

Welcome to a Year in the New Testament

By Rev. J. David Israel

I'm so glad you've taken up the challenge to read through the New Testament in a year. This is a journey of faith that will take you places you never expected to go. In the end you will be glad you went. Reading through the Gospels will ground you in the knowledge of all that Christ said and did. The book of The Acts of the Apostles will help you learn what those first believers did as they sought to imitate their Savior. The many letters that follow will give you insight into the struggles and triumphs of the first faith communities. The instructions these letters give to the early churches will inspire your heart as you seek to be as faithful. The concluding book, The Revelation of John, remains the most mysterious book printed and engages the mind with the promises of the future God is creating. Welcome to this journey.

It is my pleasure to provide you with some reflections along the way. I've written these, chapter by chapter, in prayerful hope that they will offer you deeper understanding and insight. More than anything I hope they will spark in you a desire to learn more. This is designed to be read Monday through Friday, taking the weekend off (or to catch up.) I've offered three Psalms to be read each weekend for those who want something more. If you persevere through these as well you will have read the full book of Psalms before year end.

As a side note, I've been reading through the New International Version of the Bible as I've been writing this. I think any version is helpful in its own ways, but I determined to read from just one as I've written. This should allow you a reference point if you get tripped up by some of the words that are used.

I recommend that you purchase your own study Bible or use the online Bibles provided for free at www.bible.com or www.biblegateway.org. Both sites provide many different translation choices and also reference materials to help if you like. To receive these devotions daily by email, visit www.lwinfo.org.

A Guide to Daily Reflection

By Rev. Karen Nothdurft

What? So what? Now what?

“What? So What? And Now What?” is a simple guide to help you reflect upon the scripture each day. “What?” defines the information in the chapter. “**So what?**” helps us discover the meaning of a passage. “**Now what?**” challenges us to consider what we will do in order to apply God’s word in our lives.

Read the daily scripture asking “**What?**” What is happening in this chapter? What people are in the story? What information is found in this scripture passage? What troubles arise?

Then look back over the reading asking “**So what?**” So what does this mean? So what is the point of this passage? So what questions does this scripture raise?

Review the chapter once more asking “**Now what?**” Now what am I to do? Now that I have encountered this truth, what action will I take? Now, what will I change in my life in order to live according to the Spirit of Christ?

Keep a notebook of your findings, reflections and questions. You may wish to jot down a prayer, a song or a word that you want to lift up to God.

DECEMBER 31

A NEW BEGINNING

Yesterday, one of the prayers shared in worship was the Wesley Covenant Prayer. It's a prayer that features language around devoting oneself to the will of God. Some of that prayer is hard for me to appreciate. I like to be busy and productive. Within that prayer is the line, "Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee." I find it difficult to devote myself fully to the Lord if it means God will put me on the sidelines in passive observance. Let's face it, the only thing more difficult than discerning the will of God for our lives is devoting ourselves fully to following through.

Tomorrow, you are invited to a Journey Through the New Testament. That Journey is one of discernment. Why read the Bible unless you want to know the expectations of the relationship God has established with you through Jesus Christ. The danger, of course, is that when you begin to learn more about that relationship (discernment) you find yourself drawn into a deeper call to devotion. It will be an ongoing call to a new beginning for your faith life. I'm looking forward to taking this Journey with you.

If you've had limited experience with Bible study, you may need a little bit of a head's up as to what you are reading. The links below will aid you in your understanding. I encourage you to watch these YouTube videos if you have access to the internet. If you're reading this in the paper devotional, I've given instructions below each link for what to search for after you got to **youtube.com**. Just enter the words in the search bar provided.

The New Testament

Search: **The Bible Project New Testament**

Book of Matthew Chapters 1-13

Search: **The Bible Project Matthew Part 1**

Book of Matthew Chapters 14-28

Search: **The Bible Project Matthew Part 2**

Book of Mark

Search: **The Bible Project Mark**

JANUARY 1

RENEWING A RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST THROUGH SCRIPTURE

Matthew 1

I can't imagine what was going through Joseph's mind when Mary shared that she was expecting. This relationship was not off to a good start. The arranged marriage (verse 18 says "pledged to be married" but the pledge was between Mary's parents and Joseph) was planned for years but they were just getting ready to have the wedding... and Mary is expecting. We're not off to a good start.

As it turned out, Joseph finds promise in this news. It's not at all what he had expected. It's so much better. Through this pregnancy the lives of everyone in the world will be changed. The salvation of those who choose to follow this child is promised. Maybe this won't be so bad after all. (No one warned Joseph ahead of time that this would involve a trip to Bethlehem with an expectant Mary as well as fleeing to Egypt to save the child from Herod. Those stories will unfold with time.)

As you start off on this journey of reading through the New Testament and the Psalms in a year, I hope you are expectant of the promise it holds. I pray that God will birth in you a new (or renewed) relationship with His love through His scriptures. Be aware, this won't always be an easy journey. There will be challenges to your faith, challenges to closely hold but wrongly interpreted beliefs, and there will be time when you can't find the time to read. But there is a promise within these scriptures that perseverance will reward.

JANUARY 2

SIGNS OF THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

Matthew 2

“We saw His star rising in the east.” Here were men (three wise men, by tradition) who weren’t of the faith of the people of Israel, but they could read the signs that pointed to the presence of the new “King of the Jews.” It wasn’t until these outsiders took time to point to the signs of His presence that those on the inside started to search for Him themselves. When Herod does go looking for Him, it is for the purpose of doing harm and not paying honor.

I take a few important notes from this for myself:

If I go looking for trouble, it’s likely I’ll find it. That’s what Herod went looking for. He went to destroy the Christ and ended up destroying the lives of innocent children. Not only that, Herod destroyed any chance that he himself would know the salvation offered through Christ.

Sometimes all I need to do is to look for Christ. When I do I find he was there all along. The signs that point to His goodness and grace are all around if we decide to look.

As you go through your day today, watch for signs of the presence of Christ. If problems arise, seek Christ and His goodness and not the troubles that tend to arise.

JANUARY 3

A “SPECTACLE” OF RELIGION OR A TRUE DESIRE?

Matthew 3

Baptism was nothing new. Christians often think that John the Baptist invented baptism. It had been around for a long time. One ancient Egyptian text that dates to 3,300 BC lists it as spiritual cleansing process. So John the Baptist was simply carrying forth an old practice... but perhaps with a new purpose. John was not only baptizing for the sake of spiritual renewal, but to prepare people for the coming Christ.

In this chapter, John goes on a bit of a tirade addressing the Pharisees and Sadducees who have come to observe (and maybe to be baptized.) These two groups were powerful and influential members of the faith. The first was the “holier than thou” types and the second were the ones from which the leaders of the Temple and often the governmental leaders were chosen. As with any group of hypocrites or politicians, there’s always plenty of room to be upset. John was probably calling into question their sincerity in coming for baptism.

The Pharisees would not normally stand for a man living such an unclean life as John to lay a hand on them. It’s even less likely they would allow him to baptize them. They would have felt much more qualified to do that than this ragamuffin preacher. The Sadducees were not the holy group. They were political animals and opportunists. Their belief system was based upon the question, “What do I get out of this?” So why were they there?

Each of us is interested in the “new” and the “outrageous.” It wasn’t any different back then. We gravitate toward those things we haven’t seen before as well as those things that are a spectacle to behold. John was baptizing people who had a sincere need to see change in their own lives and to, eventually, meet their spiritual savior. As you go through your day, ask yourself if your own faith is more centered on the “spectacle” of religion or a deep seated desire to meet the lifesaving Christ.

JANUARY 4

TEMPTATIONS THAT PREVENT US FROM FOLLOWING CHRIST

Matthew 4

Jesus heads off into a wilderness (read this as “desert”) area. When he was at his weakest he was tempted. One temptation is to take care of his bodily needs. The next is to put God to a test, which is specifically forbidden in the Old Testament. The third is about power and prestige. He rejects all three. There are many ways to interpret these, but it’s tough to see our own faith responsibility in this. After all, none of us is called to be the Messiah, nor do any of us have the parentage of God the Father and His virgin bride.

While I do understand temptation and the evil in the world that brings it our way, I find more personal challenge in the verses 18-22. Simon and Andrew, James and John are offered the invitation to follow. This isn’t a Saturday night party or wedding reception they’re invited to attend. This is a lifestyle change they are asked to consider. To be followers means leaving the former ways of life and deciding for the way of Christ. Do you suppose Simon and Andrew were tempted to tell Jesus, “I’m in for the weekends, but I’m a fisherman during the week?” Do you think James and John were tempted to say, “Dad’s getting up there in years. How ‘bout we take care of the family business and we’ll join you when it’s more convenient?”

What are the temptations you face that prevent you from following Christ? What changes are you not willing to make? How much are those temptations like Christ’s; to desire personal comforts, to ask God to be a genie that grants our wishes, to have the personal recognition, affluence and influence our hearts desire? Reflect on your own temptations today.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 1-3

JANUARY 7

“RIGHTEOUSNESS”: A WORD THAT CAN ACCUSE US OF HYPOCRISY?

Matthew 5

One of the most common complaints people have about the followers of Jesus Christ is that we are hypocrites. It's nothing new. In much of this passage Jesus is pointing out the hypocrisy of the so-called "Righteous" people. Over and over again Jesus chooses one of their teachings, "You have heard it said..." and He twists it to what God intended, "But I say to you...". Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that He "untwists" it.

People of faith have a bad habit of moving from trusting God to an allegiance to a set of rules to follow. Out of our desire to do what is right, we fail to be righteous in the eyes of God. We end up worshipping the laws and fail to seek the love of the Law-giver. When we commit ourselves to a particular set of rules, or worship style, or traditions, we find that the one we worship is no longer the One who calls us to worship. I think a good way of looking at it is to say "we let our 'rightness' get in the way of our 'righteousness.'" We get the rule following right while leaving out the Spirit of the rule of life.

"Righteousness" is a word that is often used to accuse Christians of hypocrisy. Someone might say "oh, that person acts all righteous" as if it is the same as being aloof or arrogant. I think there are some words that we ought to stop using while others need to be reclaimed. Let's reclaim righteousness from the gutter and set it as our goal in life. In that last verse of this chapter, Jesus says "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." In this case "perfect" means to live in love with the Lord and with your neighbor. That would be the righteousness we should seek. Not a rule-righteousness, or a self-righteousness but a righteousness that seeks the Spirit of what Jesus says when He says "But I say to you..."

JANUARY 8

RELYING ON OUR FATHER

Matthew 6

It's a beautiful prayer, The Lord's Prayer. It's the one that we read in verses 9-13. It's one I've prayed a lot and one I've tried to mimic in my own prayer life. "Father in heaven, I long for the day when Your Kingdom will reign in heaven and earth, and I recognize my responsibility to live out Your will and to encourage others to do the same. Today I ask only for what I need and thank You for the weight of the bounty You've provided me. I seek Your forgiveness for my sins and ask that You help me forgive people who have sinned against me. I need a lot of help in that area. There are so many things that I want and desire and I tend to put far more focus on those than I do on You. Deliver me from those temptations of my life. And when evil is at my doorstep, protect my heart, my body and those of my family as well."

It's a beautiful prayer and a model for our prayer life. Did you notice what the rest of these verses around it were about? One of the greatest violations we participate in when reading our Bible is to take a verse out of context and use it for something it was never intended. I believe The Lord's Prayer is meant to be taken out of this chapter and prayed as a model for our prayer life. However, you can't get away from its place in this chapter. The Lord's Prayer is sandwiched between Jesus' many teachings about our reliance on our money and how that is no way to live our lives. The Lord's Prayer, on the other hand is a prayer about our reliance on our Father in heaven; a Father who provides for the birds and the flowers and will surely provide for us if we seek to put our full trust in Him. Even our money says "In God We Trust." Pray this week that you will put more trust in God than the money that bears that phrase.

JANUARY 9

IN THE WAY YOU JUDGE, YOU WILL BE JUDGED

Matthew 7

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beauty of the beatitudes in chapter 5 and concludes with some tough words on who's in and who's out in the Kingdom of Heaven in chapter 7. It's important to note that Jesus warns us against judging others at the beginning of this chapter. He goes on to say that you should seek the Lord and that the way that leads to the Lord is like a narrow gate. This sounds about like you'd expect to hear from Christ.

Then He says that you have to watch out for "false prophets." Those are people whose teaching has the intent of drawing your focus away from the Lord and placing it on the "prophet." That sounds like a good warning, right. However, don't you have to "judge" someone to determine if they're a false prophet or a legitimate teacher? How do we judge while not judging?

Read that verse carefully, the one that follows the command not to judge. In the way you judge, you'll be judged, and the measurement you use will be used to measure you. Seek the Lord and make sure you're able to walk through that narrow gate so that when you point out the flaws in another's faith, be sure you're willing to be measured by the same standard. - - - Come to think of it, when you consider that last sentence, you'd probably be better off not judging someone else's faith.

JANUARY 10

BOTH ARE FORMS OF HEALING

Matthew 8

This chapter is full of healings and exorcisms with a few conversations sprinkled in. Where do you find yourself in this chapter? If we're honest we can find ourselves in the teacher of the law who claims to want to follow Jesus, but Jesus cautions him this is no simple life of luxury. The next man says, "I'll follow you as soon as my father passes." At least that's the scholar's interpretation. Surely Jesus would have allowed a guy to attend a funeral for a couple of days before jumping on the Jesus bandwagon. From what I understand, the way the phrase is written in that day means that the father hasn't died and the son wants to stick around and not rock any boats with dear old dad. Surely there's the implication of an inheritance. Do you find yourself in any of those?

The passage seems to shine a more positive light on those who are healed than those who think they need no healing. Peter's mother gets up from her feverish state and starts preparing a meal. A military leader doesn't need confirmation of the healing of his beloved servant, he trusts Jesus without question. And then there's the amazement of those disciples in the boat when they were "cured" of the chaos of a storm.

I think that each of us has those afflictions of our life that Jesus wants to heal us of. The word "affluenza" has been coined to mean an addiction to affluence or creature comforts. The two men who want to follow but can't are more addicted to money and lifestyle than they are to the saving grace of Christ. Each of us finds ourselves in the midst of storms in our lives but do we allow Christ's peace to wash over ourselves to the point we can say "It is well with my soul." Both are forms of healing. Spiritual healing. Healing that does more for us than any physical cure, especially when we immediately get up and start serving Him.

JANUARY 11

JESUS OFFERS US DIRECT ACCESS TO GOD

Matthew 9

I recently heard a quote of Rev. Shane Bishop, a pastor in Illinois. He said “the reason the Pharisees were so upset with Jesus is that they got Him.” I think this chapter illustrates this. It begins with Jesus saying to a paralyzed man, “your sins are forgiven.” The things Jesus says are always what upset the Pharisees. You see, their religious practice was one that involved a prescribed set of practices that had to be followed. They were the instructors of the practices and a teacher was compensated for their instruction. Only after the instructions were followed could one approach the throne of God with the appropriate sacrifice, purchased at a high cost from the priests of the temple. Then the sins were forgiven.

At that time, it was a commonly held belief that all illness and infirmity was God’s judgment on your sins. The Bible doesn’t hold this to be true, but a corrupt religious system that can benefit from that belief won’t try to dispel the rumor. A paralyzed man would not be able to afford the high cost of following the prescriptions and purchasing a sacrifice; he wasn’t employed. The evil twist would also have been that a paralyzed man wouldn’t be allowed to approach the throne of God because it would be assumed he was a sinner and unworthy to be present in the temple. The religion which Pharisees and priests had devised offered no hope at all.

Jesus cuts out the middle men. In pronouncing the healing of sins and following up with the healing, Jesus offers us direct access to God. No middle man, no special teaching, no expensive sacrifice. A simple request for forgiveness is made. Forgiveness and healing begin. The Pharisees understood this and feared what it meant for the sweet deal they had inherited from their fathers.

Sometimes we make religion far too difficult. I'm not saying that our practices and our traditions aren't important. They hold a special and important place for our faith. But the relationship with God is as simple as saying "Father forgive me, heal me from the pains of my life and allow me to get up and walk in faith from now on."

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 4-6

JANUARY 14

PRAY FOR SAFETY FOR THOSE WHO BRAVELY STAND UP FOR CHRIST

Matthew 10

This has long been my least favorite passage of the New Testament. It challenges me in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable. Head out on a penniless mission. Be prepared to be beat up by the very people you're trying to share faith with. Oh, and you'll be betrayed by the very people you trust. "Sign me up," right?

You and I live in America where Christianity is sanitized. There are places in the world where a brother will turn you in for loving Christ. There are places in the world where a trusted neighbor will have you arrested for having your family pray at the dinner table. There are places in the world where Christianity means you can be ostracized, lose your income, be imprisoned, or even put to death. By the way, in places where being a Christian brings persecution, the church is growing the fastest.

So next time a co-worker makes fun of a person of faith, or family members laughs at you for praying over a meal, give God thanks that you live in a place like this. Pray for safety for those who are standing up for Christ where it is the most dangerous. Then consider taking a risk for Christ, He took a huge risk for you.

JANUARY 15

THE FATHER IN HEAVEN IS REVEALED THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

Matthew 11

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. Before he was born, and when his mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary were both expecting, we read this about John in Luke 1:41 "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." No doubt John grew up hearing that story repeated. How else would the author of Luke know to include it?

John, the older cousin by about 6 months, begins a ministry of preaching that mirrored many of the prophets of old. His message is about preparing for the coming of the Kingdom of God. He prophesies about the coming Savior. All of his words work according to God's plan for the event of Jesus coming on the scene. John is the herald as foretold in the Old Testament. Jesus is the promised Savior. It all makes sense, right? Why then, as he sits in prison for doing the will of God, does John wonder if Jesus is the ONE he's been proclaiming? Didn't they work this out ahead of time? Was there no planning and scheming at family gatherings? How come John has to send a contingent to inquire of Jesus "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" And what puzzles me more is Jesus' response. He doesn't give a straight answer. He simply points to what has been done and allows them to come to the conclusions.

Later in this chapter He challenges several cities where He has done miracles. He firmly states that great things have been done and they don't believe. But it concludes with Jesus pointing out that the Father in heaven is revealed through Him. How many of us are looking for something more? Just one more miracle in my life. Just one more sign from God and I'll trust completely. "Woe to you." Jesus might say. "You've seen the signs, I've worked more miracles in your life than you're willing to recognize. Now, it's time to believe and to act on your belief."

JANUARY 16

DO BAD HABITS OR OUR ATTITUDE PREVENT US FROM TAKING ANOTHER STEP WITH CHRIST?

Matthew 12

This chapter jumps all over the place. It's as though Matthew had a bunch of miscellaneous stories and sayings and he didn't know where else to put them. He just figured he'd put them in the middle of the story and no one would notice. You and I did, though. So let me explore just one of these that intrigues me the most. Verses 43-45 deal with a topic that could easily be passed over by us as we think it relates to some demon possession. Since most of us aren't possessed why bother with it? However, I don't think Jesus was meaning a demon so much as He meant a spiritual attitude or habit we've held on to. When we come to faith in Christ and desire to go deeper in our love for the Lord and our love for our neighbor (a major theme of the faith as the Bible presents it) Christ desires to rid us of those habits and attitudes that get in the way of our faith maturity. Jesus personifies these habits and attitudes to make a point and I think the point is well made.

Let's take an extreme example; let's say your habit is to go to a bar after work, drink just a little too much and drive home with that little "buzz" that takes the edge off your work day. Then when you come to faith you discern that this is not the right way for you to live. So each day after work you go straight home. Yet you do nothing as a stress reliever from a long hard day. The buzz used to make it "better" for you because then the noise of the kids and the demands of your spouse just seemed easier with that buzz. If you've done nothing to replace that buzz with some healthy stress reliever, it is highly likely that you'll return to that habit over time. That habit is the demonic spirit Christ was warning about. Eventually it creeps back into your head that life was easier when you were drinking and off you go.

What is the habit or attitude that prevents you from taking another step with Christ and what healthy substitute could you make?

JANUARY 17

IF YOU WANT TO LEARN, YOU HAVE TO WORK FOR IT

Matthew 13

After 13 days into reading this let me pause to give you a pat on the back. Some picked up the reading checklist but never read it at all. Perhaps they had good intentions, perhaps they felt guilty into leaving with a copy, or perhaps they thought there might be a coupon for frozen yogurt in the back. Don't bother checking, there's not. You've stuck with it this far and that's worth a hearty "congratulations."

In the opening chapter of his book *Jesus On Trial*, syndicated columnist David Limbaugh expresses the importance of actually reading the Bible before you decide on its claim to truth. I agree, how many have decided that what they've heard about the Bible is all they need to know? It was only in reading it as a skeptic that Limbaugh came to find that he could find truth within its pages.

Isn't that just what Jesus is addressing when He points out why some people don't understand the parables He shares? He quotes a prophecy from Isaiah which states, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them." I think he's saying, if you want to learn what I mean, you've got to pay attention and do a little work on your own. You're doing that by keeping up with the readings.

By the way, don't miss the promise at the end of the prophecy, there's healing in these words. What ails your heart that only Christ can heal?

JANUARY 18

BANQUET OR PICNIC

Matthew 14

Did you take note of the stark difference between the extravagant dinner that ends with a head on a platter and the abundance of leftovers from the meager meal of five loaves and two fishes. Herod invites a crowd to honor himself on his own birthday, Jesus seeks to get away from the crowds but they show up willingly. Herod acts rashly out of lust for his own niece, Jesus is moved with compassion for a crowd seeking basic needs. Herod takes a life; Jesus offers life-giving food. Could there be a more stark contrast?

Over and over Jesus finds compassion when He'd rather be alone. Jesus finds it in Himself to heal more when He's tired and worn. Jesus acts by giving Himself away and emptying Himself on behalf of others. At the same time Herod seeks self-aggrandizement and compels a young girl to dance provocatively in front of his guests. This passage is written for you to see the life that leads to death (Herod) and the eventual death that leads to life (Christ).

So which is it for you? Banquet or picnic? Excess that leads to death or faithfulness that leads to life?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 7-9

JANUARY 21

HER RESPONSE IS GOLDEN AND HE SEES THE GRACE SHE OFFERS

Matthew 15

Verses 21-28 record an intriguing conversation between Jesus and a woman who is not a Jew. This is important for several reasons. First, Jesus shares with us the limit of His ministry. It wasn't His task to go to the non-Jews in the world. Before the Good News can spread it has to be offered to the people of Israel. Only then can others, like the Apostle Paul, take it beyond the boundaries of Israel and make it available to you and me.

Second, if something is included in the Bible that might be interpreted as embarrassing it's worth paying close attention to. Jesus calls this woman a dog. That was a common slang term the Jewish people gave to non-Jews (Gentiles). Why would Jesus do this? One hint may be the location. Jesus was in the region of Tyre and Sidon, popular resort areas of the time. It could be that Jesus needed a little R&R, don't forget He was human, and sought out a summer home of a wealthy follower. In His exhaustion a woman comes to Him and relentlessly pleads for her daughter to be healed. Jesus slips up and says something He shouldn't have (again, allow Jesus to be human for a moment). Her response is golden and He sees the grace she offers Him at the moment. His response is to heal the daughter. And from there He goes back to the business of being the Christ by feeding another 4000 more.

I wonder how many of us have slipped up in a moment of exhaustion and regretted what we've said? I wonder how many of us, being the recipients of someone else's slip, would offer a playful response like the woman in this story? In so doing she brings out the best in Christ rather than settling for His worst recorded moment.

JANUARY 22

IS TEACHING PUFFING UP THE TEACHER OR LEADING YOU TO PROCLAIM JESUS AS YOUR SAVIOR?

Matthew 16

Yeast is a curious thing. A small amount of it can cause dough to rise to many times larger than its original height. However, while it does change the volume of bread, there is still the same amount of bread, its mass has not changed. In effect, it has done nothing at all to add nourishment, it just puffs up the dough.

Jesus warns us to be aware of any teaching that adds no value but just puffs up. The Pharisees were especially proud people because they were able to follow the extreme set of rules they had created. These rules did nothing more than to puff them up in their own eyes and in the eyes of those who admired their teaching. In the previous chapter, Jesus attacks their rules (Matthew 15:3-9) by pointing out how they have schemed to make a show of honoring God while in effect dishonoring God by bypassing one of His commandments.

We move from that warning to Peter getting it right on declaring Jesus the “Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus rewards Peter for applying that teaching correctly. Then Peter gets it wrong by challenging Jesus’ wild idea of being killed and raised back up. Jesus rebukes Peter in a firm way.

It’s tough today to know what teachings are right and which are wrong. A simple measurement should help. Ask yourself, does this teaching puff up the teacher and his/her followers or does it lead you to proclaim Jesus as your Savior?

JANUARY 23

DON'T BE SO DOGGONE SERIOUS ABOUT YOUR FAITH

Matthew 17

By chapter 17 Jesus has performed quite a few miracles. There are some that are recorded in specific, like the curing of a boy with a demon. Others are mentioned only as “he healed their sick.” The actual number of miracles will never be known. One of the things that you recognize as you read of these miracles is that Jesus’ point in healing is never about healing. Jesus’ point in healing is meant to bring awareness that Jesus commands the authority to do so. Therefore, since He can heal, His teachings should also be observed with the same level of awe.

Once in a while Jesus performs something that is a little more of a magic trick than a miracle. Verses 24-27 record one such magic trick that I think was intended for the purpose of surprise, but also to make the observers roar with laughter. Jesus is accused of not paying a temple tax. Can you imagine if we put a tax on your chair in worship? Wanna sit down, there’s a tax on that. Don’t want to sit down, doesn’t matter whether you show up or not, you owe a tax. It was just another way that the wealthy religious establishment was robbing from the poor and making it more and more difficult for the average person to be a person of faith. Jesus says, “Look, I don’t want to offend anyone, so here’s what you need to do...” He sends Peter to the seaside to go fishing. Inside the mouth of the first fish he catches is a coin that will cover the cost of the temple tax for the both of them. Magic... but there’s a funny twist. Oh, we don’t see it as funny because we don’t live in that day, but the contemporary observers would have been rolling. You see the coin in the mouth of the fish would be considered “unclean” or unworthy of being put into the offering plate by the people who had devised all those restrictive rules. Jesus was thumbing His nose at the establishment saying, “You want to collect dirty money, I’ll give you dirty money.”

What do I glean from this? Don’t be so doggone serious about your faith. Jesus was lighthearted, we should be also. Lighten up and enjoy His grace.

JANUARY 24

OUR JOB AS FAITHFUL PEOPLE IS TO REMOVE STUMBLING BLOCKS

Matthew 18

Mark Waltz is a brilliant pastor and leader in his local church but also as a consultant nationwide. His blog and books have pushed pastors and churches to move toward a service orientation. I've had the privilege of meeting and speaking with Pastor Mark and find him to be a genuine person who is focused on putting into place the systems and features of the church such that people will feel welcome and welcomed back week in and week out.

His blog becausepeoplematter.com is excellent reading for pastors and laypeople alike. Because he comes out of the retail world, much of what he writes translates very easily into customer service for the "for profit" and "not for profit" worlds alike.

One of the scripture passages that Mark uses to focus his work is the one found in verses 6-7. The way he expresses it is that it is not enough that we refrain from causing people to stumble. Our job as people of faith is to seek to remove those stumbling blocks that are already in place. Most of us have learned to ignore them. The tear in the carpet, the blemish on the wall, eventually they just fade into the background. What we have accepted as the "norm" may look to a newcomer as a lack of respect for God's house.

That's a simple fix, but what about those intangibles? What if they sit in your place in worship? Some people have been known to ask them to move; I've witnessed it. I'm sure most people stumble out after that. What if someone is sitting in your spot? Do you politely move to another place? Great move! However, the new person stumbles out having been ignored when they dearly needed to be greeted by a warm and caring person. Next time someone is in your spot, can you take time to get to know them? They're searching for Christ, remove stumbling blocks at every turn.

JANUARY 25

JESUS ENCOURAGES A CHILDLIKE APPROACH TO ONE ANOTHER

Matthew 19

It would be easy to walk away from this chapter having just focused on the teaching about little children. That would have been a happy moment for us all; who doesn't love the innocence of a child, the soothing warmth of an infant's coo, or the joy of a child laughing? However, that passage is sandwiched between two very tough teachings that we can't ignore. Maybe, though, those two passages can be made to sting less in the context of children.

At their youngest a child knows very little about the difficulties of relationships. Some are hurt from time to time but a child has an amazing ability to bounce back, offer, and seek love. Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are childlike in their approach to life.

The first tough lesson is on divorce. It's a tough teaching. I want to be clear that I don't believe that Jesus is condemning people who are divorced today. Some faith expressions would exclude you from faith practices for the sin of divorce, I don't see that. Jesus is speaking harshly against the attitudes of life that often lead to divorce. In the second lesson on money, Jesus challenges some of the same things. Essentially what I see is a teaching against focusing on yourself. A rich man can't seem to find faith because he is obsessed with the comfort he finds in his bank account. A person ends up divorced when one or the other, or both, are focused upon fulfilling themselves and not the needs of the other. Jesus is encouraging a more childlike approach to one another. With inquisitiveness, joy, sharing, love, and all the other positive traits a child brings into that relationship.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 10-12

JANUARY 28

THERE'S JUST GRACE. THAT'S UNFAIR. I'M GLAD IT IS.

Matthew 20

Life is not fair. Neither is grace. I think that's the meaning of the first story in this chapter. If life was fair, lifetime Christians would have a special seat at the throne room of heaven. I suppose Peter, James and John would rate those. Then the other Apostles who didn't abandon Jesus; then Paul, James the brother of Jesus. Don't forget to make room for the women; Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha and any other Mary who followed Christ. And somewhere down the line is you and me.

However, I'm probably ahead of you because I work for Jesus full-time, right? I'll have a better seat in the auditorium whenever God has something to say to us. And my room in the mansion that Jesus has prepared for me, it's got a private bath, just sayin'.

NOT. That's not the way this works. The first people in the Kingdom and the last people through the door get an equal amount of grace. The people who were saved at age 9 and the person who came to Christ on her death bed at age 99 are both in, with equal grace and love. There is no preference for special people, early people, over-zealous people. There's just grace. That's unfair. I'm glad it is.

JANUARY 29

A HUMBLE KING ARRIVES

Matthew 21

The first 33 years of Jesus' life are covered in 20 chapters. The final week will fill eight. This is an exciting eight days and filled with important teachings for us to fully understand who Christ is. As with previous chapters, I'll only hit the highlights here. I hope you'll do a little of your own study, and research if you find questions you can't answer. Let me know and I'll point you in the right direction.

The week begins with a ride on a donkey. The importance of this is huge and would have been noted by the people in His day. A conquering king arrives on a horse prepared for battle. A triumphant king arrives on a beautiful steed for all to behold his grandeur. But to arrive on a donkey symbolizes the peace Christ brings to the world. This is not a king claiming land or power or spoils of war. This is the Prince of Peace and the King of Kings and He is claiming His Kingdom which is here on earth and exists within your very soul.

This King rides straight to His palace, the temple, thus proclaiming that all true worshippers of our Lord and Savior are welcome subjects in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is triumphalism of the heart and soul of each of us and while the battle has yet to be fought, and will be fought by the end of the week, Jesus is already claiming victory. Bend a knee, bow your head, and thank Christ for being your King, Savior and Lord.

JANUARY 30

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT: LOVE

Matthew 22

I could make an argument that the three most important passages of the Bible come in this chapter, chapter 25 and chapter 28. They are commonly referred to as the Great Commandment, the Great Compassion, and the Great Commission. I'll get to the second and third in a few chapters, but first the Great Commandment.

Love God, love your neighbor. There's nothing more important. In this simple statement Jesus has summarized the total meaning and substance of the Christian faith. It's the point of Christ's life, death and resurrection. It's the goal of all followers of Christ; to exemplify in our lives the way the Son loved the Father and the way the Son loves each of us.

In the theology of Methodists, our faith goal is to fall more and more in love with God each and every day; then to love everyone else in the same way that God loves them. Our growth in loving God and loving our neighbor is called "sanctification." Our goal in sanctification is to reach the point where our love of God and neighbor is without flaw. We call that perfection. Christ's Great Commandment is that we seek this perfection.

JANUARY 31

THE HYPOCRISY OF THE PHARISEES, OR US?

Matthew 23

“Hypocrisy” is the common accusation against Christians and the Church today. It’s really nothing new. However, now we are standing on the inside hearing the cries of hypocrite from the outside. When we read this passage, Jesus is on the outside decrying the hypocrisy of those on the inside. In our own self-righteousness we quickly side with Jesus and point to the Pharisees.

Is it possible we’re the modern day Pharisees? I’m not pointing any fingers, simply asking for an honest review:

Do we make it easy for outsiders to enter the church?

Do we have an unspoken list of rules that make being a Christian too much work?

Are we obsessed more with the importance of worship or the place and style in which we worship?

Are we faithful in our giving, our call for ministries of justice and mercy, and our practices of faith?

Do we seek to be true believers inwardly and outwardly?

Do we refrain from condemning the faith of others and offer grace when we differ?

These are questions worth asking because the hypocrisy of the Pharisees failed this level of scrutiny.

FEBRUARY 1

DON'T BE DISTRACTED BY BEING "IN" OR "OUT"

Matthew 24

The Left Behind series of books and movies from the 90's popularized America's fascination with end times. While this fascination with "The End of all Things" has been around in pockets for all of history and is present in places around the world today, it is an American obsession. So when we read this chapter we wonder if this is really that important. It's not. Certainly Jesus spent some time on the subject, but most of what He said was, "Yes, it'll end someday. No, I can't tell you when. Now go about your business of being faithful and stop worrying."

Our fascination seems to function in two ways. First, it creates in us a desire to point out who is in and who is out. I think that can be healthy if our goal is to help people into the Kingdom of Heaven. However, we Americans are more focused on keeping up with the Joneses, or even getting ahead of them. This leads us to become guilty of pointing out who's out with a little too much satisfaction because we are in. The second is that it distracts from the point of our faith. If we're focused on who's in and who's out then we're not seeking to live the Great Commandment, Great Compassion, and Great Commission.

Are you distracted, or are you on a mission with the three Greats?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 13-15

FEBRUARY 4

THE GREAT COMPASSION FACE TO FACE

Matthew 25

The Great Compassion is summarized in Jesus' words in verses 35-36. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." It's Jesus' way of saying, if anyone is in need, take care of the need and you're taking care of me.

In our area, it's highly unlikely you're going to find someone who is thirsty or naked. Jesus isn't asking us to do these specific six acts of compassion. Jesus is asking us to have compassion by addressing the needs of those around us. I appreciate the attention we give to the missional focus of Living Word. I hear stories of lives impacted by these missions and in them I see the work of Christ being accomplished.

There is one issue of importance to challenge each of us. Jesus says that if we do it to anyone we've done it to Him. So if we want a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, does it stand to reason that our compassion shouldn't be done at a distance? It's not that we should make an offering and walk away. Our compassion is meant to be hands on and face to face so that as we do it for Christ, we are looking in His eyes.

FEBRUARY 5

THE DESIGN OF JESUS' LIFE

Matthew 26

In the movie Bruce Almighty there is the line “You can’t kneel down in the middle of the highway and live to talk about it, son.” Jesus has knelt down in the street. From the beginning of His ministry in Galilee to His conflicts with the church leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus was walking into harm’s way with His every word and deed. If you’re going to do and say what He did and said, you’re going to get yourself killed.

He predicted it. More than once He said it was coming. His life was designed for it. I recently heard someone say that Jesus was the only human who was born to die. I would argue that He was born to be resurrected from death, but I get my friend’s point. If you try to turn the world toward the goodness of God, the forces of evil are going to rally against you. You won’t live to talk about it.

Keep in mind as you read the middle of this chapter, Jesus wasn’t excited about what was going to come. This is the most personal and touching moment in the life of the human Jesus. Jesus didn’t want to die. However, His drive to do the will of God was stronger than that of His personal survival. That’s a commitment you won’t likely be asked to make... but could you?

FEBRUARY 6

HIS DEATH FOR US, FOR OUR SIN

Matthew 27

Flogged, crown of thorns (imagine a head band made from a honey locust tree), spat upon and made to carry the cross member (probably not the full cross) for your own instrument of death, nails driven through your forearms right at the wrist, a nail driven through one heel and then the other to the splintered wood of a hastily crafted cross, and mocked as you hung there a foot off the ground (not at the tall height we often picture.) In our sanitized version of what happened during the crucifixion we can gloss over the fact that a man died in the most gruesome and painful way ever developed by humanity. There's no humanity in it.

Christ's death on the cross is not glorious, but the meaning of it and the result of it is. In that glorious moment every sin that was committed before or since died with Him. The gore of this method of death is a fitting metaphor for the severe ugliness of our sin in the eyes of a loving God. His suffering reminds us that God is not some far off and disconnected deity. When we suffer, God understands what that's like, God has suffered too. God's suffering isn't meaningless either. God's suffering is for your sake. So though it is the human Jesus who dies, it is the divine Christ that suffers.

That's what your sin has done. Feel guilty? So do I. But wait, there's Good News to be had and to share.

FEBRUARY 7

THERE IS NO COMMISSION WITHOUT A RESURRECTION

Matthew 28

The most amazing thing happened on the way to a funeral. The women who showed up met a resurrected Christ. He's not dead, no need to mourn, no wailing and pounding of the chest. Death doesn't have the last word. As Rev. Adam Hamilton puts it, "The resurrection reminds us that the worst word is not the last word." God has the final say in our sin-filled and hopeless life. Not death, not despair, not an eternity without, but an eternity with the Lord.

The really great news about that is that we don't have to wait to live it. Our eternity begins when we accept the work of Christ on the cross and His resurrection for our sake. We're not to keep it to ourselves. It's the greatest story ever told. It's supposed to be told by the people who know it best. The Great Commission is found in verses 18-20. There is no commission without a resurrection and there most certainly is a resurrection.

The commission is filled with verbs. Go, make, baptize, teach. You can't be a follower of Christ from the comfort of your easy-chair. That's where you learn and grow, but Jesus doesn't call you to show up once a week. He calls you to a life that invites others to the Great Commandment, Great Compassion and the Great Commission. Go make that invitation.

FEBRUARY 8

AN INVITATION TO PRAYERFUL CENTERING OF OUR LIVES

Mark 1

As you begin the book of Mark a couple of things will strike you early on, one more subtle than the others. First, Mark does not begin with the birth of Christ but with His baptism. Mark was written for the Greeks to read. The birth of Christ fulfills some Jewish prophecies that Mark isn't terribly concerned about. He inserts them when they fit the story as he tells it, like the Isaiah quote in this chapter, but he doesn't dwell much on prophetic fulfillment. That's a Jewish thing, which is why you read it a lot in the book of Matthew.

Second, Mark's Gospel is structured such that it is long on the activities of Jesus and short on His words. The Greeks of that day appreciated a very active life. So Mark uses words like "immediately" and "all at once." As I read through Mark I get worn out just thinking about the harried activities of the day. Running here, healing there. Jesus was a busy man; so busy was He that He had to get up early in the morning, while it's still dark, to spend time in prayerful centering of His life. There's a lot of good stuff in this chapter but the invitation to prayerful centering of our busy lives may be the most important for us. Does that feel like your life? Take time to know God; your relationship with Christ is far more important than the busyness of your day and will bring more meaning to it.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 16-18

FEBRUARY 11

AN OFFER OF ABSOLUTION, INSTEAD OF HEALING

Mark 2

Though the argument is voiced with the Pharisees, I wonder if other people in the room were thinking, “Why are you forgiving sins when this paralyzed man clearly needs physical help?” Four friends go over the top, literally, tear off the roof of the house to carefully lower their friend right smack in front of Jesus. (I suspect what was going through the homeowners mind had nothing to do with sin and healings.) A man is paralyzed for whatever reason. From birth, or an injury, or a disease that incapacitates; any of these could have been the cause. What do you think the friends had in mind? “Please forgive my friend’s sin.” What do you think the man had in mind? I suspect he, like most of us, wanted to be whole again (or for the first time.) And Jesus offers absolution instead of healing.

Interesting what He said to those who judge harshly following the very next story. Jesus goes to brunch at the home of a tax collector. It was safe to assume that tax collector was stealing from those who were paying the tax. Rome required they collect a certain amount each year. If you collected more, Rome didn’t care, take what you can get. To make sure you could do your job, a small force of Roman soldiers would be at your disposal. There would be a head tax, a tax on commerce, and a tax on you if you were just wandering through town. These guys were cheats and everyone understood that was a sin. Jesus’ response when asked, “How can you eat with low-lives like that?” was “It’s not the healthy that need a doctor but the sick.”

In the eyes of God the sinful parts of your life are as obvious as a broken arm with the bone sticking out. When Christ saw the man on the mat, unable to move, of course He saw the paralyzing injury, but the sickness of his heart was as clear to Him as a neon melanoma. Jesus knew He would one day hang on a cross for the sin-sick world.

I believe that healings of the body happen all the time. Sometimes by antibiotics and sometimes by the miraculous movement of the Lord, but they happen. That's the easy stuff as far as Christ is concerned. The harder, and more important, is to heal your soul through forgiveness. Have you asked for that form of healing lately? Go ahead, pray.

FEBRUARY 12

THE EASY ROAD OR THE CORRECT ROAD?

Mark 3

Verse 21 tells us that Jesus' family tried to "take charge of Him" saying "He is out of His mind." They saw the danger in what He was doing. They recognized that what He was saying and teaching was pitting Him against the powerful forces of Jerusalem's elite. Jesus was setting Himself up for a mighty fall, and they knew it. They didn't really think He was out of His mind, after all His mother knew exactly who He was. She just didn't think He was going about this the right way. Surely the way to be the Messiah was to win the hearts and minds of the religious and civil leaders and then move toward the overthrow of the Roman occupation. You can't teach what He was teaching and win the leaders over. They were more concerned with where they thought this should go than they were with following Jesus' lead. I find myself there often. I make plans, schemes, programs and ministries that I think are the right direction. Then Christ enters in through prayer, scriptural reflection, and the wise counsel of those I trust, the leaders of the church, and offers me a course correction. I'm willing to admit, I don't have the only ear Christ whispers into. Sometimes my ears are too full of what I want to hear.

When have you found yourself going down a safer road than Christ has chosen for you? Is it possible that you are like the divided kingdom He refers to: wanting to go one way and knowing the other is best? Consider that Christ's direction is the right one and then seek it through prayer, scriptural reflection and the wise counsel of those you trust.

FEBRUARY 13

LIFE HAPPENS ON YOUR WAY TO DO SOMETHING ELSE

Mark 4

Once in a while my job requires me to go to meetings in other parts of the state. I've driven the highways that cross this state for more miles than I would like to count. I'm sure there are roads you take often as well. Sometimes the view becomes so well memorized that it fades away and we don't notice it at all. We lose interest in what's on the other side of the hill or beyond the buildings. I've been in ministry in 6 different places and I always remember that my view of the exit I take to a new home seems very one dimensional. It's as if nothing existed there when I was just driving by, but suddenly there is a town, a church and a home as well as people to love and serve Christ alongside. Sometimes our familiarity with the journey causes us to miss how much is going on around us as we pass by.

It is said, "Life happens on your way to do something else." I don't know who coined that phrase but I find it to be so true. Jesus was well aware of it, too. He was on His way to heal a little girl when someone, not in His path but off to the side, reached out and touched Him. Like a promised "scenic overlook" sign you finally decide to follow off your main road, Jesus took time to stop and let life interrupt Him. In this case, it was not His life or for His sake, it was hers.

On His way to work, life happened. How many of these opportunities to take a side trip out of our routine have we passed up on our way to do something else? Someone at work makes a passing mention about a hurt in his life. He does it all the time, so you just keep going. Don't miss these God appointed opportunities to pull off the road of life and share the faith that has healed you, so others can be healed as well. Look for it this week.

FEBRUARY 14

CHRIST DOESN'T WRITE ANYONE OFF

Mark 5

Jesus heals a man of a torturous possession of evil spirits and the town comes out to meet him. Instead of a warm welcome, the people say “Leave. We don’t want your type around here.” They had reason, I suppose. The demons that possessed the man were cast into the pigs. The pig-keepers watched as their livelihood, and the community’s main food source, ran off a cliff and drowned. There are several issues in tension in this passage. A man is healed and the community is angry. They barely notice the man but they clearly notice the missing pigs. It makes you wonder about their value of life.

Life value comes up from time to time. In America we keep extending the length of our lives, but it’s not always for the best. Today we can keep a person alive indefinitely, it seems, but to what purpose? And does there need to be a purpose? The ethical questions of medicine that balance “being alive” with “quality of life” will continue to grow in the years to come. Add to that the financial cost of staying alive and the questions mount.

Note that Jesus chooses life over life. The life of a man versus the life of a whole herd of pigs is the option Jesus chooses. While we need to be careful not to read a whole lot into this that may not be the intent, it all begs an important question about what value we place on life. A community had written off a man as lost. So when they lose their livelihood and the man is healed, they have trouble comprehending the value of the trade-off. Christ doesn’t write off anyone. Who do you write off far too easily?

FEBRUARY 15

They Had Success

Mark 6

Jesus and His disciples go to His hometown. He preaches and teaches and heals a few people. Largely He goes unaccepted and rejected. It seems “familiarity breeds contempt” and they weren’t going to let some unemployed carpenter tell them how to live their lives. Jesus leaves there “amazed at their lack of faith.”

The very next story has Jesus saying something like “OK, now that you’ve seen how this is done, give it a try” before sending His disciples out on their own preaching missions. How’s that for a poorly timed pep talk? Wouldn’t it have been better to send them out AFTER feeding the 5000? At least then they’d have some confidence in the One doing the sending.

How often do we look at troubled ministries of the church or our own faith sharing struggles and think, “we’ve tried that before and it didn’t work” and give up trying something new. I think the placement of this sending forth is perfect. The result is listed in verse 13. They had success. I’m sure they experienced a few failures too. However, seeing their leader in His most difficult time gave them the ability to brush off rejection and move forward rather than backward into that “I’m not going to do that again” mode.

What have you given up on that needs a second try? Who have you given up on that needs a fresh approach?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 19-21

FEBRUARY 18

GOD-HONORING TRADITIONS

Mark 7

When I was pastor at Good Shepherd in Kansas City our worship was very modern in style. Our music was rock and our video was actively moving by on the screen. We used multi-sensory experiences and you never really knew what you were going to get from Sunday to Sunday. I enjoyed preaching in that environment and it spoke to a younger generation in a broad way. However, when Christmas time rolled around we would always roll out an old hymn or two and insert it into our worship. Christmas Eve was loud and rocking, but it always ended with a candlelight service singing “Silent Night.” Some traditions were just meant to be. They have the power to connect us to a meaningful Spirit-filled past we either remember or long for.

Traditions are good. Every church has them, even the most modern of churches. They help us understand who we are and to Whom we belong. Yet, in verse 13, Jesus issues a strong warning about traditions. Some traditions “nullify the Word of God.” It’s probably fair to say that most of these traditions do not center on our worship so much as our practices. Some churches refuse to alter their facilities to accommodate the disabled because it means removing a pew or two, “And my great grandmother sat there!” Or, when their neighborhood went through a transition from their ethnicity to another they disobeyed Jesus’ commandment to “Go and make disciples of all people” (Matthew 28). They didn’t want “those kind of people” sitting next to them in worship. Their traditions were breaking God’s commands. In many of these cases those churches are finding the need to close their doors.

Their beloved traditions were not God's, so God abandoned their church to their own demise. I believe God blesses churches that hold close the healthy traditions that are God-honoring. Traditions that are against His will are allowed to fall away so other, healthier places of worship can thrive. After all, do you know any Pharisees today? The traditions of their sect didn't survive the test of time. Closely review the traditions you hold tight to. Are they about the timeless word of God or are they as time sensitive as the span of your life?

FEBRUARY 19

HOW FULL IS YOUR BASKET?

Mark 8

Seminary is not always a place where your faith is affirmed. Many times a week I found my faith challenged and my beliefs attacked. I've never seen a sports team succeed unless their workouts were tough. I guess it's the same with faith. If your education doesn't challenge and stretch you, the opponent will crush you. I've been critical of my seminary education because I don't think they are teaching the faith in a helpful way, but they did make me "tough" in my faith. For that I'm thankful.

One of the stories that may challenge your understanding of miracles relates to the feeding of the 5000 and then 4000. I like this challenge because I think it moves Jesus from a food multiplying magician to the One who works miracles on the hearts of people. It goes like this. There were 4000 and Jesus had compassion. There was not a town near enough, or the resources available to feed such a crowd. Where will enough food come from? Have them sit down in groups and take all the food you have and distribute it to the groups. Suddenly there's plenty. Is it because Jesus waved a wand and food appeared out of nothing? Or, could it be that Jesus gave a valuable lesson that day? Give all the food away so they may eat. This suggests that Jesus and His disciples would have nothing. That wouldn't be acceptable to the people in the crowd. Jesus was the honored teacher, He must eat, and by tradition, so should His close followers. Where did all this food come from if not magic?

Let me suggest that in that crowd was all the food needed to feed them all, plus leftovers. As they sat down the first 7 groups got a loaf of bread, when that ran out, someone who had packed more than enough for their trip to see Jesus produced their bountiful picnic basket and shared. Then another, and another, and another until all were fed and there was more than enough left over to fill 7 of those baskets. Jesus didn't produce the food, He exemplified generosity and the crowd followed His lead. The miracle was the change of heart from hoarding to generosity.

By the way, there is enough food in the world to feed the starving every day. How full is your basket?

FEBRUARY 20

UNBELIEF IS NOT A FLAW

Mark 9

It may be the most relatable statement from the New Testament. In verse 24 a man blurts out the exasperated statement many of us feel but are too afraid to say, “I believe, help my unbelief.” Most of us call that doubt and it enters into the faith of all those who seek to live God’s will. How often do we wonder if we’re doing what God wants us to do, living the way God wants us to live, dating the guy God wants us to date, etc? Or, have you experienced loss of some sort and wondered where God was? Have you prayed endlessly about a desire of your heart only to experience silence?

These are not questions that suggest a lack of faith. They are the honest reaction of humans seeking God and being unsure. Unbelief is not a flaw, it is the reality of our faith. I can say that with confidence because Jesus doesn’t rebuke the father. Just moments before, when His disciples were unable to cure the man’s son, they received a harsh tongue lashing by Christ. “You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you.” Yet, when the man proclaims his own doubt, Jesus doesn’t even address it, He honors it. He moves immediately to heal the boy.

I suspect what Jesus values in this man is his honesty as well as his desire that his own doubts don’t interfere with the healing of his boy. It’s a very human moment that Christ honors. Honesty in our prayer life is honored today as well. Talk to God, openly, about all your doubts. Seek His help in your unbelief and experience the work He will do on your soul.

FEBRUARY 21

HE WILL PURSUE US, BUT NOT FORCE HIMSELF ON US

Mark 10

Once upon a time, in the fabled town of Jericho, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, heard that Jesus was in town. He can't see Him, of course, and isn't even sure whether He's on this street. He begins to shout out. Louder and louder he calls out. Loud enough that it started to bug the people following along. Even Jesus' disciples, who were just schooled by Jesus for shushing children, were bothered enough by Bar-Timaeus that they tried to hush him. Again, Jesus would have nothing to do with it. He calls for the man to step forward.

They tell him, step right up, He's willing to give you the time of day. As he does, Jesus asks the most curious question, "What do you want me to do for you?" I can imagine there was a pregnant pause at this moment. Here were the disciples who thought their position in life was pretty important considering who they were hanging out with and their leader just asked a blind man what he wanted. I'm sure no one was saying "duh" to the Son of God, but they were thinking it.

One of the things we know is that God is always pursuing us. God puts us in situations and places people in our lives that make it clear that His love is available to us and our salvation is free for the asking. What Bar-Timaeus just learned is an important lesson for us as well. God will never force Himself upon us. His love is relentless and even overwhelming, but we get to decide. Our decision will never be coerced, He loves us too much to do that. The question hangs in the air for you as well, "What do you want Christ to do for you?"

FEBRUARY 22

JESUS ISN'T LOOKING TO BE YOUR GENIE

Mark 11

What are you expecting from Christ? A couple of chapters back, James and John were looking to become Jesus' right and left hand. There was a rich man who wanted to inherit the Kingdom of God. People came to Jesus with expectations and today is no exception. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, they praise Him, wave palm branches and lay them down for His mount to ride over (a sign of respect) and proclaim the return of the kingdom of David. What they were expecting was a new king to rule over them rather than the oppressive Romans.

James and John didn't get what they were looking for. The rich man went away sad. The people didn't get their earthly king. Followers of Christ are willing to say that what we got was far better than an earthly king when Jesus' resurrection gave us salvation and a heavenly King. That's not always what we expect though, is it? Often we go to Christ expecting our problems to be fixed, our relationships to be renewed and our dogs to come back home. Do we get what we expect? Well... sometimes.

Jesus isn't looking to be your genie. He's not here to grant our wishes or to serve our needs. The One who is one with God is here to give us exactly what we need. What we expect, is not always the same thing. Can we trust God enough to take what is offered rather than the expectations we have?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 22-24

FEBRUARY 25

DON'T RENDER ONLY UNTO CAESAR

Mark 12

April 15 is only a month and a half away. It is time for all of us to prepare to “render unto Caesar.” Tax season brings out all sorts of emotions in all of us. In general we don’t mind paying for the police, fire, and public service personnel. However when we hear about contracts that involve \$800 toilet seats we begin to get a little upset about what our money is going toward. And the politicians... well let’s not even get started down that road.

It was a question about taxes that the Pharisees wanted to use to try to trip Jesus up. If He were to call upon people to refuse to pay taxes, as previous insurrectionists had, the Romans would put Him in jail or execute Him and the Pharisees would be done with Him. So they set Him up. I also think they set themselves up. They open with a line of false admiration. They throw words at Him like “integrity” and say that He’s not swayed by others but only the truth of God. Then they fire the tax question at Him. Jesus’ response is genius, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s...” They see that their trap was eluded and they set off to find some other trap.

That’s it, right? At least for them it is. It’s not all there is to it for you and me. This tax season, as you prepare to “render unto Caesar” are you also preparing to offer up to God what is God’s? The Pharisees note that Jesus only speaks the truth of God. He proves them right in this. He shows their hypocrisy as He exposes not only their trap but their greed, their focus is on the almighty dollar. Jesus points them to the Almighty Father. Which gets more of your devotion as you prepare your 1040?

FEBRUARY 26

WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW? NOT MUCH.

Mark 13

In the business of government high security issues, you must have a “need to know” in order to access certain information. I knew of a man who had the highest security clearance, same as the president, but if this man didn’t have a “need” to know the information he was seeking he wasn’t allowed to access it. In the business of top secret things, this prevents people from nosing around where they don’t belong. Maybe more importantly, it keeps them focused on the secret stuff they are supposed to be focused upon.

When it comes to the day and the hour of Christ’s return, apparently Jesus didn’t even have a “need to know.” I don’t profess to have a perfect grasp of how God is the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I would think, however, that if God is “Three in One,” all three would know what’s going on. Apparently that’s not true because the Son, Jesus, wasn’t even privy to the information about when His second coming would occur. According to Him, only the Father had that bit of security clearance. Perhaps the purpose behind that was to allow Jesus to focus on His task, our salvation, while the Father is focused upon His, the redemption of all of creation.

In that scenario you and I don’t have a “need to know” either. It’s that way so we don’t spend all our time poking our nose in where it doesn’t belong. Instead it’s intended that we spend our time doing our job. That job has three parts to its description: [1] Love God and all people (Mark 12:29-31), [2] Care for the needs of the world (Matthew 25:35-40), [3] Share the Good News with all people (Matthew 28:18-20). Are you more obsessed with what you don’t “need to know” or are you focused on what you need to do?

FEBRUARY 27

THE SCENT OF WORSHIP

Mark 14

(The following is borrowed from a sermon by Brett Cheek, preached on 11/16/14. I've made changes to fit this purpose.) This may have been the most important act of worship of the week. A woman brings in a bottle of expensive perfume (worth a year's wages by the account in another gospel) and pours the entire contents on the head of Jesus. It soaks into His scalp and drips down through His long hair. The nearly overpowering scent fills the room. This is the Tuesday before His crucifixion.

In that day people very rarely bathed. So it's likely that scent was present with Christ where ever He went through the next several days. That scent is the scent of worship and it may be what gave Christ encouragement. In that week He would kneel to pray for relief from what lie ahead, but the scent of worship was present. He would experience a friend's betrayal, but the scent of worship was present. He would be severely beaten and whipped, but the scent of worship was present. He would be hung on a cross and suffer for hours, but the scent of worship was present. In the darkness of a tomb, on the day of resurrection, as Christ drew His first breath in His renewed presence the scent of worship was the first to fill His nostrils.

Psalm 22:3 says that the Lord inhabits our worship. Other scriptures speak about our worship being a pleasing fragrance to God. Consider this, "How does your worship smell to the Lord of heaven and earth?"

FEBRUARY 28

MOCKING OF THE KING

Mark 15

In Jerusalem you can find a strange etching into the stone floor of a building that was used by Roman soldiers. When similar etchings were found throughout the wide region that was once under Roman control research into this curiosity began. It was discovered to be a board game of sorts. “The Game of the King” or “The Elevation of the King” was its name.

The practice was to have a small game piece that would follow the route mapped out on the board. It would begin as just another game piece but progress to become king. The soldiers would use the game to poke fun at their own king. The game piece would be ridiculed and beaten. Along the way it would be given a crown of thorns and a cape of straw and a stick for a scepter. All of this was a way to relieve the stress of the soldiers as they secretly made fun of their own king.

When Jesus was handed over to them they played their game with Him. He was mocked and beaten, given a crown of thorns and used His scepter stick to beat the thorns deeper into his scalp. To them it was just another game, just another local to be played with before being put to death.

In America we don't see this level of organized barbarism, however, a lot of individual pockets of shame, humiliation and bullying takes place. Much of it goes undefended. Jesus says that whatever we do to the least of all people, we have done to Him. That includes the defenseless among us.

MARCH 1

GET BUSY BEING CHRIST

Mark 16

In Matthew, Luke and John, Jesus makes an appearance after the resurrection. Not so with Mark. The stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty, the angel announces that He is risen from the dead and has gone to Galilee where He will meet them as promised.

Why no resurrection appearance? Most experts agree that Mark is the oldest of the four Gospels and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their resources in writing their own accounts. The naysayers would say that Matthew and Luke added their embellished resurrection accounts to convince people of something that didn't happen. After all, in archeological and historical studies, the oldest material gets the most credibility. This logic doesn't quite make sense when you consider the literary style of Mark.

If you remember what was said in the reflection on the first chapter of Mark, you'll know that Mark was written to a Greek audience that put a high value on action and activity. In Mark, Jesus doesn't sit around much. He's a flurry of activity right up to the cross. Mark has heard the stories of the resurrection appearances, but it isn't the point of what he's writing. Mark's experience with the Savior is one that propels a person into action. For Mark, and for you and me, the detailed account is not important. What is important is that the Savior doesn't sit around waiting on people to show up. He leaves the tomb early in the morning to get busy saving the world.

Mark is a book of action and activity. Worship is important, we see that in Mark. Jesus' teachings are vital to understanding who He is, and we see that in Mark. However, worship and learning are not the only parts of faith. Faith is about getting busy being Christ to the world.

