

Study Guide

The Moral Teachings of Jesus

Radical Instruction in the Will of God

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Study Guide Written by Jeremy Hall

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Foreword

I am grateful to my graduate and friend Jeremy Hall for this fine, detailed study guide to my new book, *The Moral Teachings of Jesus: Radical Instruction in the Will of God*.

Sometimes it seems to me that Jeremy knows my work better than I do! I was his teacher at the master's level at McAfee School of Theology (Mercer University), where Jeremy excelled as he took multiple classes of mine. Then I had the privilege of supervising Jeremy for his Doctor of Ministry research, also undertaken at McAfee.

As for this project, Jeremy's fingerprints are all over it. He helped me develop the course on which this book is based. He studied along with me each text that was selected for examination, and provided considerable research, especially on linguistic issues. Jeremy and I also talked through many of these texts in a series of conversations that were made available to the seminary students for the course and will be released as episodes on our Kingdom Ethics podcast.

More important than anything else, Jeremy and I share a deep commitment to the serious study of scripture, especially among people who claim to be believers! At heart and by calling, we are both pastors, with any scholarly efforts that either of us undertake intended to serve the church first, then the academy.

Mine is indeed a book for the church, and this study guide is designed especially for church use. Both the book and the study guide intend to help Christians truly face the radical teachings of Jesus, to engage him for what he actually said and did, not in the abstract, gauzy way so many Christians semi-engage the One we claim to worship and serve.

I warmly welcome and endorse this study guide to *The Moral Teachings of Jesus* and offer my warmest thanks to my friend Jeremy Hall for developing it. Readers, I hope you will dig in hard with Jeremy as he leads you—and your friends, your class, your church—to deeply engage the glorious, demanding, and life-giving teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

David P. Gushee

Preface

I took my first ministry job at the age of nineteen, straight out of high school as a freshman at Samford University... At the age of nineteen, I was the youth pastor (to a group of mostly seventeen-to eighteen-year-olds). I had grown up in the church and was filled with the fire of my evangelical upbringing and the zeal and energy of being given the first opportunity to live into my calling. When I received the phone call that I had gotten the job, I went to a coffee shop on campus (shout-out to O. Henry's in Homewood, Alabama) and prayed, studied, and thought about what values would govern this season of ministry.

The top of that list was something like "Kids need to know the Bible." So I went to Walmart and bought the cheapest faux-leather-bound KJV Bible I could find. I took this Bible back to my dorm room and carefully began reading. Anytime I encountered something about which I had not heard a sermon, devotion, or Bible study, I would rip the whole page out. By the time I was finished the book was about a quarter-inch thick. I saved all of the pages in a bag. That next Sunday, my first time teaching in the youth space, I brought in my dismantled Bible and explained what I had done to it. Then, very dramatically, I pulled out the massive bag of the removed pages and dumped them on the youth room floor. I promised them that I would spend my time as their youth pastor putting those pages metaphorically back into the Bible, that we would do the hard work and the deep study required to really know the Bible and the God of the Bible.

While my faith and I have changed dramatically since that time, I have kept this disassembled Bible as a relic of my faith journey. It also reminds me to lean on the full counsel of God, not just the parts of the Bible that are easy or familiar. Biblical literacy remains one of my core values as a minister and teacher.

From creating a syllabus and recording lectures to co-teaching the class and assisting on this book, working on the *Moral Teachings of Jesus* project with David Gushee has been akin to putting those pages back in the Bible.

Spending so much time carefully and meticulously studying the words of Jesus, I have rediscovered a radical and untamed Messiah, a wild itinerant rabbi with deep convictions and difficult teachings. He asks a lot from us, but he doesn't ask us to do it alone.

My prayer is that God will bless your work and your group's journey through *The Moral Teachings of Jesus*.

Jeremy Hall

Introduction

What does this study guide hope to accomplish?

This guide is to help you go deeper into the teachings of Jesus, either as an individual or as a community. It is designed with a small-group setting in mind, but the paraphrases and discussion prompts can be contemplated as an individual or in preparation to teach one of Jesus' lessons.

How does the study guide work?

The formatting is standard throughout the guide.

Each lesson assumes that the participants have read the corresponding chapter from *The Moral Teachings of Jesus* ahead of the gathering.

Each of the forty teachings David Gushee covers in the book have their own corresponding group guide. Each pericope—individual and/or parallel moral teachings of Jesus—has its own treatment where a passage is offered followed by one to two pages of text meant to summarize the corresponding chapter. Embedded in the discussion section are questions meant to give the group a chance to react to what they have read.

After the discussion section, there is a type of homework assignment that can be done by participants in the time between the group gatherings or as an exercise in the group meeting itself, depending on time constraints.

At the end of each entry you will find a short prayer inspired by the themes of the teaching.

How do I use this guide as a leader?

First off, this book is large for a study guide. You may choose to use this as a forty-week study, or you may select specific passages to focus on, and see the Suggested Map for Reading below. Either way is fine as the chapters, in general, do not compound on each other but tend to stand alone.

As the leader you can read these study guides straight through as your group's content or use them as the starting point or inspiration for your own lesson plan.

Again, each entry concludes with a discipleship-focused exercise offering participants a chance to practice what they have learned. The guide assumes that you will begin the next meeting by reviewing how the previous homework/exercise went for the participants.

Most of these assignments conclude with a series of open-ended questions exploring our concentric circles of influence (e.g., “If you applied this teaching to your life, how would your life be different, how would it change your family, how would it impact your community, how would it change your church?”). Then the question expands to something like “If your church adopted this practice, how would it change the church; how would it change your community, country, and world?” Help the participants lean into these questions by being genuinely curious about their answers.

Be mindful as you undertake this journey that some of these teachings are not easy, simple, or safe. Some of your discussions will get heated; some of them will be difficult; there will be disagreements and awkward moments. Be prepared; don’t let them scare you. Rather, model being a patient, kind, curious, and unanxious presence for your group. Make sure that everyone who wants to has a chance to speak and that no one participant is allowed to dominate the discussion or bully others out of speaking.

Suggested Map for Reading

Theme	Number of Lessons	Chapter Numbers
Family	4	3, 8, 12, 28
Forgiveness	4	17, 5, 12, 19
Sermon on the Mount	5	10, 11, 12, 13, 14
Religion	5	2, 4, 24, 32, 37
Authority / Government	5	21, 27, 31, 37, 28
Love	5	15, 20, 26, 36, 40
Economics and Money	6	9, 18, 23, 26, 29, 30
Justice	6	1, 8, 30, 31, 37, 39
Community	6	6, 17, 33, 35, 36, 40
The Least of These	6	10, 19, 22, 30, 33, 39
Conflict	6	12, 14, 15, 19, 34, 35
Piety	6	2, 6, 11, 16, 32, 36
Christian Living	6	5, 11, 18, 20, 36, 40

The Kingdom of God: Chapter 1

Read:

Mark 1:14–15/Matt 4:12–17, cf. Luke 4:14–30, Matt 13:24–50

Discussion:

One of Jesus' primary teaching concerns was the kingdom of God (or “the kingdom of heaven” in the Gospel of Matthew.) The phrase “kingdom of God/heaven” occurs one hundred times in the New Testament.

David Gushee states that “The Gospel writers never show Jesus explicating a precise formula as to what he meant by this phrase, which has made this crucial concept a matter of scholarly debate, and vulnerable to ignorance and misunderstanding.”¹

Why do you think Jesus and the Gospel writers allowed for this term to remain ambiguous in their ministries? How have you heard other Christians talk about or define the kingdom of God?

Here is a list of twelve of the parables that Jesus used to talk about the kingdom of God. (I have removed parables that get their own chapter in this book.) Either by yourself, or divided among your study group, read over these parables. *Which ones do you find most compelling? Discuss why.*

- The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19)
- The Parable of the Leaven (Matt 13:33–35; Luke 13:20–21)
- The Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44)
- The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value (Matt 13:45–46)
- The Parable of the Fishing Net (Matt 13:47–50)
- The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1–13)
- The Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30)
- The Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1–14)
- The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19)
- The Parable of the Two Sons (Matt 21:28–32)
- The Parable of the Good Seed (Matt 13:24–30)
- The Parable of the Dragnet (Matt 13:47–50)

¹ p. 4.

David writes,

“The kingdom is a *moral teaching for followers of Jesus* because our response to, and readiness for, the dawning kingdom is part of what Jesus is intending to teach. [...] Disciples of Jesus are defined by obediently participating in what God is doing by our acts of deliverance, justice, peace, compassion, healing, and restored community. The concept of the kingdom of God thus gives followers of Jesus their behavioral marching orders.”²

In their book *Kingdom Ethics*, David and his colleague Glen Stassen offer an expanded version of this list as the seven “marks of the kingdom” that become manifest in the kingdom of God:

- Deliverance/salvation
- Justice
- Peace
- Healing
- Restoration/rebuilding of community
- Joy
- The experience of God’s presence

Which of these seven marks of the kingdom is most present in your life, church, community, nation, world? Which ones are most lacking?

Homework/Exercise:

Now that you have identified what marks of the kingdom are most prevalent and lacking in the world around you, make a plan and share it with the group before the end of the meeting as to how you will intentionally display the lacking marks in your community this week.

Next time you gather, share how your efforts went. Were you effective? Frustrated? Excited? Something else?

Prayer:

King Jesus, we pray that you would establish your kingdom in our lives and that we would learn to love and serve you more as your kingdom’s influence grows in our hearts. We ask that you would make us into people of deliverance, justice, peace, healing, community, and joy and that as we live as your disciples, we would find a greater sense of your presence around us and in the world. Amen.

² p. 6.

Sabbath Observance: Chapter 2

Read:

Mark 2:23–3:6/Matt 12:1–14/Luke 6:1–11

Discussion:

Sabbath is a major theme in the Bible. The concept first shows up in the creation story found in Genesis 2. After God takes six days to create the cosmos, he takes the seventh day to rest. The first time the Ten Commandments appear in the Bible (Exod 2), keeping the Sabbath is listed among them and is sourced back to this Genesis 1 story. When the Ten Commandments are restated in Deut 5, the command to keep the Sabbath is found in the Hebrews' experience of being enslaved in Egypt, where they never got to rest from their work. Depending on how you translate the Old Testament, you can find references to the Sabbath and Sabbath observance seventy-plus times. The idea of taking a day off to not produce was one of the defining characteristics of the Jewish people in contrast to their neighbors. By the time of Jesus, groups like the Pharisees had added onto the laws around Sabbath observance to make sure that the people didn't even come close to breaking the commandment, but in doing so they made the Sabbath into a restrictive curse rather than a gift. It had become such an important part of Jewish identity that when Jesus was seen violating the Sabbath rules in his day, the leaders sought to destroy him.

What in our culture is treated with this level of significance? What rule of idea has become so unquestionable in your community or church that to violate it would result in ruin?

In the passages above, Jesus seems to shirk the importance of Sabbath observance. Writing about this, David says,

There is a problem, though. If Sabbath observance is relativized to the point that people are free to do anything that they believe amounts to doing some good for human well-being, then Sabbath obligations and indeed, Sabbath blessings, might well be relativized into nonexistence. The fundamental purposes of Sabbath—worship of God and rest from labor—might be washed away by other priorities. [...] If we focus on the divine *command* rather than the *purpose* for which the command was given, we can end up with the worst result of legalism, which is to do harm to people in the name of obeying God's commands. But if we focus so much on the purpose of a command that we attenuate its

binding power, its strength as a command can evaporate, and we can end up with the worst result of antinomianism, which is a lack of clear and binding moral obligations.³

What remains a binding moral obligation in your church? What rules or norms have you seen relaxed over your life in the church?

In ethics we often talk about the difference between *rules* and *principles*. Rules tell us exactly what to do (e.g., Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy), while principles operate on a deeper level and inform the why behind the rule (e.g., Humans are valuable beyond what they produce).

Which do you think is more important when it comes to biblical laws, to keep the letter of the law or the spirit of the law? Why?

Homework/Exercise:

Discuss where in your life you are too busy, overwhelmed, or overworked. Make a plan for how to introduce the concept of Sabbath into your week.

Think about how you personally attempt to follow Jesus and the commands of God. Where might you be enslaved to legalism? Where might you need to grow in obedience?

Take time to write or think about how your life, your community, and your family might be different if people made time for real rest.

Share your experience next time you gather.

Prayer:

God of every good gift, thank you for the gift of rest. Thank you that you have made us with intrinsic value and that we are worth more than what we produce. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. Help us to examine our Christian life; help us to see where we are out of your will either through laxity or legalism. Guide us into obedience and full life in Christ. Amen.

³ pp. 11–12.

Family Problems: Chapter 3

Read:

Mark 3:20–35/Matt 12:46–50/Luke 8:19–21, cf. Matt 10:34–37, Luke 14:26

Discussion:

In the New Testament, especially in the works of Paul, family is the primary analogy for the Church. Examples can be found all throughout the epistles. “Brother” and “sister” become the main ways of addressing fellow believers as early as Acts.

A few examples:

- Eph 2:19:
“So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of **the household of God.**”
- 1 Tim 3:15:
“If I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in **the household of God**, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”
- Gal 6:10:
“So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of **the family of faith.**”

What does it mean to you for the church to be a family?

What does it mean to you to be a child of God?

In a rather odd story the Gospel writers tell, Jesus is confronted by members of his earthly family who want him to come home. Jesus is told that his mother and brothers have come to get him. Writing about Jesus’ response, David says,

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” He looks at his family, and then he looks at the receptive crowd gathered at his feet, and says to the latter, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (3:33–35). In Luke 14, Jesus takes it a shocking step further: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

This is just *not* what religious leaders say, and it is not the kind of statement that any known culture blesses. It would not go over well in my family. It would not go over well in any family. Is this a “moral teaching of Jesus,” in the sense that here is an instruction for how his followers are supposed to live their lives?⁴

How do these words from Jesus strike you? How have you heard them taught?

David suggests that

If this is a moral teaching, and not just an expression unique to Jesus the only Son of God, perhaps it can be expressed in this way: *no human being or human community deserves ultimate allegiance—not even blood relatives*. If we truly believe in the God taught about and revealed by Jesus, then we know that this God is the only one worthy of ultimate allegiance; indeed, that it is not just folly but spiritually dangerous to offer such allegiance to anyone else. It is this God who created us, sustains us, and redeems us. It is this God from whom we came and to whom we shall return when we die. It is this God whose reign over all the earth must be acknowledged by all flesh, one way or another (Phil 2:5–11).

Where is the church most likely to misplace its allegiance? Where are you most likely to misplace your allegiance? How do we know if we have done so?

Homework/Exercise:

Take time this week to interrogate your allegiances. Start by examining how you use your time and energy, where you invest your money, and what around you brings out the most impassioned responses.

How would your life be different if you prioritized Jesus over everything else? How would that change in you affect your family, your church, your city, your country, your world?

Prayer:

Jesus, you are the king of my heart, the king of my life, the king of my future. Help me to root out anything that takes priority over you so that I may best serve you and seek your kingdom in the world around me. Amen.

⁴ pp.15–16.

Tradition: Chapter 4

Read:

Mark 7:1–23/Matt 15:1–20

Discussion:

In the Old Testament there are a total of 613 commandments or laws. These commandments cover a wide range of topics, including religious rituals, ethical behavior, social justice, and interpersonal relationships. The 613 commandments are traditionally divided into two categories: 248 positive commandments (*mitzvot aseh*) and 365 negative commandments (*mitzvot lo taaseh*). With so many rules being delivered to the people across such a large span of time and diverse situations, it should come as no surprise that some of these laws bump up against each other sometimes and can step on each other's toes. In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees would add extra rules/instructions/limitations/boundaries to help people avoid coming even close to breaking one of the laws. Jesus found himself in conflict with the Pharisees in this space where tradition, command, culture, and law were all colliding with each other.

David writes,

Probably this legal argument was ongoing during Jesus' time and had not been resolved. Perhaps Jesus, activated as he always was by justice and compassion, was outraged at examples of needy parents being left out in the cold because of vows that should never have been made by their thoughtless grown children. Convincing people to sacrifice their parents' well-being to enrich the temple coffers would have been guaranteed to make Jesus mad. One can think of more than a few modern parallels, like TV evangelists seducing people to give their last dollar to help buy these preachers nice airplanes. As Emerson Powery puts it, "Economic care for the elderly is more fundamental than 'tithes' for religious institutions!"⁵

Where have you seen churches, ministers, or other charitable organizations manipulate people by means of rules?

What tradition have you seen conflated with an instruction from the Lord in the church?

What traditions do you feel add value to your family? To your church? Why? How did they start?

⁵ p. 18.

Homework/Exercise:

To close the chapter David writes,

But is there no role for binding obligations that go beyond the state of the human heart and the most important moral deeds and misdeeds? Perhaps we would do better to move in a both/and rather than either/or direction here. We need to know that some actions are simply mandatory, while others are simply forbidden. Adultery, for example, is an act, and it is forbidden for Christians (Matt 5:27–30, 19:9, 19:18). Giving alms to the poor is an act, and it is mandatory for Christians (Matt 6:2, Luke 12:33). Still, we also need to know that underlying all actions is the human heart, whose true state, while reflected in our actions, is ultimately known only to God.⁶

This week, think about the role of obligations and obedience in faith formation. How does the role of rules change over time?

Where in your life might God be calling you to greater obedience? Which teaching of Jesus would have the most impact on your life if you took it more seriously? What might God be calling you to give up?

Prayer:

Lord, help me to know what comes from your divine heart and what comes from human imaginations. Guide me in the path of righteousness, and teach me to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit as I do my best to live in your will. Amen.

⁶ p. 20.

Deny Yourself: Chapter 5

Read:

Mark 8:27–9:1/Matt 16:13–28 /Luke 9:18–27

Discussion:

“He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.”

—Christian martyr Jim Elliot

“When Christ calls a [person], he bids [them] come and die.”

—Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Rejection, persecution, suffering, and death... Where do I sign up?

It seems like Jesus could use some salesmanship training; this is not a very appealing pitch:

“Take up your cross and follow me.” To be executed by crucifixion in the time of Jesus was to be utterly defeated, utterly humiliated, utterly discredited, and made a political example of as you died slowly for up to four days. If that wasn’t enough, in similar teachings Jesus also promises scorn, rejection, persecution, and dereliction, and in Matt 5:10, he refers to this as a state of blessing! When was the last time you heard all that in an altar call?

Where do you see the church trying to downplay the difficult aspects of following Jesus? Where do you see the church playing up persecution and martyrdom? Why do you think this is?

Have you ever felt persecuted for your faith? Do you know someone who has?

When talking about the life of faith, David writes:

the pattern of a Christian’s life is to be cruciform—cross-shaped. Genuine Christian commitment is to a life of self-denial, cross-bearing, and following-after. “He does not ask disciples to deny something to themselves but to deny the self and all self-promoting ambitions ... Those who deny themselves have learned to say, ‘Not my will but thine be done.’”⁷

Where in your life are you still holding onto your own will in opposition to God’s?

⁷ p. 23.

Where in your life are you still king rather than Jesus?

What does it mean to you to live a “cruciform” life?

Homework/Exercise:

This week, take time to evaluate the various aspects of your life: your health, your finances, your family, your relationships, your entertainment, your work, your education, etc.

Ask yourself: *What am I cultivating these for? Who am I building this for?*

Where are the holdouts in your life where you are still living for yourself rather than for the kingdom of God?

How can you deny yourself and make Jesus central in these various arenas of your life?

How would your life be different if you were to cruciform the parts of your life that you are still holding onto? How would this affect your neighborhood, your church, your city, your world?

Prayer:

Jesus, you call us to follow, even knowing the risks. You call us to take up our crosses and deny ourselves for your kingdom, but I have worked so hard to build this life for me and mine. Help me to cruciform my life—to get off of your throne and allow you to be my all. Amen.

True Greatness: Chapter 6

Read:

Mark 9:33–37/Matt 18:1–5/Luke 9:46–48, Mark 10:35–45/Matt 20:20–28/Luke 22:24–27

Discussion:

When I was a youth pastor, one of my favorite lines was to tell a student in front of the rest of the group, when they did something good or asked a deep question or did something else praiseworthy, “You’re my favorite, but don’t tell the others.” It was silly and obviously tongue-in-cheek, but some students, especially the younger ones, took it very seriously. They were proud when they were declared the new favorite and genuinely upset when that title moved to another student. There is a natural drive in humans to climb, to seek status, to want to be on top, to be important.

In this chapter David pulls on two different stories to make his point: the passage about the disciples bickering about who should be the greatest in the kingdom and the story of Jesus saying you must become like a child. In both stories Jesus warns about the instinct to climb the ladder, to seek status, to pursue accolades.

Where do you find yourself attempting to climb the ladder?

Where do you see people in the church engaging in this sort of behavior?

Why do you think Jesus is so concerned about this behavior?

To close this chapter, David writes,

These passages can be understood to teach something that might seem familiar if one is a long-time member of a Christian church—if we want to be great, we should look to serve humbly. While human beings may not honor us, God is watching, and God’s verdict is the one that matters. This teaching, repeated in two places and demonstrated by Jesus himself, is a powerful if plaintive call for his followers to be different from everyday worldlings who spend so much of their lives jockeying for title, status, and position. [...] What a waste of emotion, intention, and effort all this jockeying for position turns out to be, this scramble for power [...].

But if we read Jesus a bit more eschatologically, the teaching takes on a different flavor. The desire for God’s kingdom and a place at the head table is not so much denounced but

transfigured—that table exists, that kingdom is coming, and we might just get a place at it. But only if we follow Jesus on that path of service, selflessness, and sacrifice that ended for him on a Roman cross.⁸

How have you heard this concept taught in the church?

David lays out two ways to read these passages: the face-value teaching for the here and now, and an eschatological reading having to do with the coming kingdom. Which of these do you find most compelling? Why?

Homework/Exercise:

This week, look for places in your life where you are climbing the ladder, stepping on or over others, or trying to make a name for yourself. Ask yourself why you are trying so hard.

Find an opportunity to serve someone who can't pay you back.

Find an opportunity to elevate someone else.

Be prepared to share the experience with the group next time you meet.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to think less of myself. Cultivate in me the heart of a servant. Guide me in the way of Jesus, seeking to serve rather than be served. Grow in me a desire for your kingdom and your ways. Give me a humble spirit and a loving heart like that of John the Baptist, that I may say “I must decrease, and you must increase.” In the name of Jesus, the Messiah who came to serve rather than be served, we pray, amen.

⁸ p. 28.

Temptation: Chapter 7

Read:

Mark 9:42–48/Matt 18:6–9, cf. Luke 17:1–2

Discussion:

In this teaching on temptation, David brings two pericopes into focus for us. The first is the warning against scandalizing children, or “little ones.” There is much talk in our culture today about the “grooming” of children. This term, *grooming*, has become a political insult akin to what happened to the word *racism*. Everyone wants to accuse everyone they disagree with of grooming children, and anyone who is accused of grooming kids seems to respond with the equivalent of “No, you are!” And why wouldn’t we be up in arms about the grooming of children? Even Jesus took the issue seriously; here in the first passages we’ve looked at in this chapter Jesus had very strong words for those who would mislead children or cause the little ones to stumble.

With some closer examination of the Greek, the text opens up and expands beyond children. The word Jesus uses for “little ones” is the Koine Greek word *mikros*, which can refer to basically any sort of smallness. A child can be *mikros*; someone who is weak or physically small is *mikros*; someone who is weak or new in faith is *mikros*. Revealed in this quick exploration of the Greek is Jesus’ constant concern for the vulnerable.

Where in your life are you mikros?

Where in our culture do you see the mikros being taken advantage of?

Where in the church do you see the mikros being taken advantage of?

In the second section of the chapter, David talks about Jesus’ teaching concerning cutting off hands and plucking out eyes (gross). In the first teaching on temptation, Jesus warned about leading others into temptation; in this second teaching, Jesus warned us about allowing temptation safe harbor in our own lives. While the language is obviously hyperbolic (neither David or I think you need to actually cut your hand off), the intensity of the language reveals the severity of the situation.

David writes,

Jesus is teaching followers to make every effort to practice God's will rather than disobey it. We cannot be casual about sinning against God. A variety of forces in the contemporary church have contributed to diminishing our focus on temptation and the effort to resist it. Not wanting to be old-fashioned, judgmental, or legalistic, we no longer teach or speak much about temptation, sin, and the moral struggle within the Christian soul to choose the way of obedience. Perhaps this helps account for the moral sloppiness of the contemporary Christian scene.⁹

Where do you see "moral sloppiness [in] the contemporary Christian scene"?

What does the church need to cut out in order to achieve greater obedience to God?

How can you help your local congregation to make this change?

Homework/Exercise:

This week, take some time to examine your life. Where are you harboring temptation in your life? Where are you repeatedly failing to live in obedience to God?

Make a list of the things you need to cut out of your life to give you a better opportunity to live in obedience. Experiment with removing these temptations and things that enable temptation.

What practices in your day-to-day life are scandalizing the *mikros*? It could be the way you shop; it could be the way you interact with those considered to be at the bottom of society in your community; it could be the type of media you consume or the websites you access. What can you change to help protect the vulnerable *mikros* among us?

How would your life be different if you took these teachings to heart? How would that change affect your witness in your community? How would the world be different if the church took these teachings more seriously?

Prayer:

Jesus, we are *mikros* in so many ways. Help us to know how to best serve you and to protect the vulnerable among us. Lead us not into temptation, and guide us on the path of obedience. Help us to cut out anything that causes us to stumble, and help us not to be a stumbling block for others. Amen.

⁹ p. 32.

Marriage, Divorce, and Children: Chapter 8

Read:

Mark 10:1–16/Matt 19:1–15/Luke 16:18, cf. Luke 18:15–17

Discussion:

Many battles the church has fought in recent culture wars have been over marriage, divorce, and children. These conflicts have been particularly hurtful and ugly because of how personal they all are. These are all such deep issues; there is almost nothing more intimate than marriage, more important than children, or more potentially painful than divorce. With that in mind, it is no wonder that Jesus had things to say about it; though even with the words of Jesus in the Gospels, the church has struggled since its founding with issues of marriage and divorce.

Writing about this struggle, David says,

[a] sign of the early church's struggle is that Paul both reports Jesus' teaching in 1 Cor 7:10–11 and feels the need to offer some improvised case law to go with it (1 Cor 7:12–16). For centuries the church has continued to wrestle with what Jesus said about divorce; consensus disappeared centuries ago. These days, in almost every part of the church it has been modified, adapted, or set aside, at least in practice.¹⁰

Where have you seen the church struggle with these issues?

When is a time that you have seen the church handle one of these issues well?

Does the church or the culture have the most sway over Christian ethics at large around marriage and divorce?

Many churches today have done away with the teachings on divorce altogether; they don't talk about them; they don't teach them; they don't enforce them. It seems that the strict prohibition on divorce from Jesus is just too much for today's church to stomach.

David writes,

I do want to suggest another possible angle of vision. If we assume a Jewish audience for Jesus' original teaching, with a starting point being a biblical text (Deut 24:1–4) that

¹⁰ p. 33.

assumes only men could initiate divorce, and a rabbinic debate over the legitimate grounds for divorce, Jesus is probably best read as taking Shammai's position—divorce only on the grounds of adultery, or sexual misconduct of some sort. This position on Jesus' part would reflect his respect for God's intentions for marriage, his profound concern for women's and children's well-being, and his overall commitment to social justice for those most vulnerable to injustice.

Is it too much to imagine Jesus saying to his male audience: how dare you misread both the letter and the spirit of God's law to abandon your wives and throw your children into misery? That is just adultery, it violates the seventh commandment, and it certainly violates God's intent for marriage.¹¹

What do you think of David's suggestion?

How does the patriarchal reality of the Biblical context affect the way we read, understand, teach, and implement this prohibition?

How does your understanding of the Biblical teaching on divorce change if the primary motivation for the teaching is a justice issue, rather than a relational one?

Homework/Exercise:

Take time this week to evaluate your own relationships. Where are the power differentials that could allow for justice concerns between you and others? How can you guard against even accidentally abusing others?

Where in your community are children at risk? Where in your country? Where in the world?

How can you be part of the solution? How could the church be part of the solution? How might you be able to activate your own church to better protect families and children?

Prayer:

Triune God, you have created us for relationship. From the very start it was not good for mankind to be alone. Guide us in all of our relationships to be kind, loving, just, and merciful. Grow us into better friends, better spouses, better leaders, better protectors and caregivers, and better examples of what it means to follow you in the world. Amen.

¹¹ p. 36.

A Rich Man Seeks Salvation: Chapter 9

Read:

Mark 10:17–31/Matt 19:16–30/Luke 18:18–30

Discussion:

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” —Jesus (Matt 19:24, Mark 10:25, and Luke 18:25)

Strong's words from Jesus; potentially offensive words from Jesus. Oh, and by the way, there is not a gate called “the eye of the needle” in Jerusalem for Jesus to be referring to; someone made that up to make this teaching more palatable.

David writes about how difficult this teaching has been for the church, saying,

This text has always inspired and troubled the church that has taken it seriously. It was broadly understood as a counsel of radical economic divestment in the early church, as we see in Acts 2:44–45. Its rigor demanded more than some were willing to give, as we also see in Acts 5, through the tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira. It was not a demand that could be sustained for the church, though it has always attracted Christian radicals and it did indeed get structured into the life of the religious orders.¹²

How have you heard this passage taught in the church before? What have the teachers/preachers who have brought up the passage wanted you to do in response?

What is your gut reaction to this teaching? How have you made peace with it?

When the rich young man asked Jesus about how to inherit eternal life, his question seems honest and genuine, and Jesus seemed to answer it in a fairly conventional manner: “Keep the commandments.” This is a reasonable and predictable response from a Jewish rabbi, and the rich man seemed like he was ready for it, claiming that he had always kept them. Then, from a place of love (Mark 10:21), Jesus instructed him to sell everything and come join his group of traveling disciples. This was, as you know, too much for the man, and he left sad—but still rich.

Why does Jesus' love matter in this story? How is Jesus showing love to the man?

¹² p. 41.

When the rich man was gone, Jesus continued the conversation with those around him. The ever-talkative Peter pointed out that the twelve had given up everything to follow Jesus, to which Jesus offered a word of encouragement, part of which is the famous line, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt 19:30). This phrase, and the concept it conveys, occurs several times in the New Testament:

Matt 20:16: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Mark 10:31: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Luke 13:30: “Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

Luke 14:11: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Luke 18:14: “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jas 4:10: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

1 Peter 5:6: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.”

How has this idea been taught in the church? How have you come to understand it? How does this concept function as a moral teaching? How have you applied it in your life?

As a group, take a look at the contexts of these various uses of the concept. How are they different? How are they the same? What can you learn from the comparison?

Homework/Exercise:

David uses the work of Miguel De La Torre to show us how the author of Luke puts the rich young ruler and Zacheus next to each other to make a point. Spend some time in Luke 18–19. If the rich man and Zacchaeus are on opposite ends of a spectrum, where are you on that continuum?

How are you using your material means to advance the kingdom and make a more just world?

How can you start? How can you find greater solidarity with the poor?

What good thing are you afraid Jesus might ask you to give up? Think of ways to practice holding whatever that is with open hands. How might you enter a practice of fasting from this possible idol in order to focus on Jesus and his kingdom? How might you use it to bless others?

How would your life be different if you were less possessive of your material wealth? How would the world be different if the church better embraced this teaching?

Prayer:

God of every good gift, “You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:16). Help me to trust in your provision rather than my own wealth. Help me to think of my material possessions as tools with which I can build up your kingdom and to have the courage and readiness to follow you when you call, regardless of the cost. Amen.

The Beatitudes: Chapter 10

Read:

Matt 5:1–12/Luke 6:20–26

Discussion:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit.
- Blessed are those who mourn.
- Blessed are the meek.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
- Blessed are the merciful.
- Blessed are the pure in heart.
- Blessed are the peacemakers.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Most of us who have spent much time in the church are familiar with the Beatitudes, but we aren't always sure what to do with them. Many have relegated these sayings to the category of "wisdom literature," descriptive sayings that tell us what the world is like, explaining to us how God has ordered the world to work. In this chapter, David argues that these sayings are prescriptive moral teachings rather than descriptive wisdom sayings.

How were you taught the Beatitudes? As wisdom ("This is how the world works"), as moral teaching ("This is how you are to act in the world"), or something else?

How does the way you were taught these sayings affect the way you seek to implement them in your life? Have you attempted to implement them?

In talking about this dichotomy of readings, David writes,

Jesus is doing something very different in his teaching in the SM [Sermon on the Mount], and it is clear from the Beatitudes forward. Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. That kingdom message declares that God is now intervening, acting decisively to reclaim this broken, rebellious world. The clear connections between Isa 61, the SM, and Jesus' "inaugural address" in Luke 4:16–30 ground this interpretation. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy that God would one day come in power to redeem Israel and the world. God's emissary Jesus is claiming that now is the time. His listeners are being invited right now *to participate in God's kingly deliverance.*

If Jesus comes announcing God's dawning reign, his teaching cannot be primarily about offering timeless wisdom about how to be happy in an endless workaday world. Instead, beginning with the Beatitudes, he is offering a description of the kinds of people who are ready to participate with him in interrupting this timeless, fallen world with deliverance. He is offering a kingdom ethic.¹³

How does reading the Beatitudes as examples of the kinds of people who are ready to embrace kingdom living change the way you read the Sermon on the Mount?

Read the Beatitudes aloud as a group. Which of these sayings do you find most compelling? Which do you find the most scandalous or off-putting? Which one makes you the most uncomfortable? Why?

Homework/Exercise:

Read the short exploration of each of the Beatitudes on page 48. Identify which of these feels most foreign to you. Make that Beatitude your mantra for the week. Repeat it to yourself in the shower, on your way to school or work, while doing household chores, and while waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store.

How do you find that this saying is "working on you"? Does intentionally sitting with it and repeating it change the way it feels in your soul/mind?

How might your life be different if you internalized this teaching? How would it affect your family, your community, your church, the world?

Prayer:

Gracious God, in the Beatitudes, Jesus reveals your heart:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek.

Fill us with hunger for righteousness, mercy, and purity.

Lead us to be peacemakers.

Form us into your people, ready to live in, seek, and promote your kingdom.

Amen.

¹³ p. 47.

Let Your Light Shine: Chapter 11

Read:

Matt 5:13–20/Luke 14:34–35

Discussion:

“You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.” These lines from Jesus are so familiar that they have almost lost their meaning altogether.

So let’s take a look at the two images that Jesus used in this teaching.

Salt: An ancient Mesopotamian image for wisdom and purity, as well as being associated with covenant fidelity and sacrifice in the Old Testament, salt also has pragmatic uses for bringing out the flavors in foods and as a preservative.

Light: Throughout the Bible God is referred to as light and as the bringer of light (e.g., Gen 1:3; Ps 119:105; Isa 2:5, 9:2–7, 42:6, 49:6, 60:19). The prologue to the Gospel of John describes Jesus as the light of the world, and the followers of Jesus are several times referred to as the children of light. Light also has obvious practical uses, such as illuminating a path or a room, bringing out the colors of objects, and revealing the true nature of things.

In Matt 5:16, Jesus gave his church the new identities of salt and light and then called the church to live out its identity, saying, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory your Father in heaven.”

How have you heard this teaching preached?

How have the images of salt and light been taught to you in the past? Is David’s explanation different? How so?

What does it mean to you to live out the identity of being salt and light?

David goes on to say,

In *Kingdom Ethics*, we call this teaching a “salt, light, and deeds” triad. It is in our deeds of obedience to Jesus that we function as salt and light. Through our lives we point people to God so clearly that they honor God’s name because of what they have seen in us.

In short, followers of Jesus constitute an alternative community (salt), living toward the reign of God, distinct from the world but engaged in a caring, constructive way within the world (light), with our deeds of obedience to Christ the greatest evidence of our identity and of God's glory.¹⁴

What does it mean to let your light shine in the world? How is this connected to the witness of the church?

Jesus went on to state that he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it, and “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).

According to David,

Like the Jewish prophets before him, Jesus saw around him examples of a kind of righteousness that didn't measure up to what he believed that God really wanted. It wasn't characteristic of everybody, but it was visible in some of those who ended up competing with him to define God's will and God's way.

This righteousness was too focused on minute details of the Law and missed weightier priorities like love, justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23). It was a righteousness that focused too much on what not to do and not enough on what to do.¹⁵

Why does Jesus highlight the righteousness of the Pharisees?

Does this teaching convict or comfort you?

How do you reconcile this teaching to “Let your light shine before others” (Matt 5:16) with the Matt 6:1 teaching that we are to “Beware of practicing [our] righteousness before others in order to be seen by them”?

Homework/Exercise:

Take time this week to evaluate your public witness: Scroll through your various social media accounts; what story is your online presence telling? Does your social media persona draw people toward Jesus?

How about the way you talk to and about others, or the way you behave at work or out with your friends? Does your public witness help people experience God?

¹⁴ p. 52.

¹⁵ p. 53.

Prayer:

Lord, you have called us to a life of service and witness. Grow in us the courage to be salt and light in the world, showing people what you are like and drawing them toward you. Help us to get out of the way of our witness and to be people of your kingdom. Amen.

Making Peace: Chapter 12

Read:

Matt 5:21–26/Luke 12:57–59

Discussion:

In this chapter David lays out four ways that this passage, and those like it, have traditionally been interpreted:

Dyadic/antithetical means something has two parts, the second contrasting with the first: 1) “You have heard,” 2) “But I say.” For Matt 5:21–48, that is an obvious place to start, of course, because Jesus does use that language to start off each of the next six teachings. But this has been taken to mean that Jesus is dismissing the inferior Jewish Law and replacing it with his own authoritative, antithetical new teaching. That conclusion, Glen Stassen and I [David Gushee] have argued, is not warranted.

Intensification means that Jesus goes further than the OT [Old Testament] command. He does not dismiss Torah but does teach a more intense, more rigorous version of it: You were taught not to murder, and now I teach that it is just as wrong to be angry with someone as it is to kill them.

Hard sayings or high ideals means that Jesus teaches very hard things, offering an aspirational ethic, pretty much impossible, an ideal to strive for but always beyond our reach. Here that ethic would be that his followers should aspire never to be angry with people. It was long argued in Christian theology that one reason Jesus offered a pretty much impossible ethic was to drive us to our knees in repentance and gratitude for the forgiving grace of God. [...]

Interiorization of Jewish Law. The idea is that Jesus cares about the state of our hearts, the deepest recesses of our motives, thoughts, and feelings. Indeed, he cares so much that from his perspective murderous thoughts toward someone are *no different from*, or *just as bad as*, murderous actions.¹⁶

Which of these interpretations are you most familiar with?

Which have you heard taught the most? What are the implications of that version?

¹⁶ pp. 55–56.

Stassen suggests that there is another more useful understanding of how these teachings function. He calls them “transforming initiatives.” In this format the teaching is broken down into three parts: 1) The traditional teaching (You shall not murder), 2) the vicious cycle (Unresolved anger in the human heart leads to acts of violence), 3) transforming initiative (Go and make peace).

In this paradigm, the teachings of “You have heard it said, but I say to you” are one part wisdom teaching (Here is how the world works: Unresolved anger festers in the heart until it bursts forth as violent actions) and one part moral teaching, giving us direction and a way forward (Here is what you are to do: Go and make peace).

Is this concept new to you? How does this paradigm help you understand these teachings?

How does moving these teachings out of the realm of the ideal change the way you look at them?

Where do you see the church engaged in direct peacemaking? Where should it be?

Homework/Exercise:

Take inventory of your relationships. Who are you currently in conflict with? Who have you moved into the category of “enemy”? Who are you harboring ill will against?

How would your life be different if you didn’t allow yourself to have enemies? How would that change the way you see the world? How would that change the way you interact with the people around you?

This week, identify any open conflict or festering negative feelings in your head/heart against someone else, make a plan for how you are going to begin the process of peacemaking with them, and do it!

Be prepared to share at least part of your plan the next time the group gathers.

Prayer:

Prince of Peace, while we were still your enemies, you made the first move toward reconciliation with us by entering our world and making a way for us to come back to you. Help us to have the courage to be peacemakers in our world. Amen.

Preventing Adultery: Chapter 13

Read:

Matt 5:27–30, cf. Mark 9:43–48/Matt 18:8–9

Discussion:

In this collection of teachings we have another opportunity to experiment with the Gushee/Stassen transforming initiative paradigm for how to read the Sermon on the Mount. This, as before, contrasts with interpretive frames such as: Jesus was intensifying the law (Never commit adultery or lust after someone), Jesus was internalizing the law (Having lust in your heart is the same as committing adultery), or Jesus was offering a heavenly ideal (Christians should never experience lust at all).

The transforming initiative reading works more like this:

Traditional Righteousness: You shall not commit adultery. Jesus affirms this traditional teaching, the seventh commandment.

Sinful Pattern: Developing a habit of dwelling on lustful thoughts toward someone not your spouse. This could extend to developing patterns of inappropriate emotional, proximal, or physical intimacy that could constitute the path to adultery. Jesus refuses to allow distinctions related to the marital status of the woman whom the man might be lusting after.

Transforming Initiative: Cut off habits of viewing persons as objects, or of using hands wrongly (as in masturbating to lustful images or thoughts of someone not your spouse). The maiming language is hyperbolic, signaling that sexual self-discipline and the ban on adultery really matter to God.¹⁷

How have you heard these teachings on lust and adultery taught in the church?

What do you think of the transforming initiative approach? Is it helpful? Why or why not?

David also suggests in this chapter that there is an evolving principle behind the prohibition on adultery. He suggests that the Old Testament prohibited adultery based on how such an act stole from the husband or father of the woman involved, as she was considered their property. Then,

¹⁷ p. 61.

in the New Testament, Jesus' prohibition on adultery is a justice issue, being concerned about the vulnerability of women/wives in the culture. David suggests that with the continued cultural shifts the prohibition remains relevant due to the power and intimacy of sex:

Adultery should be understood to be banned today because of the unitive power and emotional vulnerability of sex. Sexual intercourse is the ultimate physical intimacy. Of its nature it connects persons and not just bodies. It reveals and deepens vulnerability. One reason adultery is banned is because it stomps on that vulnerability. One reason we know that matters is because of how enraged and wounded people become when they discover their spouse has been unfaithful.¹⁸

When have you seen sex misused? What were the consequences?

Do you think these teachings remain relevant in our contemporary setting? Why or why not?

What have you observed is the conventional sexual ethic of today's culture?

Homework/Exercise:

This week, take an inventory of your spiritual formation. Are you making the sort of progress you would hope for? Where do you find yourself repeatedly making the same mistakes/falling into the same sins?

Prayerfully ask God to help you identify the triggers and habits that are leading to these decisions. Think about how you can "cut off" and "pluck out" these stumbling blocks. Make a plan to make a change.

How would your life be different if you were able to get out of this cycle? Where do you see destructive or sinful cycles in your community? In the world?

Prayer:

Creator God, you have made us for intimacy and relationship. Our bodies, minds, and sexuality are all gifts from you. Help us to know how to use these gifts appropriately and in ways that honor you and your image in us. Amen

¹⁸ p. 63.

Telling the Truth: Chapter 14

Read:

Matt 5:33–37, cf. Matt 23:16–22

Discussion:

Oaths? Really? Why are we talking about oaths? This is an interesting chapter, as we don't tend to think of ourselves as participating in oath-making very often in our contemporary culture. In my experience this teaching is often either overlooked or oversimplified. When we look at this teaching we might catch ourselves thinking, *This doesn't really have much to do with me; when was the last time I took an oath?*

Well, what is an oath? David says that “an oath is a verbal declaration appealing to a god, or something else sacred, that is made to demonstrate and guarantee that one is speaking the truth or will keep a promise.”¹⁹

Throughout the Old Testament there are examples of people taking oaths and a plethora of rules around oaths, vows, and swearing. A quick internet search (so take this data as directional and not exact) yielded the following list of occurrences of these terms in the OT:

- Oaths: The term *oath* appears around eighty-nine times in the Old Testament.
- Vows: The term *vow* appears around seventy-three times in the Old Testament.
- Swearing: The term *swear* or *swearing* appears around sixty-five times in the Old Testament.

How have you heard this passage taught in the church before?

When was the last time you used the language of oath-making or swearing?

David goes on to say,

I wonder if Jesus' teaching about vows and oaths is not only about truth, but also about how to look at the future in a life of fidelity to God. What if Jesus is trying to teach his listeners to take each moment as it comes and to ask what God is requiring in that moment? Those oaths made *in advance* to do X or refrain from doing Y presume reliable advance knowledge of what it will be desirable for us to do in a future that only God

¹⁹ p. 64.

knows. As Bonhoeffer writes, “Because Christians never control their future, a solemn promise under oath . . . is fraught with greatest danger for them.” Rather than making an oath that might one day need to be retracted for circumstantial reasons, perhaps it is best to respond to God and neighbor moment by moment.²⁰

This understanding of Jesus’ teaching on oaths made sense to the early church. These Christians knew they couldn’t swear loyalty to the Roman Empire because they had already sworn loyalty to the kingdom of God. They couldn’t swear loyalty to the Caesars because they had already sworn loyalty to Jesus in baptism.

What does it mean to you to swear loyalty to Jesus?

Why does it matter, in this conversation about oaths, that Christians don’t own their future?

What does it mean to you, with this in mind, to “let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no”?

Homework/Exercise:

Among other things, Jesus called us in this passage to investigate our allegiances, be they to teams, parties, ideologies, or whatever else.

Have we given them too much power? Have we given them too much control of our lives? Have we sworn a type of oath with our hearts, minds, attention, and intentions?

Be curious with yourself this week; where have you given too much of yourself to something other than God? How will you reorient your fidelity to Jesus?

Living moment by moment in relation to neighbor and God is living honestly. Where are you not living in the truth? It could be a “mask” that you put on for school or work, or subtle tweaks to your persona or story to better fit into the world around you.

How would your life be different if you lived in the truth moment to moment?

How would your community, your country, and the world be different if we could count on each other to speak the truth plainly?

²⁰ p. 67.

Prayer:

God, you are the source of all truth. You are light, and in you there is no darkness at all. Help us to live in radical authenticity before you and as people of radical truth-telling before our neighbors. Prune out of our lives any loyalties that are detrimental to our relationship with you. Amen.

Loving Enemies: Chapter 15

Read:

Matt 5:38–48/Luke 6:27–36

Discussion:

If you want to get in trouble as a youth minister, teach these passages and tell students to take Jesus seriously. You will immediately have students push back, “But my dad says that if a bully hits you, you hit them back twice as hard” or “So I’m just supposed to let myself get beat up?!” The next day expect some angry phone calls from parents and several emails typed in ALL CAPS. If you lead that same Bible study with adults, you will get all sorts of attempts to weasel out of what Jesus said or to put such extreme brackets around the teaching that it is almost entirely neutered (e.g., “What about in war?” “What about the Nazis?” “What if someone is breaking into your home?”).

*When you read the initial passages, what is your gut/emotional reaction?
How have you heard these passages taught in the church?*

In Matt 5:38–42, the traditional righteousness is rendered as “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Yes, that teaching, the principle of *lex talionis*, is clearly found in the OT (Exod 1:23–25; Lev 24:19–21; Deut 19:21). It is always helpful to point out that eye for eye means *proportionate retribution*, which was an advance in justice over escalatory retribution, the latter being so common, and so dangerous, when people are angry and aggrieved (cf. Gen 4:23–24). Escalating retribution definitely can become a sinful pattern. But Jesus appeared to view even proportionate retribution as both the traditional righteousness and the sinful pattern.

Jesus offers a transforming initiative here most clearly if the Greek normally rendered “do not resist an evildoer” is interpreted as meaning “we should not be retaliating revengefully against evil or by evil means.” That makes it a teaching against revenge, but not a teaching against resisting evil. This move has been crucial for reading this teaching as a transforming initiative, and more broadly for viewing it as a strategic part of nonviolent resistance rather than pure nonresistance.²¹

What is the difference between nonviolent resistance and pacifism?

²¹ pp. 69–70.

Do you know any stories of significant change coming about through nonviolent action?

Do you think David is right? Do you think Jesus is right?

The second teaching in this section, which should not be divorced from the first, is the command to “Love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you.” This is another hard one.

Enemy-hood works through the natural logic of retaliation in kind.

Enemy-love works through the unnatural divine logic of grace.

Enemy-hood robs us of the freedom to choose our own moral actions.

Enemy-love makes us free again.

Enemy-hood means being overcome by evil.

Enemy-love means overcoming evil with good (Rom 12:21).²²

The world destroys its enemies... and here's something that we all need to be reminded of periodically: Christ-followers aren't allowed to have enemies!

As soon as we move someone into the category of “enemy,” we are immediately mandated by Jesus to intentionally love them! At which point they are no longer our enemy.

Do you have any enemies? How are you seeking to make peace with them?

(If someone is hurting you, strong boundaries need to be a part of this peacemaking process.)

What is keeping you from loving your enemy?

How would the church be different if it really took this teaching to heart?

How would the world be different if everyone who claims to follow Jesus took these teachings seriously?

Homework/Exercise:

When you hear the word *enemy*, who comes to your mind?

How do you feel when you think of them? Try to release those thoughts and feelings to God. (This will take practice.)

A tool for changing your inner dialogue about an enemy is the practice of the loving-kindness meditation, originally from the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Many Christians have also recognized its usefulness in praying for those we struggle to love. As a prayer, it could go something like this:

²² p. 73.

With your enemy in mind, pray:

May they experience God's love,
May they experience God's peace,
May they experienced God's mercy,
May they experience God's joy,
May they experience God's kindness.

Try to come up with your own short loving-kindness prayer that you can repeat throughout the day for the sake of your enemy. Be prepared to share how this exercise went with the group.

Prayer:

God of love, while we were still your enemies, you extended your love toward us. When men nailed you to a cross, you prayed for them to find mercy and forgiveness. Help us to grow in love, even for our enemies. Help us to start the process of changing our hearts toward those who have made themselves our enemies. Amen.

Practicing Piety Privately: Chapter 16

Read:

Matt 6:1–18/Luke 11:1–13, cf. Matt 7:7–11

Discussion:

I (Jeremy Hall) would like to offer a story: a *Tale of Two Traditions*, if you will. When I was a teenager I floated between a few youth groups, being very committed to two of them and being a casual guest at the third. The two that I was most connected to were a liberal Presbyterian (PCUSA) church and a conservative, evangelical Southern Baptist church.

I remember going on youth trips with both of these churches. When we would stay in hotels, the Presbyterians would ask for a conference room for our Bible study and prayer times, while the Baptists would just have us meet in the lobby, by the pool, or where the food was being served. Both groups were emphasizing different understandings of what we were doing: the Baptists hoped to inspire and evangelize by making our religiosity obvious and accessible (and sometimes in the way). The Presbyterians hoped to create more intimacy in the group by being locked away behind closed doors, not intruding on anyone else or making outsiders feel uncomfortable. When I asked both leaders about why we met in these places, they both answered by quoting the words of Jesus. The Baptist leader quoted a version of Matt 5:16, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” In turn, the Presbyterian leader offered Matt 6:1, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Based on this chapter’s readings, which youth leader was right?

How do you think we are to respond to seemingly contradictory teachings in the Bible?

This teaching on private piety comes in connection to reminders to do the good religious things that good religious people like to do. “When you fast, when you give, when you pray”—and not *if* you fast, give, or pray. Jesus expects his followers to engage in these acts, but Jesus also gives instructions and warning about how to do so in a God-honoring way.

David writes,

This is not a teaching of moral perfectionism, though it is incredibly shrewd in its understanding of human nature, including religious folks’ human nature. As social creatures, we are embedded in communities. In those communities we like to be seen as good and praised by others. We like other people to admire us. We like to be noticed and receive praise.²³

How are we as individuals supposed to implement this teaching in our daily lives?

²³ p. 76.

What about as a church? How should the church think about the balance between being a witness in its community and not doing good works to be seen by others? How can we tell the difference?

How do we guard against using people in need as a means to impress God?

How does the transforming initiative paradigm²⁴ help you understand this passage?

Embedded in the teaching on private piety in Matthew is the Lord's Prayer. In Luke, the other gospel that hosts a version of the prayer, Jesus gave these words to the disciples not as part of a teaching on private piety but during a demonstration of it, praying in seclusion. David points out how precious a gift this prayer is to the church, but different churches use the prayer in different ways. I've seen it treated as the highest form of prayer, as a primer or sort of my-first-prayer tool for those who don't know how to pray, as a rote part of the weekly liturgy, and as a meditative tool. I once served at a Baptist church where we were accused of being "closet Catholics" for saying the Lord's Prayer every week in the (relatively "low-church") service.

How were you taught the Lord's Prayer? How does your church use it?

As the chapter continues, David discusses the various aspects of the prayer. He breaks it down and rewords the prayer like this:

Those who pray as Jesus taught are first oriented toward the honoring of God's name and the advance of God's reign. We ask for sufficient food to live, for us and for all. We are reminded of the centrality of forgiveness both from God and toward others. We are aware of our vulnerability as sinners, and we ask to be spared trials and temptations too great for us.²⁵

Which line of the prayer has meant the most to you? Why?

Homework/Exercise:

Spend some time with the Lord's Prayer this week. Without changing the meaning, rewrite the prayer. Be prepared to share the prayer when you next gather with your group.

Experiment this week with intentionally living your faith—praying, serving others, worshipping God—in ways that don't draw attention to yourself. This can be particularly difficult when serving others. Be prepared to share *how* you did your good works in secret with your group without telling them *what* you did.

Prayer:

Our Father in heaven,
 may your name be revered as holy.
 May your kingdom come.
 May your will be done

²⁴ p. 77.

²⁵ p. 78.

on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.
Amen.

Forgiving: Chapter 17

Read:

Matt 6:14–15, cf. 18:10–35, Mark 11:25–26, Luke 17:3–4

Discussion:

In English the word (or synonym, depending on the translators' decisions) forgiveness appears around 310 times. It seems like it might be important. Why do you think the Bible needs to talk about forgiveness so much? How does the nuance of the different Greek words help you understand the Bible's understanding of forgiveness?

David pulls on these ideas to form an understanding of God and how he views humanity.

We are *loved*—God made us and loves us and dignifies us with his care and attention.

We are *understood* for the fractured, fractious mess that we are, individually and collectively.

We are *forgiven* of our sins; God decides not to hold our sins against us.

We are *called to higher ground* through the demanding but realistic command to forgive daily those who wound us. Higher ground here is not a perfect record in avoiding giving or receiving offense, but instead a commitment to forgive (and for that matter, to accept forgiveness).²⁶

How does this understanding of God's intentions toward us inform the teaching on reconciliation in Matt 18?

How have you heard the command to forgive taught in your church? How have you come to understand Jesus' teaching to forgive 70x7 (490) times?

David suggests, based on these teachings, that withholding forgiveness from others might be an unforgivable sin in and of itself. What do you think about this assertion? Why?

Homework/Exercise:

Forgiving isn't always forgetting. Where in your life do you need to set up boundaries with someone?

Forgiveness isn't just for the person(s) being forgiven; it is also liberating for the forgiver. When we forgive someone, we give up our right to hate, fume, and take revenge on the one who has wronged us. Who is "living rent-free" in your head and your heart? How would your life be

²⁶ p. 81.

different if you forgave them, no longer letting them occupy so much of your time, thoughts, and/or emotional energy?

If we took the teachings on forgiveness seriously, how would our families be different? How would our communities be different? How would our country be different? How would our world be different?

Prayer:

God of love, mercy, and grace, we thank you for the gift of your forgiveness. We thank you that you have made us with the capacity to forgive as well. Help us grow into the kind of people who can freely forgive others and themselves. Guide us into the freedom that forgiveness brings. Amen.

Storing up Treasure in Heaven: Chapter 18

Read:

Matt 6:19–34/Luke 11:34–36, cf. Luke 12:22–34

Discussion:

This chapter offers another teaching that can get you in trouble in many churches. Every time I have taught these passages, I have received pushback from at least part of the congregation or class.

When you read these passages, what do you feel? What is your gut reaction? How have you heard this collection of passages taught?

David highlights Jesus' use of the term *mamona*. This Aramaic word, often presented as Mammon in English Bibles, is typically understood to mean something like "wealth." The reality is that there is more nuance to the term than that; the word carries with it the connotation of trusting in or reliance on our wealth. When our wealth and material possessions become idols, and when we come to put our hope and trust in them rather than God, they become *Mammon*.

Where do you see people putting their faith, hope, and trust in material possessions and wealth? In what way do you struggle with this?

What does it mean to you when Jesus says that your heart is where your treasure is?

David writes,

Is this a counsel of unreachable moral perfectionism? Many have thought so, and it certainly cannot be described as the characteristic pattern of the Christian middle and upper classes in any era. We (I count myself here) have participated in the normal patterns of economic striving, saving, and securing funds for the future. Jesus' radical path in economic life does not seem to make much sense for the average family trying to meet monthly bills, pay for insurance, and send kids to college.²⁷

What do you think Jesus' perspective is on our seeking financial stability and saving for the future? Why? At what point does such behavior become idolatrous?

How does this compare to what you were taught about how to handle money?

Homework/Exercise:

This week, take time to audit your financial life, either by yourself or with your household.

²⁷ p. 87.

What story is your financial life telling? If someone had full access to your finances, what would they think you value?

Without trying to explain away or make excuses for how your finances are structured, take time to be curious about why you value what you do, why you use your money the way you do, what makes you anxious about your finances... Now take time to wonder what you could do to better align your financial life with your faith life and the teachings of Jesus.

How would your life be different if you made these changes? What would you be able to do differently? How might it change your community if your whole church family made these kinds of changes?

Is this exercise exciting or scary? Something else? Be prepared to share about your experience the next time you gather with your study group.

Prayer:

Jesus, you are enough. Help me to conform all of the aspects of my life to your kingship. Guide me in the way of righteous living, humility, and generosity. Teach me how to rely on you and to cut out of my life the dependency and trust I put on other things. Amen.

Judge Not: Chapter 19

Read:

Matt 7:1–5/Luke 6:37–42

Discussion:

This might be one of the most misused lessons in the whole book. “Judge not” gets hurled around in Christian circles like a Frisbee on a college quad! It seems to be used as a trump card you can play anytime someone tells you you’re wrong or when you tell them that they are wrong.

There seem to be two ways to understand this teaching from Jesus. First, it seems that Jesus is giving a theological moral teaching: If you judge others, God will judge you. Second, this teaching could be read as a wisdom saying like a proverb: Here is how the world works: the way you judge others will be the way others judge you.

How have you heard this lesson taught?

Have you seen this teaching weaponized or misused?

David writes,

It is a very interesting picture of God that Jesus is offering in this teaching. He depicts a God intimately concerned with the human heart and with the details of how we relate to other people, calibrating the vertical relationship between us and God based on the horizontal relationship between us and others.

Jesus retains a stern picture of a judging God, but then turns it sideways in the direction of mercy. God’s harshest, least merciful, and most negative judgments are directed at people who are harsh, unmerciful, and negative in relating to others.²⁸

But why the severity? Why is God so fired up by humans judging each other? It seems to be a pretty natural, normal behavior, so why such divine ire? Because the role of judge belongs to God. When we pass judgment on someone, we have put ourselves in the position of God over them.

David writes that

The practical consequences of this teaching for those seeking to obey Jesus are clear. We are not to posture ourselves as God, standing as Judge over others. We are to relate generously to other people, withholding judgment that is not ours to give. We are to be acutely aware of our own sins and only dimly aware of those of others.²⁹

²⁸ p. 91.

²⁹ Ibid.

Why is it so easy to judge and condemn others? Why does it seem to come so naturally to most of us?

When have you felt judged or condemned unfairly by someone else?

Part of what makes this passage so easy to abuse and misuse is how broad the meaning of our English word *judge* can be. So many times we see this line “Judge not” used as a conversation-ending tool when someone is challenged on the ethics of a decision, activity, or lifestyle.

Person A: Brother in Christ, I want to talk to you about your practice of robbing nursing homes to pay for your new sports car.

Person B: *Hey!* You can’t say that; Christians aren’t supposed to judge. Remember, Jesus said “Judge not”!

But the thing is, while we are not allowed to be *judgmental*, to decide who is of value, whose life matters, or where someone should spend eternity, we are called to *judge* rightly between right and wrong.

David ends this chapter by saying,

Perhaps our best reading is the following: even while we must make human moral judgments—as parents, teachers, governors, judges, citizens, church members, fellow humans—we must do so in a spirit of generosity, mercy, and humility, always remembering that moral scrutiny begins with ourselves, and that the ultimate judgment on a human life belongs to God alone. While we might be required to judge certain acts as right or wrong, “we are to confine ourselves to that field and refrain from passing judgement on persons.”³⁰

Homework/Exercise:

Read Jesus’ parable of the speck and the log again (Matt 7:3–5). Try it in a few translations that you are less familiar with. Let the words work on you.

How has your understanding of this brief parable changed over time?

Ask yourself: *What specks do I notice most in others? What logs do I most ignore in myself?*

Make a plan for how to deal with your own logs but also to be more merciful to yourself and others.

How would your life be different if you focused on building yourself rather than judging others?
How would your community and church be different if Christians took this idea seriously?
How would it affect the world if Christians gave up their desire to sit in judgment over others?

³⁰ p. 93.

Prayer:

God, you are our righteous judge. Give us the courage to call out injustice and brokenness in the world around us, but with the same mercy and grace we have received from Christ. Help us to relinquish our being judgmental against others and to develop patience and grace to accompany our self-awareness of our own sin and shortcomings, for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.

The Golden Rule: Chapter 20

Read:

Matt 7:12/Luke 6:31

Discussion:

Is there any teaching of Jesus more familiar or well-known than the Golden Rule? “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is not only ubiquitous in the Christian world but in culture at large. Beautiful in its simplicity, profound in its implications, it works regardless of whether you frame it positively (do unto others) or negatively (do not do unto others). But in its memorable simplicity there is a risk of misunderstanding.

David writes,

It is important to differentiate the Golden Rule from the principle of reciprocity that was so omnipresent in the world that Jesus inhabited, and not unfamiliar in our own world. That principle went something like this:

Do good unto others today *so that* they will do good unto you tomorrow.

We invite you to our lavish party today, so that you will invite us to your lavish party next week.

I help on your bank heist tonight, so that you help on my grand theft auto tomorrow night.

I vote for your bill in Congress today, so that you vote for mine tomorrow.

With all three examples, this is just the old principle of “you scratch my back, I scratch yours.” It is reciprocal dealmaking for the purpose of self-interest. There is nothing *moral* about it. One can hear Jesus saying, “even the tax collectors and Gentiles do the same” (cf. Matt 5:46–47).³¹

Why do you think the Golden Rule is so embedded in our culture’s moral imagination?

How do you understand the difference between the Golden Rule and the rule of reciprocity?

One way to think about this teaching is that Jesus is giving us the key to living a God-honoring internal kingdom life. The Golden Rule is not a wisdom teaching about how the world works (e.g., If you treat others well, they will treat you well). Rather, it is a moral teaching designed to help Christians train their hearts, minds, and gut reactions toward each other and those outside of the church in a way that honors God.

³¹ pp. 95–96.

David ends this chapter by inviting us to

Consider this as a vision for the Christian church, not just in our internal church relations, but also in our engagement with the outside world. Knowing that the Golden Rule, according to Jesus, summarizes the entire content of the Law and the Prophets—and therefore of God’s will—we seek to act toward others as we wish they would act toward us, regardless of how they do act toward us.³²

How does meditating on the Golden Rule train our hearts?

What does it mean to you that this teaching sums up all “the Law and the Prophets”?

Homework/Exercise:

This week we are going to try to practice the Golden Rule intentionally.

In your interactions with people this week, take a moment to pause and ask yourself how you would want to be treated if you were the other person in your interaction.

Then do that!

Really practice asking this question curiously and seriously.

How does keeping the Golden Rule in the front of your mind change the way you move through the world? How does it change your interactions with your family and peers?

How would the church be different if everyone took on this practice? How could it change the world?

Be prepared to share your experience at the next gathering.

Prayer:

Jesus, you have equipped us with so many teachings and tools to help us live in your kingdom. Give us the courage and curiosity to be people who treat others the way we want to be treated, even when we know it will not affect how others treat us. Free us from the trap of reciprocity and allow us to live with generous empathy as we follow you. Amen.

³² p. 96.

Fruit, Deeds, and Houses Built on Rock: Chapter 21

Read:

Matt 7:13–29/Luke 6:43–49, cf. Matt 12:33–37

Discussion:

In these closing lines of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers us two images to chew on: that of the good/bad fruit and the house built on rock/sand. Both of the teachings are pointing us at similar ideas as Jesus prepares to close his chapters-long sermon.

Jesus tells us that the path he is laying out for us won't be taken by many, and that some will think they are on it but will not be, and others will lie and say they are on the path but are not. Connected to this statement is a warning: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt 7:15). But we are also given a word of advice: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:16).

What does this teaching—"You will know them by their fruits"—mean to you?

How do you test someone's "fruit"?

David writes,

There are so many implications here. Among them is the centrality of character and its development. Jesus seems to be saying that we do (action) what we are (character). Our "fruit" reflects the overall health of the "tree" that is the moral self. Thus, all who care about how people act should care about character development. This has major implications for parents, educators, criminal justice officials, and religious leaders—really for anyone who cares about what kinds of people end up living in our communities.³³

The church has spent much time, money, and energy in the areas of "faith development" and "discipleship."

Where do you see the church at large successfully forming people?

What is your church doing to provide formation opportunities?

How are you being formed right now?

This is followed by another warning: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21). The ability to enter, live, and operate in the kingdom of God is not based solely on a religious admissions test. It is not knowing the correct name of God ("Lord, Lord") or some other ancient secret that gets you in; nor is it the display of religiosity (e.g., prophecy, exorcism, signs) that

³³ pp. 98–99.

identifies you as one of Jesus'. Rather, it is obedience to the will of God as revealed in the teachings of Jesus.

How have you heard this warning taught in your church?

How do you feel reading it? What does it make you curious about?

The last image at the end of this sermon is almost as famous as the Golden Rule in Christian circles, maybe because of the striking and simple imagery Jesus uses. In our modern Bibles this teaching is sometimes called the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders, or the Parable of the Two Houses. In this passage Jesus says that those who hear the word of God and put it into practice are like a wise builder who built a house on solid rock, and those who ignore the teachings are like a fool who builds on sand. When the trouble comes, the house built on sand is washed away and the house on the solid rock stands.

David says,

Jesus' teaching is not just eschatological or about salvation. It is an expression of love. Jesus gives us these teachings because he knows what kind of life works, what manner of living leads to joy, peace, justice, and covenant love. And after all, as we are told in John 1 and Col 1, Jesus Christ was the one through whom and for whom creation was made, the one in whom creation holds together. Since the one doing the teaching is the one who created, all in love, these teachings represent the wisdom of the Creator for human life. Good news indeed.³⁴

How does this parable land for you? How would you rework the imagery for your context (The wise and foolish investors? The wise and foolish teachers? The wise and foolish baristas? etc.)?

How does this story from Jesus strike you differently as a teaching than as a wisdom saying?

Homework/Exercise:

This week, take an inventory of your life. What is the foundation you are building on? What system of beliefs or, to use Jesus' words, what *path* is your life following? Is it the way of Jesus and his kingdom or something else?

Are you calling "Lord, Lord" and following the way of... the market? Social status? Pagan philosophies? America? An author, podcaster, politician, influencer, professor, or expert?

Who or what is the true foundation of the way you live your life?

If you say it's Jesus and his kingdom, take time to examine your life and look for places where your words, actions, decisions, and social media posts may be telling a different story.

³⁴ p. 100.

Prayer:

Lord, Lord, you have shown us the path; give us the courage to walk it. Grow in our lives good fruit as we seek your kingdom. Help us to build our lives on the foundation of your will and to know when we have mistaken sand for stone. Lead us in the way of obedience, and conform our wills to yours. Amen.

Whom to Fear: Chapter 22

Read:

Matt 10:26–33/Luke 12:1–9

Discussion:

Let's start with some questions:

What do you think/feel when you hear “Fear God”? Why?

How have you heard the command to fear the Lord taught or used?

Are you afraid of God?

David writes,

Many people have indeed been taught to fear God—more in past generations than today, but it is part of our religious heritage. Some have been taught a traumatizing fear of a God who dangles sinners over a pit of fire while angrily contemplating eternal judgments of human life.

Jesus wants us to fear disobeying God rather than displeasing people. But he surrounds the teaching with words of encouragement about the character of God. This is the God who sees all things and unveils all secrets (Matt 10:26). That is a soothing word to a persecuted church—the truth about their innocence will be revealed, as will the grotesque wrongs being done. That, at least, is one interpretation of this saying, which must have floated independently in the oral tradition of the early church and could be used in different ways (cf. Luke 8:17 and Luke 12:2).³⁵

How does your understanding of God's character change the way you receive the command to fear God?

In this chapter we are reminded that we are to fear disobeying or displeasing God more than we are concerned with other human actions or opinions.

David shares that

Bonhoeffer put it this way: “Human beings should not be feared. They cannot do much to the disciples of Jesus. Their power stops with the disciples’ physical death. The disciples are to overcome fear of death with fear of God... Anyone who is still afraid of people is not afraid of God. Anyone who fears God is no longer afraid of people.”³⁶

³⁵ p. 102.

³⁶ p. 103.

Do you remember the story of Justine Sacco? Back in 2013 she became infamous in a matter of hours over a joke made in poor taste on Twitter. As she boarded her eleven-hour flight from London to Cape Town, she published the offensive tweet (which she claims was interpreted in the opposite way she intended it), turned off her phone, and settled in. Justine had fewer than 200 followers on Twitter (below average). By the time she turned her phone back on in South Africa, she had been the subject of tens of thousands of tweets, as well as articles on all kinds of media sites. She turned her phone on to see thousands of messages from friends and strangers and mountains of hate—and to learn that she had been fired.

In a world where anyone can be “canceled” (for better or for worse) and driven out of civil society for something as seemingly trivial as a dumb Twitter post, what does it mean to fear God rather than people?

When have you had to deal with the tension of having to choose between the fear of God and the fear of people?

Homework/Exercise:

There are many of the same threats on our lives as in the time of Jesus. We are under threat of death, destitution, separation from our communities, and the destruction of our reputations. People are persecuted for their faith around the world, subject to violence and incarceration, but for the most part, most of us who will read this book do not worry about physical harm associated with living out our faith. So the question becomes, what are we afraid of?

Take some time to catastrophize. (Yes, I know your therapist told you to stop doing that.) What is the worst thing that could happen to you in your setting? Maybe your mind goes to a story like that of Sacco, or another story of someone being canceled and being pushed out of the world. How about separation from a friend group or your family? Really, what are you afraid of?

In your imagined worst-case scenario, what would have caused this to play out? Is this associated with your opinions, politics, or philosophies (e.g., I’m not welcome in my family because they think I’m a liberal. I’ve been banned on social media for my opinions. I’m being pushed out of my job for my political party of choice)? Could this scenario be triggered by your obedience to God?

If it’s over your faith and obedience, would it be worth it? Would you make that decision?

How would your life be different if you feared God over people? Would you be more free or more restricted? How would your church be different if everyone there operated under this teaching? How might that change our country or the world?

Prayer:

Jesus, you have shown us how to live; give us the wisdom to follow, to find the narrow path and live as citizens of your kingdom. We confess that we have not lived in fear of disobedience and have been too loose and flippant with your teachings and your law. Guide us back into clear perspective, realign our will with yours, and never let us grow so cowardly or cold as to fear people over you. Amen.

Wheat and Weeds: Chapter 23

Read:

Matt 13:24–30, 36–43

Discussion:

Jesus liked to teach in parables that made sense for his first-century, Judean, agrarian context. This means we get a lot of parables about food, fields, seeds, plants, farmers, vineyards, and workers. You could probably rattle off a list of teachings in this style (good/bad soil, the vineyard workers, the sower, the woman making bread, etc.), yet this parable often slips through the cracks of our preaching and of our biblical imagination.

When I (Jeremy) taught this class alongside David, my first reaction to this passage being put on the list was to question if it was a moral teaching. On its face it looks like an apocalyptic, soteriological, eschatological teaching, rather than a teaching on how we are to act in the world today.

How have you heard this passage taught in your church? When was the last time you heard a sermon on this passage?

How have you thought about this passage before?

Talking about why this passage is so unique and interesting, David writes,

This is a rare parable indeed in the way Jesus gives a complete object-by-object explanation rather than leaving a single thing to interpretation. The Son of Man (Jesus) is the one who sows good seed in the field, which is identified as “the world.” In this parable, the good seed is not a message, but “the children of the kingdom” (13:38). The “weeds” are sowed by “an enemy”—the devil—these weeds are “the children of the evil one.”

So, Jesus and the devil are both sowers in the field that is the world. The result is a mix of good and bad people, symbolized in the parable as wheat and weeds. They “grow up” all mixed together in the world. This makes the field that is the world an unsightly and messy place. The servants ask the householder whether they should attempt to pull out the weeds that are messing up the garden. The householder tells them they should not, because in so doing they would risk pulling up the wheat as well. “Let both of them grow together until the harvest” (Matt 13:30).³⁷

Does this parable line up with your experience of the world?

Jesus here blames the devil for the bad seed in the field. How do you think about the activity of the evil one in our world?

³⁷ pp. 105–106.

So the question for those of us who live in this field is what are we supposed to do with the weeds growing all around our wheat? The worst part of ourselves might want to go try to pull up the weeds to purify the field. The “14 Words,” a white supremacist slogan, comes to mind. The version of it here would read something like “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for [wheat] children.” This is a deeply flawed ideology. But Jesus offers us a different way here; he tells us to wait for the time of the harvest for the angels to do the weeding. We don’t have the level of discernment necessary to qualify us to do it. We aren’t able to correctly tell the difference, in all situations, between good plants and the weeds, so Jesus puts us in the stance of humility.

David writes,

So: we are directed to wait for harvest time, the end of the age, when God’s angels will do the assessment, sorting, reaping, and (where necessary) burning. This means no human beings are permitted to advance that timetable and take on that role. We do not do the reaping; we wait for God’s angels to do it at the very end of time. Meanwhile, we grow accustomed to living alongside and among people whom we believe may be children of the evil one. Perhaps we also accept the possibility that at the end of time there may be some very real surprises as to who is considered wheat and who is considered weeds (cf. Matt 25:31–46). In any case, it is not our call to make. We live in the world, as best we can, as “children of the kingdom” (Matt 13:38), and we wait for God to do the judging at the end.³⁸

What sort of reaction does this interpretation stir up in you? Why do you think that is?

What does it look like to live humbly as wheat among weeds?

With this teaching in mind, what should our stance toward evil be?

Homework/Exercise:

This parable along with other teachings (see: Matt 7:1 and chapter 19) point us toward a place of humility when it comes to passing judgment on others. How does this teaching lead you to behave in your daily life?

When/where do you find yourself looking for “the children of darkness”? On social media? In politics? In your church? On your school board? In law enforcement? In protest movements? In popular culture and entertainment?

The church has wasted much energy hunting for heretics and witches. It is time to reclaim that time and energy. Make a plan this week on how you can “shine like the sun” without worrying about whether your neighbor is your enemy or not. Make some practical plans; these could be things you need to add to your life or practices you need to give up. Be prepared to share these with your group.

³⁸ pp. 106–107.

How would your life be different if you didn't allow yourself to be a "witch-hunter"? How would our churches be different if we gave up the practice of calling out enemies? How could that change the world?

Prayer:

God of Eden, Jesus of the garden tomb, help us to live humbly in your world, to not usurp your role as judge or the angels' role as gardeners. Make us loving representatives of your kingdom in the world around us, for the sake of your gospel and your kingdom. Amen.

Workers in the Vineyard: Chapter 24

Read:

Matt 20:1–16

Discussion:

This is another familiar parable from Jesus. The story of the vineyard and the workers is a popular one for revivals, conferences, and “cry nights.” It has most commonly been taught with the focus being squarely on questions of salvation and eternity. In this chapter, David argues that there are more grounded and temporal ethics embedded in the teaching that Christians ought to pay more attention to.

How have you heard this parable taught?

David warns that the traditional reading of this text can lean toward an anti-Jewish reading of Jesus, where the workers frustrated by their pay are unfaithful Jews who are angry that the gentiles are being brought by grace into the kingdom of God and receiving salvation.

To get away from this interpretation, David moves us into a more grounded look at the story. This shift takes place when we move the focus of the parable, and our investigation of it, from ourselves to the day laborers in the story itself. In this reading, the land owner who hires the workers is showing generosity in meeting the needs of all of his workers; rather than rewarding some more than others, he gives them all what they need: a day’s wage.

How does this more earthly reading strike you? Why?

Is this new perspective exciting, troubling, confusing, something else?

Do you think the parable can be both about salvation and economics? Why or why not?

David writes,

We grow accustomed to daily needs going unmet in most societies. We accept the cruel logic of the marketplace, with its many unemployed people—and its many employed ones who are not paid enough to support themselves or their families, even if they work full-time. We are tolerant of societies in which a few people make millions (or billions) while many more must choose between food, heat, and health care.

In Jesus’ perspective, the economic system exists to serve people; people don’t exist to serve whatever economic system has been created. In this teaching about workers in the vineyard one can hear the echo of Jesus’ teaching about the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–3:6, see ch. 2 above), and indeed, his overall message about the relation between law, tradition, and justice (see ch. 4 above). The legal, economic, religious, and moral systems of this

earth must serve human well-being, or they should be reconsidered and, if necessary, replaced.³⁹

How often do you think about Jesus' moral teachings about the material world versus his more spiritual teachings?

Do you think Jesus is concerned with individuals' financial lives and/or economics in general?

Homework/Exercise:

This week the challenge is to evaluate the way you use your money. Does your consumption, investment, and other spending tell a story that lines up with the values you claim?

Investigate where your money is and what it is doing.

Before your next trip to the grocery store or to the mall, look into what products and brands are doing with their money, who they help, who they might hurt, and how they treat their employees and the environment. There are multiple apps and websites that can help you do this kind of research: Ethical Consumer, Good On You, and many more. Often there are options that focus on your country or region.

Prayer:

God of our daily bread, thank you for your generous posture toward us. Give us the courage and strength to model that generous spirit toward others, to think about our finances as an extension of our Christian witness, and to see our finances as means rather than ends in and of themselves. Give us eyes to see where our consumption might be hurting others, give us ears to hear the cry of the poor and oppressed, give us hearts to care, and give us minds to seek creative ways forward. Amen.

³⁹ pp. 111–112.

The Anointing of Jesus: Chapter 25

Read:

Luke 7:36–50/Matt 26:6–13/Mark 14:3–9/John 12:1–8

Discussion:

This story is another odd one for our collection. While this event does happen in all four of the Gospels, it plays out differently in each. One thing that remains the same is that Jesus doesn't have much to say. This study in the moral teachings of Jesus has intentionally focused on what Jesus *taught* us; usually that is what Jesus said to us in the text, but here, Jesus gave us a moral lesson in his actions and attitude.

As you read the four versions of this story, which do you find most attractive or compelling? Why?

What did you notice in seeing all four accounts next to each other?

In all four versions of this story, another thing that is consistent is the scandalized reaction of the people around Jesus.

Go back to the passages; what were the reactions of the people in this scene?

Notice who responded in what way. Why do you think they did so?

Why do you think the four Gospel authors chose to bring attention to these reactions?

Amid the various reactions of the disciples, hosts, and Pharisees, we must take notice of Jesus' reaction. In none of the tellings is Jesus scandalized, shocked, angered, or even frustrated—he is barely surprised. He was able to receive the act for what it was: an act of prophecy, an act of love, an act of repentance, and an act of worship. Regardless of who this woman was or what she had done, Jesus recognized that she knew who he is. This is where we find the two moral takeaways from this story.

First, Jesus didn't seem to consider what "kind" of person this woman was; who she had been or what she had done didn't seem to be part of the equation for Jesus. Rather, he welcomed her and accepted the offering she was making.

Second, concerning the onlookers and the woman, one of the most memorable objections comes from Judas the disciple. He protested her actions, saying that the costly (approximately a year's wage) ointment/oil/perfume was wasted in this display and that the jar should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Which makes sense, right? Jesus didn't *need* to be anointed in this way, and it would be a good and faithful use of this extravagant possession to sell it and give to the poor (Jesus had instructed others to do just that). But there, in that moment, the act of worship was the right thing to do. Sometimes in life we must choose between two good things. Here it was give to the poor or worship Jesus.

When have you had to choose between two good options? How did you decide?

How do you prepare yourself for facing these sorts of challenges?

Homework/Exercise:

This teaching has us thinking about formation and character again.

Two quotes come to my mind as I think about the type of formation required to have this sort of Christian discernment to know the right thing to do when there are multiple good options.

“We don’t rise to the level of our expectations, we fall to the level of our training.” — Archilochus, Greek philosopher

“The righteous didn’t suddenly become righteous...” —Paulina Plaksej, a “Righteous Among the Nations” from Poland

We must decide who we are and what values matter to us before the hard decisions come. If we wait until decision time to work on our formation, it will be too late.

Your homework for this week is to produce a list of your core values, either for yourself or with the help of your family/household. What are the values that define your character and the vision for your life and/or your family?

Write them down, no more than six. Make sure they can be clearly defined. Put the list somewhere where you will see it every day. Think about what they mean to you. Ask yourself how you are implementing them in your life, and test your decision-making against them.

Be prepared to share your list with the group at the next meeting.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you know us inside and out, and you love us. Thank you for welcoming us into your kingdom, into your family, and into relationship with you. Help us to see others the way you see us. Help us to conform our values to yours and to live those values out every day. Amen.

The Greatest Commandment: Chapter 26

Read:

Luke 10:25–37/Mark 12:28–34/Matt 22:34–40

Discussion:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

How have you heard this command taught in your church?

What has it meant to you as a Christian?

David provides a list of six takeaways from Jesus’ words:

1. Jesus’ words are positive and give us actions to do. We are called to action by this command.
2. This command is open-ended; you are never finished loving God or neighbor.
3. Jesus thinks this is an attainable way to live.
4. Love of God and love of others are connected.
5. This teaching is the standard we should judge the church by.
6. Jesus affirms self-love.

What do you think of this list? How is it similar to or different from your previous understanding of the passage?

What part of this list is most energizing to you? What part might you chafe against? Why?

When the man who asked the instigating question (“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”) tried to gain clarity on Jesus’ words, Jesus responded with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Often we miss how scandalous this parable was to its first recipients. For Jesus to frame a Samaritan as the hero of the story was beyond the pale for his Judean audience. David writes,

Jesus picks a Samaritan for his hero for an obvious reason if one knows the context. Samaritans and Jews were estranged half-brothers at a religious, ethnic, and national level. They were very uncomfortable near-neighbors—that is, neighbors by geography, not by sense of connection or moral obligation. Blood had been spilled between them.⁴⁰

If you were going to rewrite this parable for your community, who would be the most shocking and unlikely hero you could cast in the role of the Good Samaritan (e.g., the good terrorist, the good Republican, the good Democrat, the good Antifa member, the good invader)?

⁴⁰ p. 123.

In 2019, I did this exercise with a group of teenagers. They offered up a political figure who they found distasteful. At first it was funny to them, but soon they were angry and scandalized that I would tell a story where this politician was the good guy—which is sort of the point.

David writes,

To take this story as our paradigm, we could say that Jesus defines love of neighbor as *seeing with compassion* the suffering of wounded people—anyone who is hurting whose path we cross—then, *practicing merciful action* in concrete and needed ways, by purposefully including those who have been left in need into the safety and hospitality of community, and challenging all those who create the harms that leave people wounded by the side of the road. The lawyer summarizes all this with the word mercy, and Jesus does not dissent. He simply says: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

Love requires insightful vision, heartfelt compassion, and effective action. It is a matter of doing, not of sentiment.⁴¹

What does it mean for love to be “a matter of doing, not of sentiment”?

Homework/Exercise:

“Who is my neighbor?” really is the big question here.

Who in your community goes most overlooked?

Who in your community is the most despised or avoided?

Write their name, either the individual (e.g., Jeremy) or the group (e.g., vegetarians), on a sticky note and place it somewhere where you can see it often, like the bathroom mirror or the dashboard of your car.

Pray about them, ask God to show you how you can be a good neighbor to them, and then do it!

Be prepared to share your experience with the group next time you meet.

Prayer:

Jesus, you have made yourself clear in this teaching; help us to live by this command. Give us your eyes of compassion when we see those on the outside, and give us hearts that can love them as you have loved us. Nurture in us a love for neighbor and a love for you. Amen.

⁴¹ p. 123.

The Rich Fool: Chapter 27

Read:

Luke 12:13–21

Discussion:

The start of this passage has always been interesting to me. Two men came to Jesus and asked him to settle a dispute about their inheritance. This is a pretty reasonable thing to ask; it's something that rabbis do (interpret law and tradition). But Jesus was wholly disinterested. Seeing what was in their hearts, Jesus gave a stern warning and a frightening parable.

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).

David writes,

This is a characteristic statement from Jesus, but we must not miss its radical force. The aggrieved younger brother wants justice. He wants *his share*, whether that which is due him under Torah or that which he thinks basic fairness requires.

Probably most of us would respond similarly. If we were being cheated out of an inheritance, we would protest. We would not likely respond very kindly to the implication that our actions are motivated by greed. We would say we are motivated by justice.

But Jesus is not interested in what we or his questioner think justice requires in this case. He is more worried about the state of the soul of the younger brother. It's a heart condition, called greed.⁴²

Why do you think that Jesus responded with such intensity here?

Jesus then went on to tell a parable about a rich man. From the opening line of this story there is no reason that we shouldn't like the “certain rich man,” and assuming that some of his listeners knew the Torah, I believe Jesus was laying a trap, because from an Old Testament perspective, the man's earthly riches were a sign of heavenly blessing, and the fact that his “ground [...] yielded an abundant harvest” is another strong sign of divine blessing.

In this story the rich man takes in a shockingly large harvest, far beyond his storage capacity. His solution, which he makes by consulting with himself, is to build bigger barns and expand his wealth. The story continues, “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” And once again, there's a warning from Jesus: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20–21).

⁴² p. 126.

What was Jesus getting at here?

How do you receive this warning?

David concludes by saying,

This could be individualized to read something like this: have a great devotional life, read the Bible, pray a lot. But from other Gospel passages and the Jewish background it is quite clear that riches toward God and treasures in heaven are accrued by serving others—especially the poor—especially with money and possessions. This parable is not just a wisdom parable signaling the old but always valuable lesson that *you can't take it with you*. It is a judgment parable about greed and its callous twin, disregard for the poor.⁴³

How do you respond to David's conclusion?

How should Christians think about their material possessions?

Homework/Exercise:

How are you actively caring for the poor, beyond just giving to your church or other poverty-alleviation organizations? These are important, but they are not the whole game.

How are you embodying Jesus to the poor around you?

Make a plan for you and your household to serve the poor in a tangible and sacrificial way.

Find an area in your life/budget where you can sacrifice more for the sake of generosity.

Be prepared to share your plans with the group next time you meet.

How would your life be different if you thought about your possessions this way? How would that change affect the people around you? How would the world be different if the church as a whole leaned into this teaching?

Prayer:

God of every good gift, you have blessed us in so many ways. Help us to see these blessings as the means by which you have decided to bless the world around us. Give us generous hearts and open minds as we serve those around us in your name. Amen.

⁴³ p. 128.

Humility and Exaltation: Chapter 28

Read:

Luke 14:7–24, cf. Luke 18:14, Matt 22:1–14

Discussion:

The first of these scenes drawn by Jesus in this parable is a bit foreign to us; the formality of the dinner party, the role of status, the honor/shame culture at play, caring about who sits where—it's not the way we typically throw parties. The closest thing I can think of in our world that lines up with this sort of scene is a wedding. The bride and groom have their table or their seats at the head of the table with guests radiating out from them, with the best man and maid of honor being closest in, then usually family and/or the rest of the wedding party, then everyone else—everyone else, who often form a receiving line (official or otherwise) to talk briefly with the newlyweds.

In Jesus' day, this sort of ranked-seating philosophy played a much larger role in how power, wealth, and honor were distributed. David explains,

But Jesus seemed to care little about etiquette, except for the far deeper, deeply twisted values it so often reveals. In this first story about dinner party behavior, he teaches a lesson about the dialectic between exaltation and humility. In contexts in which insecure strivers constantly aim to claw their way to the top—that would be most contexts, with the full approval of society—Jesus teaches us not to be insecure, self-exalting strivers at all.

Instead, be humble, and completely opt out. Those trying so hard to be somebody will be brought low, while those who humbly know who they are—one might say *Whose* they are—have rejected the self-exaltation game altogether. They are immune to being brought low because they are already low; that is, they are not hinging their identity and worth on the approval of other human beings.⁴⁴

While most of us don't live in a culture that operates exactly like this, we still work to position ourselves for social status and advancement. In the chapter, David connects this back to Jesus' teaching on fearing God rather than people.

Where and when do you find yourself jockeying for status and recognition?

Where and where do you observe this behavior in others?

Have you or has someone you know ever had to compromise something about yourself or themselves for advancement?

⁴⁴ p. 130.

It is in our submission to and participation in the kingdom of God that we free ourselves from this rat race.

Jesus went on to tell us another story about a dinner party. This time Jesus gave countercultural instructions for *how* to throw such a party. Jesus knew that often (and still today) parties and events are ways to show off wealth and status and can be means to advance oneself inside of certain circles of status or influence. So Jesus gave us scandalous party-planning advice, unlike anything you're likely to find in *Southern Living* or other entertaining magazines. The advice is that when you throw a party, do not invite your friends or family, "in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid" (Luke 14:12). Instead, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:13). Why? "You will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14).

Is Jesus serious here?

Would you ever consider doing this?

Have you taken Jesus' instruction when planning an event?

In yet a third teaching about parties, Jesus tells us about a man who throws a party and invites many guests. All of these guests have excuses (mostly nonsensical) for why they will not be in attendance. So the man follows Jesus' instruction and invites the outsiders to the party, sending his staff out into the streets to find anyone of low status that they may bring to the party.

David writes,

Jesus teaches a scale of values that is upside down from standard human values. Be humble rather than self-exalting. Invite low-status people rather than the elite. Take the lowest place rather than jockeying for the best seat. Seek God's approval rather than human approval. His radicalism is breathtaking in relation to this mess of a world that we humans have made for ourselves. From Jesus' perspective, our normal social values are corrupted and vainglorious.⁴⁵

How can we live in Jesus' "upside down" values? Do we even want to?

From these teachings, how does Jesus think of humility?

How have you encountered these teachings in your churches? Have you ever heard them taught as being about anything other than salvation? Does God actually want us to behave like this?

Homework/Exercise:

One of my favorite ethicist/philosophers is Immanuel Kant. One of his most famous teachings says you must never treat a person as a means to an end; humans must be treated as ends in and

⁴⁵ pp. 131–132.

of themselves. Perhaps this could be a lens through which to take the first steps toward obedience to this teaching from Jesus.

Where in your life are you trying to climb the social ladder? How can you get off?

Think about those in your community who are at the bottom: the outcasts and rejects, the lost and the broken. How can you serve them in a way that is intentionally and only for their good, with no expectation or hope for you to gain recognition, catharsis, or status? Make a plan for how you will serve those who can't help you climb any ladders.

Be prepared to share this plan with your group next time you gather.

How would your life be different if you took these teachings to heart?

How would your church be different?

How might it affect your community or the world?

Prayer:

Jesus, you have shown us what you require: to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk with you in humility (Micah 6:8). Lord, guide us in the way that you have shown us; help us to make less of ourselves and more of you as we serve those who can't pay us back and shirk the conventional wisdom of ladder-climbing in order to find your kingdom. Amen.

Lost Sons, Broken Families: Chapter 29

Read:

Luke 15:1–32

Discussion:

In this section of Luke, Jesus tells a series of familiar parables about lost things. David recaps,

The stories can be summarized in parallel in the following way. First a man loses one of one hundred sheep (Luke 15:4). He leaves the ninety-nine behind to go find the one, and after achieving success, returns home and gathers his friends to celebrate (Luke 15:4–6). Then a woman loses one of her ten silver coins (Luke 15:8). She turns her household upside down to find the one lost coin, and after finding it gathers her friends and throws a party (Luke 15:8–9). Finally, a man loses one of his two sons (Luke 15:11–13). When the lost son returns home, the man gathers his household for a big celebration (Luke 15:22–24).⁴⁶

How have you heard these parables taught in the past?

What have they meant to you?

The first two stories have nice, happy endings with a theological statement as the bow on top. The last story, however, doesn't wrap up cleanly; it seems to end on a cliff-hanger. The son who leaves home in an act of disrespect and rebellion, wasted his family's wealth, and ruined his standing and his health has come home. This is where most sermons live, here at the homecoming. The prodigal sinner-son has returned home to the loving father who is waiting to welcome him—but that isn't the end of the story.

The younger brother needs to be reoriented back to being a part of the family, but so does the older brother. He has confused his identity in relation to the father as that of a slave (reread v. 29) rather than a beloved son. His outrage makes sense from this perspective; his worth is based on what he produces, based on his work. So when the younger brother, who has squandered rather than produced, is welcomed back, it seems wildly unjust.

Where do you see yourself in this story? As the younger son who doesn't feel worthy, or the older son who thinks worthiness can be earned?

David concludes this chapter by saying,

Noting that the elder brother doesn't want any part of a conversation with his younger brother and won't go to his party (indeed, won't even describe him as his brother), we see that if there is to be reconciliation in this family it will be a long journey. Will there be

⁴⁶ p. 134.

forgiveness for specific wrongs in the past? Or will the family simply have to resolve to move on together as a family, because that is what families sometimes must do?

The fatted calf party is for one evening. Whether it will be an evening leading to forgiveness, reconciliation, and family wholeness depends on the subsequent decisions of each of the characters in this story. That is often how it goes in life. Sometimes the unhealthy dimensions of our most important relationships break open with surprising possibilities of new life. But we must seize the moment. Amy-Jill Levine concludes: ‘Take advantage of resurrection—it is unlikely to happen twice.’⁴⁷

Do you think Jesus was making a statement about family dynamics here? What do you think Jesus wants you to see or understand?

What do you make of that closing quote from Amy-Jill Levine, “Take advantage of resurrection—it is unlikely to happen twice”?

Homework/Exercise:

Where do you have unresolved conflict in your family or close community?
Where might there be an opening for resurrection? Are you brave enough to take it?

Make a plan this week for how you are going to look for signs of resurrection in a broken relationship. Decide that you are going to be the kind of person who can seek health in relationships where it is possible.

Where do you need to forgive?
Where do you need to seek forgiveness?
Where do you need to erect stronger boundaries?

How would your life be different if this was your posture toward conflict and relationships?
How would it change your family’s dynamic? How would it change the way the church operates? If this idea were embraced on a grand scale, how would it change the world?

Prayer:

Father God, each of us have been prodigals; each of us have been judgmental older brothers. Help us to be people who seek restoration and reconciliation to become people of resurrection in the world. Amen.

⁴⁷ p. 137.

God vs. Mammon: Chapter 30

Read:

Luke 16:1–15

Discussion:

This parable makes many uncomfortable, so if you are feeling uneasy after reading it, you are not alone. It is a strange story, a shocking story, a confusing story. It even appears that the author of Luke was uneasy about leaving the parable on its own and added a few sayings of Jesus from other places to lend context and application to the story.

How have you heard this parable taught in the past?

Jesus tells us that a manager has been mishandling his master's estate and is soon to be fired. In order to try to prepare for this future, the manager strikes bargains with those who are indebted to his master so that they might owe the manager a favor when he is on his own.

David says that

The surprise of the story is that in the end the master praises the manager, now described for the first time in v. 8 as *adikias* (unrighteous/unjust—often translated “dishonest”). His praise is because the manager has acted *phronimos*—a term usually translated as “shrewdly,” but just as easily translated as astutely, practically, or prudently.⁴⁸

Luke then tries to interpret the parable with four different sayings of Jesus. We will look at them one at a time.

1. Luke 16:8–9: “For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth [Greek: *mamonas ho adikia*], so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

David argues that what Jesus was saying here is that there are two types of people living in the world together (think back to the wheat and the tares): the “children of darkness” are engaged in the idolatrous pursuit of wealth, and the “children of light” are supposed to use their means to make friends and introduce them to a different way of living in the world.

2. Luke 16:10–12: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?”

⁴⁸ p. 139.

The thought that David pulls out of this statement is that the children of light have been entrusted with money in this world as a sort of training opportunity to learn how to practice justice even in an unjust system.

3. Luke 16:13: “No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

The God of the Bible and the god of the economy have very different values and goals; to serve one is almost always to oppose the other.

4. Luke 16:14–15: “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts, for what is prized by humans is an abomination in the sight of God.’”

In response to these two verses, David says,

That last line, though, sums up the section and packs quite a wallop. “What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.” Everyone desires Mammon, but for Jesus, Mammon is not only unworthy of being desired, it is an abomination. That intense word, *bdelygma*, connotes something profane, unclean, polluted, and connected with idolatry.⁴⁹

Which of these four interpretive statements do you find most helpful?

Which of them do you find the most confusing or off-putting?

Where are you the most convicted?

Homework/Exercise:

We have done several exercises around money and our financial lives. How about this time we think about how we can lean into these four takeaways from Luke?

So here are four things for you to investigate in your own life. Make a plan for how to better lean into these teachings:

- 1) How are you using your means to show others a kingdom way to live?
- 2) How are you being wise and creative with your finances for the sake of justice?
- 3) How can you set up checks and balances against the values of the market in order to pursue the values of God?
- 4) How can you orient yourself away from what is prized by people (Mammon) and toward God in regard to your financial life?

Make real plans, or at least real ideas to experiment with, and be prepared to share with the group the next time you gather.

⁴⁹ p. 142.

Ponder how your life would be different if you could implement all of these things. How would that affect your family? How would that affect your community?

Prayer:

Jesus, you are a radical, and you have called us to join you. Help us be more mindful with our material things and our financial lives. Help us to be people of justice and compassion who set our sights on things above and the things of the kingdom. Make us your ambassadors on the Earth as we imitate you in all arenas of our lives. Amen.

Lazarus and the Indifferent Rich Man: Chapter 31

Read:

Luke 16:19–31

Discussion:

David ends this chapter by saying,

We will not engage any more teachings of Jesus on wealth, luxury, alms, or indifference to the poor. This is the culminating text in Luke, and in the Gospels. It packs such a powerful punch that Christians have been trying to hide from it for millennia.

We have Moses and the prophets teaching us these things. We also have one who lived, who taught this exceedingly clear parable, who died on a Roman cross, and who rose from the dead. It seems that many of us supposed followers of Jesus “do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither [are we] convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Matt 6:24).⁵⁰

How have you heard this parable taught in your church?

How do you feel reading it again, and with this chapter?

Why do you think so many Christians are uncomfortable with this passage? Do you think David is right to say that we’ve “been trying to hide from it for a millennia”?

This story can feel, at times, similar to the previous parable about the rich man who built bigger barns just prior to his death (see chapter 27). Where that story was rather general, this story makes it personal. Where the greed of the man who built new barns is imprecise in its ramifications, here the effects of the rich man’s greed can be seen in the cold, dead body of Lazarus who sat outside his gates. Many times for us, the problems that exist generally in the world with titles like *poverty*, *food deserts*, *redlining*, or *economic injustice* are too big and too theoretical for us to feel like we can or should do something. Here, in this parable, we are faced not with a problem but a person. Lazarus is dying. Dying of exposure, of sickness, of hunger in front of our homes. Jesus had a remarkable way of cutting through our defenses. In this parable Jesus is forcing us to face the personal aspect of economic obedience.

What is the difference between knowing about poverty and knowing someone who is poor?

While neither David nor I think this is a teaching about eternal destinies, this parable contains language of suffering, death, the afterlife, and eternal reward/punishment. Why does Jesus take this so seriously?

⁵⁰ pp. 146–147.

If Jesus takes this so seriously, why does the church get so scared of talking about money?

Homework/Exercise:

Reread this parable a few times this week, putting yourself in the position of different characters: the rich man, Lazarus, Abraham, the God who is ordaining destinies. How does the story read differently from each perspective?

It is likely that you are aware of social, economic, or justice issues in your community. Take some time to make a list of the concerns you are aware of in your area. Make a plan this week for how you will get closer to these issues. How will you put a name and a face on them so that they are people rather than problems?

Do some research. Find out what organizations are already doing good work in your community, contact them, and find out how you can personally get involved.

Be prepared to share what you've learned and your plan with the group.

How might knowing the names of the suffering change you as a person? What might it do to your family? How would the church be different if it emphasized showing up over shelling out? How might that change the world?

Prayer:

God, you are a home for the homeless, a friend to the lonely, and a father to the fatherless. You have shown us your deep love and compassion for your creation; help us to catch that spirit and to live as your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

The Widow Who Demands Justice: Chapter 32

Read:

Luke 18:1–8

Discussion:

This can be both a funny and disturbing parable. The tenacious widow, a victim of some sort of injustice, is demanding an almost comically unjust judge right her situation, harassing him to the point where he is afraid of her. Having judges that respect people and fear God is a critical part of Jewish civil and Torah law. Without these qualities, the judge is likely to become beholden to the powerful and/or those who can scratch the judge's back as they scratch theirs, and to disregard those on the bottom of society when they come before them (especially when someone at the bottom seeks justices against one of the judge's friends on the top).

What does it mean to you to fear God and have respect for people?

How have you encountered this parable in the church?

Eventually the widow pesters, annoys, harasses, and nags the judge so much that he breaks down and grants her the justice she deserves. Then Jesus goes on to tell us that this is how prayer works? I vividly remember my angst and consternation the first time I critically encountered this teaching. I was scandalized that Jesus suggested that God needs to be treated like this before God will hear the prayers of the "chosen ones." I think many Christians have been tripped up by this thinking. However, Jesus isn't telling us about how God receives prayers but rather how we are to pray with fervor and tenacious faith.

What does it mean to you for Jesus to suggest that our prayer life should look like "crying out to God day and night"?

There is another major point David wants to make sure you don't miss in this passage: that is the reality and pain of encountering injustice in the world. He writes,

Jesus knows that for the beaten down ones of this world, who cry for a justice that their hearts know is due them, and that the Scriptures themselves say is God's will, the grinding reality of injustice can indeed be a threat not just to their morale but to their faith in God. Think of the enslaved Jewish people crying for justice for four hundred years, and the enslaved African American people crying for justice for 250 years in what became the United States of America. Surely many lost their faith along the way. Jesus is asking his followers not to lose faith as they cry out for justice.

This brief, powerful story reveals the dynamics of garden-variety injustice in the world, the desperate efforts some must undertake to get basic justice needs met, and the grinding

challenge of injustice to faith. God's long silences in the face of our cries for justice do indeed threaten faith in God.⁵¹

What about the state of the world makes it hard to maintain faith in God?

How do you feel/what do you think about Jesus acknowledging this struggle? Is it comforting, frustrating, something else?

Homework/Exercise:

In the previous chapter's study, you were encouraged to get personally involved in a justice issue in your community. Sometimes it seems like the more we learn about an issue, the larger and less manageable it gets. Part of why it is so much more comfortable to write a check to the local food bank rather than serving and praying with those who come there for assistance is because people are messy and complicated, and that can be scary.

It can also be disheartening to see how large an issue is. How can we ever fix the homelessness problem when there are so many facets to the issue? How can we make progress against human trafficking when there are millions of people enslaved globally? These problems can start to feel hopeless, and the old questions of "How can a good God allow such suffering in the world?" start to feel more and more compelling. It can be damaging to our faith and move us to a place of despair or nihilism. Yet in response to the state of the world, Jesus says he hopes to find faith on the Earth.

This week, push into this tension. Write a brief prayer of lament for the victims of a specific form of injustice that you especially care about. Put that prayer somewhere you can see it each day. Make saying that prayer at least once a day part of your prayer life. Take note of the experience. Be prepared to share your experience with the group the next time you meet.

Prayer:

God, you are a righteous judge, and yet the world is full of injustice, suffering, and brokenness. Help us to bear witness to those who need your justice to be done. Give us eyes to see the hurting, give us hearts that care about those on the bottom, and form us into those who work for justice and cry out to you day and night as we seek deliverance in our seemingly hopeless world. Amen.

⁵¹ p. 151.

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector: Chapter 33

Read:

Luke 18:9–14

Discussion:

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:9).

This is a classic teaching. Everyone knows this one; every preacher likes to preach this one; it’s an easy lesson for a Sunday school teacher and can be molded for various ages and audiences. Where some texts invite the interpreter into a minefield, Luke 18:9–14 feels more like a gold mine.

David writes,

The Pharisee prays *by himself*, indeed one could translate this as “to himself.” If the latter is the reading, his prayer could be read as one of those internal monologues that in the Gospel of Luke always means spiritual obliviousness. The tax collector also prays alone, but clearly to God.

The Pharisee’s prayer reads like self-congratulation. He is offering thanks to God, but for his own goodness, by contrast with the sinfulness of “other people” (Luke 18:11).⁵²

In Jesus’ interpretation of the scene, the Pharisee received his reward in the adoring gaze of the other worshippers in the temple, while the humility of the tax collector allowed for him to leave right with God.

How do you see Jesus’ other teachings at play in this parable?

What does it mean to pray in humility?

In this chapter, David gives us a list of observations. Take a look at this list as a group. Discuss which you find most compelling and which might seem troubling. How could you apply these to your life and faith? Which of these would you most want to teach your children/family/team/staff/peers?

- We have never spiritually/morally “arrived”—rather, seek humility.
- Comparing yourself to others is a red flag, a warning that we are in dangerous waters—rather, strive for direct honesty with God.
- Repentance is more than just words—true repentance requires life change.

⁵² p. 153.

- Our Christian identity alone does not protect us from arrogance—we must live as humble followers of Jesus, making more of him and checking our self-righteousness.

David closes the chapter by summing it all up.

What we want for the tax collector is what we should want for ourselves. Deep repentance when that is needed, life changes that are real and lasting, but never a turn toward becoming an obnoxiously self-righteous religious person. It is the combination of humility and a way of life morally pleasing to God that should be our goal. Not one or the other. It is contrition plus spiritual and moral growth, plus more contrition, plus more growth, in a cycle of moral and spiritual health that lasts a lifetime.⁵³

Where do you see these pitfalls in the church?

What does it mean to live coram deo (“before the sight of God”)?

Homework/Exercise:

For our exercise this week, we will be utilizing the Jesus Prayer, a popular contemplative prayer mantra with roots traceable all the way back to the Desert Fathers of the third century.

The prayer is designed to be repeated as a tool of contemplation and/or meditative prayer, but we will be using it in a slightly different manner this week (though I encourage you to further explore the use of the prayer if you find it useful this week).

This week, carry this prayer with you—either in your mind or written on a slip of paper.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Allow yourself to repeat the prayer throughout the day; specifically when you notice yourself slipping into arrogance or comparison, recite this prayer, aloud or silently, to reset your perspective. Repeat as needed.

Try to notice how the prayer works on you; be mindful of how often you are saying it. Be prepared to share your experience when you next meet with your group.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

⁵³ p. 156.

The Woman at the Well: Chapter 34

Read:

John 4:1–42

Discussion:

This passage is very interesting and can be fun to work with. From the first moment of this story we have gender, religious, and ethnic divisions between the two, which are rapidly being overcome by Jesus and the unnamed woman. There are many reasons these two should not be talking. Jesus and the woman have a conversation about her marital situation, which she quickly attempts to divert from by asking this prophet a theologically sticky question about temples, ancestors, mountains, and right worship.

David introduces us to a historically nuanced feminist reading of this story, where we see the woman as a victim of an abusive patriarchal system rather than a sinful, serial philanderer. In this scenario she could have been casually discarded by multiple men or could have had a husband die and then been in the system of the brothers “redeeming” her through marriage (with those marriages all ending one way or another). Her situation with her current partner could just as easily be a choice made out of desperation as a choice made out of hedonism or lust.

How does your reading of the story change if the woman is a sinner versus a victim?

How does this change affect the way you locate yourself in the story?

Where in the world around you do you see victims being turned into perpetrators in cultural narratives?

The story ends with a series of surprises. The woman is shocked at Jesus’ compassionate insight into her life, the disciples are shocked that Jesus is talking to her (she’s the wrong race, the wrong gender, the wrong religion, and the wrong nationality), and then we as the readers are shocked when the woman becomes an evangelist and brings the town to Jesus. Many in the town of the “wrong kind” of people believe in Jesus, and he decides to stay with them and teach for a couple of days. It’s a wild scene! Hospitality, relationship, reconciliation, and ministry being shared between Jews and Samaritans. This is the gospel at work.

Why do you think this missional endeavor to the Samaritan town was successful?

When is a time that you have seen the gospel lead to reconciliation and healing?

Who is like a Samaritan to you? Why? How could Jesus change your relationship with them?

Homework/Exercise:

Normally, if a Judean wanted to go from Judea to Galilee, they would take a long, out-of-the-way road to avoid passing through Samaria—a major step beyond crossing the street to not pass

by someone who makes you uncomfortable. They would add miles and miles to their journey so as to not get any of that Samaritan “ick” on them. Who gives you the ick? Who makes you so uncomfortable that you are willing to do ridiculous things to avoid them? Is it an individual, a community, a political party, an ethnic group, a religious group, a certain profession?

Who have you been conditioned to fear/hate/dislike/distrust? Why were you taught to think this way? Interrogate this experience. Take time to write down the reasons this person or these people are perceived as so dangerous/backward/untrustworthy. Ask yourself if you really believe these things. Are they based on reality or fear?

Once you have identified the scapegoat you have been taught to stay away from, it is time to follow Jesus toward them. How can you start to form a relationship with one of these people?

Make a plan, perhaps as simple as engaging with kindness on social media, or maybe consuming some honest media from this person or group to see how they actually talk about themselves. Perhaps it is time to actually go where they are (visit their house of worship, their place of work, somewhere they can be found), or maybe Jesus is even calling you to befriend them.

Share your plan and your progress with your group the next time you gather.

How would your life be different if you intentionally moved toward the people you have been taught not to associate with? How could that change your community?

How would the church be different if we all did that? How could it change the world?

Prayer:

God of the outsider, thank you that while we were still estranged from you, you made the first move to forge a relationship with us. Help us to be more like you as we question our prejudices and try to follow Jesus into a great understanding of and love for all our neighbors. In the name of the one who gave up comfort to rescue us, we pray. Amen.

The Woman Facing Execution: Chapter 35

Read:

John 7:53–8:11

Discussion:

The story of Jesus and the woman facing execution, or as it is commonly called, the woman caught in adultery, is a familiar and powerful one. David writes,

Scribes and Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman who (allegedly) has been caught in the act of adultery. They make her stand in front of “all of them,” a presumably massive early morning crowd at the temple that has come to hear Jesus teach. The religious leaders then refer Jesus to the command that adulterers be executed (Lev 20:10, Deut 22:22). They ask for his comment on the matter.

At one level, this is a legal case, and Jesus is being asked to render a legal judgment. In the presence of a massive crowd of onlookers of every type, together with Jewish religious authorities—scribes, Pharisees, temple officials—undoubtedly accompanied by nearby Roman soldiers, whose ranks were beefed up during Passover week each year—Jesus is asked to rule on a capital case. Should this woman die?⁵⁴

David also points out that while this was a capital case, it was more like a lynching than a trial.

There has been no convening of a proper authority, no trial, no interrogation of witnesses, nothing like that. A lone woman is surrounded by a group of men who, at the very least, want to use her case to test Jesus (John 8:6) and who may well believe that she deserves to die.⁵⁵

Jesus’ opponents are once again trying to trap him. Either he condemns this woman based on the most common interpretation of Torah—destroying his reputation as a merciful teacher and protector of the vulnerable—or he decides to protect the woman, seemingly in opposition to the laws of God.

Why do you think the woman was brought before Jesus? What do you think she was expecting him to do? Why?

Where, in your context, do you see the church grappling with or avoiding a no-win situation?

When Jesus called for “he who is without sin” to be the one to initiate the execution, he did something truly incredible. Besides doing something completely new and unexpected, Jesus defused the situation through an act of radical perception. He called the accusers to self-revelation and internal honesty. He set the actors up to condemn themselves, or walk away—

⁵⁴ p. 165.

⁵⁵ p. 166.

which they did. So what of the woman? David wants us to “notice that Jesus does not demand a statement of repentance from the woman. He enacts no penalty upon her whatsoever. He offers mercy, with clear direction for living, in perfect harmony.”⁵⁶

How do you feel about Jesus’ actions? Do you think this is how Jesus treats everyone? Why or why not?

When might you have the opportunity to emulate Jesus-style mercy in your life?

Homework/Exercise:

One of the things that attracted people to Jesus was and is his graceful mercy. We see it modeled in the Gospels over and over. However, David writes,

Human beings, including Christians, don’t do this kind of thing very well. Either we judge people mercilessly or we slide into casual normless relativism in which anything goes. We err on the side of judgment, or we err on the side of grace, or we ping-pong back and forth without any consistency. This happens within our own souls, in our families, churches, and societies.⁵⁷

When do you find yourself slipping into judgment and legalism? Who do you do this with? Why?

When do you find yourself most lax or relativistic? Who do you do this with most? Why?

When do you find yourself most merciful? Who do you do this with most? Why?

This week I want to equip you with another simple prayer. Write it down, or hold it in your heart and mind. Anytime you enter into *any* interaction with *anyone*, quickly ask Jesus, “Help me see them as you see them.”

Notice if or how this practice changes the way you interact with yourself, your family, your friends, your coworkers, your classmates, and strangers. Be ready to share your experience with the group next time you meet.

If you trained your instinctive response to be Jesus-style mercy, how would that change your life? Your family? Your church?

How would your city, nation, or even the world be different if the church consistently acted in this way?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, help me to see others the way you see them. Help me to see myself the way you see me. Help me to follow your example of mercy, grace, forgiveness, and love. Amen.

⁵⁶ p. 168.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Love One Another: Chapter 36

Read:

John 13:31–35, 15:12–17

Discussion:

Let's start with a question: *What is a commandment?*

When Jesus was sharing the Last Supper with his disciples, he gave them a new commandment. As part of Jesus' farewell discourse, he commanded them to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

David asks,

But what is new about it? Love of neighbor was already commanded in Torah (Lev 19:18), as we have seen (ch. 26).

Adele Reinhartz, in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, joins others in claiming that "in the context of this Gospel [love] has a narrower meaning referring to the love among the believers, which is not extended to unbelievers."

That implication seems clear also in the repeat version of the commandment, found in John 15. The commandment is set up this way: God the Father has loved Jesus the Son, who in turn has abided in the Father's love, and with that love has loved the disciples (John 15:9–10).

Jesus is now leaving, but the love that bound him with the Father and with the disciples must not be allowed to leave as he leaves. The disciples are now to love each other in the same way that Jesus has loved them (John 15:12). They are his friends, and they are to be friends to each other. Just as he lays down his life for them, they are to do so for each other (John 15:14–15). While the world will hate them, as it has hated Jesus (John 15:18–21), they will gain strength by the love they have received from Jesus and now share with each other. Their unity in love will be the sign to the world of who they are, and Whose they are.⁵⁸

How is the way we love inside of the church supposed to be different from the way we love outside of the church?

What does it mean to you to love someone the way Jesus has loved you?

It is clear in the Gospel of John that the church is supposed to be a different kind of community: one that is set apart, lives by different standards, has a clear vision, and is guided by a strong internal love. John's vision of the church is sectarian. David writes, "Such religious communities, however they emerge, can be described pejoratively as closed, intolerant, and

⁵⁸ p. 170.

hostile to the world. But, on the other hand, they can also be described positively as clear in identity, unified in vision, and bonded in community.”⁵⁹

When you look at the church, do you tend to use the pejorative terms or the positive terms listed above? How does the outside world talk about the church? Why?

What does it mean that the church’s mission and the church’s identity are inseparable?

Homework/Exercise:

Sometimes it’s hard to love folks; sometimes it can be even harder to love folks in our churches. (That’s me speaking as a pastor.) Churches can fight about anything. I’ve personally been a part of churches that have experienced conflict over big issues, but I have also seen churches fight, split, and even close over completely trivial matters.

Why do you think the church seems to struggle so much with the commandment to love each other? Who in your church do you find hard to love? Why?

Make a plan for how you can build/rebuild a relationship with someone in your faith community who you struggle to love. This might require leading with forgiveness or repentance.

Be prepared to share with your group (maybe they are in your group!) how you have started the work of loving reconciliation.

Every so often in the United States there is a flare-up of interest in the Ten Commandments. We will go years without them being a part of public discourse, and then there will be a push and protests around putting the tablets of the law up in school classrooms, in front of city halls and courthouses, in post offices, in parks, and in front of police stations. What if we plastered Jesus’ new commandment all over our communities instead?

How would your life be different if you centered “Love one another as I have loved you” in your life? How would that change things in your family? What about in your neighborhood or city?

How would our churches be different if this command were taught more consistently, with earnestness and urgency? How could that affect the world?

Prayer:

God of love, you have shown us what it means to love. You have engaged with us from a place of love and have called us to love each other in the church in a unique and intentional way. Help us to be people of love in our words, thoughts, and actions, for your glory, your church, and your kingdom. Amen.

⁵⁹ p. 171.

May They All Be One: Chapter 37

Read:

John 17:20–24

Discussion:

In this chapter of John, Jesus offers what is sometimes called the “high-priestly prayer.” In this prayer Jesus asks the Father that, among other things, the church “may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21).

David writes,

This is a prayer for Christian unity, the unity of all believers. Jesus asks that the unity that he enjoys with the Father would be theirs. This is available to the church through participating in the unity of the Godhead (reading v. 21 as “may they also be *one in us*”). Verse 22 expands the basis of Christian unity as relating to the “glory”—revelation of God’s splendor and power—that God has given Jesus. Jesus says he has passed this glory on to the disciples, for the purpose that “they may be one, as we are one.”

The purpose of Christian unity is described twice as evangelistic—“so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (v. 21), and “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (v. 23). But, as Marianne Meye Thompson writes, “The mission of the disciples only expresses their unity; it does not create that unity,” which “exists, not because of human effort, but because of God’s life-giving love for the world that is expressed through and in the mission of Jesus.”⁶⁰

Why do you think Jesus believes that a unified church would be attractional?

What does it mean for the church to be one, the way the Godhead is one?

What does it mean for a church or a Christian to be “in God”?

When Jesus prayed this important prayer at the beginning of the passion narrative in John, he was giving us a window into his inner life; we get to eavesdrop on this intimate and holy moment of Jesus praying to his Father knowing that he was about to face the cross. So what was important to Jesus at that moment? The unity of the church: his eleven disciples at the time and those who would come after them.

In this chapter, David wonders

if Jesus, in this prayer, was already pointing obliquely but realistically to the tremendous difficulty of human beings in finding and maintaining unity. One could read his prayer something like this: O Father, I call on all the spiritual riches and mysteries and glories of our relationship with each other to fall upon these inheritors of our mission and ministry.

⁶⁰ pp. 173–174.

They are going to need every bit of it, and still they will often fall short, because they are human beings in all their brokenness.⁶¹

What makes unity in the church so difficult? (No one-word answers.)

In many congregations and associations, the call for unity can be used to squash, quiet, or threaten dissenters. Have you seen this? Why do you think we are vulnerable to it? How can we guard against this abuse?

Davis concludes by saying,

In sum: Jesus prays for Christian unity, and a theological conviction about the unity of the church is a historic part of Christian confession. Peace and unity are not easy, and Christians are often bitterly divided. But every time we Christians bear with one another, choose to seek peace, and remain in relationships that defy our natural human tendencies, something special is happening. At these times, we see Jesus' prayer being answered. We must never give up the quest for Christian unity.⁶²

Homework/Exercise:

This week I would like to offer you two versions of the same exercise, one formalized and the other more casual. You can choose which you would like to attempt based on your circumstances.

Think of someone in your faith family (church, small group, prayer group, Christians you associate with, etc.) who you feel distant from. This feeling of distance could be due to a conflict or disagreement; it could be that they annoy you; it could be that they don't run in the same circles as you in your community; perhaps they are in a different age group than you; maybe they are always in a different group/class/service; maybe you have just never really met them.

Be curious about why you are distant from them.

Wonder why you've been okay with the state of your relationship.

This week, either contact them and ask to set up time to interview them about their faith life (more formal) or reach out and schedule a conversation via an intentional chat after church or a lunch, coffee, or tea time (more casual). In either form of conversation, seek to learn about their faith journey: how they came to faith, what their faith community means to them, how they feel called to serve Jesus, and what God has done for them. Be ready to share with them, too. See if this doesn't change the way you feel about them and your church.

Be prepared to share the experience with your group the next time you gather.

⁶¹ p. 175.

⁶² p. 176.

Prayer:

Triune God, you live in perfect unity among yourself. We seek to model that unity in the way that we as the church live together to show the world what you are like and to bring you glory. Help us to move toward one another and to not let conflict, disagreement, or distraction fracture our church and our relationships. Amen.

Jesus Occupies the Temple: Chapter 38

Read:

Mark 11:15–19/Matt 21:12–13 /Luke 19:45–48 /John 2:13–22

Discussion:

This very well-known story is one of the very few accounts found in all four of the Gospels. Each of the Gospels puts emphasis on different parts of the story and tells the story in different ways. Before we go any further, discuss:

Which of these four accounts connects with you the most? Why? What surprised you about the differences?

What were you taught about the meaning of the cleansing of the temple? Do you see that in the text?

Almost everything about this scene is scandalous. Jesus, the itinerant, populist rabbi from the rural north, has just arrived in Jerusalem with a large following of those on the bottom and edges of society (and those who have allied with them). He has marched into the capital city with this throng of people quoting Scripture and implying that Jesus is the messianic king, and he takes this parade to the religious/political/theological center of the world that is the temple and occupies it. This would be enough to get Jesus moved to the top of the leaders' hit list, but then he cleanses the temple as well. In this grand act of guerilla theater, Jesus has made his intentions as a radical reformer clear.

David writes,

Scholars have long debated what was so outrageous to Jesus about the goings-on in the temple. Interpreters can only draw inferences based on Jesus' reported actions and words. He could have been offended that the temple, the holiest place in Judaism, has become a place of busy, noisy place of commercial exchange. It has also been argued that the court of the gentiles had been subsumed entirely by these transaction spaces, so that the temple was being prevented from serving as a house of prayer for the gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples who came seeking God. A holy place of prayer had become, as John puts it, a mere "marketplace," like setting up a Walmart right in front of the altar in a church.

Why, then, does Jesus call the temple a "den of robbers"? That is a powerful indictment, which goes beyond mere "marketplace" language. It has led to further examination related to the financial transactions going on in the temple.⁶³

⁶³ pp. 180–181.

Why do you think Jesus was so angry with the state of the temple?

Do you see these behaviors anywhere in the world today? In the church?

At least part of Jesus' angst must be around how the temple has seemingly been corrupted and deformed into a lucrative religious money making machine and instrument of pacification of the people. Perhaps the lesson here, what Jesus wants us to do, is to be mindful, on guard against the corruption of our religious institutions and organizations into oppressive or monetarily focused institutions. We are called to follow Jesus by stepping into the prophetic role and calling out failings in these institutions, especially those we are closest to. We must stand for what the church was called to be, and oppose its repurposing towards any other goal.

Where have you seen Christian organizations oppression, harming, or financially draining people in the name of God?

Who do you see in the world around you today whose work is bringing about some form of reformation or justice? Explain what they are doing and why it matters.

Homework/Exercise:

How can we guard against the growth of abusive, manipulative, or predatory practices in our congregations? Sometimes these evolve out of well-intentioned practices that pull energy away from the church's calling.

Almost every organization has a vision, mission, and core values. Sometimes they are implied, and sometimes they are clearly articulated. Simply explained, an organization's vision is what they imagine the world to look like if they are successful. The mission is their plan for how to get there, and their core values are the nonnegotiable principles that guide how they plan and execute their mission.

Many churches have these posted somewhere on their website or on file in the church office. Take time to think of what you would assume the vision, mission, and core values of your church would be based on your observations. How do those compare to what they actually are? Is there a discrepancy between what the church says it's about and what it is actually doing? Make a plan to talk to leadership about this and to get involved in the work your church is doing in the world.

If your congregation doesn't have any of these documented, talk to leadership about considering creating them or finding a consultant to help form these.

Prayer:

God of justice, you said that your house would be a house of prayer for all people, yet we so often take what was meant to be for you and make it about us. Help us to discern where we have missed the mark or lost our way in serving and following you. Give us the vision to find our way back to the church you would have us be. Amen.

Paying Taxes to Caesar: Chapter 39

Read:

Mark 12:13–17/Matt 22:15–22 /Luke 20:20–26

Discussion:

American founding father Benjamin Franklin famously wrote that “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” It seems this is true as far back as the invention of government. In these passages Jesus was confronted with a sticky question: Do we pay the oppressive taxes that our occupiers require of us (an act potentially akin to worship), or do we hold fast to our national identity and trust God to protect us? This was another well-designed trap by the Pharisees. If Jesus said not to pay the Roman taxes he could be arrested, but if he said that they should pay the taxes, he could be seen as a Roman collaborator and lose his following.

It’s not abnormal to hear of a Christian who is going to jail for tax evasion and who cites this passage as their defense. David points out that this passage has been co-opted for all sorts of purposes beyond what Jesus likely intended. Some have used it as a way to violate the law, while those in authority have coupled it with the concept that God has empowered them to rule and therefore paying taxes is an act of obedience to God.

How have you heard this passage taught?

How do you apply this teaching from Jesus to your life?

David says,

Jesus at least drew a distinction between God’s kingdom and Caesar’s kingdom, between what is owed to the one and what is owed to the other. But in Christendom, this distinction was often lost. Christians failed to recognize that God is not Caesar, and Caesar is not God, and that we are citizens of another kingdom, which may demand things of us that Caesar very much resents. Those who have seen this have sometimes had to pay with their lives for their understanding of what may *not* be rendered to Caesar. What price are today’s Christians willing to pay for refusing to give to Caesar what Caesar demands?⁶⁴

How does the idea that humans are made in the image of God factor into this story?

What do the Caesars of the world demand of you?

How does this teaching fit in with that of Rom 13?

⁶⁴ pp. 187–188.

Homework/Exercise:

This week, take a look at how you think about your various commitments and obligations. Think about the way you organize your life, how you use your time, money, energy, etc.

Put yourself in the shoes of an outsider looking at your life. What would they say you give the most allegiance to? The most time and energy? The most of yourself?

Look for places in your life where you are giving something that belongs to God over to someone else.

Once you have taken this inventory, make a plan for how to reorient your life to give to God what is God's.

How would your life be different if you prioritize God and his kingdom?

How would that affect your family? Your relationships?

How would that affect your community?

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you have called us to seek first the kingdom of God, but we get confused, distracted, and compelled by the pressures of the world. Help us to reorient our lives to be centered around you. Help us to live lives that honor you and to know the difference between your kingdom and the kingdom of this world. Amen.

As You Did to the Least of These: Chapter 40

Read:

Matt 25:31–46

Discussion:

The eschaton is full of surprises. This text is powerful and frightening in the way that Matt 7:21 is: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

It is also a bit of a confusing text in that it is bunched together in Matt with a grouping of parables but this teaching seems to be apocalyptic rather than parabolic. Jesus seems to be revealing to us his expectations as to how the final judgment of humanity will go.

David tells us that

The passage’s imagery is rooted in the Hebrew Bible. The image of the Son of Man coming in glory, accompanied by all the angels, sitting on the throne, comes from Dan 7:13–14. Daniel has a vision in which a “son of man” (NRSV: “one like a human being”) comes to earth with delegated authority. He carries divine dominion, glory, and kingship, and he acts on God’s behalf.

The text centers on the later-developing idea in Jewish thought of a general resurrection of the dead, in preparation for a final judgment of all humans, as described in Dan 12:2–3. On judgment day, all nations (ethnic groups, races, peoples—*panta ta ethnē*) will be gathered before the Son of Man (Matt 25:31), who identifies himself as “king” by Matt 25:34.⁶⁵

How have you heard this text taught in your church?

How do you receive this text: as a parable or more of a straight teaching? Why?

The judgment passed on all people is based on the same standard and presided over by the Father. The criteria used are shockingly simple:

I was hungry and you gave me food.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.

I was a *xenos*—foreigner, stranger—and you welcomed me.

I was naked and you gave me clothing.

I was sick and you took care of me.

⁶⁵ p. 190.

I was in prison and you visited me.⁶⁶

How do you react to this list? Do you chafe against any of it? Why?

One of the great moments of shock and surprise in this short passage is when Jesus reveals that he himself was among the “least of these” who found themselves oppressed, afflicted, destitute, sick, and imprisoned—even if in secret.

About this mystery, David writes,

But we need to push further. In this story, the hungry, thirsty, etc., are not just representatives of God, or sent by God, they are God. Or, at least, God is incarnated in them. Jesus appears to be training believers through this story to see himself in the face of the suffering and needy people that we encounter. He doesn't just send them to us, like a king sending an ambassador. He *is* the suffering one. If you want to know where to find God incarnate in this world, look to the suffering ones.⁶⁷

Does Jesus' identification with the least of these affect the way you think about the categories of people listed above? Why or why not?

How have you seen the church teach Jesus' place among those on the edges and at the bottom of society?

There are three main traditions of interpretation for this passage:

- 1) The least of these are actually the church and her missionaries, and this judgment of the people and the nations has to do with how well they received these ministers of the gospel.
- 2) This judgment is for the gentiles (the Jews made it on their status as the chosen people). Jesus shows his audience that there is mercy and grace for non-Jews who live a life of God-pleasing justice and compassion.
- 3) There will be a final judgment for all humanity where each of us will be judged by how we treated our fellow humans.

All three of these readings could make a Lutheran bishop blush!

The Protestant tradition and its adjacent movements have developed in such a way as to often prize belief and right doctrine over (and sometimes against) good works and justice-making. Perhaps this is why so many modern Bibles title this teaching as a parable.

How does this round hole fit with the square peg of the Protestant notion of sola fide, or “salvation by faith alone”?

⁶⁶ pp. 190–191.

⁶⁷ pp. 192–193.

Homework/Exercise:

Who are the least of these to you? Who is the least desirable, most oppressed, most avoided, least thought of, or worst thought of group of people in your community? It could be the homeless, refugees and immigrants, day laborers, the poor, members of the LGBTQ+ community, the incarcerated, a racial or ethnic minority, a political other, or whoever.

Go find them! No, really. For some of these groups, it's easy; for others, it may be difficult or potentially unsafe for you. But find a way to move toward them. Do some research and find who in your community is already serving this group and join them. Find a way to offer direct service and love to these people, beyond just giving money.

Do this for two reasons:

- 1) Selfishly—Go serve them because you will meet Jesus there.
- 2) Obediently—Go serve them because Jesus has commanded you to do so.

What happened? What happened when you went to look for these people and those already at work serving them around you? What was that experience like?

What was it like to encounter these people you have apprehensions about? What did you learn? What made you uncomfortable, and why?

How are you going to continue to move toward the least of these?

Be prepared to share with your group the next time you gather.

How would your life be different if you made this an essential part of your life? How could it affect your family? Your community?

How would your church be different if it made a priority out of moving toward the outsider?

How could that change your country? How might it change the world?

Prayer:

Jesus, you have hidden yourself in plain sight. You are living among us as those on the edges and the bottom of our society. You reveal yourself in the least of these and call us to serve and advocate for them. Help us to be the kinds of Christians who care for those with whom we are uncomfortable. May we find you in the work, and may we find ourselves changed and our communities with us. Amen.

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