



APRIL 2014

Exodus 38 – 40

Psalms 4 – 6

Proverbs 3 – 5

Matthew 1 – 24

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April 1st – Exodus 38

One principle that is found in the Bible over and over again is the principle of stewardship. Stewardship is defined as, “the conducting, supervising, or managing of something.” We are called for instance to manage our money. We should be careful in how we spend our money. It is important that you save money for unexpected problems as well as for your future as you won’t be able to work forever. It is also important that you steward your time well. Many of us waste countless hours doing meaningless things like spending countless hours on social media or playing video games all day. In Psalm 90:12, David asks God to “teach us to number our days”. David was asking God to show him and the people of Israel how little time we have and to encourage them to live with urgency.

In Exodus 38, we see an example of being a good steward in the record keeping at the tabernacle. If you remember, Moses had asked the people to give of their materials so that there would be supplies for the building of the tabernacle. In order to follow God’s commands, the people needed gold, silver, bronze, different types of linens, and several other materials to complete the project. The Bible says that God’s people were so generous that Moses had to return to them and inform them that there was already more than enough for the tabernacle and therefore they should cease giving anything else.

To this point, the people of Israel have done their part, but there is still a major task ahead. You see, someone had to take all of those materials and organize them to complete the project. God had blessed the builders with plenty, but they still had to use what He had given them faithfully. In our lives, God has blessed so many of us with more than enough to fulfill His calling in our lives. He has given many of you great talent, financial resources, and other blessings to fulfill His calling. The problem is that so many times we squander these things instead of using them to be faithful to God.

One of the primary ways we waste our blessings is by not organizing ourselves and knowing what we have and how it should be used. Take a look at verses 24-31 again. In those verses we see that the collectors of the gifts knew exactly how much had been used to complete the projects. They didn’t stop at the blessing of having mountains of gold, they counted what they had and then used it only in ways that would honor God. They knew that they had been given great resources and they took the time to organize it so that they could get the most out of what was provided. Have you taken the time to count the blessings and resources God has given you? If you aren’t careful, you will waste much of what has been given on things that don’t last. Don’t allow your paycheck from your part time job to go only to the newest gadget, ask God how He would have you use some of those funds. Don’t allow all of your free time to be taken by frivolous activities that don’t make any impact, look and pray for opportunities to serve in the name of God in areas that you are passionate.

The Bible says that one day each of us “will give an account of ourselves to God” Romans 14:12. This means that we will stand before God and tell Him exactly what we did with what He gave us. My prayer for you and for me is that we can stand before Him and be able to give a detailed account of how we used what was given to be obedient to Him like the people of Israel gave an account of how they used the materials they were given to complete the task God gave them to finish.

April 2nd – Exodus 39

Have you ever wondered why God isn't blessing you more? Almost every one of us has had a question similar to this at some point in our lives. Usually, we evaluate our lives based on all of the areas that we have been faithful. We point to our church attendance or the fact that we read our Bibles everyday as reason for God to bless us in the future. The truth is that many times we do have some great habits in our lives and there are many places that we are being obedient to God but are we obedient in all areas? Today, if you were totally honest with yourself can you claim that you have been faithful to do all that God has commanded you to do or are there areas of your life that you know are not righteous?

In Exodus 39 we see that blessing comes only after obedience. In verse 43 we read, "And Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it; as the Lord had commanded, so had they done it. Then Moses blessed them." Do you see what took place here? Before Moses blessed the people (on behalf of God) he inspected their work! He wanted to make sure that they weren't just faithful in doing some of the work God had commanded but that they had done EVERYTHING just as they were told. This is so important for us today, God does not want you to be mostly obedient, He wants you to be totally faithful.

The areas in our life that are not in line with Him should bother us. Instead of looking at what we are doing right, we need to ask God to show us places where we can still improve. You know, the Bible says in James 2:10 that whoever has broken one commandment is guilty of breaking all of them. Now, obviously we have all broken commandments which is why we need grace, but this verse shows us that God has a very high standard and if we are going to strive to be like Him we need to have high standards for our own lives. When we mess up, we know that there is forgiveness, but we shouldn't be lackadaisical about our sin, rather we should strive to be as close to God as we can.

I want to challenge you today to truthfully think about your life. Are there areas that you need to work on if you are going to look like Christ? What are some of the things that you struggle with? Would you pray today that God would convict you of those sins in a way that motivates you to pursue His strength? Would you commit to seeking Him when tempted to sin in these areas? I believe that this is the key to being a faithful believer and experiencing the true blessing of His grace.

April 3rd – Exodus 40

One of the most difficult things to do in life is to wait. It is hard to wait for the right person to marry, it is hard to wait for God to answer your prayers about where to go to college, it is hard to go through all the preparation it takes to be successful in business, and it's hard to wait on God to lead us.

This is what is taking place in the last chapter of Exodus. God has promised to lead Israel to a great land. This would finally be a place that they can call their own, a permanent home for their families and a place that offers great prosperity. If you put yourself in their position you can imagine the intense desire these people have just to get there, to finally arrive at their destination. Whenever my family went on vacation as a kid I experienced something somewhat similar on the drive down. I can remember feeling like the five hour trip from our home to the beach seemed like days! Every few minutes I was looking at the clock or road signs to find out just how far away from the beach we were and our progress was never fast enough! The truth is that we as humans struggle to wait. Many of you feel like the process of growing up isn't happening fast enough. You can't wait to move out or to advance in your career. You can't wait to get married or have a place of your own.

All of these things are good, but they come in time. You see, God has a plan and His plan doesn't always unfold the way we think it should. So many times, His plan requires us to follow Him and wait! In Exodus 40:36-37 we read "throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up." The nation of Israel knew that it was imperative to wait on God to move. Now, I'm sure there was great temptation. I'm sure there were days when the people looked around this desert and were tempted to just keep moving. It had to have been tempting to just abandon God's timing and find the Promised Land without Him. It is hard to wait and sometimes we have to wait in situations that are not the most comfortable, but it is always worth it. In the end, God was faithful to lead the people directly to the place He promised. If you are faithful to wait, God will lead you right where He wants you to stay as well.

Students, I know there is temptation to move forward, but follow God. There is no one who loves you more than He does. There is no one who knows more about life or about the future than Him and there is no one who has proven He can be trusted anymore than God. You might not understand and it might be difficult to wait but trust in His character! Just like Israel looked to God to make the first move, look to Him to move in your life as well. I can promise you that an extra year or two of single life before marriage is worth it if the person you wait for is God's best for you, I can promise that a year more of preparation and sitting under someone's leadership is best if God is preparing you for something great. Trust Him and follow Him, you won't regret being faithful!

April 4th – Psalm 4-6

Congratulations on reading two full books of the Bible! You are making progress and I am so thankful for your commitment to the Word of God this year. Today, we take a break from the Old Testament law and read three Psalms. In these Psalms there are many great lessons so we will take the time to think about a few of them during our devotional time.

In Psalm 4:4 we read “Be angry and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.” How many of you knew it was possible to be angry without sinning? In the life of Christ we see an example of anger that did not lead to sin in John 2. In this story, Christ gets angry because the people of God have turned the church of God into a business by using the temple courts as a place to sell their merchandise (much of what was sold were items needed for sacrifice). As Jesus encounters this situation, he gets so angry that He makes for Himself a whip and chases the people out of the temple! Obviously, this was not a sinful action because we believe that Christ never sinned (1 Peter 2:2, Hebrews 4:15). So, how can we be angry and not sin? Well the Psalmist first says we should “ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.” This means that we need to really think through the situation before we respond. Do not be quick to assume things or react, rather be “slow to anger” as James 1:19 says.

Second, we should “put your trust in the Lord.” So let’s say that you have thought through the situation and you still believe that you were wronged, what should you do? The simple answer is that you should trust the Lord and believe that He will make things right. The Bible says that revenge is for the Lord (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:19). Some of you are so concerned about getting even and you have forgotten that you serve a God who didn’t “get even” with you. How many times have you wronged God and gotten what you deserve? The Bible says that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), this means that what you earned is death. This death is not only physical (something we will all experience unless Christ returns) but also spiritual as it means spending eternity away from the very source of life.

The truth of the Gospel is that God has given us what we don’t deserve because Christ paid the debt for our sins that we should have paid. So, as we live our lives we should “forgive one another... Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). Do you embody that characteristic today? Are you holding onto some anger or bitterness because of something someone did in your past? Are you quick to respond in anger even before you know the whole story? If so, I want to challenge you to think about the grace you have been offered by Christ and let that love influence how you treat other people. It has been said that being unwilling to forgive is like drinking the poison while waiting for your enemy to die. Not forgiving a person hurts you worse than it does them and it is totally contrary to the message of the Gospel. Be quick to forgive, trust that God will do what is right to your enemies, pray for them that they might be saved, and always know the full situation before you respond.

April 5th – Proverbs 3

Proverbs 3:5-6 is a passage that contains some of the most important advice you will find anywhere in the Scripture. In this text, we see the key to walking faithfully with God. If you are a believer, you have probably wondered at times just how you should go about living a life that pleases God. Being obedient, after all, should be our goal as Christians but it isn't always easy or obvious how to be faithful. Sometimes we encounter situations that are tough to deal with or times where the "right" thing to do is not so obvious. The question for us is what do we do in these situations? Do we use just our own logic and reasoning or do we seek God's advice and trust in Him? In Proverbs 3, we read what we should do at all times.

First, if we are going to truly follow God we must trust Him totally. Verse 5 begins by telling us that we are to "Trust in the Lord with all your heart." This means that there must not be one doubt in your mind about who God is or what He plans on doing for us. Now, you might say well how would I trust in God this much? The simple answer for the believer is that you look at what He has already done for you. If God desired to harm you or to lead you into places that were detrimental would He have taken such great steps to save you in the first place? Would He have loved you so much as to send His only Son to die just so we could have relationship with Him? Not only that, but can't you point to times in life where God has answered prayers or protected you from a dangerous situation? All of these instances should help you trust Him totally. Take time today to list some of the ways God has blessed and protected you in the past, this will help you in trusting Him totally.

Second, we are not to lean on our own understanding. Our own logic and understanding (or the advice of others for that matter) is not the best source of wisdom. There are several reasons for this but the most obvious is that we are not God and therefore don't know all of the facts. Have you ever done something that seemed right at the time only to have it blow up in your face later? Chances are great that the reason why things turned out poorly is because you didn't know all the facts. Maybe you trusted someone who turned out to be untrustworthy or maybe you weren't aware of all of the risks of that type of decision. Whatever it is, we lean on God's understanding because He alone knows all things and therefore is much more qualified to tell us what we should or should not be doing.

Third, in all our ways we should acknowledge Him. God doesn't want to be a co-pilot who is there when you have an emergency, He demands to be the pilot that directs the course of your life. Whatever you do, you should acknowledge God and allow Him to lead you forward. The question should always be, what would God have me do? We do this for two reasons: First we do this because we need to rely totally on the Lord. We covered that earlier. Second, we do this because when we acknowledge God we allow others to see the real reason for our decisions. Do you acknowledge God in all you do? Would your friends know that you desire to honor and be faithful to Him above all else?

Fourth, if we do these things He will make straight our paths. To make straight our path means to make the course of our lives one that continually progresses towards our goal. If our goal is to be faithful to God, to bring Him honor and glory by acknowledging Him, and to be a witness for Him by sharing with others how He leads and directs us, then our path will always lead us to accomplishing that goal. This verse DOES NOT promise that life will be easy for you. The Bible does not promise that life will be easy, in fact, Christ said "in this life you will have trouble" (John 16:33). You cannot avoid problems and tribulations, but you can see those trials as opportunities to show others that you have hope and confidence in the God you serve. There is nothing more powerful in life than seeing someone who is struggling but doing so with hope and joy.

Don't make decisions in order to avoid inevitable suffering, rather choose to follow God and allow Him to lead you through this life. If you do that, on the other side you will be rewarded greatly and your life will have had the purpose and meaning it was designed to have. If you don't, you will still suffer but you will have no return and your life will have been wasted. My prayer is that you don't live a life that is wasted but that you live for the glory of God, acknowledging Him in all things and allowing Him to sustain you as you go!

April 6th – Proverbs 4-5

Most of us really dislike being corrected. Many of us don't even like taking instructions before we act. We like to figure it out on our own and be "independent" from a very young age. The problem with this approach is that our decision to learn the hard way often results in consequences that last a lifetime or even cost us our very lives. The message of the importance of learning to take instruction is a central theme in Proverbs. In both Proverbs 4 and 5 we see this idea presented and so today we will examine both texts to see what lessons we can learn.

Proverbs 4:13 is where we will start today. In this verse we read "Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life." What strikes me about this passage is that it recommends that we do exactly the opposite of what comes naturally to most of us. If you are like me, your tendency is to try to avoid instruction, or correction, at all costs. There is something inside of most of us that has a deep desire to "do it my way". This is why Burger King has used the slogan "have it your way" so effectively, because most of us want it our way. When you start a new job or begin dating, how many of you really want someone else "telling you what to do"? I would venture to say most of you do not, you simply want to live and learn in the process. Proverbs 4 teaches us to do just the opposite. Not only should we accept instruction from the Scripture, we should guard it for it is our very life. When you read something in the Bible, some instruction for your life, do you guard it? Do you obey and listen to your parents and treasure their advice? After all, the Bible is very explicit that this is what children are supposed to do.

Now, you may ask, why should I guard and keep hold of instruction? The book of Proverbs says you should do this because it is your life! The reason why you should guard biblical instruction is because it was written by the person who created life. Is there a better, more informed, being to ask for advice from than the one who created us and our environment? The answer is a resounding no! We should listen because the one giving the instruction knows far more than we do and loves us enough to share His insight.

At this point, you may be skeptical so I want to close with a challenge. Look around at some people who are older than you (starting in their mid 20's and older). I want you to particularly look at those who lived life in a way that is opposed to what the Bible commands. People who disobeyed their parents, participated in illegal activity, drank, used drugs, etc. Years after this began (probably in middle or high school for most of them) I want you to look at the effects this lifestyle has had on them. Are they truly happy? What are some of the effects of their actions on their lives? Some have children out of wedlock and now are struggling just to get by, some are so addicted to substances that they have no ability to even work a job, some are now in prison because of their actions or the actions of those they hung out with, some are still desperately trying to find meaning and purpose, but how many are happy and how many are living the life they set out to live? Their situation is proof of what I want to leave you with today as a warning, it is Proverbs 5:11-14. In this text, Solomon describes the life of a person who despised instruction saying "and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, and you say, 'How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation.'"

Students, my prayer for you is that you won't despise correction or instruction. I pray you search the Scriptures to find instruction and that you are faithful to follow it all the days of your life. My desire for you is that you live a life of happiness and joy that is only brought about when a person walks with the Lord. May this characterize your life and may you find your peace and guidance in God and in His Word!

April 7th – Matthew 1

Over the next few weeks, we will be reading the Gospel of Matthew, our first New Testament book. In this book we will study the most influential and important man who has ever lived, Jesus Christ. To begin this study, we read about the genealogy of Jesus and we also see evidence of the very first prophecy that was fulfilled about Christ's birth.

In verse 23, Matthew quotes from Isaiah 7:14 regarding the virgin birth of Jesus. The book of Isaiah was written in 740 B.C. or almost 750 years prior to the birth of Christ and yet we see that God revealed to Isaiah a most remarkable fact about the coming Messiah, namely that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. Can you imagine being Isaiah and putting into writing something that sounds so ridiculous? No one was ever born to a virgin mother; it absolutely defied science and experience. We were not designed to be conceived and born in this way and Isaiah surely understood this fact, yet we see that God had different plans.

You see, fulfilled prophecy is one of the strongest arguments we have to prove that Christ was in fact the Messiah. With that in mind, a very popular argument against the idea that Christ was the Messiah is the argument that Jesus simply read prophecy and then fulfilled them intentionally. Certainly there were prophecies that could have been fulfilled this way, but not this one! None of us controlled where we were born or even when we entered this world. We couldn't dictate our parents, we couldn't dictate our location, and we couldn't dictate what was said about us before we arrived. The only way something could alter or determine where or how they were born into this world is if they were superhuman!

Now, some of you might say well who would vindicate this kind of story? I mean why couldn't Matthew and the others just have made something like this up to tell other people. The truth is that many stories have been made up in human history and we must be careful not to believe any person's religious story too quickly, but consider the fact that there are at least 3 other prophecies (prophecies by Hosea, Micah, and Jeremiah) that all have to do with Christ either at His birth or directly after His birth are mentioned in the first two chapters of Matthew. Each of these can be easily verified by history. For instance, Christ was born in Bethlehem, his family did in fact flee to Egypt, and Herod did kill all the male children in Bethlehem after he learned that the Messiah had been born. All of these are rather difficult predictions to make centuries before their occurrence and yet all of them were fulfilled at the time of the birth of Christ long before a normal human being could even sit up, much less orchestrate events.

The truth is that the life of Christ and the impact that His life had on others is unrivaled. As we continue to read in Matthew we will read multiple prophecies fulfilled which were predicted by Old Testament writers centuries before His birth. We truly serve an incredible and magnificent savior, and the truth about His identity can be established by the multitude of prophecies He fulfilled.

April 8th – Matthew 2

An unfortunate reality about this life is that people are not always truthful about their motives. There are many people out there who will try to convince you that their motives are pure when in fact they are extremely sinful. Maybe the classic example in our country today is the car salesman characterization. If you have ever been shopping for a car, you have likely had an experience with a salesman who is doing their best to convince you that they are selling you a vehicle at an incredible low price and that they are doing this for your benefit alone. They might even suggest that they aren't making any money at all at this price but they like you so much that they are willing to break even. The world is full of people who will share similar sentiments about their desire to bless you or to participate in something because of pure motives and as Christians, we must do our best to figure out or discern whether or not they are truthful.

In Matthew 2, we have a story about a man who was not truthful in regards to his desire to worship Jesus, his name was King Herod. Before we get into the story, we need to talk a little bit about what was going on behind the scenes. One of the challenges you will face in life is the challenge of figuring out hidden motivations. In this story, Herod had a hidden motivation for finding Jesus. His real desire to find Jesus was rooted in the fact that he was worried that Jesus would take over his kingdom. You see, the Messiah was to be a king and Herod feared that He was to be the king of Israel. Whether we realize it or not, much of what people with bad intentions tell us is not truthful at all. They desire to mislead us to get what they want (in this case to find Christ not to worship Him but to kill Him). We need to be cautious whenever someone gives us a story and pray that God would show us whether or not it is legitimate.

So, what was Herod's excuse for wanting to find Jesus? His reason seemed on the surface to be very valid. He says in verse 8 "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." At first glance, this seems like a genuine person who simply wants to worship the Messiah. After all, there is nothing wrong or strange about a person desiring to worship God is there? There were many in the story (including the wise men he was talking to) who traveled great distances to worship just like Herod claimed he desired to do. We need to realize that people can be very good at disguising their true desires, particularly those who are not believers.

At this point, you might ask yourself what you should do about this issue. We don't want to become cynical or sarcastic so how do we go about deciding who to trust? The simple answer is that we ask God for guidance and to reveal to us what we should do. In the story, the wise men were warned in a dream (by God) not to return to Herod (v. 12). You see, we may not know other's intentions but God does (Psalm 44:21). He understands fully what is going on behind the scenes and He promises to give us wisdom if we ask (James 1:5). We should love everyone, but we should also be aware that many don't have good intentions as they speak. As we realize this, may we ask God to give us wisdom and insight so that we can be faithful to Him and Him alone!

April 9th – Matthew 3

One of the core ideas or doctrines in the Christian faith is the concept of the Trinity. The very simplistic explanation of the Trinity is that God is one but that He exists in three persons. Admittedly, this is a very difficult concept to understand but we shouldn't be intimidated or doubtful that it is possible because God by very definition is infinite and we are not. We should struggle to grasp God because He is so incredibly large and powerful.

The Trinity is a core (meaning extremely important) doctrine of the Christian faith that has been attacked over the years because the term "trinity" is never used in the Scripture. There is no place where God describes Himself as the trinity rather it is a term that man has come up with to describe what the Scriptures clearly show. Over the years, there have been many people who have argued with this concept saying that God is only one being but that He "manifests" (or shows) Himself in three different ways, namely as the Father, Son or Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

In today's chapter we read an example of why this idea that God only shows up as one or the other is totally false. In the story, Christ is being baptized. Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity. He is the creator of all (John 1:1) and He also is our Messiah as we have already discussed in the book of Matthew. As He is being baptized, the Bible says that "immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him." Now, if we just take a moment to think about what has taken place it is very obvious that the Spirit and Christ HAVE to be two distinct beings. There is no way for God to have manifested Himself in two separate beings at the same time without dividing Himself and becoming two distinct entities. As we continue to read, we see that after the Spirit descends, "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" (v. 17). Now, the only person who could call Christ His "Son" is indeed God the Father. So in this story we see the Father, the Son, and the Spirit all together in one moment in time, thus we have the Trinity.

Even though the term is never used, the idea of the Trinity is prevalent in Scripture. This is just one example of God showing that He is indeed three distinct persons. Throughout history, we have realized that this is a difficult concept to understand but it is important to realize that this is how God has chosen to reveal Himself and the Trinity is indeed the way that God exists. We believe in an incredible God who is one but three, just the thought blows your mind but it shouldn't scare you, rather it should create a sense of awe that our God is so complex and supernatural!

April 10th – Matthew 4

I am so thankful for you and your heart to study God's Word and today we are going to see one of the reasons why. When we take the time to really know the Bible and apply it to our lives, we will find that we are far better equipped to handle temptations that come our way. In Matthew 4, Jesus is tempted by Satan, and He uses His knowledge of the Scriptures to combat every one of Satan's arguments.

There are a few things about this story that I want us to take a look at today. First, is Satan's method of temptation in Matthew 4. Some of you think that Satan's temptations are always going to be obvious but this is simply not the case. If we go all the way back to Genesis 2, we see that Satan often twists God's Word. It's not that he always comes out and denies the very Word of God but that He twists it into a meaning that it was not intended to have. This is how many cults arise, a passage of Scripture is taken out of its original context and changed to mean something entirely different. This is also why it is important to examine closely what a religious teacher or pastor is preaching to you. Just because it is in the Bible does not mean that it is being taught correctly. In the news world, journalists are accused very often of taking someone's comments "out of context". Usually this means that a person says something about a particular situation and that single comment is taken from the rest of their statement and applied to a different issue. This happens with Scripture often and Satan does it in Matthew 4 (verses 5,6).

Another thing that Satan will often promise is immediate rewards if we compromise. In verse 9 Satan told Christ "All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me." Although Christ had a mission and knew that in the end He would be a conquering king, Satan offers a shortcut. So often in life we are tempted to take shortcuts to success or fulfillment. Maybe it involves cheating on a test or settling for a marriage partner because you don't want to wait. Whatever it is, realize that promise of immediate fulfillment is usually not the best road to take.

Now, we need to examine how Christ reacts to these temptations. Each time Christ is tempted, He responds by quoting Scripture back to Satan. Christ didn't try to reason with Satan or get in some debate, rather He knew what the Bible taught and He depended upon the truth in those pages to be His argument. Notice that Christ quotes the Scripture and that Satan immediately moves on to another topic. Satan cannot stand against the truth found in the Bible and so as we know and understand more of Scripture, we are better prepared to fight against temptations.

I want to challenge you today to begin to memorize Scripture. There are great (and free) apps out there that help select verses for you and remind you to review them each day. Your life and testimony as a believer is largely determined by how well you know the Bible and how closely you follow it's instructions to you. Don't neglect such an important research. King David said it best in Psalm 119:11 when he wrote, "I have hidden your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Begin hiding that Word in your heart today and resist the inevitable temptation that is coming!

April 11th – Matthew 5

For the next 3 days, we will be studying the most famous sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount. This text provides absolutely incredible insight and challenges (because Jesus preached it) and offers so much more than we could possibly cover in a few short days. With that understanding, we are going to look at some of the more famous ideas in these three chapters as we try to understand them and realize the impact they should make on our lives as Christians.

Today, we are going to look at one of the most common expressions we use in the church today, that Christians are to be “salt and light”. In verse 13, Jesus says we are to be the “salt of the earth”. What does He mean by this? Well, in days before refrigerators, salt was a preservative. People would rub salt into meat and it would allow that meat to keep for much longer than it would in normal circumstances. In the same way, Christians are to in some ways “preserve” the earth. When Christians are present, we should lead people to lives that are righteous and preserve them from judgment. We should preserve loving and respectful relationships and societies. We should preserve a love for God and exhibit that to others.

Salt had its benefits, but we should also realize that salt is an irritant in some cases. Have you ever jumped into the ocean with an open wound? If you have you know that it can be quite painful. Salt has a way of irritating places on our body that are not fully healthy. In the same way, the salt of the earth can irritate those who are not biblically healthy. If you live for Christ, you will cause irritation and bring some tribulation on yourself (Matthew 5:10).

Second, Jesus tells us to be light. Light is totally necessary for us to function. You know what it is like to wake up in the night needing to get up and not being able to see. It is frustrating and potentially dangerous! We need light to see clearly, the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way that people can see life clearly and as His witnesses (Acts 1:8) we are to share with others about this light.

Like salt, light can also be irritating. You see, light has a way of exposing what is really present. I’ve shared the example before of a restaurant that Ashley and I enjoyed eating at in Georgia. It was a very dimly lit, “romantic” place that was mostly lit by candle light with no windows. We loved the food and the environment until we were in there one day and they had to turn on the light because of an emergency. When they hit the lights, all of the sudden we could see the filth that was on the floors. The restaurant immediately turned from a place we loved to a place we didn’t want to go back to! In the same way, as light, we will both lead people to true sight and expose sin in their lives that they don’t want others to see. For this reason, you can expect people to sometimes react angrily towards your life and your message of the Gospel.

Both salt and light have their benefits but they also have some irritating qualities. Be the salt and light of the world, but do so with the understanding that not everyone will react favorably to you. This was true in the life of Christ and it will be true for us if we are truly faithful to Him!

April 12th – Matthew 6

You can do the right thing wrongly. How many of you realized that this was true? In the first verse of Matthew 6, Christ deals with this issue as he talks about people who do their “righteous” acts in front of others to be noticed. We all know someone who acts totally different when certain people are watching. Many of you have worked with a person who was extremely lazy and rude until the boss walked in the room, whenever a supervisor came through the door, all of the sudden their actions and attitude changed completely. This happens when people don’t actually care about their actions or the job they are supposed to do but instead only care about what “important” people think about them.

In following God, there are many people who are in the same boat. What influences whether or not they decide to care for others or sacrifice for the good of another group is not the Scripture and the instruction of God but rather who might see them doing good. If a leader is around or a group of people are nearby that they hope to impress, they may do something that the Lord declares “righteous” like care for the poor or help a fellow believer in need. These actions may appear to be good on the outside, but the Lord knows our hearts.

In verse 1, Christ tells us that those who practice righteousness before others, to be seen by them, will have no reward before God in heaven. The reason why this is true is because these folks are doing what is right with the wrong motives. They aren’t helping because they desire to glorify God in their lives and be faithful to Him, rather they are helping because they want to be seen. This is a dangerous trap and one that we can fall into very quickly. We need to remember that we do all for God’s glory, honor, and praise and we do our righteous acts because we love Him. If this is our motivation, it won’t matter who else is around or what they think of our actions because our aim will not be to please them but to please God.

In thinking about doing righteous acts, I want to make sure one point is very clear. Notice Christ did not forbid doing righteous acts with or in front of others. Sometimes we have to follow the Lord and help others while there is an audience. The point that Christ is making is not that righteous acts can ONLY be done in public but that righteous acts should be done regardless of whether or not other people see you! This means that if you do what God has called you to do at church and no one ever recognizes you, you still serve faithfully because you are serving a God who recognizes how you serve. You shouldn’t concern yourself with what others think or if they even notice, you should rest in the fact that God notices and that He will bless you when the time comes.

April 13th – Matthew 7

We just moved a few weeks ago into our new home. In trying to take inventory about what needs to be done around the house, I went outside and saw rather quickly that the pavers that make up the backyard patio are beginning to sink. They haven't been outside too long (about a year and a half), but they are already showing signs of caving in all over the yard. As I began to look underneath some of these pavers, I quickly realized that the issue was simply the foundation that was underneath. You see, if you are going to put pavers down in a yard, you have to go through a process to make sure that what is underneath is solid and able to hold each piece. If you don't, when the rain comes the ground will sink because of the weight on top and you will always have a problem. Put simply, whoever constructed this patio took no time to build the foundation and now the entire thing is collapsing!

The lesson I learned about pavers is a lesson we all can learn about life, the foundation matters! The question today is not if you are going to build on a foundation but what kind of foundation will you build on? We all build our lives on certain principles and convictions. Some people build their lives on the conviction and principle that the most important thing to do in life is to have fun. Some people build their lives on the conviction that the goal is to make as much money as possible. Others build their lives on the idea that their family is the most important thing. Whatever it might be for you, rest assured that you are building on something even now.

In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus tells us what the only viable foundation for life is if we are going to last, the Word of God. Verse 24 says "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock." You see, taking God's Word as authoritative and building your life around it is the only steady foundation there is in life. There is no second option if we are going to last.

Now, you might ask why is it important that I build on a solid foundation? Verse 25 answers that when Christ says "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." Notice that Christ said "when" the rain fell, floods came, and winds blew. You see students, regardless of whether or not you follow the Lord storms are coming. There is no way of life that will avoid problems and trials. The idea that life will always be wonderful and peaceful is simply untrue. We live in a fallen world that is full of sin, sickness, and tribulation. These things cannot be avoided forever and therefore we need to be prepared for them.

Christ goes on to say that the foolish man built his house on the sand. Sand is a terrible foundation because it is so shifty. Those of you who have walked on the beach know how much more effort it takes to walk on sand because it shifts under you. When the storm came for that house on sand, the house stood no chance; it toppled over because the foundation was faulty. I want to leave you today with one quick observation. As these houses were being built, there was probably very little visible difference. Both were new, both stood at the time of construction, and people could have lived in both. However, the storm separated the good house from the bad. Don't be fooled by the fact that you are building right now and your life looks the same as someone else's. Whether you are building on sand of worldly wisdom or on the rock of the Word of God, the initial results may look the same but rest assured there is a storm coming. When that storm arrives, those of you who have built on the Word of God will stand tall and those who haven't will crumble. My prayer is that you will stand, take the time to examine the foundation of your life today and if it is built on any other conviction or belief besides what is taught in the Word of God change it while you still have the time!

April 14th – Matthew 8

Christ was never vague about what it would take to follow Him. Jesus consistently informed those who wished to follow Him of the high cost they would pay to be a disciple of the Messiah. This is part of the process of becoming a true follower of Christ; first we must count the cost and still choose to follow. In chapter 8, we read of two individuals who made it clear to Christ that they wished to follow Him and Jesus' response to each give us great insight into what it truly means to be a true Christian or follower of Christ.

The first man, a scribe, came to Christ and affirmed that He would follow Christ wherever Jesus went (v. 19). Now, most of us today would look at that and say that it took great courage just to approach Jesus with such a commitment. It was a huge commitment to follow Jesus all over, and Christ emphasized that with His response saying, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (v. 20). Many have read that statement and taken it to mean that Jesus was homeless or a nomad. Although it was certainly true that Christ traveled extensively and probably had times where he had no shelter or place to call his home while on the road, I don't believe that is the primary message here. Instead, I believe what Christ is really telling this guy is that a true believer will never feel at home in this world. Foxes and birds are born into this world and are designed to live their total lives here, a Christian is someone who was born here but upon beginning their walk with Lord looks forward to their future home with Him for eternity. If you want to follow Christ, you will undoubtedly feel foreign in this world because His path is not the path of the world and His ways are not sinful humanity's ways.

The second man asked for something that seemed truly reasonable. He told Jesus, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father" (v. 21). When we first read that, most of us probably thought that Jesus would certainly agree with this man's request, but instead Christ responds by saying "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead" (v. 22). This just seems heartless! Why would Christ say such a thing to a man? The reason why is very simple, the task of following Christ (in this case physically but now for us spiritually) is far greater than any other task or responsibility we face.

Do you look at your spiritual walk with that perspective? Do you value God's commands and His instruction so much that you would forsake your own family is you had to choose? Many of you think that is totally heartless and immoral, but if God is truly who He says He is and He has called us to follow, all other tasks must take a backseat to Him. This is truly the cost of being a disciple of Christ. Jesus knew that this would not appeal to many people and the same remains true today. The call to sacrifice and deny self is not a popular message to sinful humanity, but it is necessary if we are going to truly follow the Lord.

April 15th – Matthew 9

Have you ever taken the time to think about what life would be like if you had never heard the name of Christ? Many of you are like me; you grew up in church and around a family that knew many things about Jesus. You probably had children's books that contained Bible stories and went to Sunday school, but at the very least you live in a society in which the name of Christ is very prevalent. You can't drive around the cities of Virginia without seeing many churches and you can't flip through all the radio stations without coming across stations that play music about Jesus. This is a great privilege, but it should not be taken for granted and it should not be assumed that people in other parts of the world enjoy the same blessings.

In Matthew 9, Jesus tells His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." There are a few things that strike me about this text. First, the issue is not the amount of people or the "harvest" who would be receptive to the Gospel but rather the amount of laborers. We are surrounded by people even in our own country who need to hear the Gospel but society has so few believers who are ready and willing to share it! Are you a laborer who is equipped and ready to go into the harvest? The task is monumentally huge as Jesus acknowledges by saying that the harvest is "plentiful" but that does not mean that we don't have a part to play. We must be ready and willing to labor in the area that God has called us to work to make His name known.

Second, it is God who sends laborers not us. Many of you will be burdened for people and desire to share the Gospel with as many as possible, but it should still be God who directs your path. I think of the story in Acts 16 where Paul and Silas want to go share the Gospel in Asia (a place that had not yet heard) and yet the Holy Spirit didn't allow them to go to Asia, instead the Spirit led them somewhere else. Even though the task is huge, we should still do what God has called us to do where he has called us to do it. Don't allow your own desires to dictate where you work, rather ask God to send you out among the harvest where He would have you labor.

My prayer and challenge for you today is that you would become or remain a laborer. Do you see your life as a resource that God uses to draw people into relationship with Him? Are you using your life to share the Gospel with others or do you see that as someone else's job? I pray that you understand the importance of your work as you live to share the good news of the Gospel with others each and every day!

March 16th – Matthew 10

Every single one of us have fears. Some fear sickness, some fear spiders, others fear flying, and the list goes on and on. Although fear is natural, it is often something that we must learn to overcome if we are going to achieve the calling God has given us. For many, the fear of disapproval has been the obstacle that stops them from being who God has called them to be, for others it is the fear of the unknown. As we follow the Lord, often we are asked to step into situations on faith without the slightest idea of how things will work out long term. In Matthew 10, Christ gives us three observations that should help each of us as we seek to overcome fear in order to follow the Lord.

First, Christ challenges believers to have an eternal perspective. In verse 28, He tells His disciples, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” You see, so many times we are stopped by the temporal issues of the day. We don’t want to follow God because it could cost us our health or even our lives. We don’t want to share the Gospel with someone because it might cost us our friendship with them or even our reputation among our peers. Whatever those fears may be, they are all rooted in a desire to be comfortable or safe in the short term. The problem is that while we might be “better off” in the short term in regards to our comfort, security, and earthly relationships, we sacrifice our standing before the God that we will spend time with eternally. We all must learn to think more in terms of eternity and less in terms of the here and now. The next time that you fear something, ask yourself if you are more concerned about your short term comforts rather than your long term relationship with God.

Second, Christ reminds us that God is ultimately in control and aware of all that takes place. One of your temptations will be to think that God has forgotten about you or is somehow not fully aware of the situation you would be in if you chose to follow Him. Nothing could be further from the truth! Christ reminds us that “not one of them (sparrows) will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (v. 29). Previous to this quote, Christ emphasizes how little sparrows are “worth” to humanity and yet God is still keenly aware of their every move. In short, God is in control! If he calls you do something, don’t fear because He knows exactly what He is doing.

Third and finally, you matter to God. Christ states, “But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (v. 30-31). Even though God is aware of what is going on with sparrows and other creatures, He values us infinitely more! He didn’t send His son to die so that sparrows or other creatures could be reconciled to Him, He sent Jesus to die for us! We are of infinitely more value than the sparrows and we matter. Christ emphasizes that the hairs of our head are numbered meaning that God knows about us individually and cares enough to know the little facts about each of us. You should never question whether or not you matter to God (He proved you did by sending Christ to die for you), and therefore you should never fear when He calls you somewhere.

Now, I’m not saying that nothing “bad” will happen. There have certainly been many who have lost even their lives in service of the Lord including the majority of the disciples. What I am saying though is that even short-term losses are nothing when you are assured of eternity with God in heaven. He cares and He loves you more than you will know and that knowledge should be enough to get us through the difficult times without fear!

April 17th – Matthew 11

Some of you really desire to please everybody. You hurt when others dislike something you did and you do all in your power to make sure that everyone is satisfied with you at all times. There are indeed times in which we should try to make others happy, but it is important to learn and understand that we will NEVER make everyone happy regardless of what we do. Whatever the situation, there will always be difference of opinion and sometimes (if not most of the time) those opinions are not always based on fact or biblical perspectives.

Think about this, Jesus came and lived a perfect and sinless life that was devoted to our service in laying down His life for us and people STILL were unhappy with Him. In fact, in Matthew 11 He acknowledges this fact when He compares Himself with John the Baptist saying “For John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” The background of this is that John the Baptist was called to be the messenger that proclaimed that the Messiah had arrived and he had just been imprisoned a short time ago. At the time of John’s imprisonment is when Jesus’ ministry began to grow and as His ministry grew, the same people who were critics of John for not being social at all are now critics of Jesus for being too social (particularly with those who society deemed unholy).

Jesus’ words in this text highlight a very important principle which is this, just because people are “religious” or claim to follow God does not mean that they always have good intentions or make good judgments. The people who were largely opposed to John the Baptist and Jesus were not the heathen of the day, they were the religious people! These people (particularly the Pharisees) knew the Scripture well and yet refused to believe that Christ was the Messiah. Instead, they were very bitter and hateful towards the Son of God and His servant John.

If you are going to serve the Lord, you must come to the realization that many people will not like or approve of what you are doing. Like Jesus, certain people even within the church will not approve of true ministry. It is important to realize that a true test of whether or not God is calling you to something is not whether EVERYONE agrees with or approves of what you are doing. Rather, you must study the Scripture to find the truth, pray that God would reveal His plans clearly to you, and find people who truly love the Lord and serve Him and allow them speak to into your lives as you continue forward. Don’t be surprised when opposition comes or when you encounter difficult personalities, rather press on and serve the Lord as you are called!

April 18th – Matthew 12

One of the best ways to test the sincerity of your heart is by looking at the “fruit” of your life. Jesus says to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:33, “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.” What does Jesus mean by this statement? Well put simply the fruit of your life is the product of what is growing inside of you, either God or your own sinful flesh. The Bible says that the “fruit” of the Spirit of God is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23) but the fruit of the sinful flesh are “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” (Galatians 5:19-21).

Now, what does it mean for something to be a “fruit” of your life? The simple answer is this, whatever is planted inside of you will bring forth results according to its kind. If I went out and bought an apple tree tomorrow and planted it in my yard, I may not see apples when the seed is planted but in time I will ALWAYS see apples. I wouldn't plant that tree hoping to see oranges because it isn't an orange tree. In the same way, if God lives in you then the result or “fruit” of your life will be what is listed as a fruit of the Spirit. If you live for yourself then your fruit will be fruits of the flesh.

So the question is how do we know what kind of fruit we have? The easiest answer is to examine your actions, particularly when things don't go well for you. Anyone can be “happy” or “peaceful” when everything is going their way, but what happens when things go wrong? What about that bad day you have, are you still modeling the fruits of the Spirit then? How about when you face some huge challenge in your personal life? Are you still peaceful, kind, patient, gentle, and faithful or are you more jealous, angry, and envious of others?

The point Jesus is making to the Pharisees here is that you can call yourself anything but you are known by the fruit you produce. You can call yourself a Christian today, but what does the fruit in your life suggest? You see, the Pharisees called themselves followers of God but their lives betrayed them. They were not followers of God, they were glorifiers of their own selves and Christ knew this and pointed it out to them.

I would like to challenge you today to think about the fruit your life is producing. Is it good fruit or is it bad fruit? Would you be known as a Christian if people could only observe your life without ever talking to you? If you wouldn't or don't think you would, it would be wise to ask God to show you whether or not you are truly a believer. If you are, I would challenge you to commit to spending more time with Him and honestly asking Him to change you from the inside out and if He shows you that you aren't, take the time to put your faith in Him. He is the only one who will produce the fruits of righteousness in our lives!

April 19th – Matthew 13

Today, I want us to examine one of the shortest parables in the Bible found in Matthew 13:44. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus was a master teacher and He used parables quite often to express truths about God by using everyday stories and illustrations. In this parable today I would like for us to see that entrance into the kingdom of God is valuable, produces joy, and can be possessed.

First, entrance into the kingdom of God is valuable. In the parable, Jesus says that “the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” So, this man finds an incredible treasure and in order to possess that treasure he must sell everything He owns. This is the same sacrifice it takes for us to enter into the Kingdom of God. We must realize that we only enter the Kingdom when we value God and a relationship with Him above all else. We cannot hold onto worldly treasures and goals and hope to pursue God and find assurance of eternity with Him. I’m not saying that you can no longer have possessions, but I am saying that EVERYTHING you have must be held loosely. If God calls you to give up something, you must be willing to do so because you value eternity with Him over what you currently own. Just like this man was willing to give up all to have his treasure, we must be willing to give up all we have to secure the treasure of knowing, serving, and living with God.

Second, entrance into the Kingdom of God produces joy. Once the man found this treasure, he immediately was joyful. Joy is different from happiness in that happiness is determined by your circumstance and joy is not. Happiness can be brought about because you found money in your pockets you didn’t know you had (a great discovery by the way), or because a person was kind to you or you got a better job. The flip side is true as well, happiness can be immediately taken away from us by circumstance. Have you ever had a day that went from good to bad in a moment? If you have, you know how quickly happiness can be taken. Joy on the other hand arises from a foundational belief that is not dictated by circumstance. We can have joy in the Lord despite our present problems and afflictions because we know that none of those problems can separate us from our eternal destiny with Him in heaven. Once we come to know the great reward and assurance of entering the Kingdom of God, we will find true joy forever.

Third, we can know we possess entrance into the Kingdom of God. Once this man bought his field with the treasure, he KNEW he owned it for as long as he lived. In the same way, once we place our trust in Christ and depend upon His righteousness for our salvation, we can know that we possess Him and therefore we possess a guarantee of eternity with Him in heaven. We should not have to doubt these things, rather we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is ours forever!

It is true that entrance into the Kingdom of God is valuable, it produces joy, and it can be possessed. My prayer for you is that you have already gained entrance into heaven by accepting the atoning blood of Christ for your sins. If you have, find your joy and peace in that knowledge and remember that eternity with God is more valuable than anything else you possess.

April 20th – Matthew 14

Have you ever wanted to do something great? Many of us have even wanted to do something great in the name of the Lord. Whether that be starting a ministry or doing something creative to minister to friends, the truth is that regardless of whether or not it is in service to the Lord or just in general we all have a desire to see and do something truly special with our lives. The problem is that sometimes we don't wait on God to lead us to these great things and other times, once we have begun the process we allow our dreams and energy to be choked out by the obstacles and "common sense". In today's reading, we read about Peter who did wait on the Lord before he attempted the miraculous but also fell victim to looking at the obstacles rather than to God.

To summarize the story, Jesus stayed on the shore of the Sea of Galilee well after the disciples left to cross to the other side. This would be a major problem for all of us, but Jesus being God in flesh made the decision simply to walk on water until He reached the boat. Understandably, this freaked the disciples out quite a bit as they saw Jesus' figure move towards them, many of them feared that He was a ghost! In order to calm their fears, Christ proclaimed to the disciples His identity and then in typical Peter fashion, Peter says "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" and He (Jesus) said 'come'" (v. 28-29). Peter shows some good judgment here in that he doesn't just jump out onto the water and assume that God would protect him, rather he waits on Christ to affirm that it is okay for him to come and then leaves the boat. It is important for you to pray and make sure that God is in fact giving you leadership and permission to try something before you take your first step. So many people have attempted things "for God" without taking the time to even ask if God is leading them to take on the task. Don't be like many people who are angry at God because He didn't bless their attempts at something. Instead, ensure that God is giving you the go ahead before you even start.

Now, Peter is on the water and he is experiencing the miraculous. He is doing something that is physically impossible for a human to do, but then he makes a big mistake. Matthew tells us "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and began to sink." (v. 30). Peter took his eyes off of God and began to get a little bit "practical" on the water. He started to look at all of the reasons why he shouldn't be on the water, it was stormy out after all and walking on water is already impossible! Whenever God has called you to do something, you can rest assured that you will be reminded of all of the practical reasons why its not a good idea. The question for you and for me is who will we focus on? Will we focus on all of the earthly situations that should normally prevent us from being successful or will we fix our eyes on the God of the earthly situations and trust that He will protect us?

Finally, Peter makes a good decision in that while he was sinking, he cried out to Jesus for help. If you begin to sink, if you sense that you are starting to be intimidated or to lose faith in life, don't be ashamed to cry out to God for help! We see in this text that Christ saved Peter and God will save you as well. He is faithful, and He is our very present help in time of need. We must believe that and understand that even when we fail, He continues to love us and continues to have our best interest at heart!

April 21st – Matthew 15

Many of us think that the ultimate reason why God would answer our prayers or work miracles is for the benefit of the people who ask. As Jesus walked this earth, He healed many people, fed others, and even raised a few from the dead. All of these things were great and certainly helped those who benefitted from the miracle, but in Matthew 15, Matthew gives the real reason for His miracles, namely that the result of each miracle was that people glorified the God of Israel (v. 31).

As we read through Scripture, a constant and prevalent theme in the Old and New Testament is that God's ultimate concern is the glorification and worship of His name. For instance, in Isaiah 48:9 God says, "For my own name's sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as to not destroy you completely." In this text, God is not as concerned with the well-being of Israel as He is with the hit His reputation would take if Israel, His chosen people, were destroyed. In Ezekiel 20:9 God says about Israel's exodus out of Egypt "But for the sake of my name, I brought them out of Egypt. I did it to keep my name from being profaned in the eyes of the nations among whom they lived and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites." Again, the ultimate reason for the miracles that Israel enjoyed in leaving Egypt were not for their own pleasure but for God's reputation. God is always most concerned with receiving glory and honor and with ensuring that His name is respected and honored.

Now, some of you might read that and think that God seems extremely arrogant. It might even come across to you as if God is too full of Himself, and for any other person or being you would be correct. The reality of this situation is different however, because God CANNOT be full of Himself or overly prideful. He is worthy of all praise and worship and He deserves much more than what He gets. The term arrogant is defined as "having or revealing an exaggerated sense of one's own importance or abilities." The picture is of someone who acts and thinks as if they are far greater than they actually are in reality. Many of us know people who think they are great athletes or musicians but they really are just average or even bad! These people are arrogant because they value themselves and their skill way too highly. On the flip side, God cannot be arrogant because there is no way He could value Himself too much! We cannot overestimate His ability and we cannot overestimate or express His worth. He simply is the best at ALL things and therefore His desire to see His name glorified is not arrogant but reasonable.

The great part about this fact is that this desire to see His name glorified is good for us! It isn't bad for God to get glory, in fact it is what we were created to bring to Him. We should glorify Him and we can rest in the fact that one of the ways He gets glory is by blessing us abundantly. He gets glory when we are saved, He gets glory when miracles are worked in our lives because we can tell others about Him. He delights in us and desires our good (Romans 8:28) but we also must delight in Him and work to see His name glorified in all things in our lives. May we pray for miracles and have faith that God will do mighty things in our midst, but may we also be faithful to give Him the glory He deserves and desires!

April 22nd – Matthew 16

One of the more famous lines in the Bible is found in Matthew 16:24-26. In it, Christ tells us what it will cost to be a follower of His, but He also provides very logical and important reasons why it is wise for us to forsake all to pursue Him. In this text we see that being a follower of Christ requires self-denial but it also rewards us with eternal blessings instead of temporal pleasures.

First, being a follower of Christ requires self-denial. Jesus states in verse 24 that anyone who would follow Him must “deny himself take up his cross and follow me.” One of the refreshing parts of Jesus’ life as recorded in the Scripture is that He was very clear about what it would take to truly be His disciple and He was clear up front. He didn’t play the game that many churches play today where they avoid certain “difficult” parts of the Gospel until a person is involved and then gradually inform them what the Christian life will cost them in the end. Instead, Christ wanted His followers up front to know what was expected and the ultimate expectation is that a true follower of Christ will be sacrificial. You might wonder what types of sacrifice the Christian life might require and so I want to list a few for you to ponder. The Christian life might require you to sacrifice material possessions and pleasures. Following God does not always mean pursuing the job or career that pays the most. In fact, sometimes following God means the exact opposite (though not always). Following God might mean using vacation time to go on mission with Him instead of spending it at a resort with friends. Following God means giving of your money to further the cause of the Gospel instead of spending it on yourself and loved ones. Following God means sacrificing your time with others (or sleeping) to pursue a relationship with God. For those of you who have been faithful to do a devotion every morning for the past few months, you know that these things require some sacrifice. Not only could you be called to sacrifice material possessions, you might also sacrifice your reputation. Our culture is becoming increasingly hostile to biblical beliefs. We live in a day where calling almost anything sinful is frowned upon. Are you willing to sacrifice your social standing to affirm biblical doctrines about right and wrong? Following God could cost you your life. There have been more people killed in the last century for their faith in Christ than ever before. We live in a world that is becoming even more hostile to the Gospel than it was before. Just like Jesus and the vast majority of His disciples lost their lives because of their faith, we could be called to give ours away at any time if we truly are followers.

Second, being a follower of Christ means we are promised eternal blessings to replace temporal pleasures. If following Christ just meant sacrifice, it would be difficult to sign-up, but the good news for us is that following Christ comes with a promise of incredible eternal rewards! We who choose to sacrifice here will reap the benefits of being with God forever. We must understand that everything we sacrifice here on earth will be so miniscule in comparison with the rewards we will enjoy in eternity. This is what motivates us to continue to follow and to stay committed.

My fear for you is that you will be enticed by what the world promises but can’t deliver, namely fulfillment and happiness. Jesus says in verse 26, “for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” You see, what we are offered here on this planet cannot last. You can’t take anything you have gained here with you and what you have will continue to deteriorate. It has been said that your nicest and newest stuff is still only 10 years away from being junk in someone’s yard sale. The truth is that everything you pursue that is not Christ will not last and will not satisfy. It is worth it to sacrifice a little here to gain everything in the future. I pray you believe that today!

April 23rd – Matthew 17

One challenge that I have found particularly difficult to conquer in this life is learning how to avoid needless conflict. In life, there are simply some things that are not worth fighting for because they can cost you so much more than what you would gain by winning the argument. Truthfully, even in church world there are certain things that mean very little to you (a largely younger generation) that mean the world to older generations because of their own experiences and memories. You need to learn to approach these situations with grace and learn to differentiate between battles worth fighting and those that can be let go. In Matthew 17, we see Jesus pass up a potential conflict for the peace instead of conflict.

The battle centered around a religious tradition. In short, during the census each year a temple tax was charged to all of the people. This tax paid for tabernacle upkeep and staffing and was to be paid by all Jews everywhere. Now, all of the nation of Israel were expected to pay this tax, but Jesus was not just another Jew, He was the very Son of God. He shouldn't have had to pay for anything because He was God incarnate! The tax was to be paid so that the people could worship God and here is God Himself in the flesh being asked to pay the tax. It didn't make sense, but Jesus knew that the people asking Him to pay couldn't connect those dots. They didn't understand that He was God, and so in an effort to not create unnecessary conflict He instructs Peter to go fishing, look in the fish's mouth that was caught and bring back the shekel that was going to be found in that fish (pretty cool way to pay taxes if you ask me).

The moral of the story today is this, if it is at all possible to be an agent of peace do it. You see, Jesus created great conflict in a variety of ways in religious life but He did so because what the people believed was not true and He HAD to inform them of the true way to salvation. There was simply no getting around these issues because the people needed to properly understand who He was in order to be saved. Conversely, in this situation there was no real benefit to winning the argument. He did as He was asked because He didn't want to create an obstacle to His crucial message of salvation for these collectors.

In your life, do you ever analyze a situation to see if it is really worth conflict? Are there some things you could do to live at peace with others and still not compromise the Gospel or your integrity? If so, I would encourage you to try your best to be peaceful. We don't gain by needlessly arguing with others or proving our point on issues that really don't matter. Don't let sports talk, politics, or some other worthless discussion cloud a relationship you have with a person and therefore prevent you from sharing with them the Gospel. Let those things pass and if you do, you will have less obstacles in the way of their salvation. This is what Christ taught Peter in Matthew 17 and it holds true for us today as well!

April 24th – Matthew 18

Yesterday we talked about how important it is to try to live at peace with others. There are many times when it is good to avoid conflict (particularly about meaningless topics or things that are just personal preference), but sometimes conflict is unavoidable. There will be moments where we must stand up for what is right and particularly times where we need to hold brothers and sisters in Christ accountable for their actions. In these moments, what should we do? Jesus answers that question in Matthew 18 by giving us four steps to follow: approach them individually, approach them with two or three others, bring the issue before the church, finally if they continue to refuse to repent then we remove fellowship with them collectively.

First, we approach them individually. Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” (v. 15). This is an imperative first step and a first step that we often blow past or ignore. Jesus is very clear that the very first thing we should do if someone sins against us is approach them individually. This is vitally important and it is something that most believers simply don’t do. Most of us, instead of approaching someone individually for a discussion, instead share with all of our other friends what has happened. We begin to try to get people on our side by telling them our side of the story in hopes that they will agree with us and be mad at this individual as well. The problem with this is that this NEVER solves a conflict and often ruins someone’s reputation in the process. Jesus says that if we go to a person as an individual and they listen to you, “you have gained a brother”. By that statement He means that you have gained someone who respects and loves you even more. By going to a person individually, instead of blasting them publicly, you show that you care about them and desire to protect their reputation as well.

Second, if they don’t listen to us we take a few witnesses. These witnesses should be people who also love the Lord and who desire to see your situation rectified. Don’t make the mistake of taking a few people who also dislike this person or who have been wronged by them recently. The point of their presence is not to pile onto the person but rather to make sure that “every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” (v. 16). Essentially, the witnesses are there to do away with a “he said she said” encounter that cannot be interpreted by anyone.

Third, if they still don’t listen we are to take the matter to the church. Taking the matter to the church should not be our first response but it should be something we are willing to do if necessary. This allows the entire body of Christ to deal with the issue and puts the problems out there for all to hear. If you have ever had an issue in church, you know that “secrets” get out and often the stories change over time. Taking the matter to the church body ensures that the true problems are on the table and allows the church collectively to stand in the request that a person repents of their sin.

Finally, if there is still no repentance then the church is to treat the offender as a “Gentile or tax collector”. Gentiles and tax collectors were both viewed as outside of the circle of God’s people. So, what Christ is teaching here is that those who refuse to repent should be put outside of the church body. This is not to publicly shame them as much as it is a last ditch effort to have them repent and turn from their sins. When you take something as precious as the relationships we have in the church away from us, it often will spur us on to repent and get right with the people we have offended.

As always, our desire should be to see reconciliation. Just like Christ forgave you, you should be willing to forgive others. When you approach a conflict, don’t walk into the situation wanting revenge or for the other person to pay the consequences, rather walk in with an understanding that we all deserve hell but God has graciously given us something else. With that in mind, we are to extend grace to others because grace was extended to us by Christ!

April 25th – Matthew 19

There are a few times in Matthew where Jesus comments on children and their importance to Him. For instance, in Matthew 18, Christ tells His disciples that they must “become like children” in order to inherit the Kingdom of God (v. 3). In Matthew 19:13-15, Christ again remarks on the importance of children and their place with Him stating that to children “belongs the kingdom of heaven” (v. 14). So what is it about children that Christ appreciates so much? Why do we have to become like children to inherit the kingdom of God? The answer to that question is threefold, namely: childlike trust, vulnerability, and the inability to advance their own cause without help. We will examine these three characteristics and see what they can teach us about being a follower of Christ.

First, we must have childlike trust. When you were growing up, your parents probably told you to stay away from strangers. I can remember a little girl in my neighborhood who was kidnapped by a stranger who offered her a ride to the bus stop on a rainy day. This little girl wasn't old enough to “know better”, instead she simply trusted someone she shouldn't have trusted. It comes naturally to humanity to trust, we learn distrust as we suffer later in life. In the same way that trust is an aspect of children's personalities, we must trust in God explicitly to be a believer. He requires our faith in every area of our lives if we are going to enter the Kingdom of God.

Second, vulnerability. A child is incredibly sensitive to and perceptive to the words of those who hold influence in their lives. Analeigh is now almost 2 years old and she is becoming more and more concerned about what we think of her and how we react. She wants to talk with us (all the time), she wants our approval of her “tricks”, and she wants our affirmation regularly. Similarly, we should live for the approval of our God and train ourselves to hear His voice for instruction. This is imperative if we are going to live a life that is obedient to His direction and call.

Finally, a child has an inability to advance their own cause without help. A child is extremely vulnerable and also extremely helpless. They need parents or other adults to fix their meals, make sure they are clean, and even change their own clothes. In short, children live in a constant state of dependence upon their parents. In the same way, believers should live constantly aware of their dependence on God to bless their efforts. Whenever we believe we bring even a small portion of the required talent or skill to the table that serves to “help” God we have totally missed the boat. Instead, we should realize that we desperately need Him to do all things including just breathing each and every second.

Children are precious to God and they also represent our standing before God always. There is a reason why the phrase “child of God” is used so often. We should be reminded that we are desperately in need of His direction and power if we are going to enter and live in the Kingdom of God!

April 26th – Matthew 20

The world often teaches us a philosophy that is totally different from God's instructions in the Scripture. This is never more apparent than in Matthew 20:26-28. The popular ideology in the world today is that if you want to be great you have to take the initiative and pursue success at all costs. It is truly a "cut throat" world in areas such as business, politics, and education. The idea in these circles of serving your "competition" or those who are on the same road as you are on is not only ludicrous, it is comparable to career suicide. On the flip side, Jesus teaches us that the Kingdom of God will not operate like the world. In fact, the Kingdom of God will be structured in just the opposite manner, those "who would be great among you must be your servant." (v. 26).

We must serve because the greatest among us, Jesus Christ, first served. We model His life to the best of our ability and in that imitation we find blessing. The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church to "imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). In that short verse, we see that the purpose of this life is to emulate and imitate Christ above any and all calls to advance our own cause.

The question must be asked, why would I want to serve others instead of serving myself? It doesn't really make much sense to live a life fully devoted to the good of others, after all don't these people generally get trampled on in the long run? The answer to that question is a resounding "no" and the reason is very simple, we serve a God who rewards us when we follow Him.

You see, we don't have to worry about what types of rewards our earthly counterparts may get that we don't have, because we serve a God who is able "to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). We serve the King of Kings who owns all and distributes all as He sees fit, therefore we need to be concerned about making Him happy above all else. If we are faithful to make Him happy, then greatness in His Kingdom will follow and that is what truly matters.

It is difficult to break out of the idea that we must fight for ourselves and serve our own interests above the interests of others, but when you do decide to live to serve you will find that you are totally free. You will no longer have to worry about being slighted or being passed over for something you "deserved", rather you will be concerned about making a totally righteous and faithful God happy and in the process you can be assured that He will reward you according to all you have done when the time is right. Don't live for yourself, it's so shallow and hollow, instead live for others and above all live for God. Being faithful and obedient to Him is the greatest calling any of us can ever fulfill.

April 27th – Matthew 21

Words without actions are totally worthless. Have you ever had someone tell you they were going to do something only to find out that they forgot or didn't do as they said they would? Maybe some of you have agreed to do something for someone and not followed through. These are common experiences in life and they happen quite often in our Christian journey. Many people adopt a resolution each New Year. For believers, this resolution can often be spending more time in the Word of God, praying more, or maybe serving in church more faithfully. These are often made with great intentions and sometimes people try to follow through for several weeks. The problem is that eventually these resolutions die and our lives are largely unchanged. Are you guilty today of telling God you would do something without following through?

Jesus mentions this issue in a parable about two sons in Matthew 21. In the parable, Jesus cites one son who tells the father he isn't going work in the vineyard as his father had asked. This son changes his mind in a little while and goes to work in the field. The father's second son agrees to work in the field but for whatever reason did not work that day in the field. Jesus ends the parable by asking which one of the sons was faithful and they responded correctly by saying the first son was the faithful son. Jesus takes these two sons and compares them to two groups of people, ones who say all the right things but do nothing and those who initially reject the message but end up being obedient to its commands.

If we aren't careful, those of us who have grown up in the church can fall into the category of the ones who say the right things but are not obedient. We can learn all of the right things to say and we can even have intentions of following through on our statements, but it is our actions that truly matter before God. Have you been taught to say that Jesus is Lord and yet live as if He is just your buddy? If Jesus is Lord than what He commands is not a suggestion but an order but if He is just your buddy then His advice might be welcome but it is certainly not authoritative. Have you learned to affirm the importance of sharing your faith without actually following through with your peers? These are questions we must answer and things we must deeply consider.

Although it is certainly a blessing to grow up in the church (as I did), there is also a danger. There is a danger that we take for granted the Gospel and just give verbal recognition to its precepts instead of taking them seriously and following as we are called. Don't get used to the Gospel! Don't ever take for granted the fact that God wants a relationship with you and don't justify your disobedience. Instead, do what you say you are going to do and pray that God would empower you to be faithful in ALL areas of your life. Actions speak louder than words, what do your actions say about what you believe today?

April 18th – Matthew 22

“You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-38). No more profound words have been spoken than these two commandments given to us by Christ. Jesus had an amazing ability to summarize many things simply and totally. In these words, we find the key to following God and being obedient to all of His commandments. Today, lets take a look at these two commandments and see how and why they will help us keep the Law, God’s standard of righteousness.

First, we are to love the Lord. If we truly love someone or something, we will do the very best we can to ensure that we do not hurt them or it. For instance, because I love my wife I do everything in my power to make sure that I only say and do things that will build her up. If I know that she doesn’t like something, I should do everything in my power to avoid doing it. In the same way, those who love God are truly grieved by their actions that hurt Him or go against His will. If we love God, we will worship Him because that’s what He requires of us and we will know that He is worthy of our worship. If we love God, we will not put other things before Him because He will be our top priority. If we love God, we will be obedient to His call because we desire to make Him happy and do what He asks us to do. Those whom we love have the ability to get us to do things we otherwise wouldn’t. My little girl could ask me to do something that I really have no interest in doing otherwise (like play with some of her toys) and yet because of who she is and because of my love for her, I will be happy to participate. In the same way, we will do even the things God calls us to do that we would not otherwise consider. Love Him, if you do you will keep His commands.

Second, we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Often, if we take the time to put yourself in the shoes of another “person, we are amazed at how our perspective changes. One of my favorite shows on television is “Undercover Bosses”. In this show, CEO’s of companies disguise themselves for a time and take up entry level jobs in their company. Almost invariably, a few days of working in these positions gives them a whole new perspective on their company and encourages drastic changes to the work environment and the way these people are treated. We must learn to see others as important just like we naturally see ourselves as being important. If we do, we won’t mistreat others because we don’t like to be mistreated. We won’t mislead others or steal from others because we know what it feels like to be misled or stolen from.

Begin to really pursue a deep and loving relationship with God and practice the discipline of putting yourself in the shoes of others. If we learn to value God and value others, we are well on our way to being the righteous person that God has called us to be and we will be more equipped and credible as a witness for Him!

April 29th – Matthew 23

Chapter 23 contains some of Jesus' most harsh words for his biggest critics, the Pharisees. In them, we see the description of many people who are "religious" but not followers of Christ. In particular, we see that many times religious people hold others to a standard they do not follow and they typically are more concerned with weighing others down than pursuing a right relationship with God on their own.

First, Christ says of the Pharisees that they "preach but they do not practice" (v. 3). If you have ever had a teacher or someone who is responsible for overseeing your work who does this you know how frustrating it can be to serve under someone who tells you what to do but doesn't follow their own rules. For instance, in high school I had an English teacher who constantly took off points for grammatical errors. She was by far the most difficult teacher I ever had, but her handouts and notes for our class were FULL of grammatical errors. In short, she was grading us by one standard and allowing her work to be governed by another. This was very frustrating and disheartening and it damaged her credibility severely with her students. Like my teacher, many religious people have standards that they hold everyone to publicly, but privately their own lives don't come close to meeting their rules. Be sure that whatever you follow your own advice! Don't be one of those religious people who are hard on others and easy on themselves!

Second, they "tie up heavy burdens hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. In short, they made life almost impossible for the Jews but were not willing to help alleviate any of the stress that these rules placed on the shoulders of their followers. When you deal with someone who is struggling with a serious addiction or problem with a specific sin in their own lives do you stop at telling them that they are wrong or do you do all you can to help them with their burden? In Galatians, Paul tells us that the church is responsible to help "bear one another's burdens", this is what true followers of Christ desire to do for each other. They certainly hold their brothers and sisters to a specific standard but they also do what they can to help them in their time of need. Religious people are quick to point out your problems but they refuse to help you come up with solutions. Don't be the person who is so prone to point out everyone's struggles and so slow to show them the love of God by helping them carry the weight of their problems. Sharing in the struggle is part of what the church is designed to do and each of us has a role to play!

Religious people are more concerned about rules than people. They want to conform to external rules while totally neglecting the state of their own hearts. The point of our faith is not to live by rules but to grow in relationship with Christ. Certainly a product of growing in the Lord is that our lives will conform more and more to Him and His righteousness but this is a by-product that cannot be produced in any other way besides loving and walking with Christ. May our lives point to Jesus as the object of our faith and righteousness and may we care about people to the point that we desire to help them and provide a good example of what a true follower of Christ looks like!

April 30th – Matthew 24

Over the years, people have made big business out of predicting when Christ will return. A few years ago, a guy named Walter Camping predicted that Jesus would return on my birthday! That would have been an incredible gift, but it didn't happen. The unfortunate part of that situation and many others who have predicted Christ's return is that people get caught up in these predictions and sell everything believing that they won't be here for much longer. If only these people would have read and taken seriously Matthew 24, there would be no confusion about the validity of these predictions as Jesus could not have been clearer about the subject!

Jesus says about His return that "no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (v. 36). This means that ANYONE who has found a secret code in the Bible or some sort of predictive formula that tells us when Jesus is coming knows more than the angels and Christ! Jesus told us this to protect us from the coming temptation. He knew that there would be those who want to prey on the weak and uneducated about these matters and He desired to warn them of the coming evil.

So, what should we do to prepare? Well, Christ tells us that our job is to simply be faithful. You see, Christ's coming will happen in the blink of an eye. Literally one minute things will be happening as usual, and the next those who know Christ will be taken. We cannot know the day or the hour but we can know the person who is coming again, and if we know Him we can be faithful to His call on our lives.

My hope for you and for me is that if Christ returns in our lifetime He will find that we were doing exactly what He called us to be doing. I hope that He finds each of us being faithful and serving Him. I also pray that the knowledge that He is coming again will produce in us an urgency to share the Gospel. You might not have tomorrow to share with someone. Don't take days or opportunities for granted, rather utilize every chance you have to share Gospel. We must be motivated by what Christ told us about His return and we must realize that many of the people we know and love would spend eternity separated from Him if things remained the same.

Growing up in the church, one of my biggest issues with Christianity was that all of the church people said they believed in hell but so few acted like it. They all affirmed that life was short and unpredictable and those who died without knowing Christ would spend eternity in hell but so very few were sharing their faith desperately with these people they "loved". In fact, many were taking life for granted and in the process taking a chance that the next day would in fact come and that there would be more opportunities. I want to challenge you today to think about people you know and love who don't know the Gospel and begin to find ways to share with them. You never know, Christ could come at any moment!