

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings



NORTH FORT WORTH
BAPTIST CHURCH

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO OUR DAILY READINGS

Commit to a consistent time and place (allow 15-20 minutes).

Read each day's passage prayerfully. Don't ask the question, "What does today's reading mean to me?" Read each day, asking, "What truth is God revealing?" Focus especially upon:

What does the reading reveal about God?

What does the reading reveal about humanity (about me)?

What does the reading reveal about what is "relationally" appropriate or inappropriate toward God? God isn't supplying us with a list of rules to follow.

He's inviting us to relate to Him as God so we might walk with Him by faith.

What does the reading reveal about God's unfolding work of salvation?

Underline what stands out. We want to remember key ideas or verses.

Prayerfully identify one promise, insight, or action to carry with you into the day, and then commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Read each day's devotion for further perspective.

Keep in mind—the goal is NOT to read the Bible thru. The DAILY COMMITMENT is to draw near to God by faith and to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

ENLIST A PERSON OR GROUP TO JOIN YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Agree to hold one another accountable.

Touch base consistently about your readings.

Exchange daily texts, emails, or social media posts to highlight the promise, insight, or action you seek to carry into the day.

Talk weekly or every other week by phone or in person. Discuss specific lessons or questions that especially stand out.

Adopt an approach that works best for you—consistency is the key.

Pray for one another by name for spiritual understanding and growth.

Encourage one another to press through the ups and downs of the journey.

October 1

John 5:1-47; Mark 2:23-3:6; Matthew 12:1-21; Luke 6:1-11

“Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!” Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath. (John 5:8–9)

Simon, Andrew, James, and John are now following Jesus. Matthew, the notorious sinner and tax collector, is also numbered among His disciples. Yet, as noted yesterday, not everyone is impressed or pleased by Jesus’ emerging ministry. That was evident in yesterday’s account involving the paralyzed man. Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness caused a significant stir among the religious leaders, which escalates even further in today’s reading. Indeed, some plot to put Jesus to death.

What would inspire such drastic measures? Jesus’ opponents are reacting to His claim that He is more than a man. Jesus’ words and actions elevate Jesus to the level of God. Consider the account in John’s gospel. Jesus observes another paralyzed man lying beside a pool called Bethesda. For years, the man superstitiously watched to see the waters stir, hoping he could enter the pool and be healed. Of course, his disability prevented the man from doing anything quickly, much less entering the water. Nevertheless, the man remained—year after year—hoping and waiting.

Jesus, seeing the man’s need, directs the unnamed individual to stand, pick up his mat, and walk. Immediately, the man is healed and complies with Jesus’ command. He takes up his mat and miraculously walks about. Does everyone rejoice? Certainly not! The Jewish leaders aggressively condemn the man for carrying his mat and ask, “Who told you to do this?” They are more concerned about maintaining their Sabbath Day traditions than rejoicing over the man’s miracle. Their religious pride closes their eyes to the truth about Jesus.

Jesus confronts the religious leaders and explains His actions. *“My Father is always working, and so am I.”* (John 5:17) The religious leaders understood the implications of Jesus’ words. As John describes, *“the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill Him. For He not only broke the Sabbath, He called God His Father, thereby making Himself equal with God.”* (John 5:18)

Is Jesus a blasphemer worthy of death? Or is Jesus revealing His true identity, calling for a faith response? Jesus later adds, *“I tell you the truth, those who listen to My message and believe in God who sent Me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.”* (John 5:24)

Today’s reading highlights again the decision that each of us must make concerning Jesus. Is Jesus God incarnate, the Savior of the world? Or is Jesus a deluded teacher to be denounced and rejected? The religious leaders reach their conclusion and oppose Jesus in every way possible. What about us? How will we respond?

I pray God opens our eyes of faith to trust in Jesus for who He is so we experience the life and forgiveness that the Son of God alone bestows. Spiritually speaking, we must listen to Jesus’ voice, pick up our mat, and walk!

October 2

Mark 3:7-19; Luke 6:12-36; Matthew 5:1-6:4

One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and He prayed to God all night. At daybreak He called together all of His disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles. Here are their names: Simon (whom He named Peter), Andrew (Peter's brother), James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (who was called the zealot), Judas (son of James), Judas Iscariot (who later betrayed him). (Luke 6:12-16)

Today's reading highlights a noteworthy moment in Jesus' public ministry—the selection of Jesus' apostles. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus calling these largely unknown individuals to fulfill a vital role. The term “apostle” means “sent out ones.” So, Jesus carefully selects twelve disciples to train, equip, and ultimately send out.

Why twelve? The apostles likely serve as a spiritual parallel to the twelve tribes of Israel. They represent a new leadership for the new Israel—a leadership that will be instrumental in establishing God's new covenant (Matthew 19:28).

Why these twelve? That's a fair question. Consider the following: Jesus does not act impulsively in their selection (Luke 6:12). He identifies each of the twelve by name following an entire night of prayer and reflection. Nor does Jesus lack options. There's an abundance of disciples available. An increasing number are following Jesus (Luke 6:17).

Finally, Jesus calls to Himself those whom He desires. That's how Mark describes His selections. “*And He went up on the mountain and called to Him those whom He desired, and they came to Him.*” And Mark adds, “*And He appointed twelve (whom He also named apostles) so that they might be with Him and He might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.*” (Mark 3:13–15, ESV)

Again, why these twelve? Jesus sees what others do not. Jesus also knows that He is the key to their future success. As Mark emphasizes, they are to be with Him, sent out for Him, and ultimately act in His power and authority as they go. It is important to notice the order of Mark's description. The twelve will not act in Jesus' power and authority until they first spend the necessary time with Him. There is no substitute for appropriate time with the Master.

Incidentally, this remains Jesus' approach today. Jesus draws people to Himself, sends them out for Him, and ultimately extends His power and authority through Him. Yet, like with the twelve, the first step is to be with the One who makes the difference—Jesus, the Son of God.

And the lesson? The twelve apostles represent twelve of the most ordinary of individuals. There's nothing outwardly about these men that would suggest that they would change the world—but they did! What was the key to their success? They were with Jesus, sent out by Jesus, and then acted in Jesus' power and authority. May we learn from their example and discover the difference Jesus will make through our lives. Take heart! They were twelve ordinary men, and Jesus made the difference!

October 3

Matthew 6:5-7:29; Luke 6:37-49

Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may Your name be kept holy. May Your Kingdom come soon. May Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)

Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)* is one of the more significant teaching sections in the New Testament. Jesus describes the difference He seeks to make with those who follow Him. The difference is profound. Their lives will be like a house built upon a firm foundation (Matthew 7:24-29). Their response to Jesus and His words will assure their spiritual survival, even when tested by the severest of floods. Their future (because of Jesus) is guaranteed.

Yet, Jesus highlights so much more. He teaches His followers to trust God's daily care and provision. If God provides for the birds of the air, how much more will He provide for those with whom He has a relationship? We should, in turn, cast our anxiety aside and learn to trust in God. But do we? If we are not careful, we're tempted to view life through the eyes of those who disregard the LORD and live for themselves. They live for the treasures of this world and are never satisfied. Their lives are sadly characterized by envy, worry, and selfish discontent. Jesus invites us to discover something better.

Jesus also teaches His disciples how to approach God in prayer. He warns that they shouldn't pray to make an impression on others. Nor should they view prayer as a magic incantation, believing the right combination of words or phrases is the key to their success. Instead, they are to approach prayer as a conversation between beloved children and their Father on a long journey. That's how I characterize Jesus' instructions. Think about the implications.

First, no specialized language is required since we address God as Father. We should also recognize that He's with us as we journey and invites us to share our emotions and needs—like children turning to a loving Father for help. Indeed, Jesus encourages us to request our daily bread, representing life's physical needs. He likewise promises we can experience God's forgiveness and renewal as we turn to Him in prayer. Do notice. Forgiveness is to be extended as freely as it is received. In other words, we visibly reflect the Father's heart toward those who hurt and disappoint us. In addition, God's children can anticipate future victories as they learn to trust the Father's leadership and rely upon His help. Our desired victories, however, will not occur without timely conversations along the way. Jesus modeled this Himself as He followed the Father's leadership concerning His life and mission.

One further emphasis should be noted. It's important to acknowledge who's leading the way. Jesus teaches His disciples to pray to "*our Father in heaven*"—emphasizing God's authority and position. He sees what we do not see. He knows what we do not know, so we should ask the Father to lead. We should pray, "*Your Kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" We make a mistake when we separate our requests for God's help from the Father's larger purpose and plan. Day by day, we should renew our trust in the Father's provision and humbly submit to the Father's lead.

So, will we maintain our conversation with the Father today? Please realize. We don't pray each day to gain God's favor. We enter the conversation because we are already favored because of Jesus. By faith, let's open our eyes to His presence, resume the conversation, and discover the help and support God supplies. Come on. Let's experience the difference Jesus came to make!

October 4

Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-50; Matthew 11:1-30

But the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have You come into my home. Just say the word from where You are, and my servant will be healed." (Matthew 8:8)

Faith is the necessary response of the heart to the truth of Jesus. We are not reading through the gospels chronologically to be informed about Jesus but to respond to Him in faith. It does us little good to know the stories of Jesus and not be impacted by the truth of who He is—to be unaffected by His words. Today's reading highlights the example of a person who models the faith we should emulate. Indeed, Jesus points to the most unlikely person (a Gentile officer) and celebrates the depth and beauty of the faith he displays.

The unnamed officer is concerned for a servant who is seriously ill. He hears that Jesus is near and requests the Lord's help on his servant's behalf. The officer recognizes the authority of Jesus in a way that others fail to see and humbly appeals for His help. It is at this point that the Centurion's faith shines brightly. *"Just say the word from where You are,"* the officer appeals. *"Just say the word, and that is enough!"* The officer's plea reveals a great deal about his perception of Jesus.

The Centurion recognizes Jesus' authority over life and death. He understands that Jesus' healing ability is unrelated to His touch or physical presence. Instead, Jesus' healing power is directly related to who He is and the authority He holds. The Centurion explains, *"Just say the Word from where You are, and my servant will be healed. I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, 'Go,' and they go, or 'Come,' and they come. And if I say to my slaves, 'Do this,' they do it."* (Matthew 8:8-9)

Jesus marvels over the man's confession and exclaims, *"I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel!"* (Matthew 8:10) Think about that. Jesus makes this observation as Peter, James, John, and the other twelve watch and learn. Even Jesus' closest disciples have yet to display such an understanding. The Centurion exemplifies a belief that should influence our own. The key is the officer's perception of Jesus' identity and authority. He's convinced that Jesus is more than a man. His appeal reflects as much. *"Just say the word, Lord."* The man of faith connects Jesus' position and authority with the transforming impact of His words. Because Jesus is who He is, the Centurion is confident that whatever Jesus says will be. The faith directed toward Jesus' identity is then appropriately applied to His words. It is essential to see the correlation. Jesus' words are life-changing because Jesus is life-changing. There's something about Him that makes the difference.

Jesus commends the Centurion's faith, but what would Jesus say about ours? Do we recognize Jesus' authority? Do we connect Jesus' identity and power with the words He speaks? How did we recently respond to Jesus' words in the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7)? Yesterday, I highlighted Jesus' teachings on prayer. Did we take His words to heart? Did we accept them as authoritative? If not, what does our lack of response reveal concerning our perception of Jesus? The Centurion asserts, *"Jesus, just say the word, and that is enough."*

Can we make the same confession? Will our faith be worthy of Jesus' commendation? I pray the answer is "Yes!" Faith is more than a feeling. It is a response to the truth of who Jesus is and the words He conveys. *"Jesus, just say the word, and that is enough!"*

October 5

Luke 8:1-21; Mark 3:20-4:20; Matthew 12:22-13:9

So I tell you, every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven—except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which will never be forgiven. (Matthew 12:31)

The Spirit of God descends upon Jesus at His baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). The Holy Spirit fills Jesus and promptly leads Jesus into the wilderness to prepare Him for His mission (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). The same Spirit empowers Jesus to do what no one else can. He heals the sick, teaches with authority, and visibly sets Jesus apart from everyone around Him. As Isaiah prophesied concerning the Messiah, *“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, for He has anointed Me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.”* (Luke 4:18-19) Of course, Jesus claims these words for Himself (Luke 4:21). Regrettably, the people fail to respond to Jesus and drive Him away.

Yet, in today’s reading, the religious leaders respond even more defiantly. They attribute Jesus’ healing power to that of the devil. The religious leaders know Isaiah’s prophecies and understand that God’s Spirit would recognizably work through the life of the Messiah. The term Messiah means “Anointed One.” However, they refuse to acknowledge the obvious. Their hard-hearted defiance is moving them to a place of no return. Jesus warns of their peril. *“So I tell you, every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven—except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which will never be forgiven. Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come.”* (Matthew 12:31-32)

Again, the Holy Spirit’s undeniable work is manifest by God to identify Jesus as God’s promised One. To attribute God’s power to the devil is to disregard God’s witness. If one persistently denies what is self-evident, the person risks blaspheming God’s Spirit. When that happens, the Spirit of the LORD will no longer appeal to the heart concerning the Son of God. And if the Spirit of God ceases to open one’s eyes to the truth of Jesus, then there is no hope. That individual will never recognize their need for Jesus and consequently die in sin. That is why blaspheming the Holy Spirit is so dangerous. It is, as Jesus warns, the unforgivable sin. It’s unforgivable because that person will never recognize one’s need for Jesus and experience His power to forgive.

Do note: blaspheming the Holy Spirit doesn’t happen casually or accidentally. If you’re concerned that you may have committed this offense, that indicates that you have not. An individual who has blasphemed the Holy Spirit will experience no such alarm. They are spiritually blind to all such considerations. I prefer, however, to focus on the other aspect of Jesus’ words. If someone responds to Jesus for who He is, *“every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven.”* Think about that for a moment. Through Jesus, every sin and every blasphemy can be forgiven by God. The worst of our actions, the most detestable of our practices, can be cleansed through the sacrificial blood of Jesus. Jesus can forgive ALL OUR SINS as we turn to Him in faith. Be encouraged by that truth. Accept Jesus’ forgiveness for what it is. Celebrate the forgiveness that He makes possible and give thanks.

All of this highlights the seriousness of Jesus’ warning. If a person persistently, arrogantly, and defiantly rejects the Spirit’s testimony concerning Jesus, the day may come when the Spirit’s illuminating appeals cease. All hope will be gone at that moment because their spiritual eyes will remain permanently closed. I grieve for the foolishness of that hardened soul, but I am grateful to God for the total forgiveness I have found in Jesus. And you?

October 6

Matthew 13:10-52; Luke 8:9-25; Mark 4:21-41; Matthew 8:23-27

Pay close attention to what you hear. The closer you listen, the more understanding you will be given—and you will receive even more. To those who listen to My teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them. (Mark 4:24–25)

How attentive are we to Jesus' words? Do we act upon what He says, or only read our Bibles to fulfill a religious obligation? Jesus calls His disciples to careful consideration. The verbal command, "*pay close attention*," suggests more than mere listening. It highlights a mental focus or awareness that facilitates the appropriate response. Is that our approach? Think back upon yesterday's reading. What stood out to you? What did you carry with you into the day? The key to remembering a spiritual lesson is to put it into practical action. Simply reading or listening to Jesus' words without connecting them to one's life will be of little value.

I find it helpful to identify one primary lesson or thought from each day's reading to avoid this tendency. The scope of our chronological readings can make that more challenging. Reading multiple or extended passages can make our hearts less attentive. Instead of actively receiving the Word, we're tempted to race to the finish. When that happens, our minds develop a Teflon surface—nothing sticks, and that's spiritually unhealthy.

To avoid this tendency, approach each day's reading with a prayer on your lips, "*Lord, impress a lesson on my heart that You would have me to see.*" Ask Him to speak and then read the passage, expecting God's Spirit to highlight a verse, a thought, or an application. Invite God into the experience and then identify the day's lesson. This approach will discourage us from racing through a reading. It will help us to focus our minds on listening, not finishing.

Allow yesterday's reading to serve as an example. What stood out to you? Did you ask the Lord to impress a lesson upon your heart? My lesson for the day was Jesus' assurance that He forgives all our sins. Of course, the broader context involved Jesus' warning against blaspheming the Holy Spirit. However, the helpful lesson amid the discussion is Jesus' ability to forgive all our sins. As Jesus states, "*So I tell you, every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven.*" (*Matthew 12:31*) Again, that thought encouraged my heart, and I carried its assurance into the day. What was your lesson?

What about today's reading? Look back over the combination of passages. Ask the Lord to impress a primary lesson upon your heart. Seek His influence as you glance again at the texts. Prayerfully identify a verse, thought, or application you might carry into the day ahead. As Jesus instructs, "*Pay close attention to what you hear.*"

As you do, be encouraged by what Jesus adds. "*To those who listen to My teaching, more understanding will be given.*" In other words, Jesus will build upon what you are already learning. Sadly, the opposite is true if we approach our readings haphazardly. Our lack of attention will diminish what we already know. Let's take Jesus' words to heart today as we continue our chronological readings. We will be stronger because of it!

October 7

Mark 5:1-43; Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-56; Matthew 9:18-26

A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons. He was sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid. (Mark 5:15)

Three scenes stand out in today's reading. Jesus dramatically delivers the demon-possessed. Jesus heals an afflicted woman who is beyond medical help, and Jesus does what is humanly impossible. He raises the daughter of a Jewish leader from the dead. Each scene highlights the authority and power of Jesus as the Son of God.

Let's start with Jesus delivering the demon-possessed. Matthew describes two demonically controlled individuals who suffer indescribably. They are out of their minds, dwelling in a cemetery, accosting anyone and everyone who might pass by or help. They were truly helpless until they met Jesus. Mark and Luke focus on one of the two who engages in a conversation with Jesus. We learn that an entire Legion of demons is dominating and controlling the lives of these miserable men. Yet, though many, the demons are terrified of Jesus and plead to escape into a local herd of pigs. Jesus consents, delivering the men of their demonic masters. And the result? The men are restored to their right mind and given back their lives. Behold the power of the Son of God.

Scene two—a woman who has searched for years for a medical solution to her health problem secretly turns to Jesus and is instantly healed. The manner of her healing is noteworthy. Jesus appears initially unaware of the woman's need or her plan. Yet, in the hustle and bustle of the crowd, the woman is healed as she reaches out to touch Jesus' garment. Of course, suddenly aware that something has happened, Jesus stops and ultimately singles the woman out. He calls her forward to reassure the unnamed woman. Jesus explains, "*Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over.*" (Mark 5:34) Behold the power of the Son of God.

In the final scene, a desperate father pleads with Jesus to come to his home because his daughter is desperately ill. Jesus consents and makes His way to Jairus' house when interrupted by the episode of the woman's healing. The delay, however, is accompanied by news of the child's death. Jesus' response to the father is significant. Reassuringly, Jesus appeals, "*Don't be afraid. Just have faith.*" (Mark 5:36) We know the rest of the story. Jesus miraculously raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. One more time—behold the power of the Son of God.

Consider what today's reading reveals concerning the authority and power of Jesus. An entire legion of demons is no match for Jesus. He can restore health to a woman's body without even focusing on her particular need. Even more, Jesus has authority over death itself. He takes the hand of a lifeless little girl and gives her back to her parents—alive and well. Behold the power of the Son of God.

Yes, let's consider what these scenes reveal concerning Jesus and renew our faith in Him. May we behold the power of the Son of God and step confidently into the day ahead.

October 8

Matthew 9:27-38; 10:1-42; 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-13; Luke 9:1-6

Then Jesus told them, “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family.” (Mark 6:4)

I am in awe of Jesus’ ability to do the miraculous. Even in today’s reading, Jesus heals a pair of blind men and then restores speech to one tormented by a demon. Jesus is everything that the Messianic prophecies foretold and more. Yet, despite His miraculous displays, not everyone is prepared to accept Jesus’ claims about Himself. That is certainly the case in Jesus’ hometown, Nazareth. Indeed, Jesus cites the familiar proverb, *“A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family.”*

What went wrong? Why are the residents of Nazareth struggling to believe in Jesus? It’s worth noting that they fail to offer anything that disputes Jesus’ claims about Himself besides his family relationships. They don’t point to a past failure or problem from his childhood. They don’t accuse him of being a scoundrel or embarrassing the community in some way. Again, their only indictment is His perceived family associations. *“He’s just the carpenter’s son,”* they scoff. *“And we know Mary, His mother, and His brothers—James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. All His sisters live right here among us.” (Matthew 13:55-56)*

At the same time, they are astonished by Jesus’ teaching, and they hear testimonies concerning His miraculous activities. They recognize that there is more to Jesus than they can understand but refuse to move beyond their perception of His lineage. And that’s the problem. Their perception of Jesus’ lineage is incomplete. He is more than a carpenter’s son. Jesus was supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38) and only raised by Joseph. Jesus is the promised Messiah of God, His “Anointed One.” Everything about Jesus’ words and actions points to that realization, yet the people refuse to believe. They allow their limited perceptions to hinder God’s power and grace.

Sadly, as Mark describes, *“Because of their unbelief, He couldn’t do any miracles among them except to place His hands on a few sick people and heal them.”* And Mark adds, *“And He was amazed at their unbelief.” (Mark 6:5-6)* That’s striking. Jesus is surprised by their refusal to believe. Their refusal to move beyond their preconceived ideas would prevent them from experiencing what could have been.

May Nazareth’s failure open our eyes to potential obstacles within our hearts and minds. The residents of Nazareth struggled with their perceptions. To what degree do we struggle with the same? How often do we allow our natural presumptions to hinder Jesus’ activity and work? The gospels describe Jesus being amazed by the faith of a Gentile Centurian (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) and now amazed by the disbelief of His hometown, Nazareth. The question is, “What is Jesus’ reaction to us?” Does He observe a faith that moves us beyond our natural perceptions? Let’s be honest in our assessment. Will our faith open the door to His activity or close it? I pray Jesus is amazed in a good way. How about you?

October 9

Luke 9:7-17 Mark 6:14-56; Matthew 14:1-36; John 6:1-21

But Jesus said, "You feed them." (Luke 9:13)

Our attention is pointed in two directions within today's reading. We are first informed of the tragic circumstances surrounding John the Baptist's execution. Everything about John's death is unsettling and saddens the heart. May we admire his courage and faithful service to the end. Yet, the greater portion of today's reading focuses on one of Jesus' miracles—the feeding of the 5000. And it's there I would have us reflect.

Jesus' ability to multiply the fishes and loaves is one of the few miracles recorded in all four gospels, making it all the more significant. Indeed, the account has become widely known in Bible study circles, young and old. It has become especially popular among children. But let's be careful. Jesus' feeding the multitude is more than a children's story. It reveals a great deal about Jesus, the One we follow. It also illustrates the difference that Jesus seeks to make through His disciples.

Notice first the compassion of Jesus. Jesus did not view the gathering crowd as a nuisance. Though Jesus and His disciples had traveled across the sea of Galilee to rest, Jesus was not irritated by the unexpected gathering. As Mark describes, *"Jesus saw the huge crowd as He stepped from the boat, and He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd."* (Mark 6:34)

Yet, note also Jesus' instructions to the twelve. The disciples wanted to disperse the crowd toward the end of the day because of the lack of food. Jesus' command must have startled them, *"You feed them."* Let's be clear. It was a command. Jesus intended for His disciples to feed the multitude. Earlier in the day, Jesus questioned Philip about the amount of bread necessary, so the disciples were already thinking about the problem. Andrew even found a young boy willing to share his meal of five barley loaves and two fish. However, the disciples' solution remains to send the multitude away to fend for themselves. Jesus had another plan in mind.

"You feed them," Jesus commands. He then proceeds to demonstrate how that might be. Jesus instructs the disciples to organize the crowd into groups of fifty. He then asks the disciples to give him what they have in their hands—the five loaves and two fish. Then Mark describes the miraculous. *"Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, He kept giving the bread to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people."* (Mark 6:41) The key phrase is that Jesus *"kept giving the bread."* The Greek text upon which the English translation is based is helpful. The verbal form portrays a continuing action. Jesus gave and kept giving. The miracle of multiplying the bread and fish took place in the hands of Jesus.

Imagine it this way. A disciple approaches Jesus with an empty basket. Jesus performs the miracle of multiplication into the basket, and then the disciple distributes what he receives. The same would be true of the fish. With this in mind, observe two things. Jesus commanded the disciples to feed the multitude, and they can do so from His hands to theirs. Second, consider how often the disciples bring their empty baskets to Jesus to feed at least 5000 men. We should safely conclude more than once. In other words, time and time again, the disciples discover the sufficiency of Jesus' provision as they fulfill His command. Here's a principle: whatever Jesus commands, He enables. The miracle of the disciples feeding the 5000 is exactly that. Jesus always intended for the twelve to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and they experience it by feeding a multitude with a handful of food. Do we get the idea? What is Jesus asking us to do? Will we present to Him what's in our hands?

October 10 John 6:22-71; Mark 7:1-23; Matthew 15:1-20

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

In our reading yesterday, Jesus does the impossible. He feeds over 5,000 people with a handful of food through His disciples (John 6:1-15). Who could do such a thing? It is becoming increasingly evident that Jesus is more than another religious teacher. He is God's promised Messiah, His beloved Son. If that wasn't yet obvious to His disciples, Jesus followed the miracle of multiplying the fish and loaves by suspending the laws of nature themselves. Jesus physically walks across the sea of Galilee like a hardwood floor (John 6:16-21). Who could do such a thing? Should there be any doubt concerning Jesus' identity?

Surprisingly, the crowd pursues Jesus for all the wrong reasons. Instead of turning to Jesus as the promised Messiah, they chase after Him for another free meal. Their focus is on physical comfort instead of spiritual redemption. God (for generations) had promised a coming Messiah who would reconcile sinful people to Himself (Isaiah 53). God's "Anointed One" would be the spiritual catalyst. Jesus highlights this truth by declaring: *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty."* (John 6:35) Jesus' assertion is the first of seven "I AM" statements (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:9; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1) heralding His uniqueness and His promise of life. That's the point of each. True life, eternal life, is found in Jesus.

Jesus later underscores His initial statement by adding, *"I tell you the truth, anyone who believes has eternal life. Yes, I am the bread of life!"* (John 6:47-48) Could Jesus be more clear? The focus is on how a person responds. If they turn to Jesus in faith, then eternal life results. The people, however, struggle to accept Jesus' words. Instead of humbling themselves before God's Son, they fixate on their physical needs. They chase after Jesus to supplement their lives, not save them. Do some people today make the same mistake? Do they view Jesus and Christianity as a way of enhancing their lives instead of turning to Jesus as the source of life itself?

Jesus presses the crowd toward a commitment by saying, *"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day."* (John 6:53-54) Jesus' words are deliberately provocative because He's not looking for a crowd of self-centered groupies. The church was never intended to be a social club to ease life's discomforts. Jesus is building a spiritual kingdom of disciples. He's looking for men and women of faith who will turn to Him wholeheartedly and are fully committed to who He is and what He teaches.

Is that descriptive of us? Is it descriptive of you? Many who heard Jesus' words that day turned away. Indeed, so many rejected Him that Jesus asked His inner circle if they would also depart. Simon Peter responds in a way that we, too, should confess, *"Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God."* (John 6:68-69) Can we express the same? Let's humble ourselves before the LORD, renewing our faith in Jesus and committing ourselves to follow Him fully—for ETERNAL LIFE is in Him.

October 11
Mark 7:24-8:21; Matthew 15:21-16:12

“Dear woman,” Jesus said to her, “your faith is great. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was instantly healed.” (Matthew 15:28)

Jesus continues to perform miracles in dramatic ways. He delivers a young Gentile girl of demonic possession without physically being present. He sets her free from a distance in response to her mother’s remarkable, unrelenting faith (Mark 7:24-30). Jesus makes the difference. In contrast, Jesus heals a man who is both deaf and mute by physically putting His fingers in the man’s ears and applying spittle to the man’s tongue (Mark 7:31-37). Again, Jesus makes the difference.

The demonstrations of Jesus’ power are increasing. As Matthew attests, *“A vast crowd brought to Him people who were lame, blind, crippled, those who couldn’t speak, and many others. They laid them before Jesus, and He healed them all. The crowd was amazed! Those who hadn’t been able to speak were talking, the crippled were made well, the lame were walking, and the blind could see again! And they praised the God of Israel.” (Matthew 15:30-31)* Can you imagine witnessing so many displays of Jesus’ compassion and power? How would you have responded?

What point is Jesus making through His increasing demonstrations? I remind you again of the prophecy Jesus applied to Himself at the start of His public ministry. *“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, for He has anointed Me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.” (Luke 4:18-19)* Returning the scroll to the attendant, Jesus also declared, *“The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!” (Luke 4:21)*

Do we see the correlation? More is taking place than a series of miracles. God is spotlighting Jesus, His Son, for all to see. Do we see Him for who He is? Or, has our familiarity with Jesus’ miracles diminished our appreciation of what is being revealed? Are we missing the point? The religious leaders of Jesus’ day certainly did. Given all that has been reported, they still demand that Jesus prove Himself by supplying an additional sign. Exasperated, Jesus exclaims, *“Why do these people keep demanding a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, I will not give this generation any such sign.” (Mark 8:12)* How do they fail to see?

Consider the testimony of today’s reading. Let’s marvel over what is revealed. Yet, as we do, may it strengthen our faith and deepen our devotion. Seeing Jesus for who He is, let’s renew our confidence in His ability to make the necessary difference with us. Though it may not prove miraculous, we can trust His provision. Ironically, Jesus’ disciples (who witnessed everything described above) became frustrated because they only had one loaf of bread to share (Matthew 16:7-9). Had they learned nothing from Jesus’ demonstrations of power and authority? They follow the One who heals the sick, delivers the oppressed, and multiplies loaves and fishes. Yet, they are troubled over a single loaf of bread. What bothers or distracts us? Today’s reading reminds us of who we also trust. We are followers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Think about that. Should we enter the day confident or discouraged? Let’s renew our faith and step toward our challenges with renewed confidence in the One who is with us. Jesus will make the necessary difference!

October 12

Mark 8:22-9:13; Matthew 16:13-17:13; Luke 9:18-36

*When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples,
“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13)*

Jesus asks His disciples a relevant question, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” Jesus, of course, is referring to Himself. The designation “*Son of Man*” was His favorite way of describing Himself to others. Rooted in Daniel’s prophecy concerning God’s promised One (Daniel 7:13-14), it highlights Jesus’ identity as God and man. Indeed, He is God’s solution to humanity’s greatest need, underscoring the seriousness of His question. Is He John the Baptist, as some suggest? Is Jesus the return of one of God’s former prophets—Elijah or Jeremiah? Who exactly is He? And for that matter, why has Jesus come? Jesus then personalizes the question for His closest disciples and asks, “*But who do you say I am?*” (Matthew 16:15) The answer to Jesus’ question will affect eternity itself.

While the disciples hesitate to speak, Simon Peter boldly professes, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” (Matthew 16:15–16) Peter’s words must have hung in the air, full of revelation and hope. Paraphrased, “*Jesus, You are God’s Anointed One sent on our behalf. Even more, Jesus, You are God’s Son given on our behalf. You are the ONE.*” What a statement! And the astounding thing—it’s true. Jesus is unlike any individual who has ever walked upon the earth. He is the Creator of all we see and know, yet He entered the brokenness of a fallen world so our hope might be restored. However, doing so would require a great sacrifice on Jesus’ part. Indeed, He will suffer terrible things at the hands of the religious leaders, resulting in His death. And as Jesus promised, “*On the third day He would be raised from the dead.*” (Matthew 16:21) Jesus will fulfill everything the prophets foretold, for He is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Is that your confession? Is it mine?

I recognize my devotional posts concerning Jesus’ identity seem redundant. But if we don’t understand the truth of Jesus’ identity, we will not understand anything else. Either Jesus is God’s Son, or He’s not. Either Jesus can save those who turn to Him, or He can’t. I agree with Simon’s confession. I believe Jesus is more than a religious figure or an inspirational teacher. I believe Jesus to be God’s Messiah, the Son of God. And, like Peter, I didn’t figure that out on my own. God, the Father, opened my spiritual eyes to the truth of Jesus, and I responded to Him in faith. We’re naïve if we think otherwise. And your response?

Jesus is the Messiah, my Savior, my God. May the sound of these words never become ordinary or blasé. Jesus is the Son of God, my source of hope and life. Is this your confession? If so, confess it out loud. Speak the words even now. Let your ears hear the testimony that forever changes one’s standing before God. “*Jesus, You are the Christ, the Son of the Living of God.*” Just typing the words brings a smile to my face. I anticipate speaking the words will do even more within you. Jesus asks, “*Who do you say I am?*” And your response?

October 13

Mark 9:14-50; Matthew 17:14-18:35; Luke 9:37-50

If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. (Matthew 18:15)

How would our lives improve if we consistently acted on Jesus' words and wisdom? Our readings are useless if we refuse to follow Jesus' teachings. His words are intended to illuminate our paths—to influence our behavior. With that in view, what lesson did God impress upon your heart in a particular way? My attention is drawn to Jesus' concern over broken relationships.

We should all admit that life is not perfect because people are not perfect (ourselves included). Indeed, we are all sinners, and sometimes we say things that should not be said. Or we behave in ways that we know are hurtful or wrong. The question is, "What do we do when such offenses occur?" The typical response is for the relationship to break down and for the person to find ways to get even. Instead of addressing the wrong, one failure is typically compounded by another, and the dysfunction worsens and persists.

Jesus offers a better way. As His follower, choose to address the wrong. Prayerfully approach the individual and be honest about the hurt. The goal is not to accuse or punish but to reconcile—to win the person back. We desire to work through the wrongs suffered with understanding so we can further reflect Jesus' influence and grace. Too often, when wronged, we criticize at a distance. We look for ways to hurt the person in return, and the effects of the initial wrong spread like cancer within the body. The problem rapidly grows, and the dysfunction widens and produces devastating effects. And all of it could have been addressed early on, allowing the parties involved to move toward a healthy resolution.

Again, I stress that when wronged, we don't approach the person to condemn them or to put the person down. We pray that the individual will admit the sin to restore the relationship, and we lift the person up. Can we agree that this is outside what we typically see or pursue? Yet, as Jesus' followers, He calls us to embrace this. Do note: this does not diminish the seriousness of the offense. The wrong must be addressed appropriately. And yes, hurtful behavior may require steps toward restitution and restoration. However, the goal is restoration. Address the sin so that you may win the person back.

What if the person refuses to acknowledge the wrong? Jesus teaches that this approach is so important that you bring another person or two to join you in the appeal (Matthew 18:16). Once more, the goal is to win the person back, not to punish. You are not seeking to elevate yourself above the offender but to illustrate a mutual commitment to follow Jesus—to walk in Christian love. And if that is unsuccessful? Jesus warns that additional actions should be taken to underscore the seriousness of His call and expectations.

And our response? I suspect the primary obstacle to Jesus' approach is the wounded party's unwillingness to address the wrong with reconciliation in mind. Vengeance is what we likely have in mind, not forgiveness. Yet, I remind us that our commitment is to follow Jesus, not our angry emotions. It's not coincidental that Jesus' instructions lead to an extended conversation about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35). Don't miss the connection. Too often, an unforgiving spirit feeds the growing dysfunction and begins to multiply the wrong. As I said at the start, Jesus' words are intended to illuminate our path and influence our behavior. Will we allow them to do so at this point? Will you?

October 14

John 7:1-8:20; Luke 9:51-62; Matthew 8:18-22

On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to Me! Anyone who believes in Me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’” (John 7:37–38)

Large crowds have gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the annual Feast of Tabernacles. The week is filled with festivities and worship that remind God’s people of God’s sustaining provision and grace. For seven days, worshippers lived under make-shift shelters to reenact Israel’s wilderness experience when God faithfully led His people from captivity to the land of promise.

Jesus is the topic of considerable discussion during the week’s activities. Some commend Jesus as a good man, but others portray Him as deceptive or fraudulent. Jesus, however, remains initially in the background. That changes midweek when Jesus begins to teach publicly in the Temple. His appearance provokes the religious leaders, leading to a debate concerning Jesus’ ministry and identity. Is He the Messiah or not? Should He be followed or denounced? The atmosphere is contentious. Indeed, some Pharisees and priests unsuccessfully seek Jesus’ arrest. Yet, Jesus is not done. On the last day of the Feast, the climax of the Festival, Jesus makes a dramatic announcement. Jesus cries out with a loud voice, *“Anyone who is thirsty may come to Me! Anyone who believes in Me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’”*

Jesus’ words hold particular relevance for the worshippers who have gathered. The people have observed a joyful procession from the pool of Siloam to the Temple for seven consecutive days. The High Priest carried a golden pitcher of water to pour ceremoniously upon the altar. The ritual served as a symbol and a petition for God’s sustaining provision and care. Many believe that on the eighth day (when the water ceremonies officially concluded), Jesus stepped forward. Who is Jesus and what He offers have been debated all week. Jesus is now calling the people to decide.

“Anyone who is thirsty may come to Me!” The timing of the appeal and the promise Jesus extends leaves little doubt concerning who Jesus perceived Himself to be. He is “God’s Anointed,” the Messiah. He is the One people should turn to in faith. Jesus’ words must have startled many in the crowd. They are an invitation to experience life in a way only God can make possible. *“Believe in Me,”* Jesus appeals. *“Come to Me and drink.”* Sadly, it appears that few respond to Jesus’ invitation. Arguments about Him continue, but far too many leave the day spiritually thirsty and unsatisfied.

And what of us? Jesus’ invitation is as relevant today as it was on the climatic day of the Feast. Jesus would also say to us, *“Are you thirsty, come to Me and drink!”* Have we done so? If not, why not? Jesus promises a fullness of life that rises from within. John explains that this refers to God’s gift of His Spirit (John 8:39). Jesus promises a steady stream of life that the world cannot offer. Do we believe Him? Jesus calls for us to decide. Have we done so? Have you done so? By faith, let’s turn to Jesus and allow God’s promised One to provide what only God can supply—true life within!

October 15

John 8:21-59; Luke 10:1-11:13

Later Jesus said to them again, “I am going away. You will search for Me but will die in your sin. You cannot come where I am going.” The people asked, “Is He planning to commit suicide? What does He mean, ‘You cannot come where I am going?’” Jesus continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You belong to this world; I do not. That is why I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I AM who I claim to be, you will die in your sins.” (John 8:21–24)

Jesus continues to find Himself confronted by those who question and challenge His claims. In fairness, Jesus has been making some mind-stretching declarations. As noted yesterday, Jesus invites the spiritually thirsty to turn to Him as they would turn to God. He promises to bestow a quality of life that only God makes possible. Is Jesus out of His mind? Is it unreasonable for a person to pause and try to ascertain the truth?

Shortly after that, Jesus again portrays Himself in God-like terms. He announces, “I am the Light of the world. If you follow Me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the Light that leads to life.” (John 8:12) The implication of Jesus’ words is eye-opening. People are to relate to Him as they relate to God. If they follow Him, they will discover life. If they reject Him, then death is presumed. Jesus’ words must have been provocative and outright offensive to many. The debate surrounding Jesus’ identity would persist.

As reflected in the opening passage, Jesus again presses the issue because the stakes are so high. He explains that people will ultimately die in their sins unless they believe in Him. In other words, Jesus is the only hope. Faith in Him is essential, or they will be judged for their sins. It isn’t the only time Jesus has communicated this lesson. Jesus taught the religious leader, Nicodemus, the same foundational truth. He explained, “*For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son.*” (John 3:16–18) Jesus’ message is clear and unambiguous. Without Him, people will die in their sins. That’s a statement of fact. However, by turning to Him, a person can experience God’s gift of life.

Some, as today’s reading describes, choose to believe in Jesus. He encourages them to hold onto His words to experience His liberating power (John 8:31-32). In contrast, Jesus’ opponents become angry and combative. They recycle an earlier allegation against Jesus, accusing Him of being demonically possessed. Of course, Jesus defends Himself, but the spiritual line has been drawn.

On which side do we stand? I again highlight Jesus’ words, “*Unless you believe that I AM who I claim to be, you will die in your sins.*” (John 8:24) Do you believe that Jesus is who He claims to be? Do the people you know and love? Without Jesus, every individual we know will die in their sins—for we are all sinners. I don’t highlight this spiritual truth to depress us but to remind us of our responsibility to share what we know. What we say or do will not guarantee how a person responds to Jesus, but if we share nothing? Their outcome is already determined. Jesus knew that some would react angrily to His words, but forgiveness would not be possible if they did not hear the truth. Let’s remember that the next time we talk ourselves out of initiating a difficult conversation. Jesus shares the truth so people have an opportunity to respond. May we commit to doing the same.

October 16
Luke 11:14-12:34

Then He said, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own." (Luke 12:15)

Jesus is pulled into a dispute over an inheritance and uses it to warn His disciples against the foolishness of greed. Why so foolish? It distracts the person from what truly matters. Greed or covetousness highlights a person's insatiable desire for more. The individual never seems to have enough, which distorts their perception. They are always one dollar or purchase away from true happiness. In the process, they take their attention off their relationship with God and the relationships around them. Sadly, they live for the elusive chase, failing to understand that life is intended to be more than one's wealth or possessions. As Jesus states, *"Life is not measured by how much you own."* (Luke 12:15) Is He right?

The actions of many today would argue otherwise. They define their lives by the toys and trinkets they elevate as important. To expose the danger in this thinking, Jesus shares the parable of a prosperous farmer. The unnamed farmer experiences a harvest that exceeds his expectations. Instead of viewing his success in ways that might honor God or bless those around him, his attention is exclusively on himself. He decides that the only way to take advantage of the situation is to tear down his barns and build larger ones. Again, his focus is entirely on himself and his future self-indulgence. That is until God speaks into the situation. Instead of commending the man's planning or industry, God describes the man for what he is—foolish. God declares, *"You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?"* (Luke 12:20)

Greed and self-indulgence will blind a person to what truly matters. The issue in the parable is not the farmer's prosperity. God has blessed many individuals through the years with tremendous wealth and resources. The problem is the man's preoccupation with his money and himself. The unnamed farmer fails to see that life is more than amassing earthly wealth. Indeed, true life is measured in our relationship with God and how we allow Him to influence us toward others. Jesus warns, *"Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a relationship with God."* (Luke 12:21)

Are we foolish in this way? Though the farmer in the story is unnamed, we could easily attach his greedy preoccupation with far too many in our day. Greed and self-indulgence have become an American way of life. The question is, "Are we under the same destructive influence?" Reflecting on today's account, I concluded it might be helpful to read about the farmer's plight regularly. We are inundated by cultural forces that push us toward selfish indulgence. A frequent reminder of the farmer's miscalculation could be helpful. However, perhaps a better remedy is to focus daily on what is most important—our faith relationship with God and the difference He makes through us. If we anchor ourselves to Him, then maybe we won't be so easily swept away by the greed and self-indulgence swirling around us. The decision is ours. Let's focus on what matters.

October 17

Luke 12:35-13:21; John 9:1-41

Be dressed for service and keep your lamps burning, as though you were waiting for your Master to return from the wedding feast. Then you will be ready to open the door and let him in the moment he arrives and knocks. (Luke 12:35–36)

Are we ready for Jesus' return? Are we living in ways that reflect our readiness? Jesus promises He will return on a day the Lord appoints. It will be unlike any day that human history has ever known. Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, will be seen in all His glory. Readiness is not an option.

Our reading today highlights Jesus' call to vigilance. He commands His disciples, like servants awaiting their Master's return, to be dressed with brightly lit lamps for service. They do not know the appointed hour of his return. They are instructed to live ready—appropriately dressed, busy about the Master's business.

Jesus adds, *“Then you will be ready to open the door and let him in the moment he arrives and knocks.” (Luke 12:36)* Would that describe us? Is it descriptive of you?

To motivate His disciples, Jesus shares something surprising. The Master of the house will reverse roles with his faithful servants upon his late-hour return. The grateful Master will seat the faithful servants, clothe himself with an apron, and serve them as they sit and eat together. It may be hard to grasp just how astounding Jesus' words would be to His first-century disciples. Jesus' description would have been unimaginable. Yet, Jesus shares this remarkable scene to encourage those who serve on His behalf. *“Be faithful in your service,”* Jesus would say, *“for you will be honored by your Master.”*

Of course, Jesus also warns against unfaithfulness. He confronts “so-called” servants who refuse to live with the Master's return in view. They live selfishly, mistreating fellow servants and ignoring any responsibilities. They demonstrate by their actions that they are only “servants” in name, and the Master punishes them accordingly. They are banished with the unfaithful.

So the question is, “Which servant are we?” Are we dressed for service with our lamps burning brightly? Or are we proving by our actions that we are unprepared? Even worse, we don't know the One who promised to return.

I pray we see ourselves clearly and find ourselves dressed and ready!

October 18
John 10:1-42; Luke 13:22-14:24

Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 14:11)

Jesus calls His disciples to a life of humility. That shouldn't surprise us when we consider the example Jesus provides. He models what it means to humble oneself. As Paul portrays, *"Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, He gave up His divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross."* (Philippians 2:6-8) Has there ever been a greater example than this?

Jesus lived each day with the humility we should emulate, and He expects His followers to do the same. Jesus uses a dinner party to drive the lesson home. Invited as a guest, He notices that many attendees are competing for the best seats—the seats of honor. They're motivated by their self-interest and theirs alone. Jesus offers some helpful advice. Don't push yourself forward to claim the seat of honor. You may later be embarrassed when the host moves you to a lesser position. Instead, choose the lowest place at the table. So that when the host sees you, he may elevate your seating and truly honor you.

That was Jesus' approach as He entered the room. He didn't seek to elevate Himself at the expense of others. He modeled humility. Humility is not thinking less of oneself (Jesus is the Son of God). It is choosing instead to think of others more. Is that our approach? Should it be? Of course, Jesus reminds us that God notices the humble heart. Even more, He honors them. As Jesus states, *"Those who humble themselves will be exalted."* (Luke 14:11) That was true of Jesus—*"Therefore, God elevated Him to the place of highest honor."* (Philippians 2:9) It will likewise be true of us.

So, will we take Jesus' advice? Will we selfishly push ourselves forward like so many around us? Or, will we walk humbly into the day, following Jesus' example? "But wait," someone asks, "won't people take advantage of those who choose the lower position?" Yes, some may, but our lives are ultimately in God's hands.

Think about it this way. Would you prefer the temporary attention that self-promotion affords or enjoy lasting recognition and honor from the One who matters? I choose to attract the Lord's attention. And you?

October 19

Luke 14:17:10; John 11:1-37

So Jesus told them this story: "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!" (Luke 15:3-7)

What is God's disposition of heart toward the sinful? In Luke 15, Jesus shares a series of parables that offer tremendous hope for the sinner. Jesus describes a shepherd who leaves his flock of ninety-nine in search of one lost sheep who wandered off. He also emphasizes a woman who relentlessly searches her house for one lost coin, even though she has nine in her possession. Finally, Jesus highlights the ongoing concern of a father whose younger son arrogantly demands his inheritance and then rebelliously departs for a distant country. Despite the son's disrespect, the loving father faithfully watches for his lost son's return.

With each of the stories, the primary lesson is the same. God is concerned for the lost, and heaven rejoices when one sinner repents and returns to the Lord. That is illustrated by the found sheep, the found coin, and most vividly, by the repentant son who discovers his father's embrace. What is God's disposition toward those who lose their way? God wants them to be found and lovingly restored. Our hearts should be encouraged by this truth. God seeks to restore, no matter how far a person has wandered away.

Is this a message for you? Like the rebellious son, you may have traveled to the far county, only to suffer shame and disappointment. Sin makes promises it never delivers. It takes us to places we would never otherwise go. Yet, when we finally come to our senses, maybe (like the younger son) we too can find the Father's embrace. Perhaps we will recognize that we were created for something better than the pig pen. We can humble ourselves and set our face toward home.

One of my favorite scenes in the Bible is the loving Father watching for his wayward son's return. Seeing his distant profile, the Father runs toward his son and, reaching him, joyfully throws his arms around him. Despite the filth and stench, the loving Father draws his son near. That's an image that should reassure the guiltiest of hearts. It's the picture of God's mercy and compassion.

And consequently, the Father joyfully restores his repentant son in a way he did not deserve. Again, let's be encouraged by Jesus' message of hope. And, if we are not where we should be today, let's set our face toward home.

October 20

John 11:38-57; Luke 17:11-18:8

Jesus asked, "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine?" (Luke 17:17)

Luke shares an account we do not find in the other gospels. The story highlights the supreme power and authority of Jesus to heal. It involves a group of ten lepers appealing to Jesus as He enters a village. The afflicted group obeys the biblical instruction to maintain a safe distance from others (Leviticus 13:42-46). However, it doesn't prevent them from crying out for help. They plead, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.*" (Luke 17:13) Perhaps they heard about Jesus healing the leper along the sea of Galilee (Luke 5:12-16). Would He extend the same mercy toward them? Desperate of heart, they hope for a miracle.

Jesus looks at them and commands, "*Go show yourselves to the priests.*" No declaration of cleansing. There is no promise of healing. Jesus directs them to present themselves to the priest. Their faith in Jesus is so resolute that they promptly obey His command. Though they had previously been pronounced unclean by the priests, they were determined to act upon Jesus' words—their obedience resulted in the miraculous. Luke (a physician) reports, "*As they went, they were cleansed of their leprosy.*" (Luke 17:14) In an instant, ten individuals who had suffered in ways that few could imagine are dramatically healed. Seemingly, between steps, they go from diseased to restored. Behold the power of the Son of God!

Startled and amazed, nine of the ten hastened their pace to obey Jesus' words. They rush with new enthusiasm to present themselves to the priests—who would publicly pronounce them clean. One of the ten, a Samaritan, turns his face back toward the One who had made them clean—Jesus, the Son of God. He returns to Jesus, praising God, and then falls to the ground at Jesus' feet. He is grateful to Jesus and humbly expresses it. He freely thanks Him for what He has done. It is a beautiful scene of a grateful heart honoring the instrument of God's mercy and grace. I imagine the man repeating, "Thank you, Jesus, oh dear Jesus, thank you. Thank you. I can't thank you enough." It is the appropriate gesture of gratitude and worship.

Jesus, however, glances around and then asks, "*Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine?*" Jesus' words expose the inexcusable failure on the part of the nine. Carried away by the joy of their answered appeal, the men focus more on themselves than on Jesus and His mercy. Their eyes were fixed on Jesus when they needed His help, but now, physically healed and restored, Jesus appears to be the last thing on their minds. "*Where are the other nine?*" Jesus asks.

There's a sadness in Jesus' words that should instruct our hearts. Yes, Jesus sees us when we're hurting. And yes, Jesus sees us when our hearts overflow with joy because of His grace. The question is, "Will we only turn to Jesus in our hour of need?" Shouldn't we also seek His face as we experience His compassion and love? The obvious answer is "Yes!" But do we? Let's allow today's passage to prompt our hearts toward the appropriate response to the One who consistently changes our lives. Let's bow before Jesus and express the praise and thanksgiving He deserves. May we do so even now!

October 21

Luke 18:9-30; Mark 10:1-31; Matthew 19:1-30

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so He could touch and bless them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering Him. When Jesus saw what was happening, He was angry with His disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to Me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Then He took the children in His arms and placed His hands on their heads and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

Parents are bringing their children to Jesus for Him to bless. However, His disciples rebuke the parents for bothering the Lord. Jesus is irritated with His disciples' interference and seizes upon the moment to teach a lesson—a lesson we should consider. Simply worded, "Those who desire to enter God's kingdom must come to Jesus like a child."

How does one receive God's kingdom like a child? The emphasis is not on a child's innocence, though we recognize the beauty and simplicity of young children. Instead, the focus is on a child's helplessness or dependence. Children, by their nature, are not self-sufficient. They will not survive apart from the intervention of another. The same is spiritually true of us if we seek to enter the kingdom of God. We do not earn our way or achieve our way. There's a spiritual helplessness about us that requires the intervention of another—and Jesus is the One who intervenes.

Like the children in the story, we come empty-handed into the arms of Jesus. We freely receive what only Jesus supplies. Again, we do not climb to God through our collective good works. God instead has come down to us through Jesus, His Son, so that we might receive the kingdom of God like helpless children receiving a life-giving gift. Or, consider it this way: access to God's kingdom is received, not achieved. As Paul explains to the Romans, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 6:23)

Interestingly, the account that follows Jesus' interaction with the children involves a wealthy man attempting to earn his way into the kingdom. He confidently asks Jesus, "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" (Mark 10:17) He places his attention on himself instead of the One who could make the difference. How does the exchange with Jesus conclude? Jesus asks the wealthy man to sell everything he has (giving the proceeds to the poor) and follow Him. Is it coincidental that Jesus asks the young man to come to Him empty-handed like a child? No, the contrast between the two scenes is purposeful. Indeed, Matthew and Luke's gospels include the same order of events. The difference is deliberate, and we should take it to heart.

Are we trying to achieve eternal life, or have we come to Jesus with the spiritual helplessness of a child? We will fail if we try to attain eternal life based on our efforts. Our overestimation of our "goodness" will become an obstacle to turning to Jesus. The opposite is also true. Some wrongly conclude that eternal life is beyond their reach because of the magnitude of their sins. They allow their perceived "badness" to become an insurmountable obstacle. So, potentially, both "goodness" and "badness" can stand in the way of discovering life in God's Son. Don't let this be descriptive of you. Instead, may we humble ourselves, draw near to Jesus by faith, and allow Him to take us into His arms of love. Jesus can do what we cannot do for ourselves.

Think again about the scene of Jesus and the children. Envision them in His arms, experiencing His blessing. Recognize the same is true of us as we come to Jesus empty-handed, placing our faith in Him. May God encourage our hearts as we do!

October 22

Matthew 20:1-34; Mark 10:32-52; Luke 18:31-19:27

Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to Him. "Listen," He said, "we're going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence Him to die and hand Him over to the Romans. They will mock Him, spit on Him, flog Him with a whip, and kill Him, but after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10:32-34)

Jesus continues to make His way to Jerusalem. He knows what is before Him. Each step takes Jesus closer to the suffering He would endure. Can we even imagine it? Jesus again explains what He will soon encounter. In Mark's gospel, Jesus highlights the brutality ahead for a third time. This time, He supplies an even greater detail. Yes, Jesus will die, but His execution will be preceded by physical and emotional cruelty. He will be mocked, spit upon, and flogged by the Romans. Again, can we imagine such things?

Yet, knowing all that is before Him, Jesus continues His journey to Jerusalem. Let us admire Jesus' courage. Even more, may we marvel over His love, for Jesus' love on our behalf drives Him forward. Indeed, His love ultimately motivates Jesus to accept His future suffering and death. Yet, He also knew that as the Son of God, He would conquer death and secure the possibility of forgiveness and life for everyone who believes. Would that dull the suffering before Him? No. The pain and torment would be no less great. However, the promise of rescuing sinful humanity enables Jesus to take one difficult step after another.

How do the disciples respond to Jesus' latest revelation? Do they lend support? Do they agonize with Him? No, they appear to ignore what Jesus is saying. They still have it in their minds that the masses will elevate Jesus without Him suffering. They envision Jesus seated in a position of authority, not nailed to a cross. James and John reflect this thinking when they approach Jesus with a request. They don't ask how they might support Jesus as He faces the challenges ahead. Instead, they inquire if they might share in His future glory. Could they be seated on Jesus' right and left? They fail to understand what they are asking, as Jesus seeks to explain.

When the other disciples hear of their request, they become indignant. Are they upset over James and John's failure to lend support? No. They are frustrated because the two brothers are positioning themselves ahead of the others. Instead of empathizing with Jesus or, even better, learning from Him, the disciples as a group appear self-centered and self-absorbed. In response, Jesus shares the following lesson, *"You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give His life as a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:42-45)

Everything about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem testifies to His commitment to serving in this way. Would they take His lesson to heart? And what about us? We may be more like the disciples than we care to admit. Claiming to follow Jesus, do we vie for positions of honor? And what can change this approach? Perhaps focusing on the One we follow more than ourselves would be an excellent start. Jesus, by His selfless courage and love, models the right approach. He embodies the message that should inspire our actions. Marveling over Jesus' service and sacrifice is a natural reaction. Following His example, however, is what Jesus desires us to do. May we do so in the day ahead!

October 23

Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; John 12:1-36; Mark 11:1-11
Matthew 21:1-11; Luke 19:28-44

Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had previously had leprosy. While He was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard. She broke open the jar and poured the perfume over His head. (Mark 14:3)

In today's reading, Jesus defends a woman from whom we should learn. She responds to Him in a way that should instruct our hearts. Who is the woman, and what is the lesson? The episode occurs at a dinner hosted in Bethany by Simon, the leper. Simon was likely healed by Jesus and known by Mark's readers. During the dinner, a woman approaches Jesus with an alabaster jar. John's gospel reveals the woman to be Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:3). Perhaps Mark leaves her unnamed so that we focus more on the action than the person. Mark also informs us that the woman comes to Jesus with a costly jar. The small stone container contains about a pint of expensive perfume made of pure nard that was highly valued. The flask and ointment may have been a family heirloom, adding sentimental value to its worth.

The woman breaks the neck of the costly jar and begins to pour the sweet-smelling perfume over Jesus' head and feet (John 12:3). The fact that she breaks the flask suggests that she intends to pour all its contents upon Jesus. Such an act reveals a heart of deep devotion. She loves the Lord and honors Him extravagantly--which causes me to think. Have I responded to Jesus similarly? Have you? Think about it. What's your most costly response to Jesus? Was it a gift of time, a resource, or a personal pursuit? How have you honored Him? How do you honor Him now?

Of course, Mark informs us that the woman's action becomes a source of agitation for some. They react angrily, scolding her before the Lord. How could she be so wasteful? The ointment could have been sold and given to support those in need. Do they not realize that their criticism of Mary is a criticism of Jesus for allowing such an extravagant gesture? But Jesus speaks up. He not only defends the woman but commends her. Jesus declares, *"Leave her alone. Why criticize her for doing such a good thing to me? You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them whenever you want to. But you will not always have Me."* (Mark 14:6-7)

Jesus isn't diminishing the importance of supporting the impoverished. His point, however, is that there's a timeliness to Mary's actions. The poor will always be with us, but here is a rare moment for Jesus to be honored extravagantly. To Jesus, it meant even more than that. She is preparing His body for his burial. *"Don't criticize her,"* Jesus would say. *"Learn from her."* There's a time and place to honor Jesus in extravagant and lavish ways. The truth is that when we respond lavishly to Jesus, we never know all that it may do or all that God has in store. Jesus elevates the woman's actions so that we might learn.

Again, I ask. Have we responded to Jesus similarly? Do you think we should? Shouldn't there be points in our lives when we react lavishly to Jesus with grateful hearts? Shouldn't there be extravagant gestures of love and devotion? Is it possible that Jesus deserves such an act even today? Pray about it, and then allow your heart to lead you. But be prepared. Not everyone will applaud such an effort. Let's respond to Jesus extravagantly anyway. Will you join me?

October 24

John 12:37-50; Mark 11:12-33; Matthew 21:12-27; Luke 19:45-20:8

“Put your trust in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light.” After saying these things, Jesus went away and was hidden from them. But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in Him. This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted: “LORD, who has believed our message? To whom has the LORD revealed His powerful arm?” (John 12:36–38)

The response to Jesus varied among the crowds. Much of the nation outright rejects Jesus, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy. Their lasting unbelief became a testament to their early refusal to see the truth. Though the signs surrounding Jesus should have been self-evident, they deny the obvious. The nation at large covers its eyes to the truth concerning Jesus. They refuse to see the light, which perpetuates the darkness. Their persistent rejection of Jesus would result in a permanent hardness of heart. As Isaiah predicted, *“The Lord has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts— so that their eyes cannot see, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and have me heal them.” (John 12:40)*

It is a tragic account of spiritual arrogance and pride. The nation had become the fruitless fig tree described in the gospels (Mark 11:12-14; Matthew 21:18-22)—a tree that warrants a declaration of judgment. Jesus curses the fig tree and then cleanses the Temple, pronouncing judgment upon the religious leadership within (Mark 11:15-19; Matthew 21:12-17; Luke 19:45-48). Jesus’ words in the Temple are not a call to repentance. They are an indictment against a people who consistently refuse to see the signs of God’s promised Messiah and remain spiritually corrupt. Again, they fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy, whose disbelief contributes to a permanent hardness of heart.

All of this is both troubling and sobering. To what degree did the religious leaders recognize what they were perpetuating? Rejecting the light is a dangerous thing, not only for the individual but also for those they influence around them. It is a lesson we should keep in mind. Yet, let’s consider the other possibility—the promise of what results when a person responds to the truth concerning Jesus. Jesus loudly asserts, *“If you trust Me, you are trusting not only Me, but also God who sent me. For when you see Me, you are seeing the One who sent Me. I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in Me will no longer remain in the dark.” (John 12:44–46)* Faith in Jesus moves a person from darkness into light, from death into life. He changes a person’s spiritual condition. As Jesus earlier declared, *“I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.” (John 8:12)*

Jesus came to save the world, not to judge it. He came to lead people into the light, into the life of God. If people reject the truth concerning Jesus, their refusal to believe in the Savior becomes the ultimate indictment against them (John 12:48). They choose the darkness over the light and will suffer the consequences. May our testimony, however, be one of faith. May we choose the light over the darkness and begin to reflect the One we follow. Indeed, may we not only experience His light (through Jesus) but may we also prove ourselves to be His beloved children of the light (John 12:36). May that be evident for all to see.

October 25

Matthew 21:28-22:33; Mark 12:1-40; Luke 20:9-26

Later the leaders sent some Pharisees and supporters of Herod to trap Jesus into saying something for which He could be arrested. “Teacher,” they said, “we know how honest you are. You are impartial and don’t play favorites. You teach the way of God truthfully. Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or shouldn’t we?” (Mark 12:13–14)

The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders is escalating. The Pharisees and the supporters of Herod form an unlikely partnership. Though at odds on most issues, they find common ground in their opposition to Jesus. They plan to entrap Jesus with a carefully worded question. They ask, *“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or shouldn’t we?”* In their minds, Jesus will alienate himself from the people by supporting taxation. Or, Jesus will put Himself at odds with the Romans by discouraging the people from paying their taxes—leading to His arrest. Either way, Jesus is left in a weakened position.

Jesus sees their hypocrisy and asks, *“Why are you trying to trap me? Show me a Roman coin, and I’ll tell you.”* Someone hands Jesus a coin, which leads Him to ask, *“Whose picture and title are stamped on it?”* They reply, *“Caesar’s.”* It should be noted that coins in Jesus’ day were generally understood to be the property of the person whose picture and inscription were on them. *“Well, then,”* Jesus said, *“give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” (Mark 12:17)* The verb “give” is a term in Greek that describes giving payment in return for something. It is as if Jesus is saying, *“You carry Caesar’s coins. Give him what he deserves.”* But at the same time, Jesus adds. *“You were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26—we are God’s coinage), so be sure to give to God what He also deserves.”*

The people are amazed by Jesus’ response. He successfully disarms the verbal trap. However, Jesus did more than that. He provides a spiritual principle to guide His followers for generations to come. With this statement, Jesus acknowledges a proper place for civil government and taxation. Yet, Jesus’ statement also makes an appropriate distinction. We are to render to Caesar (the government) what he (it) deserves, but no more than he (it) deserves. Interestingly, the Roman coin in Jesus’ day included two inscriptions: Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, and Pontifex Maximus, identifying Caesar as Chief Priest. Throughout history, the “Caesars” of this world have often sought to claim more than is their right to claim.

Here’s the potential problem. What do we do when God’s teaching places us in conflict with governmental authority? Do we stand according to God’s teaching or yield moral and spiritual authority to the government? Historically, governments have attempted to elevate their control over God’s authority. Indeed, the early followers of Jesus were forced to decide whether they would bow to Jesus as Lord or Caesar—which could cost their lives. And in our day? When the government seeks to usurp Jesus’ authority and wisdom, will we peacefully stand our ground?

As Jesus’ disciples, we must be prepared. We live in a day when our devotion to Jesus may place us at odds with the government. When that happens, will we peacefully hold our ground? Are we willing to face the consequences as we do? Don’t be naïve. There will be consequences. The question is, *“Will we place our present and future in God’s hands or the government’s?”* May Jesus’ words be our guide, *“Well, then,”* Jesus said, *“give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” (Mark 12:17).* May it be so!

October 26

Mark 12:28-44; Matthew 22:34-23:39; Luke 20:41-21:4

“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28)

The religious leaders continue their attempts to entrap Jesus with their questions. They do not seek the truth. Instead, they hope to use Jesus’ words against Him. One teacher, however, appears to be the exception. He is impressed by Jesus’ answers to what are admittedly tricky questions. He then poses a question of actual relevance. He asks Jesus, *“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”* The Bible experts (the scribes) of Jesus’ day identified 613 individual commandments in the Old Testament Law—365 negative commands and 248 positive ones. Which one would Jesus single out as most important?

Jesus responds by citing Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which is, *“Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.” (Mark 12:29-30)* Jesus then adds, *“The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.” (Mark 12:31)* In a straightforward manner, Jesus characterizes the life of faith and obedience in two directions.

First and foremost, we must love God vertically with all we are (heart, soul, mind, and strength). And second, horizontally, we are to love the people around us with the same attention and concern we show ourselves. From Jesus’ perspective, these two commandments provide the foundation upon which the over 600 commands in the Law arise. If we get these two right, the other commands make sense. If we disregard these two, the other directives lose their purpose and motivation. *“Love God,”* Jesus appeals. That’s where it all starts. *“Love one another,”* Jesus adds. That’s where our life of faith should lead.

Do we agree? If so, how are we living it out? If it is not evident in some tangible way, then (I would argue) it does not exist. True love for God is a verb. It should be in motion. It should be demonstrated by what we do, what we say, and who we are becoming. Do we love God in this way? The same is true of the second command, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* God expects more than confessions of love or concern. The command points toward deliberate actions. As with God, we should demonstrate our love toward others through what we say and do—particularly in what we do. Love is action, not sentiment. It should be visibly recognized. But is it?

The religious leader agrees with Jesus’ assessment. He even adds, *“This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.” (Mark 12:33)* The religious teacher recognizes that outward activity is not enough. It’s possible to offer sacrifices to God and not love Him. Worship activities lack meaning or value when separated from a heart of devotion. Yes. The teacher of the Law is on to something. Indeed, Jesus reacts favorably and says, *“You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:34)* What does that mean? It indicates that the man displays a spiritual understanding and openness that could lead him to see the truth of God’s Messiah. While most religious leaders openly reject Jesus, Jesus desires this man to receive Him.

How did the unnamed teacher respond? We are not told. I want to believe, however, that the man became a follower of Jesus. He came to Jesus with an honest question and perhaps discovered more than he ever imagined. And what of us? Have we responded to Jesus in faith? If so, are we living out the two great commandments? Do note: We can’t follow Jesus otherwise. Let’s then renew our faith in Jesus and commit ourselves to love God and our neighbor in ways that reflect His presence and influence. Will you do so?

October 27

Mark 13:1-31; Matthew 24:1-35; Luke 21:5-33

As Jesus was leaving the Temple grounds, His disciples pointed out to Him the various Temple buildings. But He responded, “Do you see all these buildings? I tell you the truth, they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!” Later, Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives. His disciples came to Him privately and said, “Tell us, when will all this happen? What sign will signal your return and the end of the world?” (Matthew 24:1-3)

Our passages today can be challenging to interpret. The problem is that Jesus’ discussion with His disciples touches on two notable events. First and most significantly, Jesus points to His glorious return on a day of God’s choosing, which will be cosmic in scope. Yet, in the context of the passage, Jesus also addresses the promised destruction of Jerusalem, which He has repeatedly warned would be. These two events are distinct, as described by Jesus, but the disciples assume they are the same. Thus, Jesus’ response to the “WHEN QUESTION” becomes more complicated since the two events are separated by at least two thousand years. The first event (Jerusalem’s destruction) already occurred in 70 A.D. And the second event (Jesus’ return) is still before us.

So what do we do? I suggest we focus on what we know is clear concerning Jesus’ return. Consider the following: First, Jerusalem’s destruction foreshadows Jesus’ future return. It will help the disciples anticipate the later event’s enormity and devastation. It will also assure their hearts. As Jesus’ pronouncement concerning Jerusalem was true, Jesus’ words concerning His promised return will likewise prove true.

Second, the days preceding Jesus’ appearance will be characterized by spiritual deception and confusion. False messiahs and teachers will mislead the masses—even Jesus’ followers. Others will misinterpret the global crises of wars, famine, and earthquakes. Such events will be recurring but intensify as the day of Jesus’ appearance approaches. In addition, persecution against Jesus’ followers will increase. They will be hated worldwide. Yet, the Good News about the Kingdom will still be preached. Indeed, the global proclamation of the gospel will be a recognizable marker that the day of Jesus’ return is near (Matthew 24:12).

Third, Jesus’ return will be cosmic in scope. When Jesus finally appears, it will be visible to all. As Jesus describes, *“Immediately after the anguish of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then at last, the sign that the Son of Man is coming will appear in the heavens, and there will be deep mourning among all the peoples of the earth. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:29-30)* When Jesus returns, all will know it. At that moment, Jesus will dramatically separate the redeemed from the condemned as He ushers forth the final events of human history. As Jesus explains, *“And He will send out His angels with the mighty blast of a trumpet, and they will gather His chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.” (Matthew 24:31)*

So, the lesson for the day? Be assured that Jesus, who died, rose again, and ascended on high, will return as He promised. We must be vigilant in service, faithful in our devotion, and expectant of Jesus’ promised appearance. We must guard against being deceived or discouraged, for Jesus warned of the challenges ahead. May we instead lift our eyes of faith and anticipate a day that will surpass anything we have ever known—the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. The promised day is coming. Let’s not be caught unaware.

October 28

Mark 13:32-37; Matthew 24:36-25:46; Luke 21:34-38

When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 24:37-39)

Jesus Christ has promised to return. Yes. The Son of God, who died, rose again, and ascended on high, will dramatically appear on a day of God's choosing. His appearance will be cosmic in scope and the defining moment in all human history. God's angels will separate unto the Lord the saved from the lost, the redeemed from the condemned. As Jesus describes, *"Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left."* (Matthew 24:40-41)

Again, it will be the defining moment as the Shepherd separates unto Himself the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32), those who trust in Jesus as Savior from those who do not. And on that day, the opportunity to trust in Jesus will have passed. Indeed, it will be like it was on Noah's day. Those outside the ark (God's way of deliverance) will be left to face the consequences of their sin. Of course, as Jesus notes, the people in Noah's day were oblivious to the coming judgment. They were doing what they always did—enjoying banquets, parties, and weddings. They refused to take Noah's appeal seriously and were swept away by the flood.

Jesus warns that we must not repeat the mistake. To the unbeliever, Jesus would call the person to faith. Today is the day of salvation. Turn to the Savior. To the believer, Jesus would call His disciples to diligence and service, for we, too, can be distracted. As Jesus appeals,

"Watch out! Don't let your hearts be dulled by carousing and drunkenness and by the worries of this life. Don't let that day catch you unaware like a trap. For that day will come upon everyone living on the earth. Keep alert at all times." (Luke 21:34-36)

Jesus expects spiritual vigilance from His followers, but is that what He's observing? To what degree are we living with an expectation of Jesus' return? How urgently do we seek to influence others to the Lord? Or do we presume we have plenty of time?

Jesus' message concerning His return is consistently the same. We must remain alert and engaged. May God help us to do so!

October 29
Mark 14:1-2, 10-26; Matthew 26:1-5, 14-30
Luke 22:1-30; John 13:1-30

It was time for supper, and the devil had already prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything and that He had come from God and would return to God. So He got up from the table, took off His robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then He began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel He had around Him. (John 13:2-5)

We have reached the place in the gospels that should cause our hearts to pause. We are (spiritually speaking) standing on holy ground. Our readings permit us to follow Jesus in the final hours that lead up to His sacrificial death on the cross. Though we may be familiar with the journey, may it never become commonplace. How do we get our minds around all that is taking place in the heart of our Savior? He knows what is before Him. Yet, Jesus also recognizes that He must still prepare His disciples. The easy thing to do would be to isolate oneself. Jesus, however, seizes every moment to help His disciples better understand God's plan. Again, do not allow your familiarity with the accounts to detract from each action and word. Let's prayerfully focus our hearts and allow our minds to ponder every aspect of what unfolds.

Today, I focus on Jesus' humble service of washing His disciples' feet. They gather in an upper room to share the Passover. Of course, during the Passover meal, Jesus will attach new meaning to the bread and cup they share. By doing so, He will teach them about His sacrificial death and shock them as they realize His betrayer is among them. How could that be? Yet, before the meal, Jesus took off His robe and wrapped a towel around His waist. Despite His heaviness of heart, Jesus assumes the role of the lowest of servants. He lovingly proceeds to wash the dirt and dust from each disciple's feet. One after the next, Jesus serves them. Please note. He did not do this so He would have a lesson to teach. Jesus washes His disciples' feet because He recognizes and chooses to meet their physical needs. He has demonstrated this quality throughout His public ministry. Jesus consistently responds to the needs of those He sees around Him. The final and ultimate expression of Jesus' love and concern will be displayed the following day—when Jesus lays down His life for humanity's sins.

Though Jesus did not serve His disciples to make a point, He nevertheless sought to impress a lesson upon their hearts. *"Do you understand what I was doing?"* Jesus asked. *"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you."* (John 13:12-15) Jesus calls for His disciples to follow His example. They are to reflect His heart—not by looking to be served, but by freely humbling themselves in the service of others. They are to open their eyes to the needs of others and then, in love, meet the needs. Jesus states it directly when He later adds, *"I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."* (John 13:34-35)

Jesus does all of this with His arrest merely hours away. And what is our excuse for not serving? For refusing to love those in need? May Jesus' example stir our hearts anew. But even more, may His command move us to action. Let's open our eyes and respond to the opportunities before us. Let's love, even as Jesus loves. Will we do so?

October 30

John 13:31-15:17; Mark 14:27-31; Matthew 26:31-35; Luke 22:31-38

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in Me.” (John 14:1)

Judas departed to facilitate Jesus’s arrest. Jesus and the eleven make their way to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Yet, Jesus continues to prepare His disciples for the events before them. He announces that they will soon abandon Him like a scattered flock. Simon argues defiantly, *“Even if everyone else deserts You, I never will.” (Mark 14:29)* Jesus, however, warns Simon Peter that he will publicly deny Him—not only once, but three times before the morning rooster crows. Even so, Simon insists he will prove faithful to the end. Of course, the evening will unfold as Jesus predicted.

Jesus’ teaching continues. He seeks to reassure His disciples concerning the upcoming changes. Their world would soon be turned upside down as He goes to prepare a place for them. The life they knew for three years would dramatically change. Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension will alter the physical access and interaction they once enjoyed. However, their new relationship will surpass what they have previously known. How is that possible? The Father will send another advocate or helper (the Holy Spirit) who will never leave Jesus’ disciples. God’s presence will dwell within them and become a continuous source of help and support. Indeed, they will learn to be led and strengthened by God’s Spirit of truth in ways that promote greater fellowship and peace. Their lives, Jesus promises, will never be the same.

And their relationship with Jesus? They will no longer follow Him like a band of disciples. Instead, they will relate to Jesus as dependent branches to a life-giving vine. They will turn to Him daily by faith, allowing His words to abide in their hearts. They will also talk to Him regularly, availing themselves of the spiritual resources necessary to become the fruitful disciples Jesus desires them to be. Their interaction with the ascended Jesus will not be less. It will become more personal and dynamic than ever—for Jesus will work in them (through the Spirit) and not simply with them. This is the message of hope Jesus shares with His disciples on the eve of His death. Did they take it to heart? Have we?

If you doubt this possibility, look again at Jesus’ words to His disciples (John 14:15-15:11). He seeks to open their spiritual eyes so they might see what would be. If you are settling for something less than what I summarized above, ask God to open your spiritual eyes to the truth. Press toward Jesus by faith. Yield yourself to His work within. Take Jesus’ command to heart. *“Remain (abide) in Me, and I will remain (abide) in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain (abide) in Me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain (abide) in Me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4-5)*

The verb “remain” can be translated as “abide” or “dwell.” Jesus commands His disciples to draw life from Him as they spiritually rely on Him. It is an active response as they recognize Jesus’ presence and continuous work by faith. They allow His words to be more than words on a page; they are the basis of their expectations and life. *“Abide in Me,”* Jesus commands, *“and I will abide in you.”* I marvel at Jesus’ words and the privilege that is ours. I pray today’s reading moves us to experience even more of Jesus in our daily lives. Will you pray the same?

October 31
John 15:18–17:26

“If the world hates you, remember that it hated Me first.” (John 15:18)

Today, we conclude Jesus’ extended conversation with His disciples on the night of His arrest. As I have previously noted, there’s an urgency in Jesus’ words. He wants to prepare the disciples for all that is before them. Jesus also seeks to impress lessons upon their hearts that they will carry with them—lessons they will increasingly understand in the coming days. We should resist reading today’s passage too quickly. Ponder His words, linger on each line and phrase.

The reading first highlights the inevitability of the world’s rejection. Like Jesus, His disciples will be hated, even despised. They will experience the same opposition to the truth. Though they reflect Jesus’ love and compassion, they will still be opposed and persecuted. But they must not take it personally. It will be more about the world’s rejection of Jesus than their dislike of His followers. It’s the truth that provokes them. People don’t want to be confronted by the light of God’s truth. They aggressively seek to extinguish the light but will ultimately fail.

Jesus seeks to reassure His disciples by teaching them further concerning the role of the Advocate that would soon be sent. The same Holy Spirit that we have already received as believers in Jesus. God’s Spirit, the Spirit of truth, will guide the disciples’ hearts more fully into the truth of who Jesus is and what He revealed. In a sense, the Spirit will come alongside each of us to instruct and teach. The term “Advocate” (Greek, *paraclete*) means “calling to one’s side.” Every believer is promised the Advocate’s beneficial presence and instruction. Jesus even states that it is to the disciples’ advantage that He depart so that the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit might begin (John 16:7). May our hearts be encouraged by such a thought.

Yet, with the reality of His death pressing in, Jesus directs His disciples to look beyond the coming shock. Yes. They will mourn and grieve as a precursor to indescribable joy. Jesus likens it to a woman suffering the pains of childbirth. He explains, *“When her child is born, her anguish gives way to joy because she has brought a new baby into the world.” (John 16:21)* Jesus is pointing to His promised victory. Indeed, He will conquer death, and their temporary sorrow will erupt into inexhaustible, overflowing joy. It’s the promise of that coming joy that moves Jesus steadily forward.

Jesus concludes His extended conversation by praying on His disciples’ behalf. However, if we look closely, it is also a prayer on our behalf (John 17:20). Think about it. On the night before Jesus’ death, He prayed for you. He had you on His mind. You are always on His mind, and He continues to intercede on your behalf (Hebrews 7:25). So, instead of highlighting a verse or two from Jesus’ prayer, let me ask you to do something instead. Take out your Bible again and read the whole of His prayer out loud. May we allow our ears to hear Jesus’ words, and may they bring fresh meaning to each of our hearts.

Please, Lord, speak to our hearts anew!

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie

All references unless noted: New Living Translation