



September 2014

John 2-21

Joshua 1-10

SWIFT CREEK YOUTH GROUP

Desiring to show others Jesus, through our words and actions!

Check out our new website: swiftcreekyouth.weebly.com, find us on Facebook: Swift Creek Youth & Follow us on twitter: @swiftcreekyouth!

September 1st – John 2

John 2 records a story that paints Christ in a very different light than many portrayals of Him we find in our culture today. In verses 13-17 we read John's account of Christ cleansing the temple. In this story, we should be reminded two things, first we must guard against those who see religion as a means for profit and second, we should seek to remove any and all distractions from true worship.

The Bible tells us that Jesus walked into the temple to find "those selling oxen and sheep and pigeons". At first glance, this seems strange to us, why would people be selling livestock at a place of worship? The reason is that the people still operated under the sacrificial system that was established way back in the Old Testament law. People would travel great distances to offer their sacrifices, and many of them did not want to do this with their own livestock because of the amount of effort it would take to transport the animals. For this reason, a big business sprouted in the temple, making many people great sums of money. Jesus saw this and reacted with great anger. What God had established as good and necessary had been corrupted by man and Christ was not going to allow this type of corruption to continue. He drove these men out of the temple and turned over the very tables they were using to conduct their business in the process!

Unfortunately, religion can still be big business today. There are many out there who masquerade as those who are trying to provide a needed "word from God" or a product that will help you gain that miracle you are praying for in your life. These people seek to profit from your desire to worship and often times their desires are rooted in greed rather than glorifying and honoring God.

There is a second issue that causes Christ to be angry however and it has to do with favoritism and distraction. The temple was designed in such a way as to allow those who were not Jews (often called "God fearers" in the Bible) to worship as well. They were allowed entry into an area called "the court of the Gentiles". This was a place where any person could come and pray and seek God. Unfortunately, God's "chosen people" the Jews, conducted their business in the middle of the court where the Gentiles were allowed to come to worship. They showed no regard for anyone else and this made Christ very angry.

Christ came to make a way to God for all people, not just the Jews. His heart is for all people to be able to worship and seek God and anything the people of God do to take away from that goal produces righteous anger in Him. Let us be careful to lovingly regard every person who comes to worship God as important. May we seek to remove distractions in our worship so that all people who come may benefit from the message being preached and the songs being lifted up to our heavenly Father. It is always God's heart that His church

September 2nd – John 3

John 3 records probably the most famous verse in the Bible, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is truly good news! John goes on to say in verses 17-18 that God did not send Christ to condemn the world but to save the world and that whoever believes is not condemned. These are great truths that bring the Christian much hope. They should encourage your heart this morning and remind you that you serve a Savior who is full of grace and mercy.

If we were to stop with verse 18, we would have to ask why anyone would pass on this opportunity for salvation. After all, who wouldn't want to live knowing that they were no longer condemned and were destined to spend eternity with God in heaven? Why would someone pass this great offer up? Unfortunately, John tells us that many in the world today pass up the opportunity for salvation because they love the darkness (sin, evil) more than the light (God, salvation). The reason for this love is very simple; salvation requires us to come to the light of the Gospel and in doing so exposes us for being the sinful beings we are. You see, in order to accept salvation you have to admit that you cannot save yourself. You have to proclaim that you are a sinner and that your only hope of salvation is to be saved by grace. This is difficult for many because their pride will not allow them to show off who they really are inside.

Salvation is offered freely by God but accepting it requires that we humble ourselves in understanding that we cannot achieve salvation for ourselves. We must come from the darkness of our sin and secrecy into the light of God which exposes all that we are inside. This is the hang up for so many when we present the Gospel and it could be the obstacle that is standing in your way today.

Essentially, there is a message here for both types of people, the saved and the unsaved. For the saved the message is simple. You don't have to pretend to be perfect because the cross has already vividly demonstrated for all to see that you are not. Christ died for YOUR SIN which means your acceptance of His offer of salvation states publicly that you are a sinner. You are not perfect, and God does not require you to be perfect in order to be saved. The church should be full of people who unashamedly admit that they fall short many many times. We should encourage one another to continue to pursue holiness, but we should also understand that each of us will fail often in that pursuit. Be open, be honest today if you are a believer. Second, for the unbeliever the invitation is the same. The Bible is very clear that Christ died for us because He already knew that we were sinners. In short, you might be able to fool some people on this planet, but you will NEVER fool the God of

September 3rd – John 4

Sharing the Gospel is something that all believers are commanded to do in the Scriptures. For some of us, it comes very naturally and for others it is always a struggle. However, regardless of how challenging evangelism is, we need to all learn about and practice sharing the good news of Christ with others. In John 4, we read about Jesus Himself sharing the Gospel with the Samaritan woman at the well. Let's take a minute today to look at three truths about sharing our faith that we see clearly in the story of the woman at the well.

The first truth we will see is that sharing your faith often requires you to branch out from cultural or accepted norms. As John 4 begins, we read that Jesus initiates a conversation with this Samaritan woman. Now, for us this may not seem so special because our culture would not frown upon this type of dialogue, but in Jesus' time initiating a conversation with a woman, much less a Samaritan, was almost unheard of. In those days, Jews and Samaritans had nothing to do with one another. In fact, verse 9 tells us that "Jews had no dealings with Samaritans." Jews viewed Samaritans as half-breeds, they were people who had some Jewish ancestry that was combined with other Gentile bloodlines. Simply stated, they were considered mutts to the Jews. On top of this, it was not widely accepted for men to speak to women of any ethnicity in Jesus' time. In verse 27 we read that the disciples marveled at the fact that Christ was speaking to a woman. They simply couldn't believe what they were seeing! Here is the Messiah and He is taking time to speak to someone as lowly as a Samaritan woman. Jesus understood then what we must understand today, society or your friends might consider a person less valuable or acceptable but the Gospel sees all people as equally important! Sharing your faith should not be limited to the people you are comfortable with or you think are most influential, rather we should share with anyone God places in our path.

The second truth is that sharing the Gospel requires us to confront people about their sin. In this story, Christ calls out the Samaritan woman by revealing to her that He knew that she had multiple husbands and was now in a relationship with someone who was not her husband. This was undoubtedly an uncomfortable moment in the discussion, but it was necessary. The Gospel is powerful because we are not! The reason why we need a Savior is because we are mired in sin and have no ability to free ourselves from its grip or consequences. Although we don't know the details of people's private lives like Christ does, we should thoroughly explain to others that they are sinners in need of grace. We must begin with the inadequacy of man before we can get to the sufficiency of God. If people have no idea that they are in need of a Savior then they won't understand the majesty of the Gospel.

The third truth is that sharing the Gospel involves the glorious truth of eternal life. Christ offers the Samaritan woman the opportunity to partake of eternal life. He appeals to her desire to be satisfied by earthly water and uses that example to equate earthly, temporary satisfaction from water to heavenly, eternal joy and satisfaction in the Gospel. Evangelism must always involve this free offer from God. It is the promise of eternal joy and comfort that makes the Gospel so incredible and fulfilling.

My prayer for you is that you would take time today to engage someone in a conversation about the Gospel. I understand that this is uncomfortable for many of us, but I also know that the good news we possess as Christians must be shared to people who desperately need the hope and salvation it offers!

September 4th – John 5

You will be really hard pressed to find a religion that does not recognize Jesus as some sort of enlightened prophet. Muslims consider Him to be a messenger from God, Buddhists recognize and honor many of His teachings, and even people who are a part of “new age” religions (like Oprah Winfrey) will speak of Jesus reverently and even fondly. Simply put, Jesus is in some ways honored by most religious systems of our day. With this in mind, it is so very important that you understand that simply calling Jesus a smart or “good” person is not unique or enough. Even acknowledging and accepting some of His teachings as wise cannot be satisfactory. These things are not enough because Jesus claimed to be God and taught with the authority of God. Either Jesus is God or He is a liar, and if He would lie about something so important, He cannot be considered a “good” or “wise” person.

John 5 provides us a most clear passage regarding this issue in verse 18 which says “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” Simply put, in the judgment of the people of the day Jesus was claiming to be God. He was teaching and acting as if the rules that governed their religious lives did not apply to Him (rules that were made up after the Old Testament). Understand, when the Bible says that the “Jews” were seeking to kill Him, the Bible is referring to a group of Jews that were led by the Pharisees. The Pharisees were some of the most educated Old Testament scholars in history. They knew their prophecy, they knew the law, and they knew how to interpret Jesus’ sayings. It was very clear to them that Jesus was claiming to be God and because of this they were outraged.

Today, many people will claim that Jesus never claimed to be God. They will offer up excuses by saying that He was simply one of God’s messengers like Abraham and Moses before Him and Paul after Him. The problem with this thinking is that neither Abraham nor Moses claimed to be God but always looked forward to the day that God would be revealed while Paul’s past proved he wasn’t God at all! He spent a great amount of time lamenting his own sinfulness and pointing people to the Cross of Christ as the real source of joy, victory, and salvation. NO ONE ELSE in the Scriptures claimed to be God but Jesus!

The people of the day knew Jesus’ claims and they were offended. He claimed to be the authority and they chose not to honor that claim or obey His teachings. He claimed to offer salvation and they neglected His gracious gift. Today, the situation is the exact same for us, Christ claims authority to forgive our sins and pay for our transgressions but we must humble ourselves by placing our trust in His work instead of our own attempts at satisfying God’s demands. Christ instructs all people in how to live, but only those who

September 5th – John 6

Have you ever been so hungry that you can't think of anything else? For most of us, this probably hasn't happened very often but when it does, you become very aware of how much your body craves nutrition. The fact is that as long as we live on this earth we will need more nourishment. Even if you eat the biggest meal of your life on Sunday, on Monday you will inevitably be hungry. If you drink all the water you can find, you will still need more in the future. In reality, life is full of these never-ending needs and desires. We are never totally taken care of with what we have today. In truth, even things that we don't need but merely want will never satisfy us totally. There will always be the next phone, the next car, the next house, and on and on we could go. Why is this? Why can't we just rest in what we have? Why does our body constantly remind us that we need more and more just to keep going? I believe the answer to these questions is very simple, all of these things lead us to understand that true fulfillment and contentment will not come from this world. No matter how much you enjoy what you just ate or what you own, there will always be another desire.

This is the issue that Jesus addresses in John 6. He has just fed thousands with only a few fish and loaves of bread, and they have followed Him because they want more. They weren't satisfied with the meal He gave them yesterday, they were looking for more temporary contentment today! In short, they began to view God as a means to an end instead of the end Himself. God (in Christ) became a type of vending machine that could produce all the food they wanted at a moment's notice. Humanity (including us) has always struggled with this temptation. If we aren't careful, we can look at our relationship with God as something that we have forged for our own enjoyment and resource. We can only seek Him when we want or need something on this earth if we are not careful. What we will always find is that our prayers (even if granted) will not yield eternal fulfillment and if we don't recognize this, we will always pursue God for the temporary reward instead of the eternal.

Jesus understood this temptation very well and so in verse 35 Jesus says these very wise words, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Now, obviously Christ is not talking about physical hunger and thirst. Those who become followers of Christ still have those desires, so what is He referring to here? He is referring to something much deeper than sustenance for our journey, He is talking about the never ending desire of our soul. In short, those who come to Christ will never hunger for meaning and never thirst for contentment. They won't pursue every avenue to earn a little more money hoping for satisfaction from their resources, they won't look to people to validate them by their opinions, they won't look for meaning in their profession or role in the family, those who are in Christ no longer thirst for validation or meaning, instead they understand that their worth is found in the very Word of God (Christ Himself) and their meaning is to glorify and honor Him in all they do and say. This is the only goal that will produce lasting rewards and blessings and this is the only relationship that will totally sustain you as a person. Do you hunger and thirst for God and His Word or do you thirst for something that will never sustain you?

September 6th – John 7

Are you guilty of judging a situation or person by appearances? If we were to be honest, many of us struggle in this area. We are all raised with certain biases and beliefs that are rooted more in our assumptions than facts. For some of you it could be people of different races that you wrongly universally judge, for some it could be certain professions, or “types” of people. Do you look at the way someone dresses or the people they hang out with or the neighborhood they live in and make judgments about them? If so, I hope that John 7 will be a wake-up call to you.

John 7 records extensively the different judgments people made about Christ. The Jews always wanted to put Christ in a box so to speak. They wanted to categorize Him by their qualifications and discredit what He was doing because He didn't conform to their beliefs about what the Messiah should be and what He should be doing. For instance, John 7:15 tells us that the people questioned Jesus' teaching because he had “never studied”. This is a statement based on their customs in their culture. In those days, the people who desired to be Rabbis (religious leaders) had to go through strict training. It was assumed that those who would teach about God would only do so after they had completed training. Jesus had not completed His training in their school and so many did not listen to what He had to say. He was considered uneducated and therefore unfit to speak on such matters as God and the Old Testament Law. Do you judge people based on your customs or qualifications? Would you listen to someone who didn't dress the way you would or to a person who might not have the same formal education as you?

John 7 also teaches us that many of the people judged Christ in ignorance. Many of the Jews who were with Christ on that day made assumptions and discredited His ministry without knowing all the facts. In verse 42 we read some who questioned Christ because He was from Galilee and the Old Testament stated the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Little did they know that Christ was indeed born in Bethlehem, albeit because His parents had to return to Bethlehem for a census. He was raised in Galilee but born exactly where the Bible stated He would be born. These people committed a cardinal sin that many of us emulate, they made snap decisions before they investigated the facts. Have you ever done something similar? Have you ever decided to stop listening to someone because you don't think they are credible only to find out that they indeed know exactly what they are talking about? We must be very careful to investigate and form our opinions slowly if we wish to avoid the mistake the Jews made in chapter 7.

In the midst of this situation, Jesus offers all of us some wise counsel as we set out to make good judgments when He tells us in verse 24 “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.” In short, don't judge a book by its cover! Take time to get to know people and situations before you come to conclusions! In this chapter, many people rejected their very Savior because they were unwilling to investigate on their own. So often, we reject things that could be very helpful or people who could be friends for the same reason. Take your time, get to know situations and people well and then come to conclusions. You won't be sorry you waited!

September 7th – John 8

It has been said that the disciple of Christ is invincible until God's purposes for their life have been completed. I believe this concept to be true, and one great piece of evidence that supports this idea is seen throughout the book of John and in particular in the 7th and 8th chapters. In these chapters, we repeatedly read about Jesus speaking to the Pharisees in terms that were offensive to them. For instance, in chapter 8 He claims to be the son of God once again and then in verse 19 says that the Pharisees know neither Him (Jesus) nor His father (God) saying "you know neither me nor my Father." You can imagine how upsetting this type of conversation would be to people who have spent their entire lives studying Scriptures and pursuing the knowledge of God.

Needless to say, it took some courage for Christ to say these words, particularly in the company of men who could have Him arrested. The Pharisees were capable of having Christ thrown into prison, and in fact made an attempt to have Him arrested in John 7. They were able to inflict great bodily harm in normal circumstances and yet Christ speaks and nothing else happens. The Pharisees simply stand confounded and allow Christ to walk free!

You might read this and wonder how this is possible. Why would a group of people with so much power allow Christ to embarrass them publicly and not respond in some way? The answer is found in verse 20 when John tells us "no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come." As you read this, you might wonder what John means by "his hour". The simple answer is that Christ was sent to suffer for us but the moment (the hour) of His suffering was not to take place on the day of John 8. Christ had very specific instructions from God and He knew that until He completed His earthly ministry there would be no one who could take His life or threaten Him.

This text teaches the believer in Christ a very valuable lesson, namely that no force on this planet can touch you unless God allows it and even when God allows us to suffer (as He did with Christ), He will ultimately use that suffering in a mighty way (just like He did through the Cross). Simply stated, the God we serve is in control! Don't be afraid of what the world threatens to do to you, instead trust that God is in control and He always has a purpose and a plan for you!

September 8th – John 9

When was the last time you shared your personal testimony with someone? Have you shared with a lost person lately the experience you've had with Jesus Christ? Have you taken the time to share how He has healed you and encouraged you to be more holy? If not, I pray that John 9 is a powerful reminder of what we need to do when we encounter Jesus. In John 9 we read about a blind man who was healed by Jesus. It is an incredible story for many reasons, but I hope that you will take a few moments today to take note of the blind man's response to his encounter with Christ.

The beginning of the chapter tells us that Christ instructed a blind man to wash in the pool of Siloam. Jesus had previously rubbed mud on the man's face, and so when he washed off the mud he began to see! The Bible records for us that the response of the man was that he "came back seeing" (v. 7). Don't miss this detail! The man was shamed for years and could have very easily left the pool of Siloam to start over but instead he came back to the very people who believed he or his family had sinned because he was blind (v. 2) to share the great news of what God has done.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to share your testimony with people who knew you already. They knew your faults and your difficulties in life and often they can remind you of those issues early and often. This formerly blind man undoubtedly understood this but he decided to come back and share anyway. What bravery and conviction this man showed to face such a difficult crowd!

Some of you have faced a difficult crowd before while telling your story. Somewhere deep inside you found the courage to share and you were confronted with unbelief and doubts from your audience. Don't allow this to discourage you! As we read in John 9, many people will doubt our story and faith. The Pharisees never would relent on the idea that what happened to this blind man was not from God despite all the evidence to the contrary! Telling your story might be very similar today. No matter what you share or how you share it, there will always be doubters. Just like many continued to doubt this blind man despite his miraculous story and proof of his former condition, some will doubt you today. Despite all of this, continue to share. Continue to proclaim what the blind man said in verse 25 "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." Remember that the same power God displayed in your life to give you sight and life He will use in the hearts and minds of others in the day to come. Don't rob yourself of the joy of seeing God move through your testimony, but go in understanding that not everyone who hears will believe. This is an unfortunate truth but it does not change the power of God in your life!

September 9th – John 10

One of the great truths we learn throughout the Bible is that salvation is forever. There is absolutely nothing that you (or anyone else) can do to “undo” what God has done in saving you. This is important because if we were to be honest there are probably many days that you don’t feel worthy of your salvation or that you don’t live up to the standards God has set for you in His Word. The truth is that we are never worthy of what Christ has done for us and we constantly fall short of fulfilling His commands on our lives. Despite this, we rest in the truth of John 10 which is salvation is eternal life and no one is able to take away our life once we find it in our Savior.

In John 10:28-29 we read “I give them (all who believe in Christ) eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” Isn’t this beautiful? In this passage we read that all who are believers have eternal life. Your physical life will end one day on this planet (unless Christ returns before you die), but your soul will live on in eternity with God. As Christians, we have nothing to fear in the future and everything to look forward to! It has been rightly said that for the unbeliever this life is the closest to heaven they will ever get but for the believer this life is the closest thing to hell that we will ever experience. For Christians, we look forward to only better days!

We look forward to these better days knowing that no scheme of man will take this hope from us. Christ is very clear that “no one” will take us away from our Father. We have no person or organization to fear. This is good news is it not? I think of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East right now who face Muslim terrorist organizations that threaten to take their lives and I pray that they know and remember this verse. No matter how hard someone may try, they cannot take your spiritual eternal life from you!

In verse 29 we read the reason why Jesus is able to give us this promise with confidence when He states “My Father... is greater than all”. Simply put, we can trust that God will deliver on His Word because He is greater than any hindrance that might arise to come against His promises. We can rest in knowing that the God who created the universe is the one who promises us His power in overcoming this world. Take heart, He who is within you is greater than any other force and He promises those who believe in Him will be saved forever!

September 10th – John 11

One huge difference between the Christian worldview and those of many other religions is that the Christian worldview gives a living, breathing, physical example of the God it worships. Many other religions have prophets who tell us about their God, but only Christianity provided a perfect example of God in human flesh (Jesus). In observing the life of Christ as recorded in the Bible, we can learn so much about the nature and character of God. We can learn about His righteousness, His joy, His sorrows, and in John 11 we can read about His unrivaled love and compassion.

In John 11 we read about the temporary death of one of Christ's best friends on Earth, Lazarus. Lazarus had become ill while Jesus was away traveling and had lost his life before Christ returned. John is very clear that this did not catch Christ by surprise but was all a part of the plan of God to bring glory to His name by displaying His power over death. Nevertheless, when Christ arrives at the scene, He encounters Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha, who are both overcome with grief. They can't understand why Christ didn't come sooner and they are truly mourning his loss.

In this midst of this situation, Christ calls for Mary to come meet Him outside of the city. As Christ interacts with Mary, He sees her grief and the Bible says "Jesus saw her weeping" and was "deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled" (v. 33). In fact, He was so moved by this display that "Jesus wept" (v. 35). This is a strange picture is it not? After all, in a few verses we will read that the plan for Lazarus to be raised from the dead occurred and great joy fell upon all of the family so why would Jesus weep? What was it about this situation that brought Christ to tears? The short answer is that Christ was hurting because one of His friends was hurting.

Did you know that God hurts with you? He has a plan that will work out in the end and He expects us to believe in His plan but in the mean time He still hurts with you. He grieves when you grieve and He cares enough about you to be moved by your distress. Isn't this great news? The God of the universe cares deeply! Hebrews 4 tells us that we serve a great High Priest (Jesus) who is not unable to sympathize with us. Simply put, Christ is moved by our struggles.

So, the next time you pray or the next time you go through a difficult time know that the same God who wept with Mary is listening and hurting with you now. He cares and He is concerned and ultimately He will make sure that all things work together for your good if you love Him and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28).

September 11th – John 12

“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will it for eternal life” John 12:25. These words have been so of the most crucial and troubling words for many in the Scriptures. In John 12, Jesus is speaking to a group of Greeks who have come looking for Him. Instead of doing what many of us would think is wise and sharing the Gospel in a less confrontational way, Christ lays out the cost of following Him very clearly to these men. He says simply, you cannot love what the world has to offer and love a relationship with me that leads to another world.

Why would Christ say this and what does it mean? Christ says this because the Gospel at its core is about finding value, fulfillment, and identity in our relationship with God instead of anything else. To follow God means to love and pursue Him at all cost. One simply cannot try to find fulfillment in the sinful pleasures of the world and in God at the same time. They are mortal enemies and therefore will never coexist peacefully in a person’s life. To follow Christ means to take into account all that the world has to offer and to believe that it pales in comparison to what Christ offers us in the years to come. It means to follow Him at all costs because we believe that the end reward is far too great to forfeit for fleeting pleasures in the present.

I have always found this passage interesting because it totally contradicts what I see and have been taught by many in the world today. So many in our society believe that the key to seeing people become Christians is making the message less offensive. Many would say that the goal is not to hide the true sacrifice of salvation from people as much as it is to hook them with all of the great rewards of following Christ before they “lower the boom” of the expectations and commitment it will take. Although this may sound like a great strategy at first, the careful student of Scripture will realize that this mode of sharing the Gospel is nowhere to be found in the life of Christ. Interestingly enough, Christ was always very upfront about the cost of following Him. He didn’t sugar coat the requirements, instead He trusted that God would provide strength to follow for those who truly believed.

My fear for you today is twofold: First, I am afraid that some of you are trying to enjoy Christ and the world at the same time. I want you to know that following Jesus does involve a major sacrifice and any attempt to “have the best of both worlds” by pursuing some sin and also attempting to follow Christ will not end well. The Gospel demands your total loyalty to God if you will be saved. Second, I am afraid that some of you are too willing to try to negate the “difficult” parts of the Gospel to somehow convince others to follow God. Please understand that not sharing the whole truth of the Gospel is not only dishonest but cruel. Christ does not change His expectations because someone doesn’t share them all. Trust in the power of God to convict and convert, share the whole Gospel and live in such a way as to always pursue future joy over current passing happiness.

September 12th – John 13

Jesus' entire human life was about lowering Himself in order to serve humankind. Humanity could not garner for itself salvation and therefore needed the God of the universe to come into this dirty and difficult place called Earth to serve us by offering a way for us to have relationship with God. Jesus exemplified service in all aspects of His life, but in John 13 we read of a great demonstration of His desire to serve and a challenge He gives each of those who would follow Him.

In Jesus' day, washing a person's feet was one of the most humiliating and lowly tasks known to man. The feet were seen as unsightly parts of the body, not to mention they tended to get incredibly dirty as people traveled on dirt roads with open toed shoes. Simply stated, washing feet was the task of a lowly servant, not a conquering Savior. For this reason, when Jesus began to go around the room washing the feet of His disciples, He caused no little disturbance among them.

The Bible tells us that Peter refuses to have Christ wash his feet at first, but relents as Christ explains that all who would know and follow Him must allow Him to serve them first. Of course, Christ was not talking about washing feet, He was talking about serving the people by dying on their behalf, but in washing their feet He gave a great visual of what it looks like to follow Christ.

Jesus tells His disciples in verse 14 that as He washed their feet, they should also wash one another's feet. What He is really saying is that just as He served them, they should serve others. Whether that be foot washing or some other avenue, Christ came to exemplify service and to call His followers to follow His example.

Christians should be servants. We should emulate Christ's sacrifice for us in order to show His true love to those around us. Have you served someone lately? Are there people in your life who could use some help? Are there opportunities to show someone that you truly live what you believe? One of the primary ways we will show others that our faith is legitimate is by our good deeds. Look for opportunities to serve one another and know that in doing so you are simply being obedient to Christ's call on your life!

September 13th – John 14

There is a lot of mystery surrounding the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. He is often misrepresented in our time and given “credit” for doing things that are totally foreign to His work in our lives. In John 14, Jesus clearly predicts the coming of the Spirit into the lives of all who believe in Christ and also tells us at least one function of the Spirit when He comes.

In John 14:26, Jesus says about the Spirit “he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” In this text, Jesus is getting ready to leave the disciples, but He wants to make sure that they know that they won’t be left alone. Instead, He is sending something that is even greater than His physical presence with them. Now, we read this and wonder how anything could be better than having the Son of God present, physically on this planet. How could Jesus say that His going is actually a good thing for us? The answer is very simple, the only way Christ’s exit from this planet could be good is if He is multiplied on this Earth by a Spirit who lives inside of each of His believers.

Although Christ was fully God, He was also fully man which means that He limited Himself to being in only one physical place at a time. If He desired to spend time with His disciples then He could only teach and work where they were at that time. However, the Spirit is not a physical body in this world and therefore His presence can be in multiple physical places at one time.

Now, this is a great thing but at the same time it still doesn’t answer the question of what the Spirit will do in us once He arrives. This question is answered in John 14:26 as stated above. One of the primary roles and responsibilities of the Holy Spirit is to illuminate (or make obvious) truth in the Bible and to constantly bring it to our mind as a help. The Spirit exists at least in part to help us understand and apply the truth of the Bible. This is why the Bible looks differently to those who are in Christ because they have a supernatural ability to understand and apply what it says!

The Spirit is not some weird ghost that operates mysteriously, instead He is a helper. He is sent by God the Father to assist and lead us in this life. Truly, those who are believers have a great resource in the Spirit of God. He speaks to us and makes clear things that otherwise are very complicated. He builds us up and is able to bring to mind all of the things that we need to remember in order to succeed in this life. He is a great help and friend!

September 14th – John 15

I hope that you truly want to honor the Lord with your life! Many people live in such a way as to accomplish nothing of eternal significance, instead they pursue their own passions and desires only to find that all of those things ultimately pass away and their life was squandered. If you want to make sure you avoid this experience one day, you need to make sure your life “bears fruit” as Jesus talked about in John 15. The term “fruit” as used in the scripture is an image for good results coming from the life of a believer. Simply stated bearing fruit means that your life advanced the work of God and in doing so brought benefit to the lives of others. If this is your desire, John 15 is a great chapter for you to study and apply!

In verse 4 we read a statement that basically sums up the whole chapter as Jesus says “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” Christ says simply, abide in me and the fruit will naturally come! This being true, we need to understand what it means to abide in Christ. To abide in Christ is to continue in a personal relationship with Him daily. This relationship is founded upon things like prayer, obedience, and trust.

Jesus compares our relationship to God with the relationship between a vine and fruit. My grandfather used to have a grape vine in his back yard. Every year, he would go out and make sure that the vine was properly watered and that it looked healthy. He didn’t sit outside and try to will fruit on the vine; he didn’t even worry about whether or not the vine would produce grapes. He didn’t worry because he understood that the vine would always produce fruit if he made sure that it was healthy and in good soil. In the same way, we don’t need to spend time worrying about whether or not our lives will produce fruit, we need to spend time making sure that our lives are firmly planted and watered in the truths of God and in our relationship with Him and the fruit will most surely come!

This idea provides us with a great truth, our responsibility is not to bear fruit, we just need to draw near to the one who bears fruit in us! If you want to see God do amazing things, don’t put effort into making those things happen, instead put effort into your relationship with God and He will do great things in and through you! This is so important students some of you want to see God move in your life and in the lives of your friends but you are trying to make Him move instead of just building your relationship and having Him lead you.

September 15th – John 16

Today we are going to continue a theme we began yesterday, namely trusting in God to produce good things in and through you. Yesterday, we talked about how important it is to remain in Christ and to allow that relationship to produce fruit in your life. Instead of trying to make things happen, we must make sure we are as close to God as possible and allow Him to lead us to a place where we see Him move in powerful ways. Today, we are going to talk about the role of the Spirit in producing new believers.

If you have ever tried to share your faith with someone who won't listen you know how discouraging that experience can be for you. You often wonder if you said something wrong or if you didn't explain things properly and sometimes we can even feel guilt because we don't feel like we did an adequate job. If you feel this way, I pray that John 16:8 can be an encouragement to you. This verse says "And when he (the Holy Spirit) comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." At first glance, you might not understand what this verse has to do with sharing your faith, but I want you to take a moment and think about your salvation experience. Chances are high that you heard the Gospel at least once before you got saved. Most of you grew up in church knowing who Jesus was and that He died on the cross for your sins. This message did not initially save you, but one day if you are truly a believer you heard and understood this Gospel in a totally new and powerful way, you were convicted of your sin and for the first time truly understood how desperate you were for help. Once you arrived at this place, salvation was something you truly craved not just a "good idea". This conviction is a product of the Spirit's work in your life according to John 16, not a result of the eloquence of the speaker who is sharing with you at that moment.

The good news for us today is that the Lord is not dependent upon the quality of your message to save souls; He is simply looking for those who are willing to share so that His Spirit can move and convict those whom He desires to save. Make no mistake, no one has been saved because you were so convincing, and no one walked away because you didn't "use the right words" as long as you shared truthfully about Christ!

The challenge today is very simple, pray for those around you who are lost, share the Gospel with them as you have the opportunity, and pray that God would send His Holy Spirit to convict those who need the Gospel. We desperately need Him to bring the lost to a place of repentance if they will be saved!

September 16th – John 17

As Jesus is getting ready to be crucified He prays an incredible prayer in John 17. In the midst this prayer, we read a great statement from Christ regarding the importance of the Word of God to those who live and navigate this sinful world. As we follow Christ, we face a most difficult situation. We live in a world that is almost totally sinful and we are tempted and persuaded daily to give in to the way of the world. The good news for us is that we have the tools we need to successfully live righteous lives in the midst of this crazy place, our responsibility is to use them and devote ourselves to the truth we find.

In the middle of Jesus' prayer we read His words to the Father regarding our place in this fallen world. In verse 15, Christ speaking to God says "I do not ask that you take them (Christians) out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world just as I am not of the world." Christ begins this little section of Scripture by affirming that we must be guarded from evil influences, chiefly Satan. As we live and pursue Christ, we do so to the disgust of the devil and his demons. Satan will not allow us free and easy paths to righteousness and for this reason we must be protected from any of his efforts to harm us. It is important to remember that while we serve a God who is greater than anything, we are also at war with a being that is very powerful as well. Although God can and ultimately will overcome Satan, we must be on guard that we do not succumb to his attacks while we still live here.

So, Christ requests that we be guarded by God from Satan, but He doesn't stop there. Instead, He states that the way we grow in our faith and defense against Satan is the very Word of God. Verse 17 says "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." The word Sanctify means cleanse. In essence, Christ is saying that the way we cleanse ourselves from unrighteousness and guard against making sinful decisions is through the Word of God. This is the same idea that David expresses in Psalm 119:11 when he says "I have hidden thy word in my heart that I might not sin against you." In both cases, the Bible teaches us that study of the Word of God is imperative if we want to avoid sin and become more righteous.

Please understand that the reason why we are studying the Bible and placing such an emphasis on you reading and learning for yourself is because the Word of God is the tool God has given us to guard you against sin and temptation. The Bible is very clear that sin will ultimately harm and kill you. Sin is not something to mess around with, it is something that will severely damage you personally and those around you as well. For this reason, it is imperative that you read and allow the Word of God to "sanctify" or cleanse you from all unrighteousness. My prayer for you is that you will live a life as free from the effects of sin as possible. May your days be full of things that honor God and your life be a model for those who follow you of what it looks like to be a true disciple of Christ.

September 17th – John 18

The Bible tells us in Hebrews 4 that we serve a High Priest (Jesus) who has been tempted and tried in every way and yet remained perfect. In John 18, we read about Jesus experiencing betrayal by a close friend (Judas). All of us have been betrayed at some point in our life. We know the hurt and the pain that comes with this type of situation, and we understand how difficult this can be to get over. Jesus' story is a reminder that even the best of friends is sometimes betrayed by those who are close to him. This is a fact of life, so let's take a moment and examine this betrayal to see what we can learn from Jesus in this type of situation.

First, we need to be very clear that Judas and Jesus were very close. Judas was a part of the group of 12 men (we call them the "disciples") who followed Christ during His years of ministry (approximately 3 years). During this time, these men spent countless hours together, they witnessed some of Christ's most incredible miracles, and they built relationships that took great time to flourish. Judas was a friend, he was a close friend and his betrayal therefore must have been painful.

Second, we see the way Jesus handled the situation. Once Jesus knew He had been betrayed, His first instinct was not to defend Himself or get revenge, rather it was to protect His other friends who may have been drawn into this dangerous situation. You see, Judas had betrayed Christ by handing Him over to the Roman soldiers. These were men who were not concerned about religious differences between the Jews and Jesus, they just believed that Jesus and His followers were creating havoc in their kingdom and they would do anything necessary to prevent a larger issue in the future. This is ultimately why they killed Christ, because they were trying to stamp out a religious war in Israel.

In this moment when Christ could have been totally consumed by His hurt and outrage at what His "friend" had done to Him, He took the time to ask the guards to "let his other friends go" (v. 7). In this moment, Christ knew He would have to suffer the consequences of Judas' actions but He did not want to see His friends have to suffer as well. When you are hurt, do you think about the way your hurt could influence others? Does your mind go to how other people might be impacted or are you only concerned with your well-being at anyone else's expense?

I hope you take a moment today and learn from the example of Christ. Unfortunately, betrayal is a part of relationships on the planet. You will be harmed by those who are closest to you from time to time. I pray that you will take the high road in these circumstances and place other's interest above your own. I hope that you will consider the impact this harm may have on others and prayerfully ask God to lead you to the solution that protects the most people. May we always love others more than we love ourselves!

September 18th – John 19

How important are your own personal convictions and beliefs? Are you a person who is easily swayed by public opinion or do you have the courage to stand up for what you believe to be true even when it is unpopular? These are crucially important questions for you to answer if you are going to follow Christ because following and believing in God will require you to do and say things that may not be so popular in the world we live in today. This has always been true, and in the person of Pilate we see a great example of what it looks like to fold to human pressure and in the process betray the God of the universe.

To be fair, Pilate finds himself in a very difficult situation in John 19. The Jews have brought Christ to Pilate because Pilate is the one with authority to put Jesus to death as the Roman official that presides over the land. Pilate is not a Jew and he is not offended by Christ's claims. In fact, Pilate says in verse 6 that he can find no fault whatsoever in Jesus. Pilate doesn't understand the issue at all, he can't comprehend why the Jews are upset and he certainly doesn't know the true identity of Christ, but he does have his own personal beliefs and those beliefs are that Christ is not a criminal. Pilate admits that he finds no fault in Christ, and he even tries to dissuade the people from wanting Him crucified, but in the end Pilate folds. He makes the decision to let the Jews do what they want with Christ and he even gives the order to have Christ crucified.

I often wonder what it was like for Pilate when he left this world and had to stand before the very God he gave over to death while on Earth. I'm sure that must have been one terrifying experience! I also wonder what it was like for Pilate in the aftermath of Christ's crucifixion. I can imagine that there was sincere guilt and pain. I would think that this case would have haunted him for quite some time. After all, a totally innocent man was given over to death because of his orders. What a great burden to carry!

The lesson we can draw from Pilate today is very simple, doing what is "popular" and "comfortable" in order to appease sinful people today may be easier, but the lasting impact those decisions will make on your life are incredibly burdensome and the consequences are eternally significant. To think that Pilate chose avoiding an angry mob of people over honoring and appeasing the God who made those people is chilling. Don't make decisions to make others happy, make decisions that honor and glorify God by ensuring that what you do lines up with His Word and His character. If you do, you will live a life of joy and peace; if you don't you will live a life of shame and regret.

September 19th – John 20

Have you ever questioned God before? If we were to be honest, we all have probably doubted God at some point in our lives. It is easy to allow a circumstance to create doubt in our minds. Sometimes things just appear to be hopeless. In those moments, we often forget that we serve a God of hope and great power who is able to work all situations out for good. The great news for us today is that the Scriptures teach clearly that our God is a patient and loving God even when we don't always believe in His abilities.

In John 20, we read about the disciple Thomas questioning whether or not Christ really rose from the dead. Unfortunately for Thomas, this is the primary way we remember him. In fact, we even coined the phrase "doubting Thomas" from this account. This being so, I want us to take a moment today and see ourselves in the person of Thomas. You may not have ever seen the risen Christ or publicly doubted His resurrection, but you have certainly doubted Him along the way. Doubt is a natural (albeit sinful) function of humanity in relation to God, and so I believe that the reason why Thomas' story is included in the Bible is at least in part to encourage us as we see how Christ reacts to Thomas' anxiety.

Let's pick up the story in verse 25. We read prior to this verse that Thomas was not there when Christ first appeared to the disciples and so the disciples tell Thomas "'We have seen the Lord,' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.'" Isn't this interesting? Here is a person who has seen Christ do incredible things. He has seen blind men's vision restored, lame men able to walk once again, a few fish and pieces of bread feed thousands, and many other unbelievable miracles and yet he doubts in the present. The truth is that all of us tend to forget what God has done in our past when we doubt Him in our present. We fail to remember how He has come through before, and in the process we have the same hard-hearted response to His current work as Thomas had to Christ's resurrection.

Now, as we read these words from Thomas, we might assume that God would be upset or even angry with Thomas' doubts. Imagine if a close friend of yours doubted your ability even though they had seen you do so many great things in the past. How would you respond? Probably not like Christ. As Christ walks into the room in John 20, He doesn't chastise or get upset with Thomas, rather He patiently shows Thomas exactly what Thomas had asked to see in order to believe.

Isn't this great? We serve a God who is longsuffering and patient with us even when we doubt Him. Doubts are not a good thing, but when they arise, prayerfully ask God to answer your doubts like He did Thomas'. Ask Him to have mercy on you and to show you the truth and give you the strength to trust Him in the midst of any circumstance. He is merciful, and He will answer you in kind!

September 20th – John 21

One of my favorite phrases that I would often yell to my parents growing up was “this isn’t fair!” Typically, it was after my sister was allowed to do something that I couldn’t do or was given some privilege I wanted. My guess is that I’m not the only one who has had those same thoughts or said the same thing! As humans, we always have a tendency to compare ourselves to others. We want to know if someone got a better deal than us or if they were given special privileges that we didn’t enjoy. At the end of the book of John, Christ deals with this subject for His followers.

In verse 18-19, Christ predicts that Peter will be crucified for his allegiance to Christ. Following Jesus would not be an easy task for Peter and Christ was very up front about the cost of his allegiance. Peter was in agreement with following Christ at first, but then that all too familiar thought crossed his mind, “what if someone else may have it easier?” So, in typical Peter fashion he bluntly asks about someone else in verse 20 “Peter turned and saw the disciple Jesus loved (John describing himself in glowing terms) following them... when Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’” Peter wants to make sure that Jesus had given marching orders to everyone! This is classic humanity, we act as if God’s plan isn’t perfect or we wonder if He has given enough thought to what everyone else should be doing. Think about it, don’t we always wonder if we are not getting treated by God the same way as someone else? Have you ever looked at a person or family that is materially blessed and wonder why God would bless them and not you? This is exactly what Peter is doing; he is making sure that he isn’t asked to give up more than someone else.

Jesus could have responded to this question in many ways, but His response is wonderful. In verse 22 we read “Jesus said to him (Peter), ‘if it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!’” Christ reminds Peter (and us today) that our responsibility is not to worry about someone else, instead the call we respond to is our own personal call to obedience.

The next time you look around and wonder why you have it so difficult, remember that Christ is fulfilling His purpose and His plan in every believer’s life. That plan may look differently than yours, but it is no less perfect and purposeful. Let’s strive to move past feeling slighted or mistreated and instead remember that we serve a God who loves us and calls us to give our lives for His honor and glory forever!

September 21st – Joshua 1

The book of Joshua is in many ways the culmination of the story began in Genesis. In Genesis, we read of Abram who God promised to make a great nation in the future. This journey to greatness was long and arduous. It included stops in Egypt where Israelites were eventually enslaved and then meandered through the desert for some 40 years. These years were spent by Israel longing for the day that they would gain possession of the land that was promised to them by God. This land would be a land of great beauty and would produce all that they needed. It would be a land they could call their own and would be a place of peace as long as Israel continued to obey the law of God. You can imagine how deeply these people desired a place of peace, tranquility, beauty, and excess. They had lived in poor conditions for generations and now, in the book of Joshua, they are on the cusp of realizing their dreams.

In Joshua 1 Moses, Israel's great leader has died and Joshua is taking the reins. He is faced with an enormous task, he is leading the people of Israel to overthrow people groups that are much larger and better equipped than they are. In fact, the reason why Israel had not already inherited the land is because a group of leaders (of which Joshua was a part) were sent to scout out the land decades prior and came back with a negative report. All of the men except Joshua and Caleb said the land couldn't be won, and because they lacked faith God punished them by making the entire nation wait in the wilderness until the generation whom those leaders represented died.

The stage has finally been set for Israel's great triumph, but they enter the Promised Land with the understanding that God must be with them if they are to realize victory. In the midst of this nerve racking entry, God gives Joshua and the rest of the people great comfort in the first 9 verses. In those verses, He repeatedly instructs Joshua to be "strong and courageous" and in verse 9 he summarizes the entire passage by stating "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

What a great reminder for the people of Israel and what a great reminder for us today! You see, as God's people we don't have to worry about what might transpire as we follow God, we only need to concern ourselves with following Him. If we are obedient, we can rest in knowing that the same God who protected Israel protects us today. God is an ever present help in time of trouble, and He alone is able to do all things! So, be strong and courageous today and endeavor to follow Him with all of your might and strength!

September 22nd – Joshua 2

No matter your past, God can use you! This is a central theme of Joshua 2 and it is one that we would be wise to learn from. Rahab had lived a very sinful life up to the time of Joshua 2; in fact verse 1 we read that she made her living as a prostitute. She lived in a city that was getting ready to be overtaken and judged by God and yet somehow she found mercy in the sight of the Lord!

The Bible tells us that Rahab understood who the one true God was and she feared Him. She affirms in verse 11 that the God of Israel is the one true God of the world and in doing so, she is saved from the judgment that awaits those around her! In this, we find a beautiful picture of a truth that still holds today, namely those who believe in and affirm God as the true Lord of all can find salvation regardless of what they have done in their past. I want us to be very careful here to remember that Rahab did somehow clean up her act before she “earned” forgiveness. Instead Rahab simply believed that God was who He said He was and she was saved.

The Bible tells us that salvation is a gift of God not of works (Ephesians 2) and that the only thing needed for salvation is for a person to confess with their mouth that Christ is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9). If those two things occur in a person’s life, they will be saved. There is no prior requirement, there is no act that must be done by a person, there is no religious activity requirement, there is simply belief and declaration!

This is so important for us because Rahab really illustrates all of us. I don’t mean that you lived a former life as a prostitute, nor do I mean that you were considered the lowest of the low in society before your salvation, but what I do mean is that you and I were incredibly wicked sinners in need of salvation from the same God that saved Rahab and her family. We were all in the same boat! God used Rahab and He will use you today if you have (or will) placed your trust in Him to save you. Don’t allow your past to squander your future, instead believe in God and follow Him! If you are obedient, He will do great things in and through you!

September 23rd – Joshua 3

If God has led you to it, He will lead you through it. That is one of my grandfather's favorite phrases. I can remember him using that very often as a kid when we encountered different struggles in our family. He had experienced so much in his life and he had found that God always made a way to accomplish His will. Joshua 3 is another great example of this principle in action as the people of God seek to cross the Jordan River at an impossible (practically speaking) time.

God had commanded Joshua and his men to move out with the Ark of the Covenant before them into the Promised Land. This was no small undertaking as moving the ark was difficult already and the Jordan River was in its usual seasonal flood stage (v. 15). In fact, any person with "common sense" would say this was the absolute worst time of the year to try to cross this river. These instructions just didn't make very much sense, but often God's plan is not in line with man's common sense.

As we attempt to follow God, let us know up front that following Him may not always be the "practical" thing to do in life. In fact, I would argue that it often might be the most impractical option, but whereas we are limited by our human strength and knowledge, God is totally unlimited in His power and foresight. God did not see the Jordan River as an obstacle; in fact He made the Jordan River! He could command the waters to do anything He wanted them to do and in verse 16-17 we read that God simply held up the water that would so threaten any human being.

The lesson I want us to learn today is very practical and something that is repeated extremely often in the Bible, God will always do what we can't do if we trust and obey Him. Are there things in your life right now that you see as obstacles to following God's plan for you? Maybe you feel called to go overseas but don't have the money, maybe you want to pursue Christian education but your parents think that is a bad idea, maybe you feel called to pursue a certain career but you don't really feel like you have the knowledge or talent to be successful. Whatever it might be for you today, know that God's ways are not our ways and He uses the weak to confound the strong. Just like Rahab would not have been our choice as an ally within the walls of Jericho, God chooses all kinds of "underqualified" or "unprepared" people today to do His will. The obstacles to accomplishing this might look like crossing the Jordan River with the Ark of the Covenant to you, but to God it is simply another creation that He has all the power to remove at His will!

September 24th – Joshua 4

The Bible talks about the importance of the older teaching and sharing with the younger generation often. It is quite obvious that the way God intended us to grow is through the older generations investing in the generations that are younger. This includes teaching and being a great example, but it also includes sharing what God has been faithful to do in and through our lives. As God moves, it is so important that we remember what He has done and we share it with those who come after us.

Some of you know what it is like to have an older grandparent or family friend who shares stories about their life experience. So often, we can find that being around a person who has seen God do incredible things is not only educational but it is also uplifting. It serves to remind us that God has shown Himself to be living, active, and powerful in the past and it helps us trust Him in our present circumstance.

This is certainly the heart behind the message in Joshua 4. Joshua 4 records God's instructions to Israel after they miraculously crossed the Jordan River on dry ground. God tells them to build a memorial at the sight of their crossing to remember the great miracle they had witnessed for years to come. In fact, God shares with Israel that one of the primary reasons for the memorial is to draw questions from the younger generation, verse 21 says "and he (God) said to the people of Israel, When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?'" God was intentionally creating a conversation piece with this memorial! In fact, His desire was to open the door for the older generation to tell the story once again of what God had done on their behalf and to institute a system of faith for each passing generation.

Today we may not come near any memorial or monument constructed by man to remind us of God's past miracles in our midst, but we do have a responsibility to listen to those who have gone before us share what God has done and to tell those younger than us about our own experiences. My prayer for you is that God would make Himself real, at least in part, through your relationships with believers who are older than you who share their stories of faith. I pray that you seek out people who love God and who can share how faithful He has been in their lives. I also pray that you will return the favor with the next generation. Even now, I hope that you will begin to invest in those younger than you by sharing your testimony and helping them see that the God we serve is very real and very faithful. May we do our part to continue a lifestyle of faith and submission to God by sharing all that He has done for us!

September 25th – Joshua 5

One prayer that I pray for myself and for you is that God will continue to remind all of us that He is the reason for any success or victory in our lives. It is easy to get full of ourselves when things begin to go well. In these seasons, people can become very complimentary of us and sometimes that can cause us to take our eyes off of God and begin to focus only on ourselves. When we do this, we forget that our victories always come from the Lord's work in and through us and not from our own natural abilities and talents.

By Joshua 5, Joshua had become the respected leader of the nation of Israel. The Bible tells us in chapter 4 that "the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him just as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life." It was important for the people of God to respect and revere their leader. Joshua needed to gain their respect and God graciously orchestrated events so that the people would know that Joshua was a qualified leader who would faithfully guide them by following God's direction. This was a most gracious act of God, and it was followed up in chapter 5 by an even more gracious act.

In verse 13 of chapter 5 we read that Joshua encountered a "man standing before him" (v. 13) whom Joshua questioned as to whether he was for Israel or fighting for their enemy. This man answered by stating that he was neither with Israel nor their enemy but rather represented and commanded the army of the Lord. Immediately, Joshua recognized that he was in the presence of one to be feared and he fell on his face in worship. Joshua wisely asked for a word from God to which the commander responded, "take off your sandals... for the place where you are standing is holy" (v. 15).

When we read this text, we need to be reminded that this experience was very purposeful. The reason for this encounter was for Joshua to remember that it was God's presence and power that brought victory, not Joshua's abilities. We need to be reminded often that God's power and protection are what truly sustain us, and we need to look for ways that we can see God's hand move in our successes.

I fear that all of us are so close to being over confident and prideful. We all need to be reminded quite often that God is the one worthy of praise and adoration and all we do should bring Him praise and not bring praise to ourselves. May we ask God to "send a commander" every once in a while to remind us that we stand on holy ground and we stand before a God who is always deserving of worship!

September 26th – Joshua 6

The first time I ever read the story of Israel and Jericho, I thought it was really strange. After all, why would God have the people march around the city for six days, saying and doing nothing? And then, why do they need to walk around 7 times before they yell and invade? It just seemed weird to me and maybe it does to you too. Truthfully, God has a way of leading people to do some unorthodox things in order to see Him move and one of the reasons for this is because it teaches people to fully obey God.

God didn't have to instruct Israel to march around the city like He did, God could have totally leveled Jericho without the help of Israel at all (like he did at Sodom and Gomorrah), but in order for Israel to understand their total dependence upon Him, He made sure they followed strict, albeit strange, instructions. This was a way for Israel to display their total trust in God. They did exactly what He asked them to do and He rewarded them with a great and convincing victory over an enemy that was formidable to say the least.

Sometimes God wants to test our commitment to obedience. He may call us to do something that would make ourselves look foolish or odd to others (much like the prophet Isaiah preaching naked) in order to test our commitment to Him. Can you imagine what the people of Jericho were thinking as they observed this display? They probably thought Israel had lost its mind totally! I'm sure there were some awkward moments and a few questions directed towards Joshua asking why this was the strategy Israel must use, but in the end Israel's faithfulness won them a great victory.

So, God may call you to do something strange. He may ask you to follow His instructions even though there are other ways to "reasonably" accomplish the goal. Follow God, prove your allegiance to Him and see Him move on your behalf.

September 27th – Joshua 7

There is a very well-known phrase in team sports that says “a team is only as strong as its weakest link.” This means that the deficiencies of your worst player will largely determine how successful your team is or isn’t on the field. In a similar way, the success of a church in being blessed by God is often determined by the sins of all its members. It only takes one or two people operating outside of the Word of God to bring down an entire group of people or ministry. We see an example of this in Joshua 7 as the sin of one man brought destruction upon a great number of people in Israel.

The man’s name was Achan. Achan decided to disregard the explicit instructions of God to not take any of the possessions or valuables of the people of Jericho personally. Instead, Achan decided that he would hide his things and no one would know the difference. This is almost always where sin begins in a church, one person decides what they do on their own time doesn’t impact the group. Sin is always destructive and it will always come to the surface.

So, Israel is feeling confident. They have found their God to be faithful, the leaders believe they are operating in obedience to God and they send a smaller group to a little city call Ai in order to conquer the people there. Unfortunately, this attack doesn’t end well as 36 of the men of Israel are killed and Joshua before God begins to look for an answer.

The answer is found after the people cast lots and it comes to the surface that Achan had been disobedient. Achan is eventually killed for his transgression and the people of God’s relationship with the Father is restored. In the midst of this, we learn a very valuable lesson, sin is destructive and it impacts more people than we like to believe. Many of you have bought into the lie of this generation that says that what you do only effects yourself. This is simply not true! If you are a believer, you belong to a community of believers who are all trying to please the very God you are sinning against and He simply will not bless disobedience! I strongly believe that the reason why we see so much failure and so little movement of God in most of our churches today is because we shelter many Achans. We have so many who show up to worship service and Bible study giving the appearance that they are honoring God in their personal lives knowing fully that they are living totally disobedient lifestyles the rest of the week.

Take some time today and ask God to show you if there are areas of your life that are not complying with His instructions. Prayerfully ask God to remove hindrances from your life so that He can move freely through your life and in the ministry you are a part of at church. Ask Him to show all of us once again how serious sin can be and pray for strength to commit to Him all of your days. This is the only way we will see God truly move in our community and in our own personal life!