conceived houses, soaking up the blessings of the pleasant weather, with no idea of the storm clouds that are forming on the horizon. These Christians honestly believe the half-truths they tell themselves. They honestly believe that being Christian is just living by the Golden Rule and being a good person. They really believe it when they tell themselves, "I don't need more Bible study or more disciplined living to be a Christian. I know the Ten Commandments. I grew up in a Christian home." Many Christians really believe that they've got it made now that they have had one dramatic baptism experience with the Holy Spirit. Others really believe that all that Holy Spirit stuff is too far-out for them, and they feel perfectly safe and secure in their house built on sand.

Dear friend, unless we constantly examine and test ourselves by the Word of God — all of the Word of God — instead of twisting it to fit what we are already doing, we shall inevitably deceive ourselves like the Pharisees and find ourselves traveling a dead-end road, that leads to destruction.

III. Self-righteousness

The false belief that we can make ourselves righteous by what we do is what the word "self-righteousness" means. This was the leaven of the Pharisees that caused them to take the wrong turn at this crucial crossroads. The Pharisees honestly believed that if they could just keep the law for one day the Kingdom of God would come! But look at the pictures Jesus paints for us in the Sermon on the Mount and you can see what this false belief did to them and what it always does to us:

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- It burdened them with a hard, judgmental spirit.
- It clothed them in the cheap clothing of a false prophet.
- It made them like thistle bushes instead of fruit trees — of no use to anyone. It turned them into all mouth and no heart.
- It caused them to build their lives on a crumbling foundation that could not stand.

This is always what happens when we try to substitute our own self-righteousness for the righteousness of Jesus Christ! He is our righteousness. To be disciples we must find our goodness in Him, not in ourselves. We must see others with His eyes of mercy. We must leave all judgment to Him. Anytime self-righteousness rears its ugly head in our lives we can be sure that we took the wrong turn back at that crucial crossroads in our Journey into Discipleship. The only thing to do is to go back and get on the Glory Road by accepting Christ and Christ alone as our righteousness.

IV. Self-will

At the heart of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees was the fact that they were determined to do their own will instead of being open to the will of God. First God gave them His will for mankind in His written law; but instead of acknowledging their own weakness and inability to keep this law and their need for the mercy and grace of God, they destroyed the spirit of the law by twisting it into inane man-made rules which they were determined to keep. Next, God gave them His living Word in Jesus Christ, but they were so closed and self-willed that they were blind to Him.

Jesus shows us the same picture of willfulness in His pictures of those traveling this dead-end road at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. There He shows us people choosing to judge others, choosing to be false prophets, choosing to produce thorns rather than fruit, choosing to be all mouth and no heart, choosing to build their lives on crumbling foundations that cannot endure. He shows us these pictures of people making wrong choices simply because their own willfulness closes their minds and hearts to the revealed will of God in His Holy Word — both in Christ and in the Scriptures.

To be a disciple we must first put our will under God's will, so we will choose right instead of wrong! Self-will always takes us down that dead-end road, called hypocrisy. God's will always takes us down that Glory Road that leads to life — abundant, eternal life!

V. Self-power

The Pharisees became hypocrites instead of dynamic disciples like Peter, James, John, and Paul, because they closed their lives to the divine power

that Christ offered them. They honestly thought they were on their own.

If I were asked to point to just one way in which modern day Christians are more like the Pharisees than like the first disciples, I would have to say that it is right here. Over and over I see Christians who are worn out and defeated, because they honestly believe that they have to do it themselves. They know nothing about the divine power that Christ came to bring them. Many are actually afraid of the Holy Spirit. Like the Pharisees they close their lives to the supernatural power of God. When they come to this crucial crossroads in their discipleship journey, there is only one direction that they can go: they must travel the dead- end road, called hypocrisy instead of the Glory Road that leads to life. You see, when we have only our own power for the journey we must constantly cover up our own shortcomings, mistakes, and lack of power.

Jesus is showing us in the vivid pictures He paints for us in the Sermon on the Mount that the real reason one person judges another, or the real reason the fruit tree doesn't produce fruit, or that a Christian turns out to be all talk and no heart, or a foolish man builds his house of life on sand, is because each has no power beyond himself! Each person is in this condition, says Jesus, because he is not open to God's power in Christ. It's God's power that gives us mercy, makes us productive, and provides us the staying power we need in life.

To be a disciple means first and foremost that we are open to God's power in Christ. It means that we are open to the power of the Holy Spirit. It means we are actually spiritually endowed with the Spirit of the living Christ. The Glory Road must be traveled in the power of the Holy Spirit or it cannot be traveled at all!

VI. Self-defeat

Jesus says in our scripture that nothing is covered over by self that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. In the pictures He paints in the Sermon on the Mount, the end is the same for the man who sets himself up as judge, for false prophets, for the loud-mouth Christians, and for the foolish builder — the end is the same for all: destruction!

Do you remember the popular TV program a number of years ago called Mission Impossible? Do you remember how it always began? The hero received his assignment from a tape which had a built-in means to self-destruct. Jesus is saying to us that the leaven of the Pharisees causes us to self-destruct. It is always a one-way road and the end is destruction! The end is a foundation that is too weak to withstand the torrential rains, the howling wind and the raging floods of life. The end is a glorified Lord looking us straight in the eye at the most important time in life and saying, "Depart from Me, I don't even know you!" The end is cutting down the worthless fruit tree and throwing it in the fire. The end is judgment for

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those who judge!

Destruction is inherent in the leaven of the Pharisees; it's built into it; it's part of it. Hypocrisy is always defeating. Shortly after Jesus spoke these words the Pharisees passed from the scene of history — totally destroyed by their own hypocrisy. Here is a truth you can depend upon: if you follow the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy, you are sure to self-destruct!

In our Journey into Discipleship we come to a sudden stop sign. Ahead we see a crossroads. Abruptly, Jesus stops and points down that dead-end road that leads to destruction, and gives us a grim, prophetic warning which we now recognize as our 15th discipleship lesson. Here it is in its entirety as Jesus would have us hear it:

Discipleship Lesson #15

Disciples, beware of hypocrisy! Beware of putting yourself in the place that is reserved for God in Christ! Disciples, beware of keeping the form and losing the power! Beware of building on a foundation of sand, for when the rains fall, the floods come, and the winds blow, your house of life will fall and great will be the fall of it!

Jesus turns His back on that dead-end road that leads to destruction and continues His journey down the Glory Road, saying as He goes, "Come, follow me, and you shall have life and have it abundantly! Let him who has ears to hear, hear!"

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #15?
2. The dead-end road called hypocrisy has one outstanding characteristic. What is that characteristic?
3. Nine expressions of our natural desire for the abundant life are listed in Section One of this lesson. Which ones are desires of your own heart? What would you add to this list?
4. List the six ingredients that make up hypocrisy and explain, define, or give an example of each.

Search the Scriptures

5. In John 13:15 we are told that Jesus left an example that we should follow. Read the listed references and record what you learn concerning Jesus' example to us for this discipleship lesson.

• John 5:19, 30 • John 6:38 • John 8:28, 29 • John 12:49 • Phil 2:6, 7

Internalize God's Word

6. The passages in Matthew 7 which give examples of hypocrisy are listed below. Identify or describe the hypocrite in each.

• vs. 1-5 • v. 15 • vs. 16-20 • vs 21-23 • 24-27

7. Ask God to "search your heart and try your thoughts" (Ps 139:23-24) and see if there are areas of hypocrisy in your life.

- Self-Centered: Am I the focus of my own life? Am I selfish?
- Self-Deceiving: Am I honest with myself about myself?
- Self-Righteous: Do I trust my own goodness, or God's forgiveness and cleansing?
- Self-Willed: Do I want and trust my way more than God's way?
- Self-Powered: Do I receive power from the Holy Spirit or am I a "do-it-yourself" Christian?
- Self-Defeating: Do I self-destruct by wearing a mask and playing a part in order to impress or please others?

Memory scripture: 2 Corinthians 10:12

Sermon 16: HOW TO LIVE BEYOND FEAR

The 16th lesson in our Journey into Discipleship deals with what psychologists say is the strongest of all human emotions: fear. Modern psychology informs us that fear is an elemental emotion, meaning that all of us have it as a part of our native equipment. Therefore, it is a God-given emotion meant for our good. Like all human emotions it can be used either in a way which will destroy us, or in a way which will help us mature and become the people God wants us to be — genuine, mature disciples. This is exactly what Jesus tells us in our text:

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. I will warn you whom to fear; fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Lk 12:4-5)

Jesus is telling us that there are two kinds of fear: the wrong kind and the right kind, the kind we should not have and the kind we should have. Modern psychology has discovered the truth that Jesus taught: fear is an elemental emotion, common to all of us, but if used in the wrong way it will destroy us, and if used in the right way, it is the doorway into eternal life.

To comprehend what Jesus is telling us and to incorporate this truth into our lives we must first understand the meaning of four biblical terms. The first term is **spirit of fear**. This is Paul’s term for the wrong kind of fear. He uses it in what many people consider the greatest chapter in the Bible, chapter 8 of Romans, where Paul describes for us the characteristics of a spiritual man. In the 15th verse of this great chapter, Paul says:

“For you,” (and by you he means professing Christians) “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship.” (Rom 8:15)

That is, the wrong kind of fear enslaves us and the right kind of fear frees us. Then, in his second letter to Timothy, Paul says:

“For God hath not given us” (and by “us” he again means professing Christians) . . . “For God hath not given us a spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” (II Tim 1:7, KJV)

Paul is referring to the spirit that controls our life, exercising dominance over our thoughts and actions. Paul is referring to what psychologists call phobias. Have you ever counted the different phobias in your dictionary? Their name is legion. There is acrophobia, or fear of height; agoraphobia, fear of open spaces; claustrophobia, fear of closed spaces; neophobia, fear of new things; pathophobia, fear of disease; photophobia, fear of lights; spermaphobia, fear of germs; zoophobia, fear of animals. Right at the top of

Scripture

Luke 12:4-7 and
Isaiah 11:1-9

Text

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!

Luke 12:4-5

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

Isaiah 11:1-3

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the list is androphobia, fear of men!

Jesus is talking about, not just one of these phobias, but all of them rolled into one. He's talking about the spirit of fear, as Paul calls it, which pushes your heart up into your throat when the boss calls on the telephone, or keeps you from taking an airplane although the occasion demands it. He's talking about the spirit of fear that denies you the fulfillment, joy, and excitement of marriage because you are afraid it won't turn out right. He's talking about the fear of taking a new job because you fear you will fail, or a fear of teaching a Sunday school class or visiting in evangelism or getting involved in any kind of ministry because you are bound by a spirit of fear. This spirit of fear makes us jealous and distrustful without reason, irritable without cause! This spirit of fear, says Jesus, will keep us from being God's people and thus destroy us; therefore, we must learn how to live beyond it.

The second biblical term is *fear of the Lord*. The Bible speaks of the fear of the Lord to characterize the attitude that man must have in order to enter into a covenant relationship with God. Fear of the Lord in the biblical sense means recognizing God for who He is, and standing in such awe of Him that we elevate Him to the supreme place in our lives. It is seeing God as the Giver of all life, the Ruler of the Universe, as all-powerful, almighty. Recognizing this and accepting this is the beginning of our covenant relationship with God which culminates in eternal life for us. Denying this or turning our back on it closes us to the source of life and power, and consequently leads to death.

Fear of the Lord is the right kind of fear, says Jesus, and the only way we can live beyond a spirit of fear, which is the wrong kind of fear. It frees us from domination by sin and puts us under God's control. The only way we can avoid living our lives in reaction to other people is in a covenant relationship with God in which we respond to Him through the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah speaks of the fear of the Lord as Jesus would demonstrate it:

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD." (Isa 11:1-3)

Isaiah is telling us that the delight of Jesus is the fear of the Lord. This is His way of life, and because of it He is the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of truth and power. He is the spirit of knowledge. This is exactly what Jesus means when He tells us to fear the Lord. He means for us to delight in being like Him, in being Christlike. He means for us to be filled with His Spirit, for only the Spirit of Christ — the Holy Spirit — can enable us to live beyond the spirit of fear which will destroy us.

The third biblical term is **wisdom**. Wisdom, when it's used in the Bible, always means knowing how to live right. According to the Bible the only way to live right is to live according to God's revealed truth. Wisdom in the biblical sense doesn't mean so much our learning as it means our doing. We are wise when we live according to God's revealed truth, says the Bible! We are foolish when we refuse to live according to God's revealed truth, no matter how many college degrees we have or how erudite we are!

When the Bible says that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, it is telling us that the right way to live is to give the Spirit of God — the Holy Spirit — control of our life, elevating Him to the supreme place. If we don't, the Bible says, we shall be controlled by a spirit of fear, reacting first to this person then that person, dominated by every circumstance that comes along, ending up like the foolish man who built his house on the sand — destroyed!

The fourth biblical term we need to understand is **eternal life**. In the Bible eternal life really means the God-Life, for God alone is eternal. All other created life is finite and will pass away. God is Spirit. God is eternal. The Bible says that God created man in His image, that God gave man His Spirit, which means that man alone among all created life was made to be eternal and not pass away. Man was created to be an eternal, spiritual being like God. The fall of man changed all of this, distorting this image of God in man, subjecting mankind to domination by the evil spirit of Satan instead of the eternal Spirit of God, who is Love. Thus, fallen man is destined to live eternally in hell — in evil.

The good news of the Gospel is that God has given all of us a second chance. This is why He sent Jesus to us. Jesus came to give us eternal life — the God-life — to re-create us as spiritual people. How? By giving us back the image of God within us, by re-creating that image in us, by giving us His Holy Spirit, by giving us the God-life! When Jesus says in our text: "I tell you whom to fear: Fear Him who holds your eternal destiny in His hands," He is simply telling us that fear of the Lord — that is, putting ourselves under the control of the Spirit of our Lord — is the only way we can ever accept this gift of eternal life, for the Spirit of God alone is eternal!

Fear is an elemental emotion; it is a part of our native equipment, common to all of us; therefore, it is God-given and meant for our good. The surest way for Satan to enslave us is to twist this elemental emotion into a spirit of fear, so that we simply re-act to the things of this world instead of responding to the eternal Holy Spirit of our Lord. According to the Bible there is only one way a person can live beyond the spirit of fear, and that our 16th discipleship lesson.

Discipleship Lesson #16

A disciple can live beyond the spirit of fear only when his dominant characteristic is fear of the Lord.

Why is this true? It is true because the Bible says that the fear of the Lord is a beginning for us in three different ways:

I. Covenant Relationship

First, says the Bible, fear of the Lord is the beginning of our covenant relationship with God in Christ. Just as the Old Testament uses the term, fear of the Lord, to characterize the attitude God's people must take in order to enter into a covenant relationship with Him, so Jesus uses this same term to characterize the attitude we must take under the New Covenant, in order to enter into our covenant relationship with Him. We must recognize Jesus for who He is and truly stand in such awe of Him that we elevate Him to the supreme place in our lives. We must see Him as John describes Him in the opening words of his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through Him and without Him was not anything made that was made. (Jn 1:1-3)

We must realize that Jesus gives us life. He rules the universe. He is all-powerful, almighty. He is God in the flesh. Recognizing and accepting this is the beginning of our covenant relationship with God in Christ. Elevating Jesus to this supreme place in our lives is what the New Testament means by fear of the Lord. When we fear the Lord, this elemental emotion within us is functioning right; then it, and everything else about us, is subject to Christ as Lord of life, and His perfect love casts out the spirit of fear. Thus we live beyond the deadly spirit of fear.

II. Wisdom

Not only is fear of the Lord the beginning of our covenant relationship with God; the Bible says that it is also the beginning of wisdom. That is, fear of the Lord is the beginning of life lived according to God's revealed truth. Both Isaiah and Paul describe this life of wisdom for us, this right kind of living. They tell us it is a life of "power, love, and a sound mind."

- Power — the ability to fulfill our purpose in life
- Love — the ability to relate right on every level of life
- A sound mind — the ability to decide right, to think right

That's wisdom and the Bible says that fear of the Lord is the beginning of this kind of life! Why? Fear of the Lord, in the biblical sense, begins with recognizing who Jesus is as God in the flesh, but it goes on to see that He

alone can redeem us from the pit dug by the deadly spirit of fear. This is really what John Wesley meant when he spoke of fleeing from the wrath to come (which was the theme of most of his preaching). He meant for all of us to face up honestly to what will happen to us without Christ as our Savior. Think about that, and you will see how awesome it is. In the words of the old Negro spiritual: “It causes me to tremble . . . tremble . . . tremble” when I honestly put myself at the foot of the Cross of Christ and think about what would happen to me without Christ as my Savior. It’s awesome to know that Christ alone can save us from the spirit of fear which takes us to the very pit of hell, and to know that He alone can give us the abundant life of power, love, and a sound mind. If that doesn’t move us to genuine awe — true fear of the Lord so that we elevate Him to the supreme place in our lives — then nothing can.

Fear of the Lord is the beginning of right living, because it draws us to Christ as Savior, who alone delivers us from bondage to a spirit of fear and gives us new life — the kind of life God intended for us to have from the beginning.

III. Eternal Life

The Bible says that eternal life begins with fear of the Lord. Jesus came to give us back the image of God which we’ve lost through sin. Jesus came to give us the God-life. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that eternal life must begin now or it can never begin at all! If this doesn’t cause us to tremble . . . tremble . . . tremble, then nothing ever can! If this doesn’t move us to flee from the wrath to come nothing ever can!

Jesus died on a cross, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sent us His Holy Spirit for one purpose and one purpose only: so He could give us eternal life — the God- life, so He could restore the image of God within us — the image that shall never die! Only the Holy Spirit of our Lord can restore this eternal image in us! In our text, Jesus says that the beginning of eternal life is fear of the Lord! What does He mean by this? He means that because of sin every human being is under the dominion of Satan, dominated by a deadly spirit of fear. As long as we remain under the control of this spirit of fear, reacting to people and circumstances through fear, we are doomed to the way of all flesh! The moment any person accepts Jesus Christ and His gift of the Holy Spirit, in that very moment eternal life begins and will continue throughout eternity. According to the Bible, eternal life does not begin after death; eternal life begins in this life, when by faith in the living Christ, we move from domination by sin to genuine fear of the Lord, and open our lives to Him as our new Life-Giver — the Re-Creator and Ruler of our lives.

He alone can give us the God-life which enables us to live beyond sin and thus beyond the spirit of fear. The good news is: He wants to give eternal life to each one of us right now. The good news is: He loves you! He loves

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you so much that He wants to live in you right now and enable you to live beyond the deadly fear which would destroy you. He loves you so much that He wants to spend all of eternity with you! He, who knows every sparrow in this world and every hair on your head, loves you so much that He doesn't want you to put your eternal security in the wrong thing. This is why the Bible makes it so clear that Christ alone is our eternal security. Think about that! It is awesome! Think about it: our eternal destiny is in His hands alone. He holds the eternal life of each of us in His hand! That's awesome! That's frightening when you turn it around and realize that each one of us is totally free to put our trust in something else for our eternal security, and thus perish! Think about it and it will cause you to tremble . . . tremble . . . tremble! That's why fear of the Lord is the beginning of eternal life — victorious life both now and throughout eternity with Him! This is why in this 16th discipleship lesson Jesus makes it clear that, in order to live life victoriously both now and eternally, the dominant characteristic in our lives must always be fear of the Lord, that is, elevating Him to the supreme place He deserves in our lives:

"I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. I tell you whom to fear: fear Him who holds your life in His hands!"

Do you fear Him?

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #16?
2. Restate this lesson in your own words as it applies to your life situation right now.
3. List the four biblical terms discussed in this discipleship lesson.
4. Have you (or someone you know well) ever experienced the spirit of fear? If so, describe and explain the experience and its outcome.
5. Review the discussion of the biblical term fear of the Lord in this lesson. Then, explain what that term means to you.
6. How can you have the kind of wisdom described in this lesson?

Search the Scriptures

7. The following scriptures from the Book of Proverbs have reference to the fear of the Lord. Look up each reference and write out what the Holy Spirit shows you.

• 2:1-5 • 9:10 • 10:27 • 14:26-27 • 16:6 • 19:23 • 22:4

Internalize God's Word

8. Psalm 34, which speaks of the fear of the Lord, is a psalm of personal witness. The Psalmist tells one or more of the following things in each verse.
 - a) What he, the Psalmist, did (or intends to do)
 - b) How the Lord responded to him
 - c) What his hearers should do (or are doing)
 - d) How the Lord will respond to them

Read the Psalm and identify the type of statement in each verse by using one of the above letters

9. Follow the example of the Psalmist and write your own Psalm of Witness, telling the same things :
 - a) What you, the Psalmist, did (or intend to do)
 - b) How the Lord responded to you
 - c) What your hearers should do (or are doing)
 - d) How the Lord will respond to them

Let your Psalm express your own witness. Use your own speaking style. Don't try to be "literary" or polished. You are not trying to impress others. You are expressing your heart. Write at least four lines or phrases.

Memory scripture: Hebrews 11:6

Sermon 17: The Need of Every Disciple

I am convinced that many of us miss the truth that Jesus came to reveal because we try to legalize what He says. We try to make it into negative rules instead of into a positive way of life; we make it into bad news instead of good news. One of the most obvious examples of this is the discussion of marriage and divorce in the 10th chapter of Mark. The Pharisees, who legalize all of God's truth, ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. They expected Jesus to say no, which would trap him into breaking one of their laws since Moses had allowed divorce. Jesus turns the tables on them and replies, "For your hardness of heart, Moses allowed divorce, but God intended through marriage to perform the miracle of making a man and woman one!" Yet, almost every time this passage of Scripture is discussed it is twisted into a negative rule against divorce instead of a divine guide for making marriage a heaven here on earth. This is what I mean by "legalizing the gospel."

No place is legalizing done more than in our text, Luke 12:8-12, and its parallels in the other Gospels. Even the name with which we have tagged it sounds like a "Thou shalt not" rule instead of a divine revelation for living. We call it the unforgivable sin, and spend most of our time trying to figure out what that sin is, suggesting everything from atheism to sex. By legalizing the gospel we make bad news out of good news, giving ourselves another burden to bear, instead of an exciting life to share with our Lord. Jesus didn't come to this earth to add more rules to our way of life. He came to release us from a life of law, to bring us the grace of God, to set us free to become the people God created us to be. That is the context in which we read these words of Jesus,

"And every one who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Lk 12:10-12).

Jesus is pointing up the importance of the Holy Spirit, saying, "Listen, carefully, for I have some good news for you. I want to tell you about the need of every disciple and how God supplies that need! Even though you don't recognize Me for who I am, God's Son, you will be forgiven for that when you finally see the light. There's one essential for that forgiveness, just as there is one essential for the rest of the life of discipleship. This essential is what I want to tell you about today. It is the one thing you cannot miss if you are to be My disciples. It is the need of every disciple!"

Scripture

Luke 12:8-12

Text

And every one who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Luke 12:10

Here it is, Discipleship Lesson #17:

Discipleship Lesson #17

The need of every disciple is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, so he can fulfill the call of Christ upon his life.

Jesus is revealing to all of us our common need in life — our need for the living God within us! He is telling us that without the Holy Spirit there is no way we can be forgiven and set free from bondage. Moreover, without the Holy Spirit God cannot supply the rest of our needs either, because God has chosen to do all of His work in the lives of men and women through the ministry of His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God coming into our lives to do His justifying and sanctifying work there. Paul expresses this truth in just a dozen plain words in I Corinthians 12:3:

“... no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.”

That is, we can’t even get started as Christians without the Holy Spirit! Paul explains this work of the Holy Spirit most beautifully and clearly in Romans 5:1-5:

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

Notice the word “because” in the final sentence. Paul is saying that all of this happens because of one thing; that is, we can experience forgiveness in Christ, assurance of salvation and eternal life, power over the adversities in life, and the love we need for right relationships and right living because of one thing and one thing only, and then follows the “because” ...

“... because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” (Rom 5:5)

That is a summary of the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men. The Holy Spirit is given to us by God to meet our every need. Therefore, to close our lives to God’s Holy Spirit is to close our lives to God’s answer to our need, not only of forgiveness, but also our need of assurance, of power and of love! This is exactly what Jesus is telling us in this discipleship lesson. Let’s go a little deeper and see what this means for you and me in each of these four areas of need.

I. Forgiveness

The Bible says that our forgiveness comes from Christ, but it can be made a reality for us only through the Holy Spirit. Let me explain. The Bible says that Jesus Christ came to this earth to defeat sin for us. Every time Jesus confronted sin He defeated it. He defeated sin in His life, He defeated it in His death, His resurrection, and His ascension. In the wilderness He defeated the temptation to sin. He released the captives of sin in His healing ministry. He proclaimed His power over sin in His preaching ministry. He taught us how to deal with sin in His teaching ministry. On the Cross He took everything that sin can do to a person and won victory over it as He rose from the dead to reign triumphantly over sin forever!

Yes, the good news is that Jesus has already won the battle over sin for us. But that is only half of the good news. The rest of this good news is that Jesus has also provided a way for us to participate in the victory He has already won. He has provided a way to join our lives today, twenty centuries later, to His victory over sin. He has provided a way to give every person of every age the benefit of His victory over sin, and that way is what the Bible calls forgiveness. Forgiveness is the way Christ releases us from bondage to sin and sets us free. Before we can experience this forgiveness, it must be mediated to us in a real way; not theoretically but actually. Jesus says this is why He sends us His Holy Spirit! He sends us His Holy Spirit to make forgiveness real for us, to mediate to us His victory over sin, so we can actually experience forgiveness and be set free from bondage to sin. Now, that's good news!

Without the Holy Spirit no person can experience forgiveness, for without the Holy Spirit the victory of Jesus cannot be mediated to us, cannot cross those 2,000 years. Jesus is telling us that without the Holy Spirit there can never be the reality of forgiveness for us; only His Holy Spirit can mediate this reality to us!

The Holy Spirit, who defeated the temptation to sin in the wilderness, who set sin's captives free wherever He went on earth, who faced on the Cross all that sin can do to a person and won the victory — this same Holy Spirit wants to be our Victor over sin today. Jesus wants to come to us in the person of His Holy Spirit and make this victory real for us through forgiveness and set us free. That's one reason why every disciple needs to be filled with the Holy Spirit. That's our common need in life.

II. Assurance

We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to experience assurance — assurance of salvation and of eternal life. Again, this assurance comes from Christ, but it can be made a reality for us only through the Holy Spirit. The Bible says that Jesus not only came to earth to defeat sin, He also came to give us life — abundant, eternal life. Paul says:

"... since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom 5:1)

Why do we have peace with God? Simply because we have assurance of our own salvation and of eternal life, our life with God! How can we have this assurance? Paul tells us in Romans 8:

"... it is the Spirit himself bearing witness to our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..." (Rom 8: 16, 17)

Jesus who lived the abundant life while He was here on earth and who ascended into heaven to live eternally, gives us this eternal life, both now and forever, when we accept Him as our Lord and Savior; but that's only part of this good news. He also sends us His Holy Spirit to assure us that this is really true! Without this assurance there can be no peace with God. Without this assurance we become victims of anxiety, fear, and doubt. It is the assurance of His Spirit witnessing to our spirit that we are children of God and heirs of Christ that enables us to rise above anxiety, doubt, and fear, and live in peace. Every disciple needs to be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to experience the assurance of salvation and of eternal life.

III. Power

We all need to be filled with the Holy Spirit because of our need for power. Power is the ability to accomplish will and purpose. It consists of both knowing and doing. Power is both knowing the truth and doing it. The great need of every person is the need for this power, power to do what we should do and power to refrain from doing what we should not do, power to rise above the suffering, hurts, pains, and hard knocks of life. Paul says:

"... the Kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power." (1 Cor 4:20)

The real test of Christianity is not what we say with our lips; it is what we do with our lives. Our common need in life is not talk, but power. We need power to be victorious over what life hands out. We need power to live right. The Bible says Christ gives us this power, for Christ both reveals to us the truth of God and brings us the power of God. Again, although the power is from Christ, it can become a reality for us only through the Holy Spirit. This is the final message that Jesus speaks on earth before His ascension:

"... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." (Acts 1:8)

That's the source of our power. The very power of Christ Himself, divine power, is available to all of us, but only when we permit His Holy Spirit to live in us, for the power is in the Spirit of Christ. To close our lives to the Holy Spirit is to close our lives to the very power of God. Every disciple needs to be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to have the power to live

victoriously.

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IV. Love

We all need to be filled with the Holy Spirit because of our common need for love. Love is a much used, much misunderstood word. The Bible's definition for love can be summed up in just one word, Christlikeness. Jesus Christ is Love personified. The Bible says that God is love and Christ is God in the flesh, so love is Christlikeness. If we are to be disciples for our Lord and carry on His ministry, the most pressing single need in our life is Christlikeness. We need the mind of Christ. We need the heart of Christ. We need to see others through His eyes and to feel for others with His feelings. If we are going to relate in love to others — our family, friends, fellow church members — our one need is Christlikeness.

According to the Bible, Christlikeness is not something we can accomplish simply by trying to be like Christ. Trying to be like Christ is the surest way to close our lives to Christlikeness, because that substitutes what we do for the good news of the gospel; that substitutes self-righteousness for Christlikeness. Trying to be like Christ substitutes bad news for good news. It is just another way of legalizing the gospel and making it a life of law instead of a life of grace. Paul tells us exactly how to become Christlike and he says it is because — there's that word again —

"... because God pours His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which He gives us." (Rom 5:5, paraphrased)

We become Christlike because we receive the love of Christ through the infilling of the Holy Spirit. This is why the Bible says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (closing our lives to our Lord's Holy Spirit by living as if there were no Holy Spirit) is not only the unforgivable sin; it is also the "unassuring" sin, the "unempowering" sin, and the unloving sin. It closes our life to the very things we most need in order to live abundantly and to be disciples of our Lord — forgiveness, assurance, power, and love! Jesus wants us to see that everything in the Christian life depends upon our being filled with His Holy Spirit. He wants us to see the truth of this discipleship lesson.

Discipleship Lesson #17

The need of every disciple is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, so he can fulfill the call of Christ upon his life.

Whether or not we are open to the Holy Spirit, so we can be filled with the Spirit of Christ, depends to a very large extent upon how we see the world we live in — our world view. There are basically two views that a Christian can take. The first view is what I call a Closed World View, where we see ourselves as living in a totally physical world with God off

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yonder somewhere in a spiritual world we call heaven. By Closed World View I simply mean that we think of the physical world that we live in and the spiritual world which God lives in as separate worlds, closed to each other, except that now and then, through our prayers — our begging and pleading — God does sometimes choose to invade our physical world with His presence and blesses us with His gifts and miracles. For all practical purposes we are totally closed off from His spiritual world. Although this is really the picture that so many Christians have of our world, it is actually a non-Christian world view, because it is contrary to the picture Jesus reveals to us.

The Christian World View which Jesus reveals is that, although we are physical beings living in a physical world, we are also spiritual beings living in a spiritual world. Jesus says that at all times we human beings actually live in two worlds — the physical world and the spiritual world! This is what Jesus means when He says that the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you, or is within you or is among you. He means that God is not out yonder somewhere so that we must beg Him to come into our world. God is with us — God is Spirit and we are always in His presence. He is always among us. He is always with us, just waiting for us to open our lives so He can come in and meet our need with forgiveness, assurance, power, and love. This spiritual world, says Jesus, is not only composed of God's Holy Spirit; it also contains the evil spirits of Satan. When we close our life to the Holy Spirit, we automatically open our life to these evil spirits and vice versa. To blaspheme — or close our lives to the Holy Spirit — simply means that we are lost because we give our lives to the evil spirits who will destroy us. The good news is the opposite of this truth and this is the truth Jesus wants His disciples to grasp: opening our lives to His Holy Spirit not only shuts the evil spirits out of our life; it is also the way we accept the salvation God has for us in Christ. It is the way God meets our need for forgiveness, assurance, power, and love!

The point is, as Christians, as heirs of Christ, we are dual citizens, but some of us have never claimed our spiritual citizenship. We haven't claimed it because we think that we actually live wholly in a physical world, so spiritually we are like a man without a country. Consequently we have never experienced this wonderful forgiveness, assurance, power, and love that is automatically ours as citizens of our Father's spiritual world. The good news our Lord has for us in this 17th discipleship lesson is that we are actually domiciled in a whole new world — an exciting, beautiful, glorious spiritual world — which is our native habitat. All we have to do to partake of all the blessings is to claim our citizenship by submitting to the dominion of the Holy Spirit, who is the Ruler there. In our text, it is true that Jesus is showing us the miseries and lost cause of a man without a country, but even more important than that, He is showing us the joys and fulfillment of a full-fledged, participating, loyal citizen in our Father's spiritual world. Have you claimed your full citizenship?

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #17?
2. What is meant by the term “legalizing the gospel” and what are some results?
3. Described in this discipleship lesson are four areas of need common to all of us. List each of these areas and explain how the Holy Spirit meets that particular need in the life of the believer.

Search the Scriptures

4. 2 Cor 3:16 and 6:19 tell us that when we become a child of God, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Read at least three scriptures from the following list. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian?

John 14:16-17, 26 | John 16:13 | Acts 1:8, 9:31 | Romans 5:5 | Romans 8:13, 16, 26 |
1 Corinthians 2:9-10, 12 | 2 Corinthians 3:6 | Titus 3:5-7

Internalize God’s Word

5. The fruit of the Holy Spirit listed in Gal 5:16, 22-23 is actually a description of the character qualities of Jesus. Read this scripture in a modern translation so that the qualities listed are ones you can easily identify, and then make a list of them. Think through the life experiences of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, seeing Jesus demonstrate each of these qualities. Identify that event or relationship by a word or phrase linking it to a quality.
6. Name those fruit of the Spirit of Jesus that are exhibited in some measure in your own life. (Don’t be falsely modest.)
7. Is there a particular area where you would like to become more Christlike — an area where you walk according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit? Is there a character quality of Jesus, a fruit of the Spirit, that you especially wish were strong in your life? Share your answers with other class or small group members. Ask them to hold you accountable for allowing the Holy Spirit control over this area. Be prepared to give an honest report the next time you meet with them.

Memory scripture: Romans 8:9

Sermon 18: The Priorities of a Disciple

God created the family as the basic unit in society, and the most important thing we can do to strengthen our country and our church is to strengthen our families. You know what has happened to the American family in the last fifteen or twenty years, and you know what is happening to our country and our church as a result of it. The problem of the American family is critical! Unless we Christians go all out to turn the situation around, both our country and our church are on a toboggan slide to hell, and the only brake is the Christian community.

We are told in the 12th chapter of Luke, beginning with the 13th verse, that as Jesus makes His last journey with His disciples from outside Galilee to Jerusalem, an anxious man rushes up to Him and says:

“Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.” Jesus replies: *“Man, who made me a . . . divider over you?”*

Then Jesus uses this setting of family alienation — brother against brother — to teach us Discipleship Lesson #18 about the right priorities in our life. He does it in a very unusual way: He shifts the subject from family to money and uses money and material things to illustrate this important lesson. First, He tells the parable of a man who spent all of his waking hours to pile up more wealth, only to discover that in doing it he had lost his soul — sounds like a modern 20th century setting, doesn't it? In the end, God calls the man a fool and says,

“So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”
(Lk 12:21)

Jesus then shifts the metaphor to birds of the air and lilies of the field; but He does it only to show us the folly of our anxiety about material things, and to drive home the punch line:

“Instead, seek first God's kingdom and all these things will be yours as well.” (Lk 12:31, paraphrased)

Then Jesus concludes with this explanatory statement:

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Lk 12:34)

Now, why does Jesus choose to illustrate His answer for family alienation and family breakdown with parables and metaphors about money? To find the answer we must ask another question: What is money? Of itself, of course, money is nothing. Money is perfectly neutral. This wedding band on my finger is nothing of itself; it too is perfectly neutral. But everyone who wears a wedding band knows that what this wedding band symbolizes is certainly not neutral. It is in fact everything — it is

Scripture

Luke 12:13-34

Text

Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.

Luke 12:31

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everything that is precious and good in my life. So it is with money! Money is a symbol! What does it symbolize? It symbolizes the most important thing in every person's life, for it symbolizes our commitment! Jesus tells us this in the concluding sentence of our scripture when He says that our money symbolizes where our heart is — that is where our commitment is!

I can give you a guaranteed, fool-proof way to discover what your life commitment is. Take all of your canceled checks for the past year and lay them out before you in piles according to the way your money was spent. Then tally them according to subjects and you will know without a doubt what is most important to you! People often ask me, "Preacher, how will God judge us when our life on earth is over?" That's easy to answer! You already have God's judgment decree in your pocket or purse right now, for it's written right there on your check stubs! All of us continually judge ourselves by the way we spend our money, for our money is the perfect symbol of our life's commitment.

This is why Jesus uses money to illustrate His answer to family alienation and breakdown. He tells us to look first at our commitments. He says, "Don't wait until it's too late like the Rich Fool. Look at your priorities! Discover your life's commitment by looking at how you spend your money. Then get those priorities right!" What are the right priorities? Can there be any doubt about this for a Christian? Jesus certainly leaves no doubt: "Instead, seek His kingdom and all these things shall be yours as well." "Put God first," says Jesus, "that's the answer to your family alienation and your money anxieties, that's the answer for living life right." By "seeking God's kingdom first" Jesus means putting ourselves under God's authority and being obedient to God instead of following the ways of the world and every modern fad that undermines the Christian concept of the family.

Is God first in your life? I don't mean lip-service-first, I mean really, honestly first. If we are to help our Lord save the American family then we must get our own house in order, for "we can't give away something we ain't got!" We all need to use the test Jesus gives us here — the check stub test — to see if God is first in our lives. The point Jesus wanted His first disciples to see and the point He wants His disciples today to see is simply this: before we can be good disciples for Him out in the world we must first get our own house in order! We can't be alienated from our brother at home and expect to be an instrument of reconciliation to a broken world. We can't fight with spouse and children and parents at home and expect to be a disciple of love to others. It's impossible! Jesus gives us our discipleship lesson.

Discipleship Lesson #18

Before he can minister for his Lord in the world, a disciple must get his own house in order by putting God first in his home.

"Put God first in your home," says Jesus, "and your family life will begin to

fall into place.” Let’s go inside of our homes for a few minutes now and see what Jesus means by this and how it works.

When we get inside our homes we immediately see that there are certain basics that are essential to happy homes and good family life, and these basics are just as definite and specific as the basics for a good education. Before a person can get a good education he must first be well grounded in the basics we call the 3 R’s. It just so happens that we can call the basics for good family life the 3 R’s, too. Let’s look at them.

I. Respect

The first R is **Respect**. What is respect? Respect is our judgment that another person has value. To respect another is simply to give that person great value in our eyes. All of us have a basic need for self-worth. We all need to know that we really do have value. Without self-worth life becomes intolerable. How is self-worth built into a person’s life? It’s built through respect in the family. As others show us that we have value in their eyes our own self-worth is built up. Respect is the name of the building blocks out of which self-worth is made.

How can a wife respect a husband who is drinking too much and working too little? How can a husband respect a wife who neglects the children and the home? How can a person respect a mate who is having an affair? How can a person respect a mate who no longer cares about appearance and just lets himself go? How can a parent respect a child who’s wasting his life on drugs or announces he is homosexually active? How can a child respect a parent who says one thing and does another? How can we respect another member of our family who is openly immoral, irresponsible, and defiant?

Let’s be honest and admit that humanly it is impossible; we can’t! The good news is “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” The Bible says that Jesus Christ came into the world not to judge the world but to save the world. Jesus didn’t come to look at us through the eyes of the world; He came to see us through the eyes of God. Jesus came to give us self-worth, and He gives us self-worth by showing us the greatest respect it is possible to show another person:

“... while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8)

He saw enough value in us to die for us. That’s respect! That gives us real self-worth. That gives every member of your family and my family real self-worth. Jesus not only showed us enough respect to die for us while we were yet sinners, He also enables us to show our fellow family members enough respect to live for them while they too are yet sinners! How? By sending us His Holy Spirit to take dominion over our lives, so we can see with His eyes and feel with His heart; that’s how! That’s the good news! When Jesus says, “Instead, seek God’s Kingdom,” He’s simply saying,

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“Instead of looking at others in your family through the eyes of the world, I’m sending you My Holy Spirit so you can see them through My eyes and you can love them with My love. Before you can do it, you must first will it. You will it by giving the Holy Spirit first priority in your life. You must seek that first of all — above everything else!”

None of us can respect the unrespectable in our own power; we can do it only by seeking first God’s Kingdom, by willing the Spirit of Christ to take absolute dominion over our lives. We can do it only by giving the Spirit of God first priority in our life. The first basic R for making your family what God wants it to be is Respect.

II. Relationships

The second R is **Relationships**. I am convinced that God created the family as the perfect opportunity for us to learn how to relate to each other, which is perhaps the most basic lesson in all life. From our first breath we have our existence only in personal relationships. Unless we learn how to relate to others properly, we are doomed to impoverishment and misery.

The whole Bible from beginning to end deals with this question of personal relationships, but the Bible adds an entirely new dimension. The Bible makes it perfectly clear that before we can relate properly with other people we must first relate right with God. In fact, says the Bible, we are actually out of relationship with people and with members of our family primarily because we are out of relationship with God.

Jesus tells us why this is true. It’s true, says Jesus, because God is love, and the only genuine, lasting relationship is a relationship of love. God created families so we can learn how to relate to each other in love. Jesus goes on to tell us that this love of which genuine relationship is made is not just a feeling; it is primarily a covenant. Love which makes a family a family must be a covenant relationship. It must be a covenant to give ourselves to meet the needs of others in our family. When Jesus tells us to seek God’s Kingdom first and all these other things will be ours as well, He is telling us to make a covenant relationship with God first and then we can fulfill our covenant relationship with others. Without this covenant relationship with God first there is no way we can genuinely relate to others in love. Why? Because all of us have fallen short of the glory of God and are self-centered instead of others-centered. Only God is love. Only when He pours His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which He gives us can we have the love we need to keep our covenant relationship of love with our family.

Every family’s strength is directly related to the strength of its covenant relationship, which we call love. When Jesus says, “Instead, seek first His [God’s] kingdom,” He is telling us that the only way we can relate rightly in our homes is to permit God to pour His all-powerful, redeeming, healing

love into our hearts so we can keep our covenant relationship of love!

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III. Responsibility

The third R is **Responsibility**. We often mistakenly think that being responsible means running the show. We're like the henpecked husband who was told by his psychiatrist to go home, be responsible, and run the show in his house. He walked in, slammed the door loudly, then shouted, "Hey, you! Come here!" His wife was shocked, but she obeyed. This gave the man more courage, so he said, "Now hear this, for I'm going to say it only once: Go in the kitchen and fix me a steak, an inch thick — medium rare, golden brown French fries, toast and coffee. Have it on the table in 20 minutes. Then go upstairs and lay out my dress suit. I'm going out on the town tonight — alone! Do you know who is going to tie my tie, and put the cuff links in my shirt?"

His shocked wife stared back in amazement, then a smile crept across her lips, as she said convincingly, "Yes, I do! The undertaker!" There's a difference between responsibility and trying to run the show!

In the opening pages of the Bible we're told that God created man and woman and set them in a family for a purpose, and He forbade only one thing: "You must not eat from the central tree — you must not put yourself in the center of things and try to usurp the place of God." Why did God say this? Because we are created to be responsible stewards or trustees for God. When we fail in this responsibility and try to take over God's place, we are cast out of Paradise and must live out our lives East of Eden, that is, out of the presence of God. When Jesus says, "Seek first God's Kingdom," He is telling us exactly the same thing: We can live in God's presence only when we put God first in our lives. We can live responsibly and fulfill our stewardship only when we put God first!

One of my crowning accomplishments as a boy was at the age of 12 or 13, when as a Boy Scout project I made a boomerang that really worked. What a thrill it was to throw that boomerang out and have it return and drop at my feet. Until a few years ago when I saw a National Geographic documentary about the aborigines in Australia, I thought that this was the real purpose of a boomerang — to throw it out and let it return to the thrower as sort of a plaything. In this documentary I learned that a boomerang actually returns to the thrower only when he has missed his target altogether. This is true for human beings, too. We return to ourselves and become self-centered like Adam and Eve, only when we have missed our mark in life altogether — only after we have failed in our responsibility to be a faithful steward for God.

The modern home is often like a house full of boomerangs, each person missing his mark in life altogether and returning to himself. Anytime this happens that family, like Adam and Eve, is cast out of Paradise and must

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live out their lives East of Eden. They have failed in their responsibility to their Creator and to each other.

Respect, Relationships, and Responsibility. Those are the 3 R's which the Bible says are the basics for making a family what God wants it to be. Now, we all know that if we miss the 3 R's in school, we flunk out; but the good news which God sent Jesus to tell us is that in His mercy God has added a 4th R just for those of us who have flunked out so far.

IV. Reconciliation

That 4th R is **Reconciliation**. The 4th R is the way to begin again when you have failed the first time, or second time or the hundredth time: Reconciliation! Because man had failed to learn the 3 R's of Respect, Relationship and Responsibility, God sent Jesus to us with the 4th R — Reconciliation! When Jesus said: "Seek first God's Kingdom, and all these things will be yours as well," I am convinced He was thinking first of all about reconciliation. This was the real need of the man who was alienated from his brother. Seek first reconciliation with God and then reconciliation in your home will follow. First let God forgive you and then you can forgive and be reconciled with alienated members of your family.

Not long ago we had an unusual service on Sunday night. When we asked our congregation to name the most meaningful service they had attended, this service was chosen overwhelmingly. It was a foot-washing service set in the context of forgiveness. Let me set the scene for you. All around our large sanctuary, every four feet or so, was a straight-backed chair with a basin on the floor in front, and a pitcher of water and a stack of towels beside each chair. Also, in the center of the chancel area was a similar chair, basin, pitcher, and towels.

Two weeks before this service I had preached on the theme of Finding Life Through Brokenness, and had witnessed to you how God had dealt with me through a broken experience with my older son John and how God had assured me that He forgave me for trying to make John over in my own image. Something I didn't tell you is that, at the same time God forgave me, He impressed upon me that I must also ask John to forgive me, so he could be set free to fulfill God's purpose in his life. When I explained this to John and asked him to participate with me in the foot washing service, he agreed.

At the foot washing service, after explaining the procedure and having a short ritual, I sat in the chair in the center of the chancel with my son John and asked him to forgive me for trying to make him over in my image. John was Jesus to me as he got on his knees, poured water over my feet and dried them with a towel. Then we exchanged places. He sat in the chair and asked me to forgive him for rebelling against me, and I washed and dried his feet. Then we threw our arms around each other in a forgiving embrace and openly wept. In that moment I experienced the meaning of

reconciliation — oneness with God, oneness with those who are very dear to you!

Following that, hundreds of our members filled the chairs around the sanctuary — husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, alienated friends. With the lights lowered they literally washed each other's feet with their own tears, as they experienced reconciliation — oneness! Since then dozens of people have told me this was the most meaningful experience they have ever had.

Reconciliation! It's God's answer for His family. It's God's answer for your family. It's the way to get your own house in order, so you can be our Lord's disciple out in the world. May God bless you as you do it!

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #18?
2. In our Scripture passage what does Jesus mean when He says to seek God's kingdom first?
3. List and define the 3 R's that are the basics for good family life.
4. God in His mercy provides a 4th R for us when we fail to pass the 3 R's. Name and define the 4th R.

Search the Scriptures

5. According to Romans 5:10-11 what was our spiritual state when we were reconciled to God?
6. Having been reconciled to God, what is our responsibility regarding reconciliation? (See 2 Cor 5:18, 19)

Internalize God's Word

7. Check your own priorities by answering each of the following questions as the Holy Spirit guides you.

Respect: Does each member of my family have great value in my eyes? Does each one know for sure that he/she is of great value to me? In what ways do I convey my respect to him/her? Does my behavior toward each family member help to build up his/her self-respect or tear it down? What changes need to be made?

Relationship: Think about the atmosphere in your home. How would an outsider describe it? Describe your personal covenant of love with your heavenly Father? Is there a similar covenant of love within your family, or is love expressed only when it is "deserved?" What can you do to strengthen love relationships within your family?

Responsibility: Is your family living "East of Eden," or is God the acknowledged ruler? Does one or more family member try to usurp God's place, His throne? What is your part in allowing God's kingdom to come and His will to be done in your family?

Reconciliation: Think about your relationship with each member of the family. Is there any relationship that needs mending? If so, what is your first step? Take that first step before answering the final question. What directions did you receive from the Father about how to proceed with reconciliation?

Memory scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:13

Sermon 19: Be Ready!

Since Jesus uses His last journey with His disciples from outside Galilee to Jerusalem to teach them the basic discipleship lessons they will need in order to carry on His ministry, it stands to reason that He would include a lesson on one of the most often mentioned subjects in the Bible. This subject is called by several different names: The Last Days, The End of the World, The Second Coming of Christ, The Second Advent, The Last Judgment, The Day of the Lord, The Final Judgment, and End Times. Regardless of the name used, they all refer to that time when God brings an end to this age and Christ Jesus comes again to judge all men. Jesus devotes a discipleship lesson to this important subject, Lesson #19.

In Luke 12:35-48, Jesus reminds His disciples of the fact of His coming again, and then tells them what they must do in order to be ready when it happens. I say Jesus reminds them of it, for much that He has already taught before this final trip deals with the subject of His Second Coming. One of every 25 verses in the New Testament refers to the Last Days and The Second Coming of Christ. If we are to understand what Christ means by His Second Coming, and the part we are to have in it, we must not limit ourselves to one passage of scripture, or we shall surely misunderstand it and be very confused.

This is what has happened when people based their understanding of end times upon four short verses in the 20th chapter of the Book of Revelation — verses 4, 5, 6, & 7. The words “one thousand years” are mentioned in each of these verses in connection with the reign of Christ for a thousand years. The Latin word for a thousand is millennium, so this thousand years is generally referred to as “the Millennium.” Since the time of St. Augustine more than 1,500 years ago, some of the bitterest controversies in the Church have arisen over whether this thousand years refers to the millennium immediately following the Second Coming of Christ, or the millennium immediately preceding it, or whether it refers to an actual period of time at all, since so much of the Book of Revelation uses numbers as symbols for something else altogether. In theological circles, the ones who believe Christ will usher in the Millennium are called the “Pre-Millennialists” (or the “Pre-Mills”), and those who contend that Christ will come after His followers establish His kingdom on earth and it exists for a thousand years are called the “Post-Millennialists” (or the “Post-Mills”). The third group who contend that the thousand years is simply a figurative way of speaking of the eternal life in Christ both before and after His coming again and has nothing to do with a specific period of time are called the “Amillennialists” (or the “A- Mills”) — meaning “no Millennium.”

Scripture

Luke 12:35-48

Text

You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour. . . . Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more.

Luke 12:40,48b

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Each of these views can be supported with strength and logic and each can be refuted the same way. Would you believe that denominations and sects have actually been started with one of these views as the chief cornerstone? And some of the most bitter and vitriolic arguments have been waged between the Pre-Mills, the Post-Mills, and the A-Mills!

That's why we must never limit ourselves to just one passage of scripture when we deal with this important subject, but must consider everything the Bible says about it — especially what Jesus Himself says about His Second Coming in the following passages:

- chapter 13 of Mark
- chapter 24 and 25 of Matthew
- chapter 21 of Luke
- chapters 13-17 of the Gospel of John (The Upper Room Discourse)

As we look at these passages of Scripture, we find Jesus emphasizing four truths about His Second Coming, including the truth we find in Luke 12:35-40 — Discipleship Lesson #19:

Discipleship Lesson #19

A disciple must always be ready for judgment by being a wise and faithful steward for our Lord.

In order to understand what Jesus is saying to us in this discipleship lesson, let's look first at the other three truths.

I. The Fact

The first truth Jesus emphasizes is the fact of His Second Coming. He leaves no doubt about this fact. Never is it a question of, "Will Jesus come again?" It is always emphatically stated that He will come again! Jesus specifically states that He will come again personally and visibly. He says it as clearly and plainly as it can be said. Listen to Him:

"Therefore, you . . . must be ready," He says, "for the Son of man is coming [again]" (Mt 24:44)

Again, He says that all people

" . . . will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." (Mt 24:30)

Jesus testifies before the high priest at His trial with the same promise, when He says:

"I tell you, the Son of man will come again." (Mt 26:64, paraphrased)

In our text, Jesus says:

"You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour." (Lk 12:40)

It was these statements about His Second Coming which formed the official ground of His condemnation for blasphemy for which He received the sentence of death on the Cross. Jewish scripture specifically prophesies that the Messiah will sit at the right hand of God in power and will return personally and visibly in the clouds. In the Old Testament there are approximately 300 prophecies regarding the First Coming of Christ, but more than 500 prophecies relating to His Second Coming! It was His flat statement of His Second Coming which finally sealed the case against Jesus and sent Him to the Cross.

All three parables in Matthew 25 say that Jesus will come again to judge all men. The Bible specifically says that when Jesus came the first time, He came to save all men, but that when He comes the second time He will come to judge all men and this will be the Final Judgment. That is, in the first Advent, which ushered in God's kingdom, Jesus came to open the door and invite all men to enter. We are still in that age. When Jesus comes again it will be to close the door, and to set up God's eternal kingdom with the faithful who have accepted His invitation. That will be the end of this age — the end of human history as we know it.

These are the facts as the Bible records them, and to dismiss them is not only to dismiss the Bible as God's Word to us; it is also to dismiss the very climax of human history itself. It is to dismiss the most glorious event in God's total plan for man, which is the establishment of His eternal kingdom with His faithful followers. It is to dismiss the best news of all: Christ does go to prepare a place for you and me, and He will come again and take us to Himself, that where He is we may be also!

II. The Signs

The second truth which Jesus emphasizes about His Second Coming concerns the signs which will precede and accompany it. When Jesus tells His disciples that He will come again and that God will put an end to the world as they know it, the disciples naturally ask:

"... [Lord], what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Mt 24:3b)

His disciples today are still asking the same question, "What are the signs?" It is a natural question for any of us to ask, for curiosity is a part of our make-up. So Jesus tells us about certain signs that will precede and accompany His coming again. Everything that Jesus says about these signs is included in the following list.

1. Many false messiahs leading us astray;
2. Wars and rumors of wars;
3. Famine;
4. Earthquakes;
5. Tribulations among the faithful;

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6. Christians betraying Christians, hating one another; 7. False prophets leading the faithful astray; 8. Wickedness multiplying on the earth; 9. People's hearts and love growing cold; 10. The Gospel preached throughout the whole world; 11. The desolating sacrilege spoken of by Daniel — pagan gods set up in holy places; 12. Even greater tribulation; 13. More false christs and false prophets with great signs and wonders leading even the most faithful astray; 14. The sun darkened and the moon without light; 15. Stars falling from the heavens,

These are the 15 signs which will precede and accompany our Lord's Second Coming, as revealed from His own lips.

III. When?

The third truth which Jesus emphasizes about His Second Coming is the one which immediately comes to all of our minds when it is mentioned: "What is the time of it? When will it be? When will Jesus come again? When will the world end?" If we just went by the signs which Jesus mentions there can be only one answer to these questions: We are in the last days now! According to the signs there can be no doubt about it, for all of these 15 signs, except the last ones — the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of the stars — are happening right now. If you will carefully study these signs again, you will also see that the first century Christians were living in the last day, too! All of these signs were fulfilled in the first century before the New Testament was even written. Many of those first-century Christians were contending that Christ would return immediately because of the signs. Much that both Paul and Peter wrote was to call these first Christians back to a life of stewardship instead of just sitting around and waiting for Christ to return. It actually got so bad in the Christian community of Corinth that Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians to straighten them out on this subject and other problems resulting from it.

Peter's second letter was written for the same purpose. In this letter, Peter first reminds the Christians that some non-believers will scoff at the fact of the Second Coming of Christ; but then he cautions them about dwelling too much on the signs for he says that will cause them to be unstable. Then, Peter comes to the heart of his message in that second letter, when he says: "But do not ignore this fact, beloved . . ." Now when Peter, the leader of the Apostles, says, "Do not ignore this fact," we had better not ignore it!

"But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (1 Pet 3:8).

Peter goes on to explain that the reason God has not ended the world, even though all of the signs have come to pass, is because of one thing: God's amazing grace. Peter says that God does not want any of us to perish, but wants all of us to come to repentance and be saved. Peter concludes by

assuring us that The Day of the Lord will come, never doubt it; but it will come in God's timing, not man's.

Both Peter and Paul are simply emphasizing exactly the same thing Jesus emphasizes each time the question, "When will it be?" is asked: It will be when God wills it! It will be according to God's timing, not man's! Each time this question, "When will it be?" is asked, Jesus doesn't put the emphasis upon the signs; rather, He puts the emphasis upon the grace of God. This is what the first century Christians forgot when they predicted the immediate return of Jesus, and this is why Peter and Paul wrote to remind them of the amazing grace of God. This is what many present day Christians are forgetting too, when they say quite emphatically, "The Lord is coming soon!" They are forgetting that the only thing in all creation that is not ordered and subject to signs is the grace of God. God does what He wills, and signs cannot control God--nothing controls God. Jesus specifically says several times that the time for the end of the world is totally controlled by the amazing grace of God! Only the Father knows the time!

Oh, I'll admit that the signs in our world are right for the coming again of our Lord — probably more pronounced than they have ever been. They are all there: wars, famine, tribulation, wickedness, sacrilege, false prophets and false messiahs, hard hearts. They are all there, it's true--and I wouldn't be surprised at all if it happened within our own lifetime! On the other hand, let us never forget these great words of Paul in Romans:

"... where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20)

Many of us think that because the signs are right, our Lord should come immediately and will come immediately and set it right; but, oh, how different is the amazing grace of God! Even though, like the fig tree in Jesus' parable (Lk 13:6-9), many people on this earth are not producing fruit and deserve to be judged and cut down, God's amazing grace says, "Give them another season. Dig around them. Fertilize them. Cultivate them. Give them another chance!"

I say to you in all love, there is no harm in speculating about the signs as long as you do not forget about the most important thing of all: the amazing grace of God! As long as you remember that even though every jot and tittle of every sign may be fulfilled, the time of the Second Coming of Christ still depends completely and entirely upon the grace of God! Not even the angels in Heaven, nor the Son Himself, can manipulate this amazing grace of God! The Bible says that God's grace is so great, long-suffering and patient that even a thousand years is like one day. It is so all-encompassing pure and holy that even one day is like a thousand years!

IV. Our Instructions

The fourth and final truth which Jesus emphasizes about His Second Coming is what we, His disciples, are to do about it, and it's not to study

the signs or try to figure out the times. He states it in just two words: “Be ready!”

“Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Mt 24:44)

In our text Jesus not only says,

“You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.” (Lk 12:40)

He tells two parables to explain how to be ready — one about waiting servants and another about a wise and faithful steward. Matthew devotes an entire chapter of his Gospel, chapter 25, to this point and uses three of Jesus’ most memorable parables to illustrate it: *The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, The Talents, and The Last Judgment*. All three of these parables also tell us exactly what we must do to be ready when the time comes. The truth in all these parables is our discipleship lesson:

Discipleship Lesson #19

A disciple must always be ready for judgment by being a wise and faithful steward for our Lord.

Stewardship! That’s our Lord’s formula for readiness! Jesus makes it clear that stewardship is not what we say, or how we feel; it is what we do with what we have! What we have is what our Lord has entrusted to us, which is nothing less than His whole ministry — His Church! He has entrusted to us His very Body here on earth! Like the master who went on a long journey in the parable of The Talents Jesus left everything to us in trust. What we do about this trust while He is gone — that is, what we do now — will determine whether or not we are ready when Jesus returns again to judge us. Our calling as disciples is not to study signs or try to figure out times; our calling is to be wise and faithful stewards of what He has entrusted to us now. Our calling is to be ready for an accounting when Jesus comes again. Our calling is to live each day as if it were the last day, by being wise and faithful stewards of all Christ has placed in our hands.

This leaves only one final question: What is a wise and faithful steward? How can we be wise and faithful stewards for our Lord now, so we will be ready when he returns? Our Lord answers these questions specifically with the three parables He uses to illustrate His Second Coming and our judgment in Matthew 25. No one makes these truths plainer than John Wesley when he applies them to our stewardship of money. In his final sermon in the Forty-Four he compiled as the basic beliefs of the people called Methodist, Wesley says that a wise and faithful steward will do three things when it comes to money.

First, a wise and faithful steward will make all that he can. By this Wesley means that we are not meant to be drones on society; we are meant to

produce, we are meant to be industrious, we are meant to work hard and make money. Money is the means by which our commitment is transformed into useful service and lasting benefit for our Lord. That is the point of Jesus' parable of The Talents in Matthew 25. The servants who used what they had to make all they could were called the wise and faithful servants by our Lord. The one who didn't produce with what he had was called a wicked and slothful servant.

Next, says Wesley, a wise and faithful steward will save all that he can, by which he means that we should conserve what we make instead of spending it foolishly. This is the point of Jesus' parable of The Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. The bridesmaids who conserved their oil and had it when they needed it were called the wise and faithful bridesmaids by our Lord. The ones who spent their oil carelessly and frivolously were called foolish.

Finally, says Wesley, a wise and faithful steward will give all he can. This is the point of the final parable our Lord tells — the parable of The Last Judgment. Those who are judged as wise and faithful stewards by our Lord at the Last Judgment are those who have given of themselves — their time, talents and money — to meet the needs of others. On the other hand, those who confess with their mouths but do not give of themselves and their possessions are called wicked and foolish! That's the threefold formula for genuine stewardship. That's our Lord's plan for being ready when He returns to judge us:

- Make all you can! Be industrious! Use your time to produce!
- Save all you can! Conserve the fruit of your labor, don't waste it frivolously. Conserve it for when you will need it!
- Give all you can! Use what you make to serve God, His church and His people!

Do this, says Jesus in our discipleship lesson #19, and you will be ready when He returns, for then you will be a wise and faithful steward for our Lord. That will be the basis on which He will finally judge all of us!

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #19?
2. Jesus taught three other important truths about the Second Coming that help us understand this discipleship lesson. What are they?

Search the Scriptures

Look up the following references regarding the judgment of God. The context of these scriptures indicates they are addressed to Christians. Write out what you learn from each of these passages. Internalize God's Word

3. Who will be judged? For what? (2 Cor 5:10)
4. According to Hebrews 9:27-28, Jesus' purpose in coming a second time will be quite different from the first. What was the purpose of Jesus' first coming? What will be the purpose of His second coming? What is the big difference?
5. 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 concerns the meaning of Judgment Day to Christians — those who are waiting for Jesus. What is the foundation, the basis, of their salvation? They will be judged by what they have built on this foundation. How will what they have built be tested? By what "yardstick" will it be judged? What will be the results of this judgment?
6. According to Paul's example in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, what should be your present attitude about your own appearance before the Judgment Seat of God?

Internalize God's Word

7. Choose one of Jesus' three parables in Matthew 25 as a basis for prayer using Steps in Praying God's Word (see Appendix). Let the Spirit show you who you are in this parable. Follow His lead as he reveals areas in your life that He wants to change. Be sure to record your insights in your journal. Share them with members of your class or your small group so they can hold you accountable.

Memory scripture: Choose either 1 Peter 1:13 or 2 Corinthians 5:10.
Share with members of your class or your small group the
reason for your choice.

Sermon 20: The Cost of Discipleship

As we continue our Journey into Discipleship with Jesus, our faces pointed toward Jerusalem and the Cross, we are jolted with perhaps the most difficult discipleship lesson of all for today's Christian to understand and accept. It's hard to accept because it sounds so cold and unloving — so foreign to all Christianity stands for; but when we understand it we see that it is the very heart of the good news itself! We are told in chapter 12 of Luke that Jesus turns to His disciples and says emphatically,

"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!" (Lk 12:49)

Now, to the Jew of that day, fire was the symbol of God's judgment. Of course, later, for the Christians, fire also became the symbol of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. From what follows it's apparent that Jesus is using it as a symbol to emphasize the reality of judgment in all of our lives, for He goes on to say in the following verses:

"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! I have come to divide; for henceforth in one house even families will be divided because of me!" (Lk 12:51-53, paraphrased)

What does Jesus mean by this difficult saying? What is the discipleship lesson for us here? He is telling us The Cost Of Discipleship, that's what He is telling us! He is saying, "I want you to know what can happen to you if you decide to become My disciple. I want you to be sure of the price you may have to pay!" This is Discipleship Lesson #20.

Discipleship Lesson #20

The cost of discipleship is division--
division from the world, and sometimes even from families and friends.

This lesson is hard for us to understand and accept, primarily because we twist the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Holy Spirit into what we would like for them to be, instead of accepting what the Bible says they really are. So often, Christians literally reverse the mission of each, resulting in great confusion in the Church and in the lives of Christians. Let's go to the Bible and see what it tells us about this important subject.

I. The Mission of Jesus

The Bible states unequivocally that Jesus came to this earth to be the dividing point in the life of mankind — in the life of every person! Let's make no mistake about it: Jesus always divides! What Jesus says in our text

Scripture

Luke 12:49-53

Text

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

Luke 12:51

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He repeats again and again throughout the Gospels: “I have not come to bring peace . . . but division!”

Jesus Christ always divides; He even separates those who have the closest blood relationship. The Bible specifically states that the mission of Jesus, while on earth in the flesh, was to divide! This division is built into the very fact of the Incarnation, for once God made His ultimate move for man — wrapped His Spirit in the flesh of Jesus and came to live on this earth as a man — the die was cast and the dividing point in life was clear-cut from then on. The dividing point is Christ Himself! The Bible is clear about this: all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are saved, and all who reject Him are condemned (Jn 3:18, 36; 1 Jn 5:11). Yes, it really is as simple as that. The Bible says that Jesus Christ is the dividing point in life. This is why Paul tells Christians in 2 Corinthians 6:14: “Do not be unequally yoked.” The RSV translates this: “Do not be mismated with unbelievers” and then goes on to say:

“For what partnership has righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? . . . Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? . . . For we are the temple of the living God . . .” (2 Cor 6:14-16)

This is simply Paul’s commentary upon our text; he is explaining why there must inevitably be division and dissension between believers and non-believers even within home and family.

II. The Mission of the Holy Spirit

The Bible not only tells us that Jesus Christ is the dividing point in life; it also tells us that the Holy Spirit is the unifying point in life. The mission of Jesus Christ is to divide, yes. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to unify! The Bible is clear about both of these points. Jesus Christ separates God’s people from the people of the world or Satan’s people. The Holy Spirit unifies God’s people — those who have already accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior — into the Body of Christ on earth. Jesus specifically says that the Holy Spirit will come only to His followers, not to the world.

“I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.” (Jn 14:16-17)

This is what Paul is telling us when he says, “Do not be mismated with unbelievers . . . for we are the temple of the living God.” He is saying that Christ has sent us, the believers, His Holy Spirit — the Spirit of the Living God — to live in us, to unify us and make us one. “We are the temple of the living God” and there can never be agreement, he says, between God’s temple and a temple built for idols. Because they have an entirely different value system, division and dissension are inevitable.

Often we twist these two basic truths about the dividing point in life and the unifying point in life into the exact opposite of what the Bible teaches. We try to make Jesus Christ into the Great Unifier as we teach about gentle Jesus, meek and mild. We preach and teach universal salvation and say, “Oh, it really doesn’t matter what you believe about Jesus. ‘God is love,’ and the Christian is really the person who goes around doing good work in the name of Jesus; for that is what really unifies the people on earth.”

Then there are those at the other end of the spectrum who have tried to make Jesus Christ the Great Unifier by requiring that people reach a certain state of perfection before they can be part of the Church — a part of the Body of Christ on earth. They say that before you can be a full-fledged member of the Church you must attend so often, you must read your Bible so much, you must give the required amount and so on, ad infinitum and ad nauseum. In this group are also those who would de-church others who fall short in certain areas of perfection. Unfortunately these folks are missing one of the most important truths in the Bible, which is this: Jesus Christ is the dividing point in life, and all who accept Him are already a part of the Church — His Body — whether they like it or not; and all who reject Him are condemned already. Following the most memorized verse in the Bible, John 3:16, Jesus says it like this in John 3:18:

“He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (Jn 3:18)

The Bible is clear: Jesus always divides! Jesus divides us from the world into God’s people, and the Bible is clear that He divides us so that the Holy Spirit can unify us and perfect us to spend eternity with God. Because we have missed this basic truth there is great dissension today over the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit. All across the church the Spirit of God is being quenched by people in high places, who honestly but mistakenly — and contrary to Scripture — believe that the Holy Spirit divides instead of unifies. We’ve all heard it said again and again: “Oh, the Holy Spirit sure divided that church!” Well, the Holy Spirit never did any such thing, for the Holy Spirit never divides--He always unifies and perfects! The trouble is we are confused about the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This causes problems in our families, it causes problems in our churches, and it causes problems in our lives.

III. God’s Part

“But preacher,” you say, “I’m not unequally yoked. I’m married to a Christian. My family is Christian. My business associates are Christian. Certainly, my fellow church members are Christian. Then, why is there still division and dissension in my home, in my work, in my church? Why doesn’t the Holy Spirit unify us? We accept Christ as Lord and Savior,

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but often it's no better in my home than in the homes of non-believers. Sometimes it's even worse! Why?" The good news is Jesus has answered these questions for us. In one of His shortest but most penetrating parables, Jesus illustrates the "why" for us in a way we can all understand. The parable is the one about the fishing net or seine. Jesus says,

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad." (Mt 13:47-48)

As you hear this, can't you just see the excitement on the faces of these fishermen as they draw their net to shore bulging with valuable fish? Then, as they examine their catch closely, their facial expressions change. Excitement turns to disappointment as they see all of those unacceptable rough fish among the good.

Haven't we all had similar experiences? What bride or groom hasn't been excited about the wonderful catch he or she has, only to discover after a few months or years that it's a pretty rough fish, after all, with all of those blemishes. We're so excited about our little children as long as they are still in the net; but when they're grown we can't understand how with such a good background they could turn out to be such rough fish. It's the same in the church. Excitedly, we take the vows of membership and enter into the life of the church; but, when we begin to examine the inside of the net carefully, this excitement turns to disappointment when we discover almost every fish has some kind of blemish or another: pettiness, bickering, gossip, hate, ignorance, hypocrisy. It's almost more than we can take when we see that even the preacher is covered with those blemishes!

Can you see what Jesus is telling us? He wants us to understand that imperfection is a grim fact of life! He wants us to see that it is always with us, because sin has caused all of us to fall short of the glory of God. He wants us to see that in every family, in every church, in every company, and in all of society, people are in all different stages of growth. Jesus is telling us that even though He has divided us into God's people, we still need His Holy Spirit to live in us because we all are imperfect. Jesus divides us into His people, yes; but it's not this division that makes us perfect, this only makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to begin to do His work in us. This only makes it possible for our bodies to be the temple for our living God. The work of Christ — the dividing of His people from the world — is done at a specific point in time in each of our lives. The work of the Holy Spirit — the perfecting of us, the unifying of the family — is a continuing work throughout all of our lives! Confusing these two is what causes us so much trouble.

Christian, don't expect your husband or wife or children or parents to be perfect simply because they have accepted Christ! Don't expect perfection

of yourself simply because you're a Christian. Being a Christian simply means that Christ finally has us where He wants us, so His Holy Spirit can begin to work on us and perfect us. With some of us He has a lot of work still to do! Church member, don't expect your church to be perfect simply because the members have accepted Christ and joined the church. The fish which Christ gathers into the net of any church consist of all kinds of rough fish. Visitors, if you are waiting to find the perfect church before you join, I can save you a lot of trouble. Stop waiting! Stop waiting, for you will never find it! Even if you did, the moment you joined it would be imperfect again.

As Christians, Christ wants us to see ourselves, not as spotless and unblemished, but as redeemed sinners who have been set apart from the world by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, so His Holy Spirit can sanctify us in love and prepare us for eternity with Him. Our hope is not in our own goodness; our hope is in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who divides us into God's people, and in the sanctifying love of the Holy Spirit who perfects and unifies us. The point is this: Jesus has divided us who call ourselves Christians into His people, and we are to be His people in our families, our church, our jobs, our society, so He can perfect us with His Holy Spirit. Now, this perfecting is a lifetime process and we are not here to judge the fellow members of our families, our church, and our society; but to be perfected along with them so we can spend eternity with our Lord. God alone can make the final judgment. Jesus tells this parable of the fishing net to help us to see the difference between God's ways and man's ways — to keep us from falling back into the ways of the world.

To the Jews only certain fish were clean and edible. Those without scales or fins were considered unclean and unacceptable as food and were tossed aside, not because they were not nutritious, but because that was simply man's arbitrary rule about fish. Jesus wants us to see that the world in every age has its own arbitrary rules for separating the good people from the bad. If history has demonstrated any truth at all, it is that today always reveals how ridiculous are yesterday's manmade rules for judging righteousness. Jesus is saying that it is not man's job to sort the good from the bad; this will be done by God at the end of the age. In the meantime, Christian, rejoice that you and your family and your church have been divided by Christ into His people and He sends you His Holy Spirit to be your righteousness. It is the only righteousness we can ever have upon this earth: His righteousness. This is the whole point of Discipleship Lesson #20. Because Christ has come to this earth and divided us into His people we now have a special place in God's Kingdom. We are different from the fish in the parable of the fishing net. Yes, men may sort their fish according to their arbitrary rules, but only God can sort His people and He has only one rule for this division! It is our response at the dividing point in our life!

Let me illustrate by reminding you of one of the great American novels. The novel is *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. You will remember that it is the story of two itinerant farm workers, Lenny and George. Lenny is a

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physical giant with the mind of a child. He doesn't know his own strength. His greatest thrill in life is feeling soft, furry things. He dreams of the day when he and George can have their own rabbit ranch so he can have a limitless supply of soft, furry things to handle. In his own way, Lenny is tender and kind to these soft little animals, but, because he doesn't realize his own strength, he always destroys them. In the beginning of the novel it is a mouse he kills, as he crushes it in his hands. In the middle of the novel, the same thing happens to a puppy. In the end it is a human being, Curley's wife, with her soft, blond hair.

To Lenny and his childish mind, there was no real difference between mice and men; both were meant to be handled in the same way. His undoing was his failure to make a distinction between mice and men. When finally he killed Curley's wife he had to be destroyed like a wild animal.

In a sense, Jesus is reminding us in our text that the world is a lot like Lenny, the giant with the child's mind, making no distinction between mice and men, making no distinction between animals and human beings created in the image of God. Jesus came into the world to save the world from itself. He came to keep us from perishing like animals at the hands of the world, the giant with the child's mind. He came to divide all human beings who believe in Him into God's people and then send them His Holy Spirit so they can be perfected for eternity with God. Oh, some of us may be a bit slower in our perfecting process than others, and perhaps some may be more perfect than others when we finally see God face-to-face. A few of us are so rough that God may have to continue to work on us. That, says Jesus, is really beside the point, for when we do face God, the Bible is clear that God will use only one measuring stick for that final judgment. And, it is not how nearly perfect we are, but it is one thing and one thing only: it is how we responded at the dividing point in our life!

Did we actually permit Jesus to divide us into His people on earth and begin to perfect us through His Holy Spirit, or did we continue to let the world destroy us? Do we really belong to Christ or do we belong to the world? That, says the Bible, is the only thing that really matters! The Bible says that the world, the giant with the child's mind, must eventually be destroyed, for it makes no distinction between mice and men. Those whom Christ has divided from the world into God's people shall never die,

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (Jn 3:16)

Hallelujah!

Explore the Sermon

1. What is Discipleship Lesson #20?
2. State the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Holy Spirit.

Search the Scriptures

3. What do the following scriptures tell you about the division that Jesus brings?
 - John 3:18, 36 • 2 Cor 6:14-16 • 2 Cor 2:15-16
4. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is to perfect us, conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ. What is our responsibility in this lifetime process of sanctification? (See 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:12-13; Eph 4:30; Rom 12:1-2.)

Internalize God's Word

5. Read each of the following passages. State its theme and give it an appropriate title.
 - Romans 12:14-18
 - 1 Corinthians 1:10-13
 - Ephesians 4:1-7
 - Ephesians 4:11-16
 - Philippians 2:2-4; 4:2
6. Rewrite the prayer from Romans 15:5-6 as a prayer for your small group or for your family, church, or community. Share it with them.

Memory scripture: Romans 12:1-2
