

Chapter One

“The Best Books in the Bible”

The first four books of the New Testament are often referred to as “The Biographies of Jesus” because they are the sources from which we get our biographical information on the most important life ever lived. However, these four books are not typical biographies as we think of biographies today because two of them do not even mention His birth and the first thirty years of His life.

The Gospel of Mark simply states, “Jesus came,” and then we meet the thirty-year-old Jesus and follow Him through the last three years of His life. We find the same to be true when we read the Gospel of John. Matthew mentions His birth very briefly and then he also ignores the first thirty years of His life. Luke is the only Gospel writer who gives some detail about His birth. Luke breaks the silence and tells us about one small incident that occurred during the first thirty years of the life of Jesus. The priority of these authors is to tell us that Jesus came - and why He came into this world.

The Synoptic Gospels

When you read the four Gospels, one of the first observations you should make is that Matthew, Mark and Luke have much content in common, while ninety percent of the content of the Gospel of John is only found in the Gospel of John. Because so much of their content is synonymous, the first three Gospels are called “Synoptic

MINI BIBLE COLLEGE

Introduction to the Gospels

And

A Survey of Matthew

STUDY BOOKLET #10

Gospels.”

Mark states the facts about Jesus Christ very clearly and concisely. To gain insights into clear and concise reporting, students in schools of journalism should read the Gospel of Mark after reading Matthew and Luke. Based on their observations and a study of the backgrounds of these Gospels, it is the opinion of many scholars that Mark wrote first and had Peter as an eyewitness informant. In the opinion of these scholars, Matthew and Luke used Mark’s Gospel as a foundation for their own writings. The authors of the first and third Gospels obviously believed there was a perspective on the life of Jesus that Mark did not record. They were led by the Holy Spirit to write their Gospels because they wanted to share those perspectives with us.

Since ninety percent of the content of the Gospel of John is not found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Apostle John obviously wanted to present a perspective on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ that is not found in the first three Gospels. Since the Gospel of John is unique for many reasons, we will survey these Synoptic Gospels, and the Gospel of John separately.

The life of Jesus is a dateline in human history. Much of the world divides history into the years before Jesus lived and the years since He lived. Pick up any major newspaper or magazine in the world and it will have today’s date. That date recognizes how many years it has been since the life of Jesus the Christ. By the time we have surveyed and summarized all four of these inspired biographies

together, we will have gained a comprehensive insight into the life of a Man, Who only lived for thirty-three years, and made that dynamic impact on the history of our world.

A Key to the Scriptures

After He had been crucified and raised from the dead, Jesus had a conversation with the apostles. We read that He told them something about the Scriptures that completely opened their understanding of God’s Word. Even though they had been with Jesus for three years, the apostles apparently did not understand the Scriptures.

What was it Jesus told them about the Scriptures that opened their understanding of the Word of God? We read: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.” (Luke 24:25-27, 44,45) When they heard that the Scriptures were all about Christ, for the first time in their lives, the apostles understood the Scriptures. (He was obviously referring to the Old Testament when He told the apostles the Scriptures were all about Him.)

Jesus also told the scribes and Pharisees: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you will find eternal life. But, they testify of Me, and you will not come to Me that you might have eternal life.” (John 5:39,40)

Oswald Chambers, an extraordinary British devotional writer, believed these two verses are the key to the entire Bible. We will

never really understand the Bible until we realize that *the Old and New Testaments are all about Jesus Christ!* The Bible is not a history of civilization. The Bible is not meant to be a science textbook on origins. The Bible is a textbook on salvation and redemption. The purpose of the Bible is to present Jesus Christ as our Savior and Redeemer, and to give us the historical context in which our Savior and Redeemer came into the world.

If the religious leaders had acquired the spiritual ears to hear Jesus, they would have received from Jesus the key that could have opened their understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. Their eyes would also have been opened to see the miracle that their Messiah was standing there before them.

This simple truth, that the whole Bible is all about Jesus Christ, can open our understanding of both the Old and New Testaments today. *These four Gospels are the most important books in the Bible, because the Bible is all about Jesus Christ, and these four Gospels are His inspired biographies.*

What the Gospels Are All About

All that we believe should begin with the greatest Revelation of truth God has given to this world, which is the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. One of these Gospels will tell us that, “It is true that no one has ever seen God at any time, yet the divine and only Son, Who lives in the closest intimacy with the Father, has made him known.” (John 1:18) The Greek word that is translated “made Him

known” is the word “exegeted,” which means, “to bring out truth”. To exegete a verse of Scripture means to bring out of that verse, all the truth that is in that verse.

We are being told here that Jesus Christ brought out from His intimate oneness with God, all the truth we could possibly understand about God. This means that Jesus Christ was the greatest Revelation of truth the world has been given by God. Everything He was, everything He did, and everything He said “exegeted” God. The Gospels are the most important books in the Bible because they tell us all about the Jesus, Who fully revealed God.

There is another verse in the Gospel of John that tells us what the four Gospels are all about. John writes, “In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (1:1) Later in the same chapter, we read, “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” (14)

To illustrate this great verse, I invite you to use your imagination. Imagine that you have a problem with ants. When you leave something sweet on the table, when you come home at night, your table is covered with ants. Suppose you decide to solve your ant problem. You have discovered the ants are coming from a large anthill behind your house. In an effort to eliminate the ants, you pour gasoline on the anthill and set it on fire. The flames rise and the ants simply move down into the anthill. When the fire is out, the ants come out again and are soon coming and going again into your house.

How do you solve your ant problem? Your problem is not that you hate ants. Your problem is that you have ants all over the table on which you eat your meals. If you could communicate with ants, you could say to them, “Look, I do not hate you. I simply do not want you on my table. I am willing to leave you a large supply of food out here near your anthill if you will simply stay out of my house.” Your biggest problem is you cannot communicate with ants. You are a human, they are ants, and people are not able to communicate with ants.

Now use your imagination even more. If you loved ants enough and you had the power to do anything you wanted to do for ants, you could decide to become an ant and go down there in that anthill and say, ‘Hey, you ants, I may look like an ant, but I am not an ant. I am the person who lives in that big house up there and I have a proposition for you. I am willing to make a sacrifice for you if we can work out an agreement. I will leave a huge food supply for you near your anthill if you will simply agree to stay out of my house!’”

I know this is a ridiculous illustration, but do you see what I am trying to communicate? A word is the vehicle of a thought. God had truth He wanted to communicate to us, and a covenant of salvation He wanted to establish with us. Our loving heavenly Father loved us enough to make a great sacrifice and leave heaven to communicate truth to us. But, He was God and we were people. The best way to convey a great idea is to wrap that idea in a person. That

is why God calls His Son “the Word” and then tells us that the Word became flesh and lived among us for thirty-three years.

It would certainly be condescending for a man to become an ant to communicate with ants, and make a sacrifice for the benefit of ants. However, when the Bible teaches that God became human flesh that He might communicate with us and save us from our sins, that was the greatest condescension this world has ever seen.

Jesus is Coming! Jesus Came!

The fundamental problem addressed in the Bible is the problem that man has divorced himself from God and that divorce must be reconciled. The message of the Old Testament summarizes the solution to that problem with these words: “Jesus is coming!” The message of the New Testament describes the solution to that problem in two words: “Jesus came!”

Throughout the Old Testament we hear prophets and others say, “I know it is going to happen. I believe God when His Word tells us He is going to send the Messiah into our world.” We hear men like Job prophesy, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and one day He will stand upon the earth.” However, we also hear Job cry, “Oh that I knew where I might find Him.” (Job 19:25; 23:3)

In these Gospels, we hear people like Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, exclaim, “We have found the Messiah!” (John 1:41) And when a Samaritan woman states that the Messiah is coming one day, we hear Jesus respond very clearly, “I am He.” He claims that He is

indeed the Messiah promised by the prophets in the Old Testament (John 4:25, 26).

The first four books of the New Testament are called “Gospels” because the word “Gospel” means “Good News.” When the apostles summarize and apply the Good News of these Gospels, they tell us that God is reconciled to us because Jesus came. They summarize the challenge of these four inspired biographies of Jesus Christ this way: “God is using us to speak to you: we beg you, as though Christ Himself were here pleading with you, receive the love He offers you – be reconciled to God.” (II Corinthians 5:20)

As we survey the New Testament together, it is my prayer, that if you are separated from God, you will experience reconciliation with Him through Jesus Christ. When you are reconciled and brought back into a relationship with God through Christ, then you can be reconciled to yourself and you can be reconciled to other people. That is the essence of the message of the New Testament.

Look for that message as you read the New Testament. That message is: peace with God, peace with yourself, and peace with others, because you believe Jesus Christ the promised Messiah came into our world.

Chapter Two

“Mission Statements of Jesus”

When we read the Gospels carefully, we discover that Jesus was a Man with a mission, and He knew what His mission was. As you read the Gospels with me, listen to Jesus tell you why He came. You will hear Him profile what we might call His “magnificent obsession.” As He clearly states the purpose of His life and mission, there will be no doubt about Who He was and why He came into this world. For example, in the Gospel of John we hear Jesus describe His mission statement and mission objectives this way: “As long as it is day, I must do the work of Him Who sent Me. The night is coming, when no one can work.” (9:4) We also hear Jesus say to His apostles, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about... My food is to do the will of Him Who sent Me, and to finish His work.” (4:32, 34)

When He came to the end of His three years of public ministry, Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed: “I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave Me to do.” (17:4) His last words on the cross were a loud cry of triumph, “It is finished!” (19:30)

The Purpose of Life

Jesus lived a model life that showed us the purpose of a human life. A well-known creed that is taught to children of devout

parents reads: “The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” The purpose of a human life is to glorify God. But, what does that mean, and how do we glorify God?

Jesus answered that question when He essentially prayed, “Glorify Yourself, Father, and send Me the bill – I am willing to pay the price.” (John 12:23-28) He demonstrated the reality, that by living the life He lived, He did pay the price that glorified God when, at the end of His life, He declared: “I have glorified You on the earth; I have finished the work You gave Me to do. ... It is finished! ... Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit.” (17:4; 19:30)

In the decade of the '50s, a young man named Jim Elliot, and four other missionaries who were with him in Ecuador, were martyred when Auca Indians attacked them with machetes, and then threw their dismembered bodies into a jungle stream. When military people were sent to recover the bodies, they found Jim Elliot's body, and they also found his diary. In that diary, smudged with water, they read these words: “When the time comes in the plan and purpose of God for you that you must die, see to it that all you have to do is die.”

As we survey the New Testament together, my objective will always be obvious when I ask you personal application questions like: “What does it say? What does it mean? What does it mean to you? What does it mean to the people in your sphere of relationships? What does it mean to those you are teaching, and what does it mean to God?”

All the days of His life, Jesus was obsessed with the works the Father wanted Him to finish. Day by day He had said, “I must finish the works of Him Who sent Me while it is day, because the night is coming when I can no longer work.” When Jesus came to the end of His life, He had no unfinished business. All He had to do was die.

As you apply this introduction personally, I want to ask you some questions:

What has begun in your life as a consequence of what Jesus finished by the way He lived His life? Have you found the work God has created you and saved you to finish for His glory? Are you finishing, or accomplishing that work day by day? When the time comes in God's plan for you that you must die, will you be able to say, “Father, I have glorified You on earth. I have finished the work You gave me to do? Will you be able to say, “All I have to do is die? Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit?” Or, will you have a sense of unfinished business as you reflect on God's purposes for your salvation in this life?

The Life of Christ

A good approach to a study of the life of Jesus Christ in the Gospels is to ask this question: What were those works the Father wanted Him to finish that were so very important to Jesus? At the end of His suffering, when Jesus shouted that great cry of triumph from the cross, “It is finished!” He had obviously accomplished His

mission. But precisely what had He finished?

There are eighty-nine chapters in the four Gospels. Four chapters cover His birth and the first thirty years of His life. Eighty-five chapters cover the last three years of His life. Twenty-seven chapters cover the last week of His life. Fifty-eight chapters cover His ministries of teaching, healing, and the recruiting of His disciples. In the Gospel of John, approximately half the chapters cover the first thirty-three years of His life, while the other half cover the last week of His life.

To the authors of these Gospels, the last three years of His life are far more important than His birth and the first thirty years of His life. The last week of His life is about seven times more important than His birth and the first thirty years of His life. The fifty-eight chapters that cover His teaching, healing and recruiting of disciples demonstrate the value these authors placed on those dimensions of His life and ministry.

Since this survey of the New Testament is not an exhaustive, close-up study of the Gospels, but an introduction and overview that attempts to show you how to approach these Gospels and give you the big picture, I will try to place the emphasis of our survey where the authors of the Gospels placed it, and focus our attention on those areas of these sacred biographies.

The Priority Mission of Jesus

Our survey of these books will show us they are called

“Gospels” because they report the “Good News” that Jesus came, and when He came, He was the Lamb of God Who came to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). If we are aware of the fact that we are sinners, we will know why these writers think that is “Good News.”

So many chapters of these books emphasize the last week in the life of Jesus because in that one week He did all He had to do as the Lamb of God to save us from our sins. The emphasis of these Gospels shows us that His death on the cross in Jerusalem for our sins and His resurrection from the dead was His primary mission, and therefore, His number-one priority work.

One third of the content of the Gospels is the record of how Jesus fulfilled the primary mission assigned to Him by His Father, when God so loved the world that He sent His Son to die on a cross for our salvation (John 3:15-19). The apostles stressed the importance of this saving work of Jesus (I Peter 1:18,19; 2:24; II Corinthians 5:19, 21-6:1, 2).

Two More Mission Objectives of Jesus

As we read how Jesus turned His mission statements into mission objectives, there are two more dimensions of His life and ministry that are emphasized in the Gospels. We discover the first of these two mission objectives when we continuously read about the supernatural dimension of His life and ministry, which is a very definite emphasis in all four Gospel writers. Jesus performed many

miracles, and most of those miracles were miracles of healing.

If we discovered these documents and had no idea what they were, as we read these Gospels, we might think that a good title for them would be, “The Miracles of Jesus,” or, “The Healings of Jesus.” About one-third of the content of the four Gospels describes the miracles of Jesus. It is significant that this emphasis continues under the ministry of the apostles into the first generation of His church.

As you read story after story about the miracles and healings Jesus performed, and as you see the apostles in first generation of the church performing miracles and healing the sick, ask yourself, “What is the significance of this dimension of the ministry of the risen, living Christ today?” If the same Christ Who lived here two thousand years ago now lives in you and me, do you think He can perform miracles and heal you and me today?

Based on your experience and observations, is Jesus working miracles, healing the sick, and raising the dead today as He did when He was here physically on earth? Is it always His will to heal? Did Jesus heal everyone? Was and is Jesus more interested in the physical or the spiritual health of people? What do you think? As you answer that question in the context of physical healing, be sure to take into perspective the spiritual healing that takes place through the salvation experienced by those who believe and become disciples of Jesus Christ today.

The Message of Jesus

One other mission objective of Jesus is emphasized in the four Gospels, along with His death and resurrection and His many miracles. I would like to conclude this introductory overview of the Gospels with the observation, that at least one-third of the content of the first four books of the New Testament, records the spoken words of Jesus.

Jesus claims that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that we cannot come to God the Father any other way (John 14:6). When He tells us He is the Way to God, He is referring to His work on the cross, which provides the only way we can reconcile our divorce from God and have a restored relationship with our heavenly Father.

When He tells us He is the Life, He is referring to His miracles, including giving us eternal life and changing the lives of all those men and women who believe in Him and are made whole spiritually, emotionally and physically.

When He claims that He is the Truth, He is undoubtedly referring to His teaching and preaching ministry.

As the Son of God, Jesus Christ could have left heaven on Friday afternoon from His ministry in the heavenly dimension and accomplished the salvation of the world in a few days. Why did He spend thirty-three years in this world? He must have had other works to accomplish for His Father in addition to all that was accomplished through His death on the cross and His resurrection.

When Jesus told us He was The Truth, and when John described Him as the Word that became flesh (John 1:14), we see a ministry of Jesus in focus that could not be accomplished in an afternoon. God had already given us a written Word, but in the providence and plan of God, Jesus gave us more than written words. John describes what Jesus gave us this way: “For the law (Scripture) was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17) God had already given us truth through Moses and the Old Testament. Through Jesus Christ, however, God gave us truth *and the grace or* “charisma” to live that truth. Jesus not only gave us truth, He *was* the Truth He gave us. He not only told us how to live life, He lived that life - He was that Life. Everything Jesus was, everything He did, and everything He said was the Truth God wanted to communicate to us through His Son. That is why the Gospel of John describes Jesus as the living Word (John 1:1,14).

We have already seen that the greatest message God ever spoke to this world was Jesus Christ. The part of that message He said or taught makes up one-third of the content of the four Gospels. This message of Jesus comes in many forms. There are major discourses, like the Sermon on the Mount, the Upper Room Discourse and the Mount Olivet Discourse (Matthew 5, 6, 7; John 13-16; Matthew 24, 25).

There are many other discourses, especially in Matthew and Luke, which like the Minor Prophets, are not inferior to His major discourses because of their brevity. Many of these discourses come

in the form of parables and metaphors, and much of the message of Jesus comes in the form of dialogue. The dialogue is often hostile dialogue with the religious leaders of His day and is frequently initiated by Jesus as He asks questions. (He asks eighty-three questions in the Gospel of Matthew alone.)

He apparently trained the apostles to ask Him questions. The Mount Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, 25) and His longest recorded discourse, the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-16) are given in response to questions asked by the apostles, and answered by Jesus. Much of this dialog is hostile dialog with the religious leaders. You will also find much of this dialogue in the many interviews of Jesus. Some of His most profound declarative statements are in response to questions He asked in the context of His interviews with people.

As you read the Gospels, any time Jesus says something, whether it is a major discourse, a parable, a prayer, something He asks or says in response to something He was asked in an interview, or a hostile dialogue, remember that He is the eternal Word of God made flesh, and living among us. As He speaks, He is revealing (exegeting) God to us. He is giving us the most complete revelation of God this world has ever received (John 1:18).

A good approach to the sum total of all the truth taught by Jesus is to approach all the teaching of Jesus asking this question: “What was the value system of Jesus Christ? Based on all His teachings, regardless of the form in which He declared or revealed them, what were the values of Jesus Christ?”

As you read the Gospels, look for the primary mission of Jesus Christ, which is accomplished on His cross when we meet Jesus as the Way to reconcile mankind to God. Also look for the miracles of Jesus, especially miracles of regeneration and healing, which present Jesus as the Life. And look for the teaching ministry of Jesus when the Word of God was made flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. Read the Gospels to see Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

A Survey of the Gospel of Matthew

Chapter Three

“The Strategy of Jesus”

In all four Gospels Jesus is not only pictured as a Man with a mission. He is pictured as a Man with a strategy for the implementation of that mission. This is especially true in the Gospel of Matthew.

If you knew you only had three years to live, and you wanted to reach the whole world with your message, what would you do? Jesus knew He had three years to live and He wanted to reach the whole world with His Gospel. Knowing that, what did He do? Asking and answering that question as we read the Gospel of

Matthew will identify the strategy of Jesus for accomplishing His mission objectives.

If you take courses or seminars on how to be an effective executive, you will be told that to be an effective executive you must: analyze, organize, deputize, supervise, and then agonize!

In the Gospel of Matthew, each time we read that Jesus saw the multitudes and was moved with compassion for them, we have a picture of His compassion for the whole world and His strategy for reaching the world with His message of salvation. When Jesus looked on those multitudes with compassion, He always did something strategic. The first time this is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew He was healing every kind of illness imaginable on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He analyzed the needs of that multitude then He organized what I call, “The First Christian Retreat,” where He gave His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 4:23-5:2).

The next time He viewed the multitudes with compassion He deputized some of those who heard His teaching on the mountaintop to be “apostles” or “sent ones.” This word means something like our modern word “missionary.” There is a difference between a disciple and an apostle. Jesus had many disciples - followers, but He only had twelve apostles.

We might say that He has now analyzed, organized, and deputized those who will implement His strategy for reaching the world. As we follow the thread of His strategy through the Gospel of Matthew, we read about two incidents that are almost identical. He

again looks on the multitudes with compassion. This time, in addition to all their other problems, they are hungry. The apostles come to Him and ask Him to send the multitudes away that they might buy food. He challenged them with the question, “How many loaves do *you* have? He tells them the multitudes do not have to be turned away because, as His deputies and representatives, *they* can meet the needs of that multitude. This familiar story, which is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels, is actually a parable of the missionary vision of Jesus (14:14-36; 15:32-39).

If we realize that the multitude represents the world with all its needs, - when we see Him strategically place the apostles He has deputized between Himself and His provision for the needs of that multitude. We are reading an allegory of the strategy of Jesus for meeting the needs of the world. God’s supernatural provision for the multitude does not pass directly from Jesus to that multitude. God’s provision is passed from Jesus to that multitude *through the hands of the apostles!* That is still His plan today. The risen, living Christ chooses to use His disciples to pass His Truth and Gospel to those who are in need of salvation.

The inspired account of this miracle is obviously a story in which the people, places, and things have a deeper meaning. The strategy of Jesus represented by this miracle finds its ultimate expression at the end of the Gospel of Matthew when Matthew records the way Jesus gave what we call the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). When Jesus is about to ascend and leave this

world, He commissions these men to reach the world as His deputies.

We might say that after His ascension, Jesus took the last two steps of the effective executive - supervising His disciples through two thousand plus years of church history as they reach the world for Him. It seems only logical to conclude that He has also agonized over their efforts. This has been especially true during the great periods of persecution they suffered in the first three hundred years of their history. We can assume that He has continued to agonize as that persecution continues over the two thousand years of church history and is happening in many parts of our world today. We can also assume that He has also agonized as some terrible chapters of church history have been written.

This should help us to understand the church of today. We can see the pure essence of the purpose of the church as we observe Jesus implementing His strategy in the Gospel of Matthew. The Church is a missionary organization! The Church is designed and empowered by Christ to be the vehicle through which the grace and truth of Jesus Christ are proclaimed to this world. All the plans, programs, and activities of the church should be seen as a means to that end.

The great affirmation of this truth is the Book of Acts. The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus commissioning His church to go out and preach the Gospel to a lost world. As they go, they are to make disciples, baptize those disciples, and teach those disciples everything Jesus has taught them. In the Book of Acts that is exactly

what they do. On the Day of Pentecost they receive the charisma – the power of God - to do it, and it is as they implement this Great Commission that the Church is born.

The Book of Acts is simply the record of how they went to their world, made disciples, baptized those disciples, and taught those disciples everything their Lord had taught them. The Book of Acts and church history tell us the strategy of Jesus is at work. We, who make up His Church today, are still called to go, disciple, baptize and teach everything that Jesus taught.

Chapter Four

“Important Events in the life of the Christ”

There is no character in the Bible who is more significant, and yet to whom less space is given, than John the Baptist. Jesus said this man was the greatest man and the greatest prophet ever born of woman (Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28).

The life of John the Baptist is described very briefly in the four Gospels. What is the significance of his life? First, he was not only the greatest of the prophets. He was the last of the prophets. The prophets preached the Good News that the Messiah was coming. This prophet actually pointed to a Man walking down a road in Galilee and said to his disciples, “There He is! Behold, the Lamb of

God, Who has come to take away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) John the Baptist was the last of the Messianic prophets, the one who literally introduced the people of God to their Messiah.

The Baptism of Jesus

There are several important events in the life of Jesus Christ that are described in the early chapters of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. One day John was baptizing and he saw a Man standing in line, a young Man like himself. When John saw Jesus, he said, “I should be baptized by You.” But Jesus said essentially, “No, we must fulfill all righteousness, John. You baptize Me.” So John baptized Jesus. When he did, the Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove and God the Father spoke: “This is my beloved Son, Whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.” The written account of this happening is called the record, or the witness of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:17).

His baptism was not the same as our baptism today. The baptism of Jesus is one of the important events of the Christ. It was an inauguration that launched His three years of public ministry. When a person is elected president of a nation, an inauguration is held. At his inauguration, the new president gives an inaugural address. Jesus began His ministry with an inauguration. In this case, however, the Speaker was Almighty God, and the inaugural address was very short. It was simply: “This is my beloved Son, Whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.” (3:17)

The Temptation of Jesus

In the fourth chapter of Matthew, we read that the baptism of Jesus was followed by another important event. The Spirit leads Him into the wilderness where He had a confrontation with Satan, after He had fasted for 40 days, where He was tempted three times. First, the tempter came to Him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written, ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God.’” The first three recorded words of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels are, “It is written.” (Matthew 4:4)

The second temptation occurred when the devil tempted Jesus to leap from the highest point of the Temple of Solomon. “If You are the Son of God,” he said, “Throw Yourself down. For it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You and they will lift You up in their hands, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.’” (6) Here we have Satan quoting Scripture. He knows his Bible very well and he loves to beat up on believers by bringing Scriptures to their minds that condemn them, or cause them to be fearful.

Jesus is soon going to claim that He is God in human flesh. How was anyone to believe that claim? Satan is suggesting that He use His supernatural powers to prove that claim. But Jesus answers Satan, “It is also written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (7)

The third temptation of Jesus is when Satan shows Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this will I give you,” Satan says, “If You will fall down and worship me.” But Jesus responds, “Away from Me, Satan, for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.’” (8-10)

What is the significance of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness? First of all, I believe that if there had been any way Satan could have avoided this confrontation, he would have avoided it. We need to understand that the Spirit of God was leading Jesus the Christ, to confront Satan at the beginning of His public ministry. Figuratively speaking, this is the “big brother - Jesus” Who is settling accounts for His “younger brother - Adam”, who was bullied by Satan in the Garden of Eden. The first temptation of Jesus is essentially the same temptation Adam and Eve faced in the Garden of Eden.

As we have observed, Jesus responds to this repetition of the temptation in the Garden of Eden by quoting Scripture: “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:4) In the Garden, Satan raised the question, “Has God said?” Adam and Eve essentially replied, “Yes, God has said.” In so many words, the devil responded, “Well, what God said is not true.” After raising the general issue of whether God had spoken at all, the Word God had spoken was questioned, challenged, and disobeyed.

Does this sound familiar? The evil one has never stopped asking those same questions throughout the long history of the people of God. Both these temptations are also descriptions, of how we are tempted to sin today. This is also a definition of sin. Sin is a matter of what we do, or do not do, about what we know God has said.

The important truth with which Jesus responds to this first temptation is, that if we want to live, the Word of God will show us how to live. The more we understand the Bible, the more we will understand life. The more we understand life, the more we will understand and appreciate the Bible. The Bible and life throw light on one another. The purpose of the Bible is that we might know how to live.

In the Garden of Eden, the essence of the temptation was, put your physical needs first, and put what God wants you to do, second. In other words, interpret the Word of God in the light of your physical needs. God wanted them to interpret their physical needs in the light of His Word to them. In a sense, the temptation was, “your needs first, God’s Word second.”

When Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, the temptation was, “You have been fasting for forty days. Use Your supernatural powers to put the physical need first, and the Word and will of God second. The response was, “Word first, needs second.”

The message of the Bible can frequently be summarized in two words. Those two words are: “God first!” The responses of

Jesus to all three of these temptations can be summarized in those two words. Remember temptation is not sin. How we respond to temptation is either victory or sin. Our response to temptation today should also be the application of those two words – “God first”.

In the second temptation, Satan quoted Scripture and suggested that Jesus prove He is the Son of God by leaping from the highest point of the Temple of Solomon. The thought was that when He was supernaturally rescued from His fall, He would have proven that He is the Son of God.

Again, Jesus responded with Scripture, pointing out to Satan that God told us we are not to test Him. There is a fine line between putting out a fleece, as Gideon did, and putting God to the test (Judges 6:37,38). When we enroll in the “University of Faith” – accepting the challenge of becoming a follower of Christ, we do not have the right to give God examinations. He has the right to test us anytime he wants to test us, but we do not have the right to test God.

The third time Satan tempted Jesus he offered Him all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would simply worship him. Again, our Lord responds with Scripture that parallels the Scripture with which He responded to the first temptation. “It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” The essence again is those two words: “God first!” This time those two words are supplemented with the two words: “Him only!” (Matthew 4:10)

The personal applications of these three temptations of Jesus for you and me are obvious. The first application is: “God first!” First God’s Word then our needs. Worship God and Him only. We all have those times when we are tempted to make faith unnecessary by giving God a test, forgetting that it is God Who should be testing us.

After Jesus refuted Satan for the third time, we read that Satan departed from Jesus “for a season” or for a short while. These three words mean there was a powerful, continuous, and relentless Satanic attack upon the Savior while He lived out the last three years of His life. This was especially true as He approached and lived through that last week when He died and rose again for our salvation.

Some wonder if Jesus could have given in to one of Satan’s temptations. While Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness, was God the Father looking over the balcony of heaven, holding His breath, asking, “I wonder if He is going to make it?” Do you think it was like that? I assure you, God knew that His Son would not be like Adam and yield to these temptations. When He was tempted in the wilderness, there is no way Jesus could have fallen.

So, why was He tempted? It was very important for God to demonstrate for us, at the beginning of the life and ministry of our Savior, that He could not fall. One of the last verses in the Bible says this about Jesus Christ: “To Him Who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before His presence with great joy....” (Jude 24) If the Christ Who was tempted and could not fall

lives in us, can He keep us from falling? Of course He can! If we trust Him and walk with Him, He can keep us from falling.

By the way He faced His temptations He shows you and me how to respond to the temptations of the evil one. Satan is relentlessly trying to say to each of us, “Put the physical first and the spiritual second. Put anything first in your life but God.”

The greatest enemy of that which is best is often that which is good. This is how Satan robs us of God’s best. He tempts us to do the good so he can make us fall short of the best God has for us. Because God loves us, and He knows that when we put Him first, He can give us His best, He wants us to put Him first and defeat the temptations of Satan.

Chapter Five

“The Greatest Discourse of Jesus”

Jesus gave many great discourses. In some ways, His greatest discourse was His Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is a concise summary of the ethical teaching of the entire Bible. It is also a concise summary of the ethical and relational teaching of Jesus. When we consider the context in which this teaching was given, we realize that it was not a typical sermon as we think of sermons today.

The Context of the Sermon

It is important to consider the *context* before we consider the *content* of this great discourse of Jesus. One of the rules for Bible study is that we should always try to see passages of Scripture in their context. The word, “context” means, “with the text.” It is always important to see what comes with the text we are studying, what comes before, or what was going on at the time the teaching was given, and what comes after the teaching or event we are studying in a passage of Scripture. The context will help us interpret the passage we are studying.

At the end of the fourth chapter of Matthew, we find Matthew’s description of the context for this great teaching. We read that Jesus was healing sick people who had traveled great distances, from many cities and several countries, to be healed (Matthew 4:23-5:1).

While Jesus was healing multitudes of people that were gathered around the slopes of the Sea of Galilee, He invited some of His disciples to meet with Him on a higher level of the hills that gradually rise from the Sea of Galilee (Mark 3:13). This divided that multitude into two groups; at the bottom of the mountain were those who were part of the problem. At that higher level, with Jesus were, those who at least wanted to be part of the solution and the answer. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of the Gospel of Matthew record the great discourse Jesus gave in this setting.

I call the context of this great teaching, “The First Christian

Retreat.” When Jesus organized this retreat the challenge He gave was, “Are you part of the problem or would you like to be part of the solution?” At that retreat, Jesus recruited disciples to be part of His solution and answer for those who were still part of the problem.

Jesus was ministering to that multitude of sick people and He knew that in a body, as merely one man, He could never solve all those problems Himself, even though He was God in human form, the Son of God. So, He analyzed. Then He organized the First Christian Retreat. According to Mark, attendance at the retreat at that higher level was by invitation only (Mark 3:13).

In the seventh chapter, we read that Jesus concluded this retreat with an awesome invitation. I am convinced that when He gave that invitation He only had twelve who responded. I base my conviction on the fact, that shortly after Jesus came off the mountain, He commissioned the twelve apostles. I believe Jesus was recruiting His twelve apostles at The First Christian Retreat.

The Content of the Sermon

Jesus began the sermon by teaching His disciples some beautiful attitudes (called “the beatitudes”), which will make them part of His solution to the problems at the bottom of the mountain (5:3-12). These eight attitudes or virtues profile the mind-set of a disciple of Jesus. According to Jesus, the way we see things can be the difference between a life filled with light and a life filled with darkness (Matthew 6:22,23).

The Beatitudes: Some General Observations

These eight beautiful attitudes are the sermon, and all the rest of this teaching is His application of the sermon. The best teachers and preachers spend a small percentage of their teaching or preaching time presenting the truth they want to teach, and a large percentage of their time illustrating and applying that truth. In this discourse, Jesus models this method for us as He spends a small percentage of His time presenting the truth He is teaching (the beatitudes), and most of His time illustrating and applying those beatitudes.

The context of this sermon presents the crisis involved in becoming a follower of Christ, a Christian. The beautiful attitudes profile the character involved in being Christian. The four metaphors that follow the beatitudes - salt, light, city, and candle - describe the challenge involved when Christian character impacts secular culture. The essential issue is, “Are you part of the problem, or are you part of the solution of Jesus? Are you one of His answers or are you still asking questions?”

There is an imaginary “spiritual dividing line” between the fourth and fifth beatitudes. Throughout the Scripture there is a pattern that emerges when God is recruiting leaders for His work. Those leaders have what we might call “coming experiences” and “going experiences.” They have a meaningful coming to God before they have a fruitful going for God. They are worshipers of God before they become workers for God. The first four beatitudes present the attitudes that are learned in coming to God, and the

second four beatitudes profile the attitudes we must learn as we are going for God.

Talent can be developed in solitude, but character must be developed in the stream of humanity, or while we are in relationships with people. The first four beatitudes are developed on the mountaintop, or in what Jesus will describe later as our “closet” experiences with God (Matthew 6:6). We can learn and cultivate the first four beatitudes in our private relationship with God, but the second four beatitudes must be learned and developed in our relationships with people.

The beatitudes also divide into four sets of double beatitudes: the poor in spirit who mourn; the meek who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful who have a pure heart, and the peacemakers who are persecuted. Each beatitude couplet profiles a spiritual insight that must be learned by a disciple of Jesus before they can be part of His solution and one of His answers.

The first two beatitudes teach the disciple to say: “It is not a matter of what I can do but of what He can do,” or “Without Him, I can do nothing.” The second couplet brings this confession from the disciple: “It is not a matter of what I want, but of what He wants.” The third couplet represents this spiritual secret: “It is not a matter of who or what I am, but of Who and what He is.” The fourth couplet witnesses the results of these beatitudes and confesses: “It was not a matter of what I did, but of what He did.”

Finally, the beatitudes are like climbing the mountain. The

first one takes us a short way up the mountain, the second takes us a little further, meekness moves us three fourths of the way up, and our hunger and thirst for righteousness takes us to the top of the mountain. These “climbing” beatitudes are the coming beatitudes.

Every retreat comes to an end and those who attend must leave the mountaintop. The going beatitudes take us back down the mountain again. When a disciple is filled with God’s righteousness, what is he or she like? Are they like the legalistic, self-righteous Pharisees? No, we read that they are merciful, and they are merciful with a pure heart. Being merciful with a pure heart begins their descent back down the mountain to be part of God’s solution to the problems of the needy multitude. When the disciple is a peacemaker who gets persecuted, we know they are at the bottom of the mountain again where all the problems are.

The Beatitudes: Some Individual Observations

“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit.”

To be poor in spirit is the right attitude toward ourselves. This attitude is the realization that by ourselves, we will never be God’s solution. We must be subject to the King, the One who is the Solution. That is the first attitude we must have if we are going to be part of the solution to human need Christ wants to be through His disciples. In one word, the state of grace described as poor in spirit is “humility”.

“Blessed are Those Who Mourn.”

The second beautiful attitude is, “Blessed are those who mourn.” (5: 4) A primary interpretation and application of the second beatitude is that we will never be part of the solution and answer of Jesus to all the suffering represented by the multitude at the bottom of the mountain if we never suffer ourselves. Another possible interpretation and application of this beatitude is we mourn while we are learning that we are poor in spirit, or that we can do nothing without Him.

“Blessed are the Meek.”

Meekness is probably one of the most misunderstood concept in the Bible. It does not mean weakness, but tameness. Picture a wild, powerful, but untamed stallion - a powerful animal that has never had a bit in its mouth, a bridle on its head, or a saddle on its back. All that animal strength is out of control. When that animal finally yields to the bit and accepts the discipline of the bridle and the saddle, then that animal is a metaphor for the meaning of the biblical word “meek”.

Jesus claimed that He was meek (Matthew 11:28-30). When He made that claim, He was saying the same thing as when He made another claim. Speaking of the Father, He said: “For I do always the things that please Him.” (John 8:29) Jesus had accepted the yoke, or the discipline of the will of His Father. That is what made Him meek. In this beatitude, Jesus is teaching that we will only be part of

His solution and answer in this world when we surrender our “want to” to God, and accept the discipline of His will for our lives and ministries above our personal desires.

“Blessed are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness.”

This beatitude is not that we should hunger and thirst for happiness, but for righteousness. Observe the emphasis in this sermon on the truth that His disciples must be righteous. In addition to this beatitude, He pronounces a blessing on the disciple who is persecuted for righteousness; the number-one priority of a disciple should be righteousness, and the righteousness of His disciples must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:10,20; 6:33).

“Blessed are the Merciful.”

The word “mercy” means, “unconditional love”. “Blessed are the people who are filled full of the agape love of God” would be a good paraphrase of this beatitude. If you are going to go down from the mountaintop and be part of the solution for those who hurt, you must be filled with the love of God. To be filled with righteousness is synonymous with being filled with the love of God.

“Blessed are the Pure in Heart.”

The word “pure” in this beatitude is actually a Greek word from which we get our word for “catharsis” and “cathartic”. The essence of the attitude is that when the disciple loves with the

unconditional love of God, any selfish motives will be removed out of his or her heart and made pure.

“Blessed are the Peacemakers.”

A peacemaker is a reconciler. The fundamental problem at the bottom of the mountain is alienation. Many of the problems people have stem from their basic alienation from God and the people in their lives. That is why Jesus challenged His disciples at this retreat to be agents of reconciliation.

According to Paul, the mission objective committed to the disciples of Jesus is the message and the ministry of reconciliation. We are to go out and essentially say to people: “God is reconciled to you because of Jesus. As a minister of Jesus Christ, I plead with you, be reconciled to God.” (II Corinthians 5:20)

“Blessed are the Persecuted.”

You would think that if there were people with these beautiful attitudes in our world today, they would be applauded by the people of this world. However, the eighth beatitude tells us that the disciples of Jesus Christ are persecuted for all their beautiful attitudes.

The disciple with these attitudes confronts people with a model of what they should be. When they experience that confrontation, they can confess their improper attitudes and learn how to acquire the blessed attitudes, or, they can attack the disciple

with the beautiful attitudes. For more than two thousand years, they have been exercising that second option.

A messenger of reconciliation goes where the conflict is, and that is often a place of grave danger. Authentic disciples of Jesus have always - and are today - giving their lives for their ministries of reconciliation. Devout disciples also carry out their peacemaking ministries in their homes, churches, neighborhoods, school classrooms, and in their places of employment.

Chapter Six

“The Application of the Sermon”

Jesus followed His profile of Christ-like character with four profound metaphors that show us what happens when that character impacts pagan culture. He taught His disciples that they are the salt of the earth ... the light of the world ... a city on a hill that cannot be hidden, and a candle on a candlestick (Matthew 5:13–16). These four metaphors begin the application of the sermon. To consider these metaphors one by one:

“You are the Salt of the Earth.”

One obvious interpretation and application of this metaphor relates to the fact that salt was the only way they could preserve meat

in those days. Jesus was saying that the world is rotting like spoiled meat and His disciples were the “salt” that would preserve the world from moral and spiritual corruption. The original language reads, “You and you alone are the salt of the earth.”

Another possible interpretation of this metaphor is that no living organism can survive without salt. According to this interpretation, Jesus was essentially saying to His disciples: those people at the bottom of the mountain do not have life. But, if you live these eight beautiful attitudes, you will be the vehicle through whom those people will find life.”

“You are the Light of the World.”

When Jesus looked on those multitudes, the thing that moved Him to compassion more than anything else was that they were like sheep having no shepherd. They did not know their left hand from their right. Because you know what they do not know, you are the light they need. Again, the original language reads, “You and you alone are the light of the world.”

A Candle on a Candlestick

In this metaphor, Jesus was essentially saying: “Before you were converted into one of My solutions, you were like an unlighted candle. But now that you have experienced the “new birth” involved in becoming one of My disciples, your candle has been lighted. Every time I light a candle, I have chosen a candlestick on which I

want to strategically place that candle.” Jesus is saying, “You are a candle on a candlestick.”

A City on a Hill

The fourth metaphor is that of a city on a hill, which cannot be hidden. If we have the eight beatitudes in our lives, our witness for Christ cannot be hidden. There is no such thing as a secret disciple of Jesus Christ.

A Turtle on a Fencepost

Have you ever seen a turtle on a fence post? Anytime you see a turtle on a fence post, there is one thing you know for sure about that turtle - somebody had to put him there because a turtle cannot climb a fencepost! Every strategically placed disciple of Jesus should feel like a turtle on a fencepost. We should all look around; realize where we are strategically placed in this world, and, thinking of the candle on the candlestick and the city on the hill metaphors, we should say, “I am where I am today because the living, risen Christ has placed me here to be part of the solution to the problems of a needy world.”

The Application Continues

Jesus continues the application of His sermon in the most difficult part of this discourse (5:17-48). He begins this part of His application by making two important statements: the first is that He

has not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill the Law of God. The essence of the second statement is that unless the righteousness of His disciples exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, they have not really understood His teaching (17-20).

Observe that in this long passage in Chapter Five, Jesus says six times, “You have heard that is was said ... but I tell you.” (Matthew 5:21-48) Most of the time Jesus quotes what has been said, He was not quoting Moses but the scribes and Pharisees. He was quoting something they taught that was not really the teaching of Moses, or the Word of God. When He does reference something Moses taught, He disagrees with the way they were interpreting Moses.

The essence of this teaching is: “Everything I teach agrees with the Word of God. However, My teaching does not agree with the teaching and traditions of the scribes and Pharisees.” In this part of His greatest discourse Jesus challenged the teaching of these religious leaders. His challenge of their teaching and values continued until they realized they could not co-exist with Him and they had Him crucified.

The Purpose of the Scriptures

The fundamental difference between the way Jesus and the religious leaders interpreted and applied the Scriptures was, that before He applied the Law of God to the lives of people, Jesus passed the Law of God through the “prism” of the love of God. When the

scribes and Pharisees taught the Law of God, they did not understand or remember the purpose, or the intent, of the Law when it was given to Moses on Mount Sinai - which was the total welfare of the people of God.

The Law of God was an expression of the love of God for His people. Obviously, Jesus never lost sight of that purpose of Scripture. That is the essence of what Jesus is challenging His disciples to learn and never forget when they return to the multitude at the bottom of the mountain. He was teaching His disciples that they must know how to apply the Law of God to the lives of the people of God if they are going to be the light of the world.

Relational Righteousness (21-48)

After making these statements regarding the importance of Scripture in the life of a disciple, Jesus shows His disciples how to apply His teaching in their relationships. The first relationship He addresses is the relationship with their brother, or fellow disciple. It is notable to hear Him teach that sometimes the priority is not God first, but “First your brother, then God.” This priority focus shows us how greatly Jesus values our relationship to our fellow believers. We cannot win the world if we lose each other.

He taught them how they should relate to their adversary. We live in a very competitive world. Our adversary is our competitor, or our opponent (25, 26). He had some words about relating to women (27-30). (Since there were no instructions about relating to men, we

can assume this was a men’s retreat.) Many misunderstand this teaching. He was not teaching that thinking about adultery was as serious as actually committing adultery. The instruction for us is to win the battle with temptation when it only involves a look and a thought.

Jesus then addressed their relationship with their wives (31–32). He taught that their relationship with their wives must be a permanent relationship. Relate this instruction to what He taught about their relationships with women. One cause of the epidemic divorce we have today is infidelity. When there is an epidemic of divorce, there is an epidemic of dysfunctional families and hurting children. Much of the pain and suffering at “the bottom of the mountain” is because men are losing their battle with the temptation Jesus addressed in the verses above (27-30).

They were also instructed not to accompany their verbal commitments with an oath, as the Pharisees did. When they say “Yes” they should mean yes, and when they say “No” they should mean no. They should not only be men of the Word (the Bible), but they should be men of their word, men of integrity.(33-37).

The Supreme Ethic (38-48)

Jesus closes this long passage of application by giving us the supreme ethic of all of His ethical teaching. What Jesus teaches in these closing verses represents the highest ethical teaching of any religion. This teaching was a vital factor in the deaths of the apostles

and has been for millions of disciples throughout church history. These verses are also considered the most difficult teachings of Jesus. Two of His most difficult statements are that we are not to resist when others do evil to us and we are to love our enemies.

Remember, Jesus did not teach this ethic at the bottom of the mountain to a mixed multitude. It was given on the top of the mountain to His disciples. His disciples were people who had made a commitment to follow and even die for Him (Luke 9:23-25; 14:25-35). He had made it clear to all who professed to be His disciples that they were to carry a cross as they followed Him. When Jesus said, “Do not resist evil,” and, “Love your enemies,” He was simply telling them where, when, how, and for what He wanted them to die.

During the “Holy Wars” around the year 1220, Francis of Assisi was nursing a Turk who had been wounded. A crusader on a horse looked upon Francis and the wounded Turk and said, “If that Turk gets well Francis, he will kill you.” Francis responded, “Well then, he will have known the love of Christ before he does!”

The heart of this passage is the question Jesus asked, “What do you do more than others?” (47) All the way through this sermon, Jesus is essentially teaching, “As a disciple you must be different.” One translation expresses this question of Jesus like this: “If you only love those who love you, what grace do you practice? It does not take any grace to love those who love you.”

The New Testament church had grace, which they received on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). That grace gave the people of the

New Testament church the capacity to be different. We must pray for grace when we too apply this supreme ethic of Jesus to our relationship with our enemies.

Chapter Eight

“Three Perspectives for Living”

When Jesus taught the beautiful attitudes, He challenged His disciples to look in to the core of their beings and consider the mindset that was driving their lives. In the long passage that followed the beatitudes He challenged them to look around and apply the beatitudes in their most important relationships. When the disciples who attended that retreat on the mountain heard how the beatitudes apply in their relationships, especially their relationships to their enemies, they were more than ready for the third perspective on life Jesus shared with them.

As we begin to read the sixth chapter of Matthew, we read that Jesus told His disciples to look up and consider the spiritual disciplines and values of an authentic disciple. (The word “discipline” and the word “disciple” come from the same root word.) He shares three spiritual disciplines with them and He teaches that all three of these disciplines must be practiced vertically and not horizontally.

The Pharisees had a righteousness that was horizontal, or practiced for the applause and approval of people. Jesus challenged His disciples to have a righteousness that was practiced vertically, or for the approval of God. This is at least part of what He meant when He taught that the righteousness of His disciples would be greater than the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

The Discipline of Giving (1-4)

The first spiritual discipline Jesus teaches is what we call stewardship today. Our spiritual health and welfare are vitally affected by our faithful practice of this spiritual discipline. Our giving is to be vertical, or before God and not to impress people. If we are giving to God, we should have no need for anyone to know what we are giving.

The Discipline of Prayer – Communication With God (5–15)

You cannot love your enemies, or be part of Christ's solution in the lives of the people who are still part of the problem, if you do not know how to pray. In fact, you cannot even solve your own problems if you do not know how to pray. That is why He demonstrated and teaches His disciples the discipline of prayer.

The main point of His teaching about prayer is that we must be sure we are talking to God when we pray. Jesus taught that if we want to make sure we are talking to God when we pray, we should enter a closet (or any place we can be alone) and shut the door. Since

there is nobody there to impress but God, closet prayer is better than public prayer, according to Jesus. He promises that our God, Who is in secret, will honor and respond to our sincere private prayers.

In this context He gives the greatest teaching this world has ever received about how we should pray. This teaching should be called, "The Disciples Prayer." There are seven petitions in this prayer. After addressing God as our heavenly Father, there are three providential petitions: Your name, Your kingdom, and Your will. Only then are we to pray, "Give us."

Through these three providential petitions, we are praying, "God first." Prayer is not a matter of coming into the presence of God with a shopping list and sending God on errands. We should come into our prayer closets with an open heart and ask God to send us on errands for Him. Once we have that priority in place, then we are to pray the personal petitions. The personal petitions are: "Give us, forgive us, lead us, and deliver us."

The first personal petition is, "Give us today our daily bread." (11) Bread symbolizes all our needs. The bread we ask for is only for "today". Then we are to pray, "Forgive us". (12) Jesus is not teaching that our forgiveness is based on the fact that we forgive. We forgive because we are forgiven. How could we not forgive others when we have been forgiven so much? But we will only experience forgiveness when we practice forgiveness, according to Jesus.

The next personal petition is, “Lead us not into temptation.”
(13) This petition is really: “Father, if You order my steps, and I am following Your leading, I will not face the confrontation of temptation.”

The fourth petition is actually, “Deliver us from the evil one.”
(13)

We are taught to conclude our prayers the same way we began them by essentially praying “God first” again. We conclude by acknowledging and affirming, “The power to answer my prayer will always come from You, so the result (the kingdom), will always belong to You, and the glory will always go to You.”

The Discipline of Fasting (16-18)

Like giving and praying, Jesus taught that the spiritual discipline of fasting must also be vertical (16–18). Fasting makes the statement to God and to ourselves, that we value the spiritual more than the physical. According to Jesus, fasting demonstrates the sincerity of our prayers. Certain miracles will not take place except by much prayer and fasting. (Matthew 17:21)

The Discipline of Vertical Values (19-34)

Jesus then teaches the discipline of heavenly values (19-34). In this passage He profiles another cause of the suffering of those at the bottom of the mountain. People suffer because they do not have

spiritual values. For His disciples to be part of His solution and one of His answers for the people who are still part of the problem, they simply must have the heavenly, vertical, spiritual values of Christ.

There are treasures in heaven and treasures on earth. His disciples are not to lay up treasures on earth, which depreciate and can be stolen. They are to lay up treasures in heaven, which do not depreciate and cannot be stolen. He is brutally honest when He tells them how to know what their values truly are. A paraphrase and summary of this teaching today would be: “If you want to know what your values are, look back and see where you have spent your money and look at your old calendars for the last five years and see where you have spent your time.”

Your heart is where your treasures are, and if you want to know what your treasures are, ask yourself these questions: “How do you spend your money and your time? What do you do all day? What do you want all day? What do you worry about all day?” If you will evaluate your activities, your ambitions, and your anxieties you will focus your values.

He concludes this discourse on the vertical values by teaching His disciples that their absolute priority value must be the kingdom of God and His righteousness - what He shows them to be right. If those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will make this their absolute priority value, God will bless them with everything they need as they put God and His kingdom first.

Look in (7:1-5)

When we read the seventh chapter of Matthew, we realize that Jesus is now concluding His retreat. Having challenged them to look in, around, and up, He is bringing His teaching to a verdict by asking them to make the deliberate decision to look in and examine themselves. Using a humorous metaphor, He teaches that we should not be looking for specks of sawdust in our brother's eye when we have a log in our own eye. We must look in and ask God to judge ourselves before we can help others. Therefore, we must make the decision to look in and get the log out of our eye before we can minister to others. Jesus is telling us not to be hypercritical hypocrites.

Look up (7:3-5)

Jesus continues to conclude His teaching by inviting those who had heard this teaching to make the decision to look up. He brings His teaching about spiritual disciplines and values to a verdict by inviting these disciples to look up with perseverance - to ask, seek, and knock continuously. He follows with a threefold promise: Everyone who asks, receives; everyone who seeks finds, and everyone who continuously knocks, eventually finds himself standing before an open door (Luke 11:9-13).

Look around (7:12)

As those who have heard Him are about to leave the mountaintop, Jesus invites them to make the decision to look around. This teaching is called, "The Golden Rule." This one short verse is a summary of the ethical-relational teaching of Jesus and of the entire Bible.

The essential challenge of this teaching is: "If you want to be the salt and light the people of this world desperately need, put yourself in the place of every person you meet. Then ask yourself this question: 'If you were that other person, what would you want a disciple who has heard what you have heard here on this mountaintop to do?' When you get the answer to that question, simply do it! That is the teaching of the whole Bible on the subject of human relationships. Whatever you want men to do for you, go and do that for them."

By application, put yourself in the place of your spouse, children, parents, siblings, and fellow believers. Apply this teaching to all the people whose lives intersect your life. If you were those people, what would you want you to do?

Be sure to apply this teaching to those who have not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ, who have not experienced salvation or any of the blessings of salvation. Then ask, "If I were that person, what would I want a disciple of Jesus Christ with these attitudes to do?"

When you get the answer to your question, simply do it because that is The Golden Rule of evangelism.

The Invitation (7:13-27)

When Jesus began this retreat, His invitation was “Are you part of the problem or do you want to be part of the solution?” At the end of the teaching, Jesus issues the same challenge He gave at the beginning - only this time those who hear the invitation have already professed that they want to be part of the solution. As He concludes the retreat, His invitation is, “What kind of a solution are you going to be?”

To summarize and paraphrase His invitation, Jesus closed this retreat by saying: “There are two kinds of disciples - the many and the few, the false and the true, those who say and those who do. The many think there is an easy way to be a solution and an answer. They never become part of My solution.

But, the few realize that being the salt of the earth and the light of the world begins with a narrow gate that is followed by a disciplined, difficult life of discipleship. Are you going to be one of the many, or one of the few? Are you going to be one of the false or one of the true disciples that actually become part of My solution? Are you going to be one of those who merely say or one of those who actually do what I have taught on this mountain?”

The great metaphor with which Jesus concludes His greatest discourse presents two kinds of disciples who are about to leave that

mountaintop. Jesus pictures two homes (lives), one built on the rock (the disciple who obeys Jesus’ teachings) and the other one built on the sand (the disciple who does not obey His teaching). Both have heard this teaching, but one – the foolish one - never applies what he has heard. The other has heard and applies all this teaching. This powerful conclusion makes the statement that the difference between these two disciples is what they do about what they know. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Now that you have surveyed this great teaching, what kind of disciple are you going to be for Jesus? What are you going to do about what you know?

Chapter Nine

“The Commission of the Committed”

We have no idea how many disciples attended the First Christian Retreat. As I have already observed, shortly after Jesus concluded His teaching on the mountain with that awesome invitation, He commissioned twelve disciples to be His apostles. Jesus obviously recruited these apostles at the retreat and later commissioned them to share His mission – to be part of His strategy for reaching the entire world with the salvation He came to bring to this world.

As I asked earlier, if you knew you had three years to live and accomplish your mission, what would you do? Jesus certainly knew He had three years that is why He deputized and delegated to these apostles His desire for reaching the world with salvation. His disciples faithfully spread the Good News during their lifetimes. Five centuries after He commissioned them one could not even get a job in the Roman Empire unless they professed to be a Christian. In the same way, we must be faithful to reach our world for Christ as we proclaim the Gospel to the world in which we live.

Meet the Twelve Apostles

Jesus spent an entire night in prayer before He commissioned these twelve apostles (Luke 6:12,13). The first four apostles listed in Matthew are two sets of brothers: Peter and Andrew, and James and John. These four men were in the fishing business together.

Philip and Bartholomew are always listed together, as are Thomas and Matthew. Philip was a businessman whose business was horses or transportation. He would probably be in the automobile business in many of our cultures today. When we compare the listings of the apostles in the different Gospels, we should conclude that Bartholomew was also known as Nathanael.

Thomas was an intellectual with an inquiring mind. Today we call such a person a “Doubting Thomas.” Matthew was a tax collector, a publican, who collected taxes for Rome from his fellow Jews, which means he was a traitor to his own people. You will

observe that the Gospels mention “sinners and publicans.” This does not mean publicans were not sinners. It means that publicans were sinners in a class all by themselves! The Jewish people truly hated publicans. It is interesting that Jesus chose a publican to be one of the twelve.

The last four names on the list are names that are duplicated in the list of the twelve. For example, there was another Simon, in addition to Simon Peter. This other Simon was called “the Canaanite” or “the Zealot.” This means he was the opposite of a man like Matthew. He belonged to the Zealots, who were guerrilla fighters who continued resistance against Rome, even though the Jewish people had been conquered by Rome. Today, we would call him a revolutionary. Scholars believe that three or possibly four of the apostles were Zealots.

I have often wondered what Simon the Zealot and Matthew the publican talked about - if they talked to each other at all - as they walked with Jesus in Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem and Samaria. Imagine the drama when Jesus told Matthew the publican, and Simon the Zealot to wash each other’s feet and to love each other (John 13:34,35).

There was another James in the list of the twelve, who is called “James the son of Alphaeus.” This James is also referred to as “James the Less,” which probably means he was a shorter or younger man (Mark 15:40). There were also two men on the list with the name Judas. There is, “Judas the brother of James,” who is also

called “Thaddaeus” or “Lebbaeus,” and Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus.

The apostles were to preach the Gospel and demonstrate the kingdom of God through signs and wonders. They were to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, cast out devils and raise the dead. They were to preach and give the Gospel freely without asking anyone for anything, trusting God to meet their every need. They were to live by faith.

Jesus warned the apostles that they would not be well received. He warned them: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.” (10:16) He was essentially warning them: “The world is not going to wish you well when you obey My commission and implement My strategy.” That is still very true today.

An Assignment

You will be enlightened and blessed if you will answer these six questions about these twelve men with whom Jesus spent His entire three years of public ministry, and to whom He entrusted His mission in this world:

What was he doing when He met Jesus?

How did that change as a result of the fact that he met Jesus?

Where was he when he died?

What was he doing when he died?

From what you are able to learn, from the Scriptures and other sources, how did he die?

Why did Jesus choose this particular man to be an apostle?

Jesus asked for a tremendous level of commitment when He gave that invitation on the mountaintop because He knew these apostles were going to suffer and die for Him. What is the level of the commitment you have made to Jesus Christ? Are you His authentic disciple? Are you willing to make a commitment to Jesus like the commitment that is exemplified in the lives of the apostles?

Chapter Ten

The Parables of Jesus in Matthew

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew is the great parable Chapter of this Gospel. The word “parable” (Greek = “para ballo”) is derived from two Greek words. The word “para” means “alongside of.” The Greek word for “throwing” is “ballo.” That is why we often call an object we throw a “ball.” A parable is a story that is “thrown alongside of” a truth one is trying to teach. Jesus was the absolute Master of the parable.

There was a period in His ministry when He taught exclusively in parables. One reason was that He would not be arrested for telling little stories the authorities did not understand. Only those who had the Holy Spirit to teach them understood His parables. The thirteenth chapter of Matthew is the great parable, or

story, chapter of this Gospel. Since this is a survey and an introduction to the Gospel of Matthew, I will only have time to introduce you to the concept of the parable and give a few examples of parables Jesus taught.

Jesus begins with The Parable of the Sower. A farmer goes out and sows seed in his field. The farmer takes the seed from his sack and scatters it. Some seed falls on hard soil, a path where people had been walking. That seed simply lay there on the surface. It never penetrates the soil, and the birds come and eat it.

Some of the farmer's seed fell where the earth was loose, and that seed started to put down roots, but under the surface of that soil there was rock. So the roots hit rock and were turned back. When the sun came out, the plant produced by that seed was scorched and did not bring forth any fruit.

Some of the seed falls where the soil is great; it is deep, it is watery, and the seed takes root. But when the plants start to come up and grow, they encounter weeds, which choke off the plants so that they too do not produce fruit.

The last of the farmer's seed falls where the soil is good. There are no problems beneath or above the soil. That seed produces fruit; some thirty-, some sixty- and some a hundred- times the seed that is planted.

When we first read this parable we agree that this parable should be called, "The Parable of the Sower." When we study this parable carefully, however, we might think this parable should be

called "The Parable of the Seeds." Because "the seed is the Word," this parable is a profound teaching about the Word of God and some of the issues involved when the Word of God is taught or preached. "Take heed how you hear" the Word of God, is the way Luke applies the meaning of this parable (Luke 8:18).

After Jesus taught this parable, when He was alone with the apostles, they asked Him about the parable and He interpreted it for them. He told them that the seed the farmer sowed is the Word of God and the four soils represent four ways people respond to the Word of God.

When we read the Lord's interpretation of the parable, we realize that a better title for this parable would be, "The Parable of the Soils." As we reflect on the fact that the focus of the parable is on how people respond to the Word of God, we realize that the best title would then be, "Four Ways to Hear the Word of God," because this parable is profiling four ways people respond to the Word of God when it is taught or preached.

When the Word is presented, the first person does not even understand the Word; their mind or understanding is hard, not penetrated, and they bring forth no fruit.

The second person understands the Word. Their understanding is penetrated, but the rocky soil that prevents the seed from rooting deep into the earth represents what Jesus calls elsewhere "the hardened heart." This suggests that their will is not penetrated and that their commitment is shallow. They believe the

Word, and when tribulation or persecution comes, they quickly fall away or drop out, and they bring forth no fruit.

The third person is not defeated by anything under the soil or within their life, like the understanding of their minds or the commitment of their wills. They are defeated by forces above the soil or outside their lives, like the deceitfulness of riches, and their accompanying pleasures. They may also be defeated by the “cares of this world,” or by worrying about the riches they have or do not have. In the parable, these obstacles are weeds that choke the plant the Word would like to grow in the soil of their lives. This third person is also unfruitful.

We might say the first person is wearing a spiritual “hard hat”. The second person has a hard heart, and the third is being distracted by the hard choices.

The fourth soil pictures the way Jesus would have all of us respond when we hear the Word of God. There is nothing under the soil or above the soil that prevents the growth or fruit bearing from taking place. This pictures the person who determines that nothing within their life, like their understanding or their stubborn will is going to keep them from being fruitful. They also determine that nothing in this world in the way of forces outside their life will keep them from fulfilling the purposes of God for giving them the Word of God.

As Luke describes this person, “Having received the Word in an honest and good heart, he keeps it,” and this makes him fruitful

(Luke 8:15). Luke also describes the essence of this profound parable with these words: “Take heed how you hear the Word of God.” (Luke 8:18)

The truth of this profound parable is very obvious to anyone who teaches or preaches the Word of God. When the Word of God is taught or preached, these four people are always there and the discerning preacher or teacher can point them out to you.

All those who hear and teach the Scriptures should think much about this parable as they hear or teach the Word of God. First of all, we must look at our own soil. What kind of soil is God’s seed finding in our hearts? Are we allowing God’s Word to bear fruit? Are we very fruitful (100%) or just a little fruitful (30%)? Secondly, those who teach should be keenly aware of the hard reality that the teaching or preaching of the Word will be unfruitful unless those being taught understand the meaning of the Word they are hearing.

We should further realize that our teaching and preaching will be unfruitful, unless the will of those we are teaching is penetrated. When we teach we must, therefore, teach simply enough to penetrate their understanding. We must also prayerfully bring our teaching or preaching to a verdict that the Holy Spirit might penetrate the wills of those who hear our teaching and preaching.

We are not being challenged here in this great parable to produce “Bible experts” who know the Bible, but committed disciples of the Lord who practice the Word that has penetrated their understanding and their wills. Therefore, we simply must hear,

teach, and preach the Word, praying that the Holy Spirit will open the spiritual eyes of those who hear us that they might understand and obey the Word of God. We should pray that He will give us, and those who hear us the gift of faith, and the “will to do” the Word, that the Word will be fruitful (John 7:17; Philippians 2:13).

We must also rely on God to empower us, and those who hear us, to overcome all those forces in this world, that would do everything in their power to see that our hearing, teaching and preaching of the Word is unfruitful. Only God can do these things. That is why when we study, teach, or minister the Word, it must be, “prayer and the ministry of the Word”; the two must go together. (Acts 6:4)

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Mathew 13:24-30; 36-42)

This profound little parable, along with its interpretation, is a very important teaching of Jesus because it is His answer to a question that has plagued theologians and philosophers for as long as the disciplines of theology and philosophy have existed. That question is, “Where did evil come from?” Or in other words, “How can we account for the presence of evil in a world that has been created and is sustained by a loving, omnipotent God?”

The parabolic answer of Jesus is, “Some enemy of Mine has done this, while men were asleep.” The origin of evil is attributed to “some enemy of Mine,” and also to the negligence of men. This

explanation of Jesus probably inspired the man who wrote: “All that is necessary for evil to triumph over good is for good men to do nothing.”

In this parable, the “seeds” are not the words of God falling on the soils of men’s lives, but the sons of the kingdom being planted in the soil of this world. We may not understand, but once we accept the reality of evil, the challenge becomes: What are we going to do about this problem? “The field is the world,” according to Jesus, and that makes us think of a burden He often expressed. He challenged His disciples to pray that God would send forth laborers into this field because it is overripe for harvest and the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37,38).

John Wesley understood and shared this perspective of Christ when he declared, “The world is my parish!” We should never lose sight of the fact that “The field is the world,” and not only our little corner of that field. We should always have a world-view as we accept the challenge that good and evil exist together in our world.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast (Matthew 13:31-33)

These two short parables have been fulfilled throughout church history. These very short parables teach that the kingdom of which Jesus often spoke would start out small, like the tiny mustard seed that became a large tree, and the measure of yeast that is placed

in the dough when bread is being made that permeates the whole loaf and makes it grow.

However, in these two parables, Jesus is prophesying that this kingdom will have extraordinary growth like that of the mustard seed and amazing influence like the way yeast influences bread. Two thousand years later, much of this world dates history before and after the life and influence of this Man called Jesus.

The principle of the yeast and the mustard seed still works today. When we consider the growth of the church, even in places where it has been persecuted, we see the fulfillment of these two short parables.

Like the Parable of the Sower, the birds, that come and lodge in the branches of this tree, are a negative symbol that pictures here the mixed multitude of those who are not part of the kingdom but that profess to be part of the kingdom. The main thrust of the teaching, I believe, is the growth and ultimate triumph of the kingdom and the influence of the sons and daughters of the kingdom.

Although yeast usually represents evil elsewhere in Scripture, it does not represent evil in this parable but the presence and influence of the Kingdom in this world. If it does represent evil here then the parable is teaching the total corruption of the kingdom, which is not consistent with the emphasis in Scripture regarding the ultimate triumph of good over evil, of God over Satan, and of Christ triumphant as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The Parables of the Treasure and The Pearl (Matthew 13:44-46)

These two short parables that are obviously a pair, are a beautiful picture of joyful, total commitment to the King and to His kingdom. They say to us, “If Jesus Christ is anything to you, then Jesus Christ is everything to you, because until Jesus Christ is everything to you, then Jesus Christ is not really anything to you.”

We have not really seen the kingdom of which Jesus is teaching until we see that this kingdom is the greatest thing we have ever seen. The kingdom of heaven is worthy of a joyful, total commitment from us. These parables teach that we will never really understand or appreciate the kingdom until we are joyfully willing to sell everything we have and surrender everything we are to the King Who leads this kingdom.

A Parable of Forgiveness (Matthew 18:15-35)

The context of this profound parable is instruction about forgiving our brother. Peter had asked how many times he should forgive the brother who trespasses against him. The traditional position of that day was that you forgive your brother seven times, which is probably why Peter mentions the number seven. The teaching of Jesus was that your forgiveness of your brother should be unlimited. The real meaning is “seven times itself, seventy times,” which would be an infinite number of times per day. And the rationale for this position is illustrated by the parable that follows.

The large debt that was forgiven represents the forgiveness of all our sins when we first experience salvation. Our salvation involves the cancellation of all our “debts” or the forgiveness of every sin we have ever committed.

This parable is an important sequel to The Disciple’s Prayer. Jesus taught us to ask that our debts be forgiven as we forgive our debtors. He also followed that prayer instruction with the awesome comment that if we will not forgive those who trespass against us, our Father will not forgive our trespasses.

This parable concludes with that same comment. The Gospel of salvation proclaims, “When Jesus died on the cross, He paid a debt He did not owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay.” We are not forgiven because we forgive. We show that we really believe we have been forgiven because we are forgiving people. We simply must forgive others, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:12, 13)

A Parable about Credentials (Matthew 21:23, 28-31)

This is one of the most fascinating parables of Jesus. When God became a Man and came into a world, which values credentials so very much, He became a Man with no credentials but His performance. One of the many distinctions between Jesus and the Pharisees was that He placed great value on performance and little value on profession. They had the opposite priority. That point of contention is at the heart of this little parable.

The two sons in this parable professed one thing, but they did another. Their profession was, therefore, meaningless and their performance was their ultimate credential. The application that was obvious to the religious leaders was that Jesus and John the Baptist had no credentials of the type the religious world recognized at that time. In terms of their profession, they were not identifying themselves as the sons of God working in God’s vineyard; but in terms of their performance, it was obvious that both Jesus and John the Baptist were in the vineyard, and they were doing the work of the Father.

On the other hand, the religious leaders were all profession and no performance. By all their robes, trappings and religious status symbols, they were professing to be the sons of God at work in God’s vineyard. Based upon their performance, however, it was obvious that they were not in the Father’s vineyard, and they were not doing the work of the Father.

When Jesus was asked for His credentials, this was His profound answer. His performance was His credential, and we are deceiving ourselves until we realize that ultimately our performance, rather than our profession, is our true credential. It is estimated that there are two million pastors in this world today and fewer than one hundred thousand of them have seminary degrees. That means the majority of pastors in this world today need to hear this parable of Jesus. The following is like a commentary on this profound parable.

One Solitary Life

“Born in an obscure village, He was the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty years old, and then for three years He traveled around the country, stopping long enough to talk and to listen to people, and help where He could.

“He never wrote a book, He never had a hit record, He never went to college, He never ran for public office, He never had a family, or owned a house. He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself.

“When He was only thirty-three years old, the tide of public opinion turned against Him, and His friends all rejected Him. When He was arrested, very few wanted anything to do with Him. After an unjust trial, He was executed by the State along with admitted thieves. Only because a generous friend offered his own cemetery plot was there any place to bury Him.

“This all happened twenty centuries ago, and yet today He is the leading figure of the human race, and the ultimate example of love. Now it is no exaggeration to say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever set sail, all the rulers that have ever ruled, and all the kings that have ever reigned on this earth, all put together have not affected the life of man on earth like this One Solitary Life.” (Fred Bock)

The Palm Sunday Parable (Matthew 21:33-46)

Millions of people know that Jesus rode a little donkey into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. Have you ever read what Jesus did when He got off that donkey? Jesus created the context for this awesome, powerful parable by cursing a fig tree and cleansing the Temple. This parable brought the dialogue between Jesus and these religious leaders to its zenith of hostility.

The content of the parable is a picture of God sending His prophets (the servants) to receive the fruit of the kingdom. When these servants are treated shamefully the son of the owner of the vineyard is sent to receive the fruit of his father’s vineyard. The owner of the vineyard believes they will respect his son, but rather than respect him, they kill him! Of course, Jesus is the Son in this parable, and these religious leaders are plotting to kill Him at that very moment.

Some of the hardest words ever spoken by Jesus are found at the conclusion of this long chapter when Jesus uses an awesome metaphor to apply this parable to the Jewish religious leaders. He uses this metaphor to duly inform the Jewish religious establishment, that because they were not bringing forth the fruit of the kingdom, the kingdom is being taken away from them and given to a people who would bring forth the fruit of that kingdom.

We see that literally happen in the Book of Acts when the chosen people of God become the church (Acts 10, 11). The metaphor that this parable teaches is that when the people of God fail

to fall on the rock of commitment to Christ and experience brokenness to Him, His will and His work, that Rock will eventually fall on them and crush them to powder.

In the Scriptures, the fig tree is a symbol of Israel. When we relate the metaphor at the end of this chapter to His cursing of the fig tree, we realize that Jesus is telling the religious leaders of Israel that His Father God is doing the same thing through Him that He did to the Hebrew people in the wilderness. The awesome fourteenth chapter of numbers should be related to this sobering parable. God had patiently proven Himself to the children of Israel in the wilderness, ten times, through miracles. He then declared that they would perish in that wilderness because they would not believe and invade Canaan and claim the Promised Land.

There is a sense in which Jesus “fired” the Jewish religious leaders when He removed the kingdom from them on that first Palm Sunday. Throughout church history this Palm Sunday Parable has been fulfilled several times. God seems to have “moved His headquarters” from the church in a certain part of the world that no longer produces the fruit of the kingdom, to where the church is producing fruit for the kingdom.

How to Approach the Parables of Jesus

There are forty-seven parables in the three synoptic Gospels. I have only selected a few samples to introduce you to this important dimension of the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. I

encourage you to make a special and in-depth study of the parables of Jesus. As you do, I have some thoughts about how to approach these parables I want to leave with you:

Remember that a parable is a story a teacher throws along side of a truth they want to teach. Jesus was the absolute Master of this approach to teaching. We should look for the central truth of each parable Jesus taught because His parables are usually thrown alongside one primary truth.

When attempting to interpret the parables of Jesus it is very important to understand the context of each parable. Therefore, when you study the parables of Jesus, you should always ask yourself the following questions: What was the context in which the parable was given? Where was this parable given? When was this parable given? What circumstances, actions or interactions with people led to the teaching of this parable? To whom was this parable addressed? In your opinion, what was the objective of Jesus for teaching this parable? What is the primary truth alongside of which Jesus was throwing this story? If an interpretation is given by Jesus, accept that interpretation. If not, be humble about your interpretation. A parable may have one correct interpretation but have many applications. Therefore, always ask, “How does God want to apply this to my life, my family, my church?”

Chapter Eleven

“Treasured Teachings of Jesus in Matthew”

Another Great Invitation

“Come to Me, all of you who are weary and over-burdened, and I will give you rest! Put on My yoke and learn from Me - for I am gentle and humble in heart - and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

As we saw at the conclusion of the greatest discourse of Jesus, He liked to bring His teaching to a verdict by giving an invitation. This is one of His greatest invitations. It is addressed to all those who have heavy burdens, are working themselves to the point of exhaustion trying to carry their heavy burdens in their own strength. The burdens are becoming greater and their exhaustion intolerable. The invitation is to come to Christ, be relieved of their heavy burdens, find rest for their souls, and discover that life can be easy and their burdens can be made light.

At first it sounds as if we simply come and He gives us rest from our burdens. But, as we consider this invitation more closely, we realize that He is inviting us to come and learn. We are invited to learn about His burden, His heart, and His yoke.

No human being ever had a greater burden than the burden Jesus carried in this world. Yet, we hear Him say, “My burden is light!” If we want to find rest for our souls and relief from our

burdens, He Who taught us that the meek are blessed, invites us to learn about His lowly and meek heart.

He then invites us to learn about His yoke. We are invited to accept the spiritual disciplines of Jesus Christ, and be yoked with Christ as His disciples. A key to understanding this invitation is to consider just what He means when He invites us to take His “yoke” upon our lives.

A yoke is not a burden, but a tool that makes it possible to move a heavy burden. Think of an ox cart piled high with cargo. Then imagine that you want to get an ox to move that cart. You may then realize the purpose of a yoke. An ox does not have the intelligence or discipline to move that cart with its head, but it can be yoked to pull that load. A yoke is an instrument that makes it possible for an ox to do the impossible and move an ox cart.

In the same way, the teaching, and the other spiritual disciplines of Jesus are a “yoke” that makes it possible for us to move the great burdens of life. That is what Jesus meant when He promised us that, accepting His yoke will make our lives easy and our burdens light because we are yoked together with Him.

This great invitation is to come to Christ. He is not inviting us to come to church, to a Bible study, a support group, a meeting, or to one of the many church functions that are supposed to bring us to Christ. The invitation is to come to Christ. He is inviting us to come and have a relationship with Him. He is also inviting us to face life as He faced life. If we will see life through His values and spiritual

disciplines, He promises us that we will find rest for our souls, relief from our heavy burdens, and the life that is effortless and easy because we are yoked in a relationship with Him.

The Kingdom becomes a Church (Matthew 16:13-23)

This is a very important passage in the Gospels because this is the first time Jesus mentions the word “church”. He and John the Baptist began their public ministries preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. On the mountaintop and in His parables He proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom of heaven, or of God. On this occasion, Jesus proclaims that He is going to build His church and the gates of Hell will not stop Him from building His church. He also announces that He is going to build His church on the Apostle Peter.

The context of this announcement is that Jesus has asked His apostles, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Christ!” As important as this confession of Peter is, the response of Jesus to this confession of Peter is even more significant. To paraphrase and summarize that response, it is as if Jesus is saying: “Simon, you are not that smart! It was My Father Who revealed that to you! I am going to build My church on the miracle that a man like you could say something as wonderful as that, Peter - that ordinary people will do extraordinary things because they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The powers of hell will not prevail against that Church,

Peter, because the power within and behind My Church will be the Holy Spirit!”

Although this is a different figure of speech, we should not see this as a contradiction. Was Jesus building a kingdom or a church? It is not either/or, but both/and. The kingdom is an expression of the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven. The Church will be the same when it really is His Church, accomplishing His will on earth.

This passage is also remarkable because when Jesus shares a mission statement about His death in Jerusalem, Peter rebukes His Lord! Jesus then turns to this same man, who has so recently been the vessel through whom God has spoken, and He calls him “Satan”. Jesus informs this same man that he is standing in the way of God’s will, blocking the will of God, and not expressing the will of God, but the will of Satan!

This amazing exchange between Peter and Jesus obviously teaches that we can be the ordinary man or woman through whom extraordinary things are done because of the Holy Spirit. This dynamic exchange also teaches the awesome opposite! We can be a vessel through whom the will of God is blocked on earth, and the will of Satan is done on earth. And both these potentials can be expressed through the same person in a matter of a few minutes!

Who Do We Say Jesus Is?

The story is told that Jesus returned in the middle of the night to the gates of a theological seminary. He rang the bell, and when the president of the seminary answered, Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” The seminary president answered, “Why, You are the existential root of our being. You are the kerygma by which we determine all of our interpersonal relationships!” And Jesus said, “What?” It is critically important that we have the right answer to this question Jesus asked the apostles. We need to know that He is Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Redeemer and Savior of the world.

The Leadership Philosophy of Jesus (Matthew 23:1-12)

This passage presents the revolutionary leadership philosophy of Jesus. This teaching is very similar to His teaching earlier when He told them all to serve one another, even as He Himself had consistently served them (Matthew 20:20-28). He showed them and taught them this same truth when He washed their feet in the upper room (John 13:1-17). He is even more specific on this occasion as He spells out the leadership structure for His kingdom (church), which is based on service and humility.

If we get serious about implementing this philosophy of leadership in our churches today, we will realize there is nothing in the whole world like a church. According to this teaching, and the one in Matthew chapter twenty, the church is to be a unique spiritual

community where there should be no “over-under” as there is in the world.

There are three specific prohibitions cited here by Jesus. In presenting His philosophy of leadership, He uses the scribes and Pharisees to prepare the apostles to hear these three prohibitions. The scribes and Pharisees were the antithesis of everything Jesus believed and taught in His philosophy of leadership. They loved the “over-under” emphasis, with themselves “over”, and other people “under”. They loved the head table at banquets, and to be greeted in public places by being called “Rabbi”, “Teacher”, and “Father”.

Using these religious leaders as a backdrop, Jesus profiles three prohibitions in the leadership structure of His Church. He tells us not to let anybody call us “Rabbi” – “Master Teacher” - because we have one Rabbi, Who is Christ, and we are all on the same level, as brothers! In this same context Jesus tells us not to let anyone call us “father” or “teacher”. Some translations call this teacher the “leader”. The rationale for this instruction is, that your Father is God, and your Teacher or Leader is Christ and you are all on the same level, as brothers.

How do we apply this leadership philosophy of Jesus to the leadership structure of our churches today? It is very difficult for me to understand the “over-under” emphasis in some parts of the church today. The secular “rationale of rank”, with all of the trappings and external status symbols that say one person is better, over, or of more worth than another, is just as prevalent in some segments of the

institutional church today as it is in the military. Jesus teaches that the leadership structure of the Church is to be different (Matthew 23:11, 12, James 2:1-9).

The Mount Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24,25)

This is the discourse of Jesus regarding His Second Coming and the end of the world. Like His Upper Room discourse, this discourse begins as a dialog and there was probably much dialog as the discourse was given. He and the apostles are visiting the Temple of Solomon, and the apostles make some remarks about the magnificence of the Temple. Jesus responds by declaring that the time is coming when one stone will not be left on another in that great Temple.

The apostles ask three questions: “When will these things be? What will be the sign of Your coming?” And “What will be the sign of the end of the world?” As you study this discourse of Jesus, let these three questions of the apostles and His answers to those questions outline this profound discourse for you.

The Second Coming of Christ is not one event but a series of many events. As with all biblical prophecy, the challenge is to separate an event that was being prophesied in the relatively near future from the events that are being predicted in the distant future. Forty years after this discourse was given, the Romans completely destroyed the Temple. Not one stone was left on another. That cataclysmic event is definitely being profiled in this discourse.

“These things” in the question of the apostles and the answer of Jesus relate to that event. “One will be taken and another left” refers to the rapture of the church as taught by the Apostle Paul (I Thessalonians 4:13-17). Great tribulation parallels events in the Book of Revelation where judgments of seals, trumpets and bowls prophesy great tribulation to come (Revelation 6-19).

The apostles asked for the sign of these three events. Jesus teaches that nobody knows when these events will take place, but just as we can see the signs of bad weather approaching, there will be signs of His coming and of the end of the world. Some of those signs are: wars, and rumors of wars. (We call rumors of war, “cold war”.) Nations and kingdoms will rise up against each other. (We call those conflicts “world wars”.) Famines, earthquakes, and apostasy are also given as signs. We therefore always take these three events seriously.

He predicts that His coming will be spectacular, like a flash of lightning across the sky and, for all these signs, His coming will be at a time when we do not think He will come. Nevertheless, His challenge is to watch and make sure that when He comes, He will find us a faithful servant.

His application to this discourse comes in the form of three parables in chapter twenty-five. The first parable makes the point that His coming will be a judgment on every empty vessel. Oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. The foolish virgins, who have no oil in their vessels, picture those who are in the Church but are not

spiritual people when He returns. The challenge of the first parable is, that when the Bridegroom (Jesus) comes again, it is too late to go to those who provide oil (believers) to get oil for their vessels.

The thrust of the second parable is that His coming will be a judgment on every empty hand. This is the familiar Parable of the Talents. We will all be asked the question God once asked Moses, “What is that in your hand?” (Exodus 4:2) Other Scriptures tell us the judgment seat of Christ will follow the Second Coming of Christ (I Corinthians 3:13-15; II Corinthians 5:10) This parable teaches us to be servants who are faithful stewards of what God has entrusted to them.

The third parable applies this great discourse by teaching that His Second Coming will be a judgment on every empty heart – those who did not care for those who are thirsty, hungry, without clothes, sick, or in prison. The people Jesus describes as “My brothers” who are suffering these fates could be His disciples who have suffered these needs while serving in the great mission Christ has committed to His Church.

Chapter Twelve

“The Greatest Crisis of Jesus Christ” (Matthew 26-28)

As these three chapters record the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ they also share some very important teachings and examples of Jesus. It is in this context that Jesus turns the basic Jewish worship form of the Passover into the basic worship form of the church, which is called, “The Eucharist”, The Lord’s Table”, or “Communion”. It is also in His greatest crisis that we hear Jesus pray, a prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, which should be called “The Lord’s Prayer”.

After His resurrection He gives the apostles and many disciples His Great Commission. Therefore, as you read these chapters that describe His greatest crisis, carefully consider the basic worship form of the church, the model prayer of Jesus, and the Great Commission of Jesus.

The Lord’s Table (Matthew 26:17-35)

When a husband and father must be away from his family for a long time, he sometimes has his picture taken which he then gives to his family. This picture becomes very important to the family while they are separated. When he returns from his travels and the family has him back in their circle of love again, they no longer need that picture.

There is a sense in which this is the meaning of what Jesus did when He put this worship form in place. He knew He was going away for a long time. He, therefore, gave His church a “picture” of Himself, and He said to us, in so many words, “While I am away, I want you to remember Me by looking at this picture.” When He comes back again, we will no longer need the picture, but until He comes, this is the way He has chosen for us to remember Him.

When Jesus met in that upper room with His apostles, He knew some of those men were going to memorialize Him with word pictures as they wrote the four Gospels. From among all the ways He knew they would memorialize Him - raising the dead, healing the sick, stilling the storm, loving the sinner, teaching and deputizing His apostles - He gave them this picture and essentially said, “This is the way I want to be remembered! For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you remember my death for you till I come again!” (Matthew 26:26-29, I Corinthians 11:26) The Lord’s Table is the “picture” Jesus gave His church of Himself, and *this is the only instruction Jesus gave His church about worship!*

The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 26:38,39)

Since Jesus never prayed the prayer He gave His disciples to pray, this is the prayer that should be called, “The Lord’s Prayer,” and should be considered a model prayer for us all. The key words are, “Not My will, but Your will be done!” This same truth is at the heart of the Disciple’s Prayer. This prayer also teaches us that prayer

is essentially an alignment between the will of a believer and the will of God - an experience of the presence of God that aligns us with His will and results in our being called according to His purposes (Romans 8:26-28).

The first part of this prayer of Jesus is also instructive and exemplary: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me.” As a child of God we always have a right to pray this way. If you are told that you yourself, or people you love have a malignancy, you have a right and a responsibility to pray this way. In other words, you have a right to ask for healing. But to pray as Jesus prayed in this model prayer, you must finish that prayer by praying, as one translation expresses it: “Yet it must not be what I want, but what You want.”

Many people believe it shows a lack of faith to follow a petition for healing, with the words, “If it be Your will.” I cannot understand how people can say that, when the Son of God Himself prayed that way in His greatest crisis. If He had not prayed the way He did concerning the cross, there would be no salvation for any of us! All who are saved will be eternally grateful that, as a result of this model prayer of Jesus, there was an alignment between the will of God the Father, and the will of God the Son that resulted in our salvation!

The Death of Jesus Christ (Matthew 27:11-34)

When the first three Gospels actually describe the death of Jesus Christ, they are eloquent in what they do not say. They do not

give us the gruesome details of crucifixion. They describe that horrible event with only three words: “They crucified Him.” We will gain insight into the meaning of the death of Jesus if we consider those three words individually.

“**They crucified Him!**”

Crucifixion was a cruel, though fairly common form of Roman execution. It could take as much as five days or a week for a victim of crucifixion to die. A Roman citizen could not be crucified because that form of capital punishment amounted to torture. It was considered inhumane punishment, and since the victims were crucified naked, it was also shameful and humiliating (Matthew 27:35; Philippians 2:8).

Biblically speaking, the important thing about the way He died was that it fulfilled prophecy. Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 prophesy some of the details about the death of Jesus Christ that were precisely fulfilled when Jesus was crucified. However, according to the passages mentioned above, and many others, it was the *spiritual* suffering and the agony or pain in the soul of Christ that accomplished our salvation. When He became sin for us, He cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” According to the prophets and apostles, when this spiritual suffering took place in the soul of the Savior, the chastisement of our peace was being laid on Him. It was then that He accomplished our salvation. That is why

He cried out, “It is finished!” and, “Father, into Your hands I commend My Spirit,” When His suffering ended He sealed our pardon with His blood (Isaiah 53; II Corinthians 5:21; I Peter 2:21-25; John 19:30; Luke 23:46). That is the significance of the fact that they crucified Him.

“**They crucified Him!**”

We get closer to the true meaning of the death of Christ when we place the emphasis on the last of these three words. Rome crucified thousands and thousands of people, who hung on their crosses far longer, and experienced more physical suffering than Jesus. The tragic suffering of those thousands of people, however, even those who died for Christ and their faith in Him, could not begin to atone for the sins of the world.

We must emphasize the fact that it was not merely the fact of the physical suffering of Jesus that was significant about His death. In the final analysis, it was Who suffered there on that cross that made the crucifixion of Christ the basis of our salvation.

When He died on the cross, if He had not been the Son of God as He died there, His death could not possibly have anything to do with our sins two thousand years later. That is what is significant about the fact that they crucified Him! (Matthew 27:22, 23, I Corinthians 1:23-2:2)

They crucified Him!

Finally, if we emphasize the first of these three words, we raise a question about the greatest crisis of the Christ. Who killed Jesus Christ? The first answer to that question is usually that Rome killed Jesus Christ. However, even though a Roman soldier literally drove the nails and thrust the spear into Jesus, if we read the record carefully, we will conclude that it was the Jews who had Jesus crucified (Matthew 27:25).

The biblical answer to this question is that it was God Who sacrificed His Son for the sins of the world! Let us look at some examples: In that great Messianic prophetic chapter, Isaiah 53, we read, “Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief.” (Isaiah 53:10) The New Testament puts it like this: “God made Him Who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God.” (II Corinthians 5:21)

We should remember this when we consider the fact that, “They crucified Him!”

The Resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28:1-15)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ can be proven by the change in His apostles and disciples. We must not be too hard on Peter, because when Jesus was arrested, we read that “They all forsook Him and fled.” (Matthew 26:56) When Jesus faced the greatest crisis in His life, He did not have a single follower. The membership of the church at that point was zero!

What was it that caused the great “comeback” of His church? It was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was partly because He had told them, and they had heard Him tell others, that He would prove His deity and validate all His claims about Himself after He had been put to death, by being raised from the dead. We read: “When He was raised from the dead the disciples remembered what He had said to them and that made them believe both the Scripture (Old Testament) and the words that Jesus had spoken.” (John 2:22)

In his great sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter pointed out that Old Testament Scriptures had taught the resurrection as well as the death of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:30-32; Psalm 16). Peter also made it clear that all the signs and wonders on the Day of Pentecost were the work of the risen, living Christ (Acts 2:33). And it is the resurrection of Jesus the Christ that proves that His death was atonement for our sins and provides an everlasting hope for the Church today (I Corinthians 15).

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20)

As I have now observed several times, the strategy of Jesus was to reach the whole world through His apostles and disciples. That is seen very clearly by the way the Gospel of Matthew concludes. Jesus had deputized and supervised as He apprenticed His apostles. Now He gives them their commencement address and graduates them from His three-year seminary course as He commissions them to make disciples for Him of every creature in every nation of the world.

The Great Commission has one commandment that is modified by three participles. The commandment is: “Make disciples.” The participles are: going, baptizing, and teaching. “While you are going, while you are baptizing, and while you are teaching, make disciples” would be an accurate paraphrase of this Commission. Our objective when we announce the Gospel to the world is not to tell them, “Here is something for nothing. You can receive salvation by believing, and then live your life your way.” Our commission is to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

Dr. Robert S. Glover, an extraordinary missionary statesman, wrote: “The Great Commission is ‘The Charter of the Church.’ Like any other organization, the church must fulfill the terms of its charter or the church should cease and desist.”

Scholars tell us there are five hundred teachings of Jesus in the four Gospels. I have only shared a few of His teachings in this introduction to the Gospels and brief Survey of Matthew. When we examine the Great Commission carefully, we discover that making

disciples involves teaching those disciples everything Jesus taught His disciples.

When the church became the vehicle, that not only made disciples, but taught those disciples, it was the Great Commission that gave birth to the church. This same Commission made Pentecost necessary, because the purpose of Pentecost was and is to empower the church to fulfill the terms of its charter. The church is the only organization in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members.

In our next booklet we will continue to survey the Gospels and I trust you will continue to study these magnificent biographies of Jesus the Christ. In conclusion, I want to ask a few questions: Have you come to know Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Promised One? Have you trusted in the death of Jesus for the payment of your sin? Have you decided that you want to be a disciple, or a follower of Christ? What are you going to do with what you have learned?

My prayer is that the Mini Bible College will continue to help you get into God’s Word and that God’s Word will get into you.