



JESUS SAYS

*Over 200 Notations of the
Master in Matthew's Gospel.*

A BIBLE STUDY COMPANION

MODUPE KUMAPAYI

Jesus Says

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DEDICATION

To everyone who looks up to Jesus and whose desire is to be more like Him, I dedicate this book.

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SOMETHING TO NOTE

AS CHILDREN WE played “Simon says”, a game where we obeyed instructions that are prefaced with the words ‘Simon says.’ And as we grew older, we unknowingly replaced the game with the world’s view, whatever the world says became acceptable as guide on how to live.

But God’s people ought to live under a different set of rules. What if we replaced what the world says with what Jesus says? Apostle Paul knew the importance of the influence of God in the life of a believer, and in Romans 12:2, says: “Don’t be like the people of this world, but let God change the way you think. Then you will know how to do everything that is good and pleasing to him” (CEV).

If you are interested in learning more about how God wants us to live, then this book is for you. Explore with me the guidelines for this new life that we have in Christ.

Yours in Christ,
Modupeola-Oluwa Kumapayi

INTRODUCTION

WE MUST DO all God wants us to do; this is Jesus' way of thinking, and it guided His every decision and lifestyle. The first time He uttered these words was at the beginning of His public ministry when He went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized there by John. His going to John didn't make sense to John who by discernment knew who He was and didn't want to baptize Him; but Jesus answered (to John's concerns by saying), *"For now this is how it should be, because we must do all God wants us to do."* Then John agreed (Matthew 3:15, CEV).

Bible scholars have made various attempts at explaining why Jesus was baptized. If you do a research you would read their brilliant and insightful reasons; but perhaps, the real reason can be found in Jesus' words: "We must do all God wants us to do." He did it simply because it was what God wanted at the time, even if it made no sense to John at the time nor to us today.

While Jesus' move to be baptized was because "God said so" it's still symbolic that Matthew would record it as one of the first words Jesus would speak just at the very beginning of His ministry, don't you think so? Perhaps it's to show us the kind of mindset we ought to have as we set out living this new life that He came to offer us.

If we would think the same way that Christ thought, then being transformed into the image and character of

Christ will be attainable. Even though to a large extent the work of transformation is by the Holy Spirit, our hearts will be in the right position to play our part.

Be honest. How many times have you failed to obey God because what He instructed didn't make sense or went against your natural instincts? At least once or twice right? Now, would you have done things differently if you had earlier accepted that whatever God tells you to do, you will do without trying to make sense of it whether it went against your natural instincts or not? The preparedness of the heart is very much our duty, and becomes a necessary step if we are to do everything that is good and pleasing to God.

Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is God. Jesus speaks the word of God. Jesus is the Word. Prepare your mind as you read through this book that even when you come across His hard sayings, you won't turn your back on it; you won't stop following Him; you will cling to Him and challenge yourself to receive by faith His word as truth, and believe that His word can help you live the abundant life on earth and eventually lead you into eternal life in heaven.

It is my deepest prayer that when we have fully prepared our hearts and have accepted Jesus' words, that if there be any struggles in carrying out His instructions, we will receive the help of the Holy Spirit to do as He commands. We must do all God wants us to do; but first, we must know what God wants us to do... shall we begin?

*“God is working in you to
make you willing and able to
obey him.”*

Philippians 2:13 (CEV).



SATAN TEMPTS JESUS

JESUS SAYS 1

*“Jesus answered, “The Scriptures say: ‘No one can live only on food. People need every word that God has spoken’ ”
(Matthew 4:4, CEV).*

JESUS WHO IS the Word quotes Scripture (Deuteronomy 8:3) as His response to the devil. Here’s the context:

*“The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert, so that the devil could test him. After Jesus had gone without eating for 40 days and nights, he was very hungry. Then the devil came to him and said, “If you are God’s Son, tell these stones to turn into bread.” Jesus answered, “The Scriptures say: ‘No one can live only on food. People need every word that God has spoken’ ”
(Matthew 4:1-4, CEV).*

Before we delve into Jesus' response to the devil's suggestion here, let's first talk about the situation and the characters at play. Here, we have a desert, and we have Jesus who had gone without eating for forty days and nights. We also have the Holy Spirit and the devil. The Holy Spirit was responsible for leading Jesus into the desert (and likely for His fasting too), and the devil was tasked with testing Jesus. The reason I am stressing the situation – hoping we see a clear picture and who is responsible for what – is because some Christians think God cannot lead us into hard places.

It's important that we know that God may choose to lead His children into hard places, like He did in taking Israel through the wilderness. He may even allow the devil, as test, to tempt us in hard times. Mind you, God is not the author of temptations; the devil is. When God allows the devil to tempt us, it becomes a test of our faith designed to reveal our strengths, capabilities and commitment to the Lord.

It is because this will become a usual practice of God and a recurring experience for believers that Jesus first experienced it. From Him we learn how to conduct ourselves when we are put under strain.

Jesus was under strain; He was very hungry. And like anyone who is hungry, He had to have been desiring food. It was Jesus' state and desire that determined the direction of His first testing. We too should be mindful of

our desires, lest the devil take advantage of them. The devil came to Him saying “*If you are God’s Son, tell these stones to turn into bread.*” His words contained mockery first before the suggestion that He use His supernatural power to meet His physical needs.

The mockery! Think of it this way, the devil was saying, “How come someone who we perceive to be God’s Son is here hungry? This suffering is beneath you! Now use your powers to save yourself.” Do you see it now?

It was Jesus’ response to the devil’s words that’s captured in the opening verse. First, He shows us what to do when we are the target of mockery (yes, especially in hard times). He didn’t respond to it; and so we mustn’t either. He didn’t let Himself be goaded by it nor should we. And when we are given the suggestion of “using what we have to get what we need”, like Jesus, we state what our priorities are. Jesus said to the devil, ‘*No one can live only on food. People need every word that God has spoken.*’ Jesus informed the devil that there was another kind of sustenance and satisfaction that food couldn’t give, something having your present needs met couldn’t provide, and it had everything to do with God. It was the sustenance and satisfaction that God gives that He wanted and prioritized. It is what we too should desire and prioritize.

Something else to note is this: Although Jesus rejected the suggestion of the devil to use His powers to get His

physical needs met, His taking sides with God didn't move God to meet His needs immediately. He continued to be hungry, at least for a time. What this tells us is that taking sides with God and doing the right thing as a Christian doesn't always attract immediate rewards from God. Most times, it leaves us in uncomfortable and painful situations, at least for a while until when the time is right for God to send us relief. What we must do while we wait is be quiet in our spirit and trust God.

Someone might ask, what's so wrong with Jesus using His powers to get His physical needs met? You see, Jesus was surrendered completely to God's leading. He had gone into a desert and stayed there without food for several days just because God's Spirit had said it was what He must do; if He was ever going to use His power to meet His physical needs, then the go-ahead had to come from God as well. I believe from this Jesus is showing us the importance of listening for God's leading and approval before we act on outside counsel even if the counsel seems the logical thing to do.

JESUS SAYS 2

*“Jesus answered, ‘The Scriptures also say, ‘Don't try to test the Lord your God!’ ”
(Matthew 4:7, CEV).*

The devil gives Jesus another suggestion, this time he backs it up with Scripture (Psalm 91:11-12); but Jesus responds with yet another Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:16). Here's the context:

“Next, the devil took Jesus into the holy city to the highest part of the temple. The devil said, ‘If you are God's Son, jump off. The Scriptures say: ‘God will give his angels orders about you. They will catch you in their arms, and you won't hurt your feet on the stones.’ ” Jesus answered, ‘The Scriptures also say, ‘Don't try to test the Lord your God!’ ” (Matthew 4:5-7, CEV).

This time the location is no longer the desert but the highest part of the Temple. At first glance the location

seems insignificant; but on a closer look we notice it's a setup for Jesus' next test. The location was to give Jesus a great view, to enable Him see everything beneath, especially the people whose acceptance and rejection would play an important role in His public ministry. If He wanted their acceptance He could get it quickly.

The devil was actually suggesting, all Jesus had to do was give the people a show, by jumping off! By doing 'just that' He would get the attention of the people. He wouldn't have to fear breaking any bones, as God's angels are stationed to give Him soft landing. Besides, the extraordinary feat would announce Him to the people as God's Son, and He would have the acceptance and support of the people. Satan's suggestion was rejected by Jesus who cared less about the attention, acceptance or support of the people, but was more interested in pleasing God.

Notice the response of Jesus: "*The Scriptures also say, 'Don't try to test the Lord your God!'*" These very words prove what Jesus' primary concern was: to please God. We too must always ask ourselves before we act: "How will God view my action? How will my action affect my relationship with God?"

From time to time, as Christians, we will find ourselves at the "highest part of the Temple" with the suggestion from the devil to jump off! Our response in such situations will reveal the contents of our hearts,

whether we are willing to do anything and everything to gain the attention of people, to be accepted by people and gain their support or whether all we are concerned about is pleasing God or people. I pray we choose God over people.

The setting of this second test makes it clear that we can't please God and people at the same time. The devil wanted Jesus to choose the people; but Jesus chose to please God. We too must choose to please God always even if it means rejection from people or suffering at their hands.

I couldn't possibly move on to Jesus' next test without discussing the battle of the Scriptures. The devil had backed up his absurd suggestion with Scripture, even though he used it in the wrong context. And Jesus had rejected Satan's suggestion using the Scripture as well.

Can you tell when Scripture is being used in the wrong context in order to lure you into sin? It is the duty of every child of God to be a student of the Scriptures; reading it daily and relying on the Holy Spirit for insight. Failure to do so will only leave one in a situation where one can easily become prey to the devil's tricks. Jesus couldn't be prey to Satan's temptations, nor should we leave ourselves in a condition to be one.

There are Christians who have the habit of using Scripture to back up their wrong actions. I feel led to put it out there that if you're in the habit of doing this, you

should know that it's not Christ-like. In fact, such behavior is only traceable to the devil. The right response to this is to drop *that* behavior and begin to rightly use the Scripture.

JESUS SAYS 3

*“Jesus answered, “Go away Satan!
The Scriptures say: ‘Worship the
Lord your God and serve only him’
” (Matthew 4:10, CEV).*

It’s finally time for the last test and in the verse above Jesus responds to the devil’s suggestion using Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:13). Read the interplay:

“Finally, the devil took Jesus up on a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms on earth and their power. The devil said to him, “I will give all this to you, if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus answered, “Go away Satan! The Scriptures say: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him’” (Matthew 4:8-10, CEV).

A third location was introduced. This time it’s a very high mountain that gave the view of the kingdoms on

earth and their power. When the devil was done showing all of this to Jesus, he offers Him a deal, a suggestion that Jesus should receive help from the devil to become influential and powerful; and all Jesus had to do in return was pay obeisance to him and worship him. The suggestion is so absurd, deserving a rebuke. Jesus commanded the devil to go away, insisting that His allegiance was to God and God alone.

This particular testing of Jesus reveals an important truth that you cannot cut a deal with the devil and still be affiliated with God. It will cost you something, the very thing which should be prized above anything else: our relationship with God. Jesus' response however shows us what Jesus placed much value on, and what we too should value more: our relationship with God.

But wait, do you see what I see? The devil was really in no position to be offering Jesus the kingdoms on earth and their power. I say this because, temporarily, Jesus might have stripped Himself of the fullness of His divinity and power in order to become man and fulfil His good plans for us; but it didn't mean He still wasn't who He was and still didn't have what He had. Do you get it? Time was what was at play. Once the time was up and Jesus had fulfilled all of God's good pleasure, He returned to being fully who He was, having all He always did. So in actual sense, there really was no deal.

What the devil offered was a counterfeit to the original. And by this Jesus teaches us how to avoid the

traps of the devil: by continuing to believe we are who God says we are and have what God says we have, even though it's not something we have yet. In due time, we know it will all become evident; we will evolve and we will possess our possessions.

From time to time we come across people who are apparently under the influence of the devil, demanding worship in exchange for their help. These people could be influential and wealthy, some would have attained enviable positions as well. When I say they demand worship, I mean they insist on being revered, on having your devotion and submission to their will completely. Mind you, reverence, devotion and submission are three things that should be reserved for God only; so for anyone to require them in exchange for their help puts them in competition with God, an anathema! When our paths cross with such people, we will be doing ourselves a world of good by not lingering in their company, nor take any help from them.

After Jesus' response to the devil, it is recorded that the devil left Jesus, and angels came to help Him (See verse 11). The truth remains that God has prepared help for those who love Him since we have been chosen for His purpose. So, it's just a matter of time before God's help starts to manifest. Before then though, we must continue to stand firm on what we believe.

JESUS SAYS 4

*“Then Jesus started preaching,
“Turn back to God! The kingdom of
heaven will soon be here” (Matthew
4:17, CEV).*

After His tests, Jesus leaves the desert to begin His public ministry, and starts with “Repentance” as His theme. Here’s the context of the Scripture above:

“When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he went to Galilee. But instead of staying in Nazareth, Jesus moved to Capernaum. This town was beside Lake Galilee in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. So God’s promise came true, just as the prophet Isaiah had said. “Listen, lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, lands along the road to the sea and across the Jordan. Listen Galilee, land of the Gentiles! Although your people live in darkness, they will see a bright light. Although they

live in the shadow of death, a light will shine on them”
(Matthew 4:12-16, CEV).

John who was Jesus’ fore-runner had been imprisoned; but the work of God was not to be discontinued. In fact, John’s imprisonment which was the beginning of the end of his ministry signified the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. But first things first, Jesus as led by the Spirit moved to Capernaum, a town beside lake Galilee, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. This is where He begins His public ministry (in this case, His preaching). The move and His preaching were significant as they had been revealed by God to the prophet Isaiah. Also, His move and preaching helped Matthew recognize Jesus more and more as the fulfilment of prophecy.

The theme of Jesus’ preaching was repentance. Before we delve into that, let’s first appreciate Jesus’ humility. It shines through the leading verse which states: “Then Jesus started preaching...” This opening says nothing of His Divine status. He chose instead to put the needs of others first. He served! This is worthy of emulation. Every Christian, regardless of who we have become, what we own or what we have achieved, must never scoff at serving humanity, especially in regard of spreading the gospel.

Now, back to Jesus’ message. Since the theme of Jesus’ message was repentance, it suggests that there was rebellion against God, His word and His ways at that time, a perversion that needed to be corrected, and a plan

for the desired change to be re-established. Jesus' message to that generation was valid, and till now and beyond our generation, it remains valid. Why? It's because there will always be people who have the wrong attitude to sin. This is why as Christians we can't afford to be ignorant of our responsibility to the world. Jesus urged the people to turn back to God; but to do that they needed a change of attitude towards what they had done wrong. They needed to believe in and accept God's forgiveness as revealed by Jesus; and they had to have a real change of heart and attitude towards sin. This is what we are expected to let the world know as well.

While it's good to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, we must however not lose focus of our own lives. While we help others find their way to God, we must put the necessary measures in place so we do not drift away from Him. As we explore the book of Matthew, we will realize that Jesus' preaching was not reserved only for those who didn't know God but also for those who claim to know and serve God.

Yes, you can know and serve God, yet fall into the temptation to sin. If that happens, we mustn't ignore what we've done wrong; we must admit our wrongs and then, as Jesus said, *"turn back to God!"* There are supposed Christians that have formed an opinion that believers don't need to repent from sins committed after they became saved. Not only did they form this opinion

independent of any true scriptural backing, they teach others this error. They have stumbled and continue to cause others to stumble.

Please let's always remember that being saved doesn't exempt us from being held accountable by God for our misdeeds, neither will it exempt us from the consequences, including hell fire if we fail to repent. Let no one deceive you, and stop deceiving yourself in thinking otherwise.

JESUS SAYS 5

*“Jesus said to them, “Follow me! I will teach you how to bring in people instead of fish”
(Matthew 4:19, CEV).*

If you are truly turning back to God, there's only one way to do it right: it's by following Jesus in your daily life. Let's check out the context of Jesus' words quoted in this verse:

“While Jesus was walking along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers. One was Simon, also known as Peter, and the other was Andrew. They were fishermen, and they were casting their net into the lake. Jesus said to them, “Follow me! I will teach you how to bring in people instead of fish.” Right then the two brothers dropped their nets and went with him. Jesus walked on until he saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in a boat with their father, mending their nets. Jesus asked them to come with him.

At once they left the boat and their father and went with Jesus” (Matthew 4:18-22, CEV).

These verses introduce to us Jesus’ first disciples: Peter and Andrew, James and John. We also see Jesus’ desire to teach a generation that has gone left, how to find their way back to the right track with God, and remain with God. It was this desire that led Jesus to call to Himself the men who will become His disciples, men who will be the prototype of what we must be and do, a show case of what Jesus is willing to do through us and with us.

To His disciples Jesus proposes that if they would follow Him, they would be trading a life of just making ends meet to a life of impact. The offer was too good to pass over; these men realized the better life with Jesus and jumped at it, leaving all else behind.

Jesus’ offer still stands. While we may not see Him with our physical eyes, He still invites us to an intimate relationship with Him, a relationship that will last all our lives, making a difference in our lives and equipping us to impact the lives of others. Jesus’ offer stands! We’re to let people know Jesus saves, and must never forget to constantly be fishers of men for Jesus. To be noted too is the response of these men to the invitation of Jesus, for in it lies the condition required for following Jesus.

“Right then the two brothers (Peter and Andrew) dropped their nets and went with him... At once they (James and John) left the boat and their father and went with Jesus.”

Jesus' call met no hesitation. These men willingly left all behind. Someone might ask, does this mean to follow Jesus and be used by Him we must all quit our jobs? Does this mean we must neglect our families?

The answer is simple. To follow Jesus as intimately as is required of us and to present ourselves vessels willing and worthy for the Lord's work, we must put God first; this will mean adjusting our schedule and commitments in order to make room for God to take top priority. And, sometimes, like in the case of these disciples, it might mean a career change or less time spent with those we love. Someone might say, this is more like a sacrifice than just some random condition that need to be met. Well, think of it as you may, it is what's expected of us Christians. Hopefully we are committed to doing our part because He is always ready to do His part of transforming our lives and making us useful.

2

KINGDOM CITIZENS LIFESTYLE

JESUS SAYS 6

*“God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven!”
(Matthew 5:3, CEV).*

JESUS TEACHES THE crowd. What crowd? Towards the end of Matthew 4, we are told that *“Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news about God’s kingdom. He also healed every kind of disease and sickness. News about him spread all over Syria, and people with every kind of sickness or disease were brought to him. Some of them had a lot of demons in them, others were thought to be crazy, and still others could not walk. But Jesus healed them all. Large crowds followed Jesus from Galilee and the region around the ten cities known as Decapolis. They also came from Jerusalem, Judea, and from across the Jordan River”* (Matthew 4:23-25, CEV).

Now that we know where the crowd came from, let’s enter the next chapter.

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the side of a mountain and sat down. Jesus’ disciples gathered around him, and he taught them: God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven!” (Matthew 5:1-3, CEV).

Did you notice what Jesus did with the crowd? He taught them. It’s true that the crowd might have followed Jesus only for His healing power; but Jesus knew how to handle His growing popularity just right. He didn’t let it get to His head. He didn’t use it for any selfish ambition; instead, He seized the opportunity and maximized it fully for the work of God.

Makes me wonder why some Christians with large following and influence think it’s okay to not take full advantage of what they have to further the work of God. Do they know that doing this means they are emulating Christ? Anyway, Jesus taught the crowd and said, *“God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven.”*

To depend on God means to rely on Him. To admit that you rely on God means you’re saying there’s something you lack, something you need or require, something you can only get from Him. Jesus says people that think this way and feel this way about God will attract God’s blessings and will also have eternal happiness.

Jesus' words should then reveal to the unbeliever that they'll need to have the right view of their spiritual state and of God in order to take the first step towards having a relationship with Him. And what might their spiritual state be? That they are sinners in need of a Saviour. And, what might the right view of God be? That only in Him can their status change from sinner to saint, from condemned to redeemed, and only through Jesus can all this be made possible. Once they start to think and feel this way about God, they move closer to turning their lives around forever.

Meanwhile for the believer, Jesus' words reveal to us how to preserve and sustain a relationship with God. A Christian must never forget that they need God, and must never stop seeing God as their Source, whether it's for basic physical needs or complex spiritual needs.

Want to know the opposite of depending only on God? Being self-sufficient or trusting in the arm of flesh: like believing you don't need God but only yourself and others. That's not the kind of mindset a Christian should have. It doesn't please God nor attract blessings from Him, nor will it guarantee eternal happiness.

JESUS SAYS 7

*“God blesses those people who grieve.
They will find comfort!”
(Matthew 5:4, CEV).*

To suffer grief means to be sorrowful. There are different reasons why someone can be sorrowful. For instance, someone can be sorrowful and show regret for having done wrong; and someone can be sorrowful over something that was done to them. Jesus’ words address both groups. Let me explain.

If you feel or show sorrow and regret for having done wrong against God, it means you’re repentant; and the person who is repentant, according to Jesus’ words, will end up attracting God’s comfort which He offers through His forgiveness. And if you are sorrowful because of the trials and tribulations that come with the Christian lifestyle, you too qualify as a recipient of God’s comfort which can come in form of reassurance and support.

Our God is a God of comfort. And He freely gives it, whether it’s in the form of forgiveness or reassurance and

support. We can and should boldly approach Him for it. I believe this is one of the reasons why we mustn't grieve like people who don't know God, because we will never be left without comfort.

JESUS SAYS 8

*“God blesses those people who are humble. The earth will belong to them!”
(Matthew 5:5, CEV).*

A humble person is not exalted in their own eyes. They walk in humility before God and it's also obvious in their relationship with others. Jesus says humility is an attitude that will attract God's blessings, and specifically the earth will belong to those who are humble.

The call to action for every Christian is to humble themselves. I'm not sure anyone was born humble. What I am sure of however is that people practice humility. By 'practice humility,' I do not mean to think highly of one's self and then pretend to not; what I mean is to lower your importance in your own eyes and then make it a habit to think and feel that way until it begins to show in your interaction with God and with others. Do you get it?

Someone might ask, why did Jesus stress humility? It's simple. If Jesus stresses humility as a godly attitude that

attracts God's blessings then that means there's something wrong with the opposite of it. The opposite of humility is pride. Pride is having an excessively high opinion of one's self and one's importance. God hates pride and doesn't approve of it. If humility attracts God's blessings, you can imagine what pride would attract from God. Pride is sin, and all sin attracts is punishment.

That being said, there's also this: "*The earth will belong to them!*" How does the earth belong to those who are humble? Bible scholars have different interpretations of Jesus' words; but I've come to the conclusion that even though it might be spiritually complicated like they put it, it could also be pretty simple and about physical existence too. Here's what I mean.

Allow the possibility that God has determined to bless those who walk in humility before Him with all there is to be enjoyed here on earth. This doesn't mean that their lives will be free from troubles; but it means they will be guaranteed happiness by God even in the midst of whatever adverse situations they face. They can trust in divine intervention. This should be your lot; it should be mine as well. The question now remains, are we willing to practice humility?

JESUS SAYS 9

*“God blesses those people who want to obey him more than to eat or drink. They will be given what they want!”
(Matthew 5:6, CEV).*

There are those who just want to spend their lives eating and drinking. This must not be you and I. We cannot afford to spend our lives chasing the pleasures of this world. Why? It's because the world's pleasures do not give complete satisfaction. They end up a complete waste of time.

Christians are expected to hold God in high honour, such that we put Him first in our lives, and let every other thing, especially our personal interests, take second place. We're also expected to take our reverence for God a step further by esteeming His word and will. We take the pains to study God's word for guidance and willingly obey Him no matter the cost. Jesus says this is the only way to receive complete satisfaction!

You know what I find interesting? It's that satisfaction is something only God can give; and it's a blessing He has

reserved for those who esteem and obey His word. You ask: What is that thing people feel and mistake for satisfaction? Whatever it is, it's not the real deal; it's a counterfeit, and it's fleeting. Let's stop chasing the wind and devote our time to obtaining the real deal.

JESUS SAYS 10

*“God blesses those people who are merciful. They will be treated with mercy!”
(Matthew 5:7, CEV).*

Jesus continues with the teaching on the godly attitudes that can bring God’s blessings. Now He says those who are merciful can expect to be treated with mercy. But by whom? Jesus is most likely referring to God. Since God is the ultimate Rewarder, He will be the one to reward with mercy those who are merciful, even if sometimes He has to use humans to accomplish this goal.

Let’s look into what it means to be merciful. Being merciful is a state of mind that expresses itself in different forms, like:

- Forgiving: Repaying evil with evil is the way of the world; but overcoming evil with good is the way of God. And the way to overcome evil with good is by being merciful, i.e. refusing to retaliate; instead, offering forgiveness when we’ve been offended. A person whose

aim is to please God and be transformed into the image and character of Christ never forgets that he/she was forgiven by God first and as such has the responsibility to offer forgiveness to others.

- Sharing: The way of the world is to build a higher fence when you have much; but God's expectation of us when He blesses us is to build a longer table and invite as many as possible to share in our blessings. For instance, Jesus had endless wisdom, and He made sure to preach and teach with it, like He still does today via His Spirit. Jesus had miraculous power; He didn't put a price on it, but gave of it freely! The Bible records that He went about doing good.

When your world does not consist of just you and your family but is broad enough to include others who are not as privileged as you, then your heart is filled with mercy; but if you take it a step further and share your knowledge and resources with others, then you are in fact being merciful. And then, there's my favourite expression of mercy:

- Refusing to abuse your power or position: When I think of this expression, I think of Jesus and His ministry on earth. He faced a lot of rejection but never used His power or position to coerce anyone into accepting Him. He didn't rob anyone of their choice. While some rejected Him, others accepted Him. Those who accepted Him were the ones who gained from the relationship. He never

exploited them. For Him, it was never about using His power or position in their hearts selfishly. And what about the times He was mistreated; Jesus made sure not to use His power to punish or exact revenge. While we saw their faults, Jesus saw their needs and prayed for those who spitefully used Him as an example for us all.

The world has a different view on how to use power and position; but God's way is the complete opposite of that. Jesus models to us what a person in power or lofty position with a merciful heart looks like. We can take a cue from Him and begin to model it too.

I've shared three ways of expressing mercy, but the expressions of mercy aren't limited to just those. For as many expressions as they are, we must be willing to practice them all knowing full well that blessings come to those who are merciful, while those who aren't run the risk of receiving troubles.

Someone might ask, How will those who are merciful be treated with mercy? The answer is simply this: According to God's discretion. But what's guaranteed is that God's decision will always be in their favour.

JESUS SAYS 11

*“God blesses those people whose hearts are pure. They will see him!”
(Matthew 5:8, CEV).*

Being a Christian carries with it many responsibilities; one of which is the state of maintaining a heart that is pure. Jesus, in the verse above reveals that a person who possesses such a heart will see God. But what does a heart that is pure look like?

A heart that is pure is yielded to and guided by the Holy Spirit and filled with the pure ways of Christ. You can identify a person whose heart is pure by the following traits:

- They love God and people, not just in words but in deeds.
- They are happy people and spread happiness wherever they are.
- They are peaceful people so they try to maintain a peaceful atmosphere.
- They are patient with others.

- They are kind to others.
- They are good to others.
- They have the quality of being faithful, trustworthy.
- They are gentle with others and have self-control.
- Yes, they don't give in to immoral ways, entertaining filthy thoughts nor engage in shameful deeds.

Someone might ask, Is it possible for an unbeliever to be pure at heart? I'd say, everyone has the potential to be pure at heart, but not everyone will be able to maximize that potential and maintain such purity at all times. And the reason is, there are just some things we can't do on our own. The Christian is able to be pure at heart and maintain that purity by yielding continuously to the Holy Spirit. That being said, the question we should ask ourselves as believers is, "Am I pure at heart?"

Jesus said those whose hearts are pure will see God. You know why? It's because some things are just easier when you're yielded to and guided by God's Spirit: like discerning God's presence easily, distinguishing His voice clearly, understanding His ways better, and encountering Him more frequently. And if those whose hearts are pure will see God, then those whose hearts aren't pure won't see God. Why? It's definitely because, when you aren't yielded to and guided by God's spirit, you'll discover it's hard to discern God's presence, know and distinguish His voice, understand His ways or encounter Him on a daily basis.

If you've asked yourself the question "Am I pure at heart?" and you've discovered that you are lacking in some areas, then I strongly suggest you check your relationship with the Holy Spirit and the things you watch listen to and allow your thoughts to dwell on.

JESUS SAYS 12

*“God blesses those people who make peace. They will be called his children!”
(Matthew 5:9, CEV).*

One more godly attitude that God blesses is being a peace-maker. A peace-maker is one who intervenes between people in a dispute in order to bring about an agreement or reconciliation. Jesus says those who are of this disposition will be called God's children. This could mean: considered as God's children or referred to by others as God's children. Whatever it means, being a peace-maker is a mindset we must all have as Christians.

Some might ask, why should I be a peace-maker? Aside peace-making being an attitude that God blesses, you should consider being a peace-maker because first, Jesus was one too. He is the Mediator between God and Man. Our sins separated us from God but the sacrifice of Jesus made a way for us to be reconciled with God, be at peace with God, and receive the peace of God. Jesus is not called the Prince of peace without reason. When we too take it

upon ourselves to encourage others who are estranged from God to be reconciled with Him through Jesus, then we will be following Jesus' example.

Another reason you should consider being a peace-maker is because it helps us die to our flesh. Christians are not expected to be preoccupied with themselves and their own affairs only. Being a peace-maker is one way we can die to our flesh. How? It causes us to think of others. Disputes are bound to happen within our family, in our community, at the workplace, and even in our churches. When this happens, we will do well not to look the other way, but step in with God's wisdom and mediate. We will be doing others much favour, but ultimately we will be helping ourselves too.

Also, you should consider being a peace-maker because the opposite is not an option for the believer. We must be people who strive for harmony and not go about sowing discord amongst others.

It's important that I add that being a peace-maker isn't always rewarding; at least not immediately. But we can take comfort in the fact that we are doing what God expects of us and trust Him not only for our reward but to help others do as they should.

JESUS SAYS 13

*“God blesses those people who are treated badly for doing right. They belong to the Kingdom of heaven”
(Matthew 5:10, CEV).*

“Stay wicked” is a phrase commonly used by young adults today. The rationale is that since people are mostly treated badly for doing right and being good, it’s best to stay wicked. Being treated badly for doing what is right is a very common phenomenon for Christians, and can be very hurtful. It can indeed get you to the point where you are tempted to “stay wicked” with the world. But doing that will mean we are living our lives according to the dictates of the world, not according to the will of God.

The will of God for us Christians is that we continue to do right and be good even when we are treated badly for it, and not harbour any grudge against those who treat us badly. This is the kind of attitude God blesses, and that attracts eternal happiness.

Should a Christian only do what is right when they are treated well? Should a Christian only be good when it is reciprocated? Of course not; a Christian must do what is right and continue to do so even when they are treated badly; because, it's one of the ways we differentiate ourselves from the world. This is what Jesus did, and it is what His disciples are expected to do. And when we do this, we are in good company, securing our spot amongst other believers who were treated badly for doing right.

It's not an exciting thought though, I know. To do good because Jesus said so, and then be repaid with evil. But perhaps it will encourage you to know that God blesses those people who are treated badly for doing right. I can't stress it enough that obedience to God never goes unrewarded. What we however don't have a say over or can't predict is how God will decide to bless us. Let's take Stephen's case as an example.

Stephen is one of my favourite Bible characters (Acts 7) , and serves as a good example for the point I'm trying to pass across. The only thing Stephen was guilty of doing was speaking with great wisdom that the Spirit of God gave him. But in the audience were those who took offence at his words. In return for the truth Stephen spoke, he was dragged to the front of a council, falsely accused, physically attacked, dragged outside the city and eventually stoned to death.

I'm sure you're wondering where the blessing in all of this is. I'll get right to it. That day, two significant things happened. The first is that before Stephen was dragged outside the city and stoned, he had a vision where he saw God and Jesus. We know without a shadow of doubt that his spirit will be received with a "well done, thou good and faithful servant!" Isn't that a blessing?

The second significant thing that happened that day was that Saul who later became the Apostle Paul was present while Stephen was being stoned. To be specific, it was at his feet that the coats of those who stoned Stephen were kept. But because Stephen prayed a prayer of forgiveness for those who hurt him, Saul who was also Paul could partake in that blessing. Besides, it would forever be stated that Stephen was a part of Paul's story. Isn't that a blessing? Let me even stretch it a bit further and say, Stephen's blessings is also that he became a great example for every believer, as his suffering for Christ sake became part of our Christian experience.

I know Stephen's actions would have pleased Jesus greatly. Wouldn't you want Jesus to observe your actions and be pleased? If yes, then continue to have a long-suffering and forgiving spirit.

JESUS SAYS 14

*“God will bless you when people insult you, mistreat you, and tell all kinds of evil lies about you because of me. Be happy and excited! You will have a great reward in heaven. People did these same things to the prophets who lived long ago”
(Matthew 5:11-12, CEV).*

Jesus is still addressing those who are treated badly for doing the right things. This time He is more specific, He is referring to those who are treated badly because of Him. Again He mentions that there's a reward for this sort of treatment; and this time He specifically says, there's a reward in heaven. He further encourages us by saying, we are in good company, for even the prophets of old had to endure such treatment.

It shouldn't be news to you that being a believer and a follower of Christ attracts persecution. It's like there's an invincible seal on us that reads: “Associated with Christ” that is seen by all, especially by the devil and his cohorts,

who so hate the believers and are stirred to unleash all sorts of madness just to discourage us from continuing to associate with Christ.

Immediately after I gave my life to Christ, everything that could go wrong went wrong. It did eventually get better but that was after a long while. I had enough time to change my mind not to follow Christ anymore, but thank God I persevered. Years later, I still experience different kinds of persecution, spiritually, physically, in my health, financially etc. To be honest, I have come to expect it still and it won't make me renounce Jesus.

I have decided to follow Him, and by His grace, will do so until my dying day, God helping me! This is how you should think too. The persecutions we face should make us all the more determined to remain associated with Christ; our suffering shouldn't sway us nor lead us to renounce the Lord. This is how the prophets of old handled persecution, and it's how the disciples did too.

Will the thought of a reward in heaven and being in the company of the prophets of old encourage you to respond differently to persecution for Christ's sake? If not, then how about this, that your willingness to endure persecution for Christ's sake proves how deep your faith in Him is.

JESUS SAYS 15

*“You are the salt for everyone on earth. But if salt no longer tastes like salt, how can it make food salty? All it is good for is to be thrown out and walked on”
(Matthew 5:13, CEV).*

It is an undeniable fact that salt is useful; we all use it to season our food and as preservative. I even recently read that some use it as fertilizer! Amazing, huh? Jesus in this verse likened believers to salt. He meant that me, you, all of us are useful. Useful to whom? To God. Our lives will be used by God in several ways for the benefit of the world. Do you get it?

Since Jesus emphasizes on salt as seasoning rather than preservative or fertilizer, let's shed some light on what that could mean for us. If you add salt to a bland food, what happens is that the food's taste improves. Let me ask you this: What do you think will happen over time when you put good, religious and godly people in the midst of bad, irreligious and profane people? If we go by the fact

that salt seasons bland food, then the good, religious and godly people are expected to have influenced the other group positively with their character. Do you now know what direction God intends to use our lives?

But Jesus reveals something else to us, a situation where salt no longer tastes like salt, and so can't make the food salted. For a minute don't dwell on the fact that the salt can't make the food salted, instead consider the salt no longer tasting like salt; because, before the salt is no longer able to make food salty, it first stops tasting like salt. This is a warning to us all who are believers. It's true our lives can suddenly not be used by God anymore; but it all starts with the Christian first losing the salt quality.

Some people have argued that salt doesn't lose its savour, and can't become worthless; but that argument has been countered by those who having done some research say salt when left on the bare earth, or exposed to the elements: sun, rain and air does in fact lose its savour. In the same way, Christians who become separate from Christ by allowing themselves become deeply absorbed in the ways of the world, till they start behaving according to socially acceptable conventions or standards, will end up becoming useless to God, at least when it concerns soul-winning.

Jesus says when the salt no longer tastes like salt and can't also make food salted, it stops being useful. It ends up being thrown out and walked on. We mustn't allow

this to be how our story ends. We must take our responsibility to ourselves seriously, and be mindful of our spiritual state. I know the ultimate desire of every believer is to be a useful vessel to God; but we must never forget that our spiritual state determines that. So it requires our full attention and commitment.

JESUS SAYS 16

*“You are the light for the whole world. A city built on top of a hill cannot be hidden, and no one lights a lamp and puts it under a clay pot. Instead, it is placed on a lampstand, where it can give light to everyone in the house. Make your light shine, so others will see the good you do and will praise your Father in heaven”
(Matthew 5:14-16, CEV).*

If God called for light during creation, it was because there was need for it. The Bible records that *the earth was barren, with no form of life; it was under a roaring ocean covered with darkness* (Genesis 1:2a). Light was essential and very important. So, if Jesus has called you and I, in fact every believer, the light for the whole world, it is to reveal the world's need of us. We are essential and very important in God's plan for the world. While visible light is a source of illumination, when a

human is referred to as light it is said that the person is worthy of attention or notice because of what they know and/or what they do.

Want to know God's plan for the world? Apostle Paul reveals it in 1 Timothy 2:4-5. *"God wants everyone to be saved and to know the whole truth, which is, there is only one God, and Christ Jesus is the only one who can bring us to God. Jesus was truly human, gave himself to rescue all of us."* Wondering how we are essential and very important in this plan of His? It's simple. He calls us light, because of what we know: we know the whole truth. Also, because of what we will do: we will live out the truth and tell people the truth. Someone who believes differently and lives differently from the world will be worthy of attention, and is bound to be noticed; don't you think?

This is why Jesus urges us to make our light shine. If we decide to hide what we know and refuse to live out the truth that we know, we will be opposing God's plan for our lives and for others. We must make our light shine because the people covered in darkness need our light to see; these are the people who have believed lies, who are deep in sin. How else will they discern good from bad, and how else will they recognize God's involvement and appreciate it?

JESUS SAYS 17

*“Don’t suppose I came to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to do away with them, but to give them their full meaning. Heaven and earth may disappear. But I promise you not even a period or comma will ever disappear from the Law. Everything written in it must happen”
(Matthew 5:17-18, CEV).*

Since Jesus said to the crowd *“don’t suppose I came to do away with the Law and the Prophets,”* it can only mean some people had assumed that was the case. And so it became important for Him to state clearly what His mission wasn’t and what it was. Did you know that the Law referred to the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch) which also contained God’s commands? And that the Prophets referred to the books which the Prophets wrote?

Anyway, Jesus says to the crowd, *“I did not come to do away with them, but to give them their full meaning.”* How? As Teacher, He will help the Jews as well as the rest of us learn more about and understand God and His revealed will. And as Messiah, He will be the fulfilment of prophecy! Do you see now how Jesus’ ministry and mission were connected with the Law and the Prophets?

Jesus, still speaking, informed the crowd that *“heaven and earth may disappear. But I promise you not even a period or comma will ever disappear from the Law. Everything written in it must happen.”* By this He revealed to the crowd a valid reason why the Law must persist: because of all the things it foreshadows; those things will eventually happen and we will need it for reference.

Since Jesus doesn’t “do away” with the Law and the Prophets, why should we? Since Jesus’ ministry and mission are so connected with the Law and the Prophets, don’t you think we should pay a little more attention to the Old Testament Scriptures? Think about it.

JESUS SAYS 18

*“If you reject even the least important command in the Law and teach others to do the same, you will be the least important person in the kingdom of heaven. But if you obey and teach others its commands, you will have an important place in the kingdom”
(Matthew 5:19, CEV).*

Jesus had a warning for those who make the mistake of rejecting God's command, treating some of it as important and the rest unimportant, and even go ahead and teach others to do same. He said people who were involved in such misdeeds wouldn't be honoured in God's kingdom. Honour in God's kingdom is reserved for those who take all of God's commands seriously, obeying, teaching and encouraging others to obey God too.

Does Jesus' warning apply to Christians today? Very much so. Sadly today, we have Christians that take the

“Do not murder” command seriously yet ignore the “Do not tell lies about others”, and indulge in lies. We also have professing Christians that believe that we have the obligation to obey only the commands in the New Testament but disregard the ones in the Old Testament; they disregard, for instance, the Ten Commandments. Both groups will do well to take Jesus’ warning seriously.

Did you notice from Jesus’ words that both groups get to teach? What I am trying to say is:

- We must be mindful about who we allow to influence us in our Christian faith. Only imitate those that imitate Christ, else you risk falling into the same sin as them.
- We must also be mindful about whose teachings we embrace. Too many teachings are subject to personal biases for us to swallow them hook, line and sinker. We must be willing to take the pains of staying with the word and learning directly from the Holy Spirit, so that when we are under whatever teaching, we know what to accept as truth, and what to reject because they are lies.

It’s true that God will handle those who lead others astray, but we don’t have to be in the number of those who are led astray, do we?

JESUS SAYS 19

*“You must obey God’s commands better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law obey them. If you don’t I promise you will never get into the kingdom of heaven”
(Matthew 5:20, CEV).*

The word ‘must’ is a verb that expresses necessity. Jesus used the word ‘must’ when talking about God’s commands to the crowd, and by extension you and me. He says, “*You must obey God’s commands.*” By this He means, it is required of us to comply with God’s command. But He doesn’t stop there; He takes it further and tells us that it is required of us to comply with God’s commands better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law do!

Did anyone ever tell you that God doesn’t require anything of you? Well, they lied. Did anyone ever tell you that God doesn’t have a standard? Again, they lied.

When Jesus said *“You must obey God’s commands better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law obey them. If you don’t I promise you will never get into the kingdom of heaven,”* He meant that we must approach the things of God in a better way than those religious hypocrites if we want to achieve the best result there is. You see, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were distinguished by their strict observance of the traditional and written law, so much so that it resulted in them being self-righteous. They saw themselves as morally superior and believed their works could earn them the best of what God had to offer. They believed a lie. Jesus therefore is telling us not to practice self-righteousness, but instead pursue the righteousness that He offers (through His sacrifice), as embracing it will be the only way to get into God’s kingdom, which also is God’s best.

Someone might ask: So, does all this mean we are free from the obligation of doing good works? The answer is no. Remember the laws and commandments in the Old Testament and the new are binding. What we are free from is depending on our own righteousness to get us anywhere or earn us anything. Those who understand the weight God lifted from our shoulders through the help of Jesus’s sacrifice will be grateful.

JESUS SAYS 20

*“But I promise you if you are angry with someone, you will have to stand trial. If you call someone a fool, you will be taken to court. And if you say that someone is worthless, you will be in danger of the fires of hell”
(Matthew 5:22, CEV).*

One minute Jesus is talking about anger, then evil speaking. Gets you thinking, what’s this all about? Let’s read the context.

*“You know our ancestors were told, “Do not murder” and “A murderer must be brought to trial.” But I promise you if you are angry with someone, you will have to stand trial. If you call someone a fool, you will be taken to court. And if you say that someone is worthless, you will be in danger of the fires of hell”
(Matthew 5:21-22, CEV).*

Did you know that just as there is an earthly court, there is an heavenly one too? It's like I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start from the beginning.

You see, one of the Ten Commandments stresses God's special disapproval of the sin of murder, and as such the people and the local court took it seriously. Now Jesus takes it upon Himself to inform the people about other sins that God disapproves and considers just as weighty as the sin of murder, hoping the people would also take them seriously and stop treating them lightly. They are anger (without a cause, left uncontrolled), name-calling (calling someone a fool) and concluding about someone (saying they are worthless). Jesus' words reveal that even though the local courts don't take these sins seriously, God does, and will hold those who engage in such behaviours accountable, and their misdeeds will not go unpunished.

How do you feel learning that anger, name-calling and concluding on people's worth is just as weighty as murder before God? I feel a need to be more cautious in my dealings with people. And if you are guilty of these sins, let the words you've read lead you to the path called new beginnings: where you confess your sins to God, renounce those sins and stay committed to living differently. Never forget that being a Christian also means being self-aware and being committed to one's growth.

JESUS SAYS 21

“So if you are about to place your gift on the altar and remember that someone is angry with you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. Make peace with that person, then come back and offer your gift to God”

(Matthew 5:23-24, CEV).

Addressing unresolved conflict should come before worship. Jesus’ words must have startled the crowd. Are you startled as well? You shouldn’t be. What if I told you that doing as Jesus said will end up improving the quality of our worship? Yes, if the condition of the heart is good, by this I mean pure, then the worship will be accepted; but if it’s not, then the worship will be rejected by God. Now how do you intend to offer worship to God with a heart that’s dismissive/lackadaisical/unrepentant towards the hurt you’ve caused others? Do you get it now?

If you thought God isn't interested in your interactions with others, now you know better. He is interested, so much so that He says it's okay to put off doing anything sacred – as worship, giving money: tithe, offering, contributions – if you're using that time to make things right with others. If you thought that your relationship with others is separate from the one you have with God, now you know better. Jesus' words reveal how intertwined they are and what influence one has on the other.

That being said, do you remember that earlier Jesus had mentioned that anger was just as weighty as murder in the sight of God; and those who engage in such negative emotions will be held accountable by God? Shouldn't that tell us that we ought to avoid unresolved conflicts at all cost? And, why? Think about it, why should someone engage in anger on account of us? Why should someone run the risk of facing the judgment of God because of our inaction? We shouldn't be the reason why someone stumbles into sin and faces punishment. Let's look out for one another by avoiding unresolved conflict at all cost.

To balance this, I believe I should add that there will be times when you aren't on the same page with the person you've offended. What I mean is while you might be interested in making things right, the offended party might not be interested at all or even ready yet. In the case of the former, my advice is that you still make your intentions known; and if the latter is the case, my advice

is that you be willing to wait till they are ready, then you try again. God has placed value on our relationship with others; shouldn't we also?

There's also the rare case where after we've done all we can, the situation doesn't improve; in such case, you should know you have two options: you can either be bogged down in guilt and regret, or choose to live in the present and work towards paying more attention to the relationships you have/will have. My advice is that we choose the latter.

JESUS SAYS 22

*“Before you are dragged into court, make friends with the person who has accused you of doing wrong. If you don’t you will be handed over to the judge and then to the officer who will put you in jail. I promise you will not get out until you have paid the last cent you owe”
(Matthew 5:25-26, CEV).*

Bible scholars say under Roman law, you could force someone who have offended you to go before the judge. However if both of you settle on the way to seeing the judge, then the person you’ve accused won’t be tried in court. Now having received this information, read again Jesus’ words in the scripture above. Does it make sense now?

I believe Jesus is urging us to be time-sensitive when trying to make things right with others, since situations often go from bad to worse when we procrastinate on the right things we ought to do. In the original context Jesus

is addressing our relationship with others, but you know we can also apply it to our relationship with God. We ought to as well be time-sensitive when dealing with unresolved offenses against God. It's not wise to put it off, or do it when we please as if we have all the time to live on earth. Even if our lives on earth are long, what if the Rapture takes place suddenly as sure it will? Why run the risk of facing "sudden" judgment?

After reading this, if there are some hard conversations you need to have, go ahead and do so. If there are apologies you need to make, go ahead and do so. Take advantage of the time you have now.

JESUS SAYS 23

“But I tell you if you look at another woman and want her, you are already unfaithful in your thoughts” (Matthew 5:28, CEV).

Let's read the full context first. “You know the commandment which says, “Be faithful in marriage.” But I tell you if you look at another woman and want her, you are already unfaithful in your thoughts” (Matthew 5:27-28, CEV).

Adultery is defined in the dictionary as sexual intercourse between a married person and a person who is not his or her spouse. And God's direct command is that we be faithful in marriage, meaning no adultery. At first glance, Jesus' words look like He is adding to God's command; but if you look closely, you discover that He is only elaborating on it. With the detail Jesus adds, we know how to guard against this sin properly.

Jesus says, “if you look at another woman and want her, you are already unfaithful in your thoughts.” What does this

mean? Two things: the first is that there's a connection between the eyes and thought, as it produces longing. The second is that continual longing, like in this case, corrupts the mind and eventually will result in the sinful action itself. What then is the call to action?

- Choose carefully what you see/ watch.
- Do not entertain lustful thoughts.
- Allow your mind dwell on the pure ways of Christ.

Jesus might have been addressing married folks, men specifically, but women and singles too will gain a lot from paying careful attention to Jesus' words.

JESUS SAYS 24

*“If your right eye causes you to sin, poke it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body, than for your whole body to end up in hell. If your right hand causes you to sin, chop it off and throw it away! It is better to lose one part of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell”
(Matthew 5:29-30, CEV).*

In the full context of these verses, Jesus is still addressing adultery and lust. We shouldn't take what Jesus says in the literal sense. He really doesn't mean we should cause ourselves bodily harm. What Jesus teaches in the verses is priority, setting our priorities right. In His words, there seems to be the question: “What is that thing that I enjoy, who is that person I adore that can lead me to sin?” Whatever that thing is, and whoever that person is, I must do away with, even if it hurts me.

Still maintaining the original context here are some examples:

I. A married man/woman that spends his/her time watching pornography, and/or movies where there's soft porn and/or listens to audios that promote eroticism should pay special attention to the words of Jesus. Visual images are powerful; what we hear has an impact on us as well. If you spend your time watching and listening to such immoral content, you already know what you are filling your mind and thoughts with. Jesus makes it clear that lustful thoughts are regarded as sin by God, and when these thoughts propel you to act (of which they will), you will be committing another sin. It will be best to take a cue from Jesus' words and make the much needed sacrifice of protecting your eye-gate and mind. Break the habit of watching pornography, movies or reading books containing immoral content and audios that promote eroticism. Doing away with what you've enjoyed in the past might be hard, but when you ask yourself this question, "Which do I prefer, earthly pleasures of sin or eternal happiness in heaven?" you would be motivated to keep choosing to do the right thing.

II. A married man/woman that has a "bestie" of the opposite sex and they at one time had feelings for. I may not know everything but I know that feelings die hard.

For that reason alone, it is foolishness to keep someone of the opposite sex whom you once had feelings for as a bestie, especially if you are married. Sooner than later, you will be tempted, and God help you if you fall into that temptation! We already know that the consequences are always dire. If you are married and you do not have a bestie of the opposite sex that you had feelings for, good for you. But if you do, you will do well to take a cue from Jesus' words and put serious gap between the two of you. Yes it might be uncomfortable, seeing that you are close with this individual; but will keeping the relationship and losing heaven be worth it?

III. A married man/woman that has close friends that are always up to no good. I'm yet to be married but the marriages of many whom I know have become the guide of "what not to do when married" for me. It's no secret that the company we keep is important. Our friends can either influence us to go into a deeper relationship with God or influence us to turn away from God completely. If you are one who has friends that are always up to no good, for instance, discussing immoral topics and engaging in extra-marital affairs, it won't be long before you find yourself indulging in their sin and slowly but eventually turning away from God. The right move to make is to cut them off! What you need are friends that revere God. Yes, you might be uncomfortable and be alone for a while

before God helps you pick out the right friends, but you will be preserving yourself in the long run from sin and God's judgment.

Being morally pure in thoughts and in action doesn't come cheap, but it attracts a good reward.

JESUS SAYS 25

*“But I tell you not to divorce your wife unless she has committed some terrible sexual sin”
(Matthew 5:32a, CEV).*

After addressing what seems to be one of the biggest enigmas in marriages: adultery, Jesus moves on to talk about divorce and remarriage. Here’s the full context of this verse.

“You have been taught that a man who divorces his wife must write out divorce papers for her. But I tell you not to divorce your wife unless she has committed some terrible sexual sin. If you divorce her, you will cause her to be unfaithful, just as any man who marries her is guilty of taking another man’s wife” (Matthew 5:31-32, CEV).

Jesus takes on the topic of divorce by first saying, “You have been taught that a man who divorces his wife

must write out divorce papers for her.” By this He mentions that someone had instructed the people on the matters of divorce, on how to go about it. And this someone was Moses. Jesus was making reference to the Old Testament law (See Deuteronomy 24:1-2).

Indeed Moses had permitted divorce; but what about Jesus? What’s His mind on the matter? When He reveals it, He says, *“But I tell you not to divorce your wife unless she has committed some terrible sexual sin.”* At first glance it does seem like Jesus is permitting divorce on the grounds of some terrible sexual sin, but to be absolutely sure we aren’t missing anything, let’s check out the King James Version.

“It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”

Now it seems Jesus is permitting divorce on the grounds of fornication. But since fornication means sexual intercourse between a man and a woman not married to each other, then was Jesus’ response directed at the married? I believe it was to those engaged to be married like in the case of Mary and Joseph (the earthly parents of Jesus), who had formally agreed to be married

but were yet to be united in marriage. These too are referred to as wife and husband because they were already engaged and awaiting their wedding when Mary became pregnant by God's miraculous act. Bible scholars say engagement under Jewish law is just as binding as marriage.

In order to give meaning to Jesus' words, if Mary, while engaged had had sexual intercourse with another man instead of waiting to be united in marriage first to Joseph before engaging in such activities only with him, then Joseph upon discovery of Mary's indiscretion, was permitted to dissolve the agreement to marry her. I hope you understand.

So although Moses permitted divorce amongst a man and a woman united in marriage, Jesus does not (See also Luke 16:18). What He permits is the dissolution of the agreement to marry between those who are engaged to be married.

Next is the issue of remarriage. What does Jesus say again?

"If you divorce her, you will cause her to be unfaithful, just as any man who marries her is guilty of taking another man's wife" (CEV).

"But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to

commit adultery: and whoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery” (KJV).

Now Jesus is addressing those already united in marriage but seek to divorce their spouse. Since His address is to the men, it must be understood that it was a patriarchal society. Back then, men issued the divorce writings; unlike now when women too can initiate and seek to be divorced from their husbands. So, what does Jesus say, He tells the married men (women must also take note) that if they go ahead with a divorce, they would cause their spouse to be unfaithful.

How? Often times those divorced seek remarriage. And even though the law will recognize that re-marriage, God won't. So in God's eyes, whoever marries the divorced woman is guilty of taking another man's wife, just like whoever marries the divorced man is guilty of taking another woman's husband, and the sexual acts they engage in, even within the confines of the remarriage, is considered as adultery.

Are you startled by Jesus' words concerning these matters? It's okay to be, but what's more important is what you do with what you now know. I hope going forward you realize that marriage is not a thing to be taken lightly but seriously. It's designed by God to be a permanent bond and so, it is necessary for singles to be intentional about being united in marriage with the right person.

If this is your resolve, then I'm almost certain you have plans of getting God involved in the process of choosing a life partner. Right? So here's my advice: Don't just pray about it, be armed with the truth about what the right spouse should be like. All over Scriptures you'll see hints on what Mr right/Miss right should be like; one of which is in 2 Corinthians 6:14 (CEV). Apostle Paul says, *"Stay away from people who are not followers of the Lord! Can someone who is good get along with someone who is evil? Are light and darkness the same?"* By this he warns against permanent association with an unbeliever. There you have it. You already know that Mr right/Miss right has to be someone who believes in and follows Christ as you do.

You ask, Does this mean marrying a believer guarantees success of a marriage? I'm not married yet, but I know one of the reasons people don't stay married is because their values don't align. Marrying a believer gets that out of the way; it's also a plus that both of you can take whatever issues you have to the Lord, hear from Him and work with Him to get the issues resolved. Now how will you get all that done with an unbeliever?

Anyway, that leads me to a second go-to scripture that hints on what Mr right/Miss right should be like: 2 Peter 1:5-7 (CEV). *"Peter says; Do your best to improve your faith by adding goodness, understanding, self-control, patience, devotion to God, concern for others, and love."* Peter's words make it clear that Mr right/Miss right should be someone who is

actively working on their spiritual growth as a believer. If they are working on their spiritual growth, it reflects on the physical. So it's easy to tell.

There are endless examples in the Scriptures; we will do well to spend time searching the Scriptures for them. If the world is making a mockery of the marriage institution, it then becomes our responsibility as Christians to model God's original intention for the institution, wouldn't you agree?

JESUS SAYS 26

“But I tell you not to swear by anything when you make a promise! When you make a promise, say only “Yes” or “No.” Anything else comes from the devil” (Matthew 5:34a, 37, CEV).

Let's read the full context of these verses.

L “You know our ancestors were told, “Don't use the Lord's name to make a promise unless you are going to keep it.” But I tell you not to swear by anything when you make a promise! Heaven is God's throne, so don't swear by heaven. The earth is God's footstool, so don't swear by the earth. Jerusalem is the city of the great king, so don't swear by it. Don't swear by your own head. You cannot make one hair white or black. When you make a promise, say only “Yes” or “No.” Anything else comes from the devil” (Matthew 5:33-37, CEV).

It was an accepted and common practice back in Bible time to make a promise using God's name. And why? It was because it convinced people you were going to really keep the promise. I also suppose it could also serve as motivation for the one who made a promise to keep it. I had said that this was the practice in Bible time; but do you agree with me that even now in our day this is still practiced? Even more disappointing is that it's practiced among Christians too.

But against this practice Jesus says, *"I tell you not to swear by anything when you make a promise."* Why? It's because, firstly, our word should be enough. People should be able to rely on our word; there really should be no need to embellish what we say with God's name or any holy thing. Secondly, we have no business making promises we don't intend to keep. If you aren't making a promise you don't intend to keep, then there should be no need profaning anything holy.

"When you make a promise," Jesus also says, *"say only 'Yes' or 'No.' Anything else comes from the devil."* By this He means when making a promise we should keep it simple and honest, else we find ourselves treading the path of deception. You know what the summary of Jesus' word is? That a Christian must be someone who hallows God's name and a person of integrity. Does this describe you?

JESUS SAYS 27

*“But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you”
(Matthew 5:39a, CEV).*

Dealing with offenses: What’s the godly way to respond when you have been offended? Jesus says it’s not to try to get even. Let’s read the verse above in its full context.

“You know you have been taught, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you. When someone slaps your right cheek, turn and let that person slap your other cheek” (Matthew 5:38-39, CEV).

What a hard thing to do! I’m sure this must have been the thoughts of those who listened as Jesus spoke; and to us too who are reading this right now. If I’ve observed anything about Jesus’ teachings it’s that it’s designed to stretch us. We are expected to leave our comfort zone and

try something challenging. The good thing however about obeying Jesus even when it's challenging is that transformation happens.

But let's go back to talking about what Jesus said. He gives an example to this new challenge of no revenge. He says for instance when someone slaps our right cheek, instead of slapping the person's right cheek in retaliation, we must turn and let the person slap our other cheek! Does Jesus mean that literally? No. He says that to address our attitude when we have been offended/hurt. He says don't raise your hand in revenge; instead, turn the other cheek. Turning the other cheek is an attitude: that sort of attitude that says, "I'm not going to mirror your actions, I'm going to respond in a way you don't expect; I'm going to be the bigger person."

I know these things are easier said/read than done; but they aren't impossible. Think of it this way. If it was an unbeliever that slapped you and you respond by slapping the person back, then at that moment you've failed to present the evidence of a life that spends time with Jesus and is undergoing transformation. But if you turn the other cheek, you will take the unbeliever by surprise. He/she or someone else observing the scene/hearing about it would be able to see clearly how different you are, and perhaps want to know why you reacted like that or how you were able to react like that. (Do you see an opportunity to witness?)

What if it's a believer? When a believer slaps you and you slap them back, it proves you both have a lot of work to do. But if you turn the other cheek instead of raising your hand in revenge, you show him/her that you are prioritizing your inward transformation hence the ability to do so. You also indirectly send a message to the other believer who clearly has a lot of yielding to do.

One more thing to note is that while Jesus asks us not to revenge, God is not dismissing our feelings nor is He overlooking the offense. Our feelings are valid before Him and the offense noted by Him. In His wisdom He will compensate us and avenge us. In fact, Jesus is in no way telling us to deliberately put ourselves in a vulnerable position nor is He encouraging us tolerate or remain in a situation of abuse, be it verbal or domestic or any other kind.

JESUS SAYS 28

*“If someone sues you for your shirt, give up your coat as well. If a soldier forces you to carry his pack one kilometer, carry it two kilometers”
(Matthew 5:40-41, CEV).*

What are your thoughts on going the extra mile when it's not fair? Hold that thought. Read again what Jesus just said. It sounds so unnatural, doesn't it?

Someone suing me for my shirt and I not only give up my shirt but hand them my coat! A soldier forces me to carry his pack one kilometre and I carry it for two kilometres instead. Unnatural, yes! But is it enough to make you reject this teaching?

Why do you want my coat so badly that you sue me for it? Why would you rob me of my right and make me your slave? Jesus says instead of focusing on the attitude of those who treat you unfairly and spitefully use you, focus on your own attitude. How do you respond when things

aren't fair? I insist on my rights. How about you? Let me guess, you insist on your rights too?

But do you see what Jesus wants us to prioritize and promote above our rights? Peace. Let's re-read the verses above, (For the sake of peace) *"If someone sues you for your shirt, give up your coat as well. If a soldier forces you to carry his pack one kilometer, carry it two kilometers."* Does it make sense now? (It might help to read Genesis 26:17-22).

Someone might ask, When I'm busy trying to make peace at the expense of my rights, who will fight for my right? The answer is God. God will fight for your rights if you prayerfully respond to the unfair way you've been treated. And continue to follow God's leading. The important thing is that instead of leaving God out of the solution to the problem and taking matters in your own hands, you make God a part of the solution to the problem, then watch Him do for you what you will like to do for yourself and more.

JESUS SAYS 29

*“When people ask you for something, give it to them. When they want to borrow money, lend it to them”
(Matthew 5:42, CEV).*

Jesus' words lay emphasis on being charitable. A Christian is expected to readily give assistance to those in need. Our lives as Christians must involve others, the resources we are blessed with must be shared with others. There's truly no room for self-centeredness in Christianity.

You know what else is revealed via Jesus' words? That our generosity must be to human beings in general. He said *“When people”*, He didn't say when citizens of a particular country, or when people with special rank or position in the society, or when your relatives, or when your supporters/employees, or when a particular gender or when Christians like you etc. I'm sure you get it.

We've all heard the popular saying, “You can't give what you don't have”. It's applicable even here with Jesus' words. So, yes, even though Jesus says *when people ask you*

for something, give it to them, remember, you can only give it if you have it. Yes, He says, *when they want to borrow money, lend it to them*; again, you can only lend someone money that you have. The sin is refusing to share when you have, not declining a request because you don't have.

It's also fair that we address a popular reason why some Christians find it hard to share with others. Many Christians have found themselves turning a deaf ear to the plea from others for help because people don't reciprocate. It's true not a lot of people repay generosity the right way. Many turn around and repay someone with evil who had been kind to them. If this is why you haven't been sharing and caring, then I'd share this true life story with you.

My mum told me about a time in her life that she was tired of being charitable. She had always assisted those in need but she was always repaid with evil. One day, she made up her mind that she will no longer be who she was – the one who people could turn to for different kinds of help. The very day she made that decision, she was in the Bible college, and it was still morning. By evening when she was leaving the college for home, someone ran up to her with a message from God. It was a young man, a fresher that never really spoke with anyone. He told her God said He knows what her decision was concerning being charitable and that she must not tread that path but continue to be charitable even though she's been repaid with evil. That He is the one who rewards, not humans,

and He has been rewarding her generosity in different ways and will continue to do so.

Didn't you notice that Jesus says nothing about the attitude of the receiver? Or mentions that the receiver be obliged to repay the giver? You know, I bet it's because He wants us to shift our focus from those we tend to expect good deeds, and focus instead on God. God takes note of our good deeds, and will do the rewarding Himself.

JESUS SAYS 30

*“But you must always act like your
Father in heaven”
(Matthew 5:48, CEV).*

Jesus says we must always act like our Father. What does He mean by this? Let’s read the full context of this verse.

“You have heard people say, “Love your neighbors and hate your enemies. But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And He sends rain for those ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong. If you love only those people who love you, will God reward you for this? Even tax collectors love their friends. If you greet only your friends, what’s so great about this? Don’t even unbelievers do that? But you must always act like your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:43-48, CEV).

A long time ago I sat under a pastor's teaching and heard him say, "You have only one enemy. And no, it's not someone who is actively opposed to you or someone who is hostile to you, it's the devil." I have since then believed that truth. In fact, it has helped me in my interactions with people and my relationships as well.

Do you regard certain humans as your enemies? If yes, then you will agree that hatred is the accepted attitude towards those you consider enemies, right? It is the generally accepted attitude towards those we consider "enemies" that Jesus challenges first in the verses above. He says *"love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven."*

I know what you're thinking that Jesus is asking for the impossible. But He isn't. He isn't telling us to do what He doesn't know we can do, at least via the provision that's been made to us and for us. What's that provision? The Holy Spirit! A person who is living under the influence of the Holy Spirit and walking according to His leading will be able to mirror the actions of the Father. The love of the Father is not subject to any conditions. It's the reason why *"He sends rain for those ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong."* It's His desire for our love to look that way, so much so that He rewards us when we do so.

Rounding off He says, *"But you must always act like your Father in heaven."* I'm glad Jesus doesn't say you must always act like God; rather, He says you must always act like your Father in heaven. I say this because people can

get the wrong idea and think it's okay to go around with a god-complex. Jesus says act like your Father. There are many sides to God, but for me, Father is my favourite side to God. And why? It's because of His heart, a large one that contains everyone and loves everyone unconditionally. Ever heard of the saying, "like father like son... like mother like daughter"? When people say this, what they mean is that there are certain traits the father possesses that the son does too, same applies in the case of mothers and daughters. This is what I believe Jesus meant when He says we should always act like our Father, that our love should look like His.



DOING GOOD DEEDS

JESUS SAYS 31

*“When you do good deeds, don't try to show off. If you do, you won't get a reward from your Father in heaven”
(Matthew 6:1, CEV).*

‘**W**HEN YOU DO good deeds’, Jesus says. Let’s take note that He didn’t say ‘*if you do good deeds.*’ And, because He says ‘*when*’, we know that God expects us (Christians) to do good deeds.

One such example is giving, as we will soon read; however, good deeds can’t be limited to just giving only. It’s generally actions that are virtuous, righteous etc. But it is not enough to “do good deeds”, it has to be done right. How do we do it right? Jesus says, “*don't try to show off*” – what He means by this is that we must be careful not to do our good deeds with the intention of drawing attention to ourselves. The danger with doing our good deeds the wrong way is that we won’t be rewarded by God for it.

Furthermore, Jesus says: “*When you give to the poor, don't blow a loud horn. That's what show-offs do in the synagogues*

and on the street corners, because they are always looking for praise. I can assure you that they already have their reward. When you give to the poor, don't let anyone know about it. Then your gift will be given in secret. Your Father knows what is done in secret and will reward you" (Matthew 6:2-4, CEV).

Jesus uses "the poor" to represent those who will be recipients of our giving. When we say someone is poor it usually means they are lacking sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in society; but it can also mean that they are deficient or lacking in areas aside their finances and are deserving of pity or sympathy. Either way, in the scenario Jesus gives, there's the giver who has and is willing to give, and there is the poor who is lacking and eager to receive.

Jesus' warning however is to the giver. He warns the giver not to *blow a loud horn* when they give, thereby announcing their good deeds and drawing attention to themselves. Jesus' says doing that only proves that the giver is looking for the praises of men and that's all they will receive. This means they've forfeited the praises of God and His reward. However, the giver who gives in secret – refusing to announce their good deeds or drawing attention to themselves and preserving the anonymity of the poor – is the one who will receive the praises of God (rather than of men) and will be rewarded by Him as well.

How have you been giving? The right way or the wrong way? If it's the wrong way, it's time to start doing it right.

Someone might ask, What then should we do in a situation where we have to give in public? Not give at all? It is true that there are some giving that will be done in the public. In such cases, we mustn't refrain from giving. There is no law that says we should. What we must however remember is not to make a show of it. And, even if we end up getting the attention of people and their praises begin to trickle in, remember to give God the glory.

JESUS SAYS 32

*“When you pray, don't be like those show-offs who love to stand up and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners. They do this just to look good. I can assure you that they already have their reward”
(Matthew 6:5, CEV).*

Again, the word ‘when’ is used. Jesus says *when you pray*; we should understand and accept this to mean that God expects us to communicate with Him. He looks forward to it. That being said, Jesus goes on to say, *“don't be like those show-offs who love to stand up and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners.”* Let's read this to mean Jesus is telling us how not to behave during prayer. Of course Jesus doesn't condemn standing up to pray, nor does He condemn praying at public gatherings or in public. What He condemns is making a show out of prayer time, especially when at public gatherings or in the public.

People who make a show out of prayer time when at public gathering or in the public do it for one reason: to look good. By good I mean they want to appear religious or religiously superior to others. And the reward they'll receive is the praise/admiration of others; they can't expect anything from God.

You may ask, What then is the right way to conduct one's self while praying at public gatherings and in public? I tell you, it's simple. From Jesus' words the answer is revealed: let prayer be prayer, be sincere and don't make a show out of it. Communicate with God without the intention of impressing the people around.

In verse 6, Jesus says, *"when you pray, go into a room alone and close the door. Pray to your Father in private. He knows what is done in private and will reward you"* (Matthew 6:6, CEV).. Seeing that Jesus talks about praying in private after addressing praying in public, it's easy to think He is approving praying in private and condemning praying in public. But that is not the case. Tell me, can we really avoid praying at public gatherings or in public? The answer is no. Therefore we shouldn't take His words to mean what they don't mean.

Here in verse 6, Jesus talks about praying in private. He was reassuring His hearers and us that prayer doesn't have to be done only in public for it to be answered. Prayers done in private are also recognized and rewarded by God.

Put the two prayer places side by side, which do you do more: pray in public or in private? If you ask me, my advice is that you pray. Whether it's in public or in private, just make sure you pray. A Christian should pray. There will be a stunt in your spiritual growth and maturity if you love to pray only in public and do not pray at all in private though. One of the reasons we are often encouraged to pray in private is because there's no room for pretence there. In private you are just yourself before God and don't have the distraction of trying to impress anyone. Beyond that, it also helps to deepen your bond with God and gives you many opportunities to grow your faith. I tell you nothing deepens your bond with God more than practicing communicating with Him about everything and hearing Him communicate back. It strengthens your faith in Him as you make your requests known to Him, and watching Him come through for you, like He promised to do. These are things you should experience with God; and the way to go about it is by privately praying to God.

JESUS SAYS 33

*“When you pray, don't talk on and on as people do who don't know God. They think God likes to hear long prayers. Don't be like them. Your Father knows what you need even before you ask”
(Matthew 6:7-8, CEV).*

Whether we are praying in public or in private, Jesus says we mustn't pray concerning our needs at a tedious length. We must leave such practices for “those who do not know God”. They are the ones who *believe* that the secret to answered prayer is in the length of the prayer and in many words. We mustn't *be(lieve)* like them.

Jesus then rounds off His advice by reminding us that the God we are praying to is our Father, One whose responsibility is to cater to our needs, One who knows what we need before we even ask. So we can go ahead and offer faith-filled simple prayers, yes, even if they are short, and thank Him for His help.

It was after saying this that Jesus gives a model prayer. *“You should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, help us to honor your name. Come and set up your kingdom, so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven. Give us our food for today. Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others. Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil”* (Verses 9-13, CEV).

From Jesus’ model prayer, we are reminded of who our prayers are directed to: Our Father in heaven. Next He reveals to us other aspects to prayer. When we pray, we must remember to pray for a heart that desires to honour God, an earth where people acknowledge God’s revealed will and obey it. We should pray for our daily needs, then God’s forgiveness because we ever so often fall short; and steadfastness during testings so we don’t get tempted, and for protection from evil.

Let’s note that what Jesus gives via His model prayer is guidance in prayer, because we need the right mindset in prayer, and also to learn the various aspects of prayer. When we follow His guidance, our prayer time ceases to be only about our physical needs, but in a broader sense, includes our relationship with God and our duty to others.

JESUS SAYS 34

“If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins”

(Matthew 6:14-15, CEV).

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus had prayed saying, *“Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.”* The Lord is stressing that one of the conditions for answered prayer is forgiveness. What does this mean?

To the Non-Believer who wants to be reconciled with God, please note that you going ahead to forgive those who have wronged you will not be enough to earn you God’s forgiveness for all of your sins. It is Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross that makes being reconciled with God possible. To enjoy the privileges of Jesus’ sacrifice, you simply have to repent of all your past sins, then express your personal faith in Jesus. Believe who Jesus is. Believe in His sacrifice and resurrection. Confess it freely and live according to His ways, turning away from your old ways

completely. Bear in mind Jesus' words in John 14:6 (CEV), *"I am the way, the truth, and the life!" Jesus answered. "Without me, no one can go to the Father."*

To the Believer who prioritizes their relationship with God, please note that Jesus means what He said: God's forgiveness is conditional. You will receive God's forgiveness for your errors in your day-to-day life only if you're forgiving of the hurt others cause you. The ability to forgive is one of the graces a Christian must possess since it is a by-product of love, which is one of the works of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

I often held grudges before I came to Christ. But now forgiveness has been made easy after knowing Christ. Let me explain it to you. I started out trying to understand why Jesus and Stephen would want to forgive those who hurt them, injurious people who weren't even sorry, by the way. But I ended up discovering that it wasn't about the why, but the how. They were able to do it because they had given complete control to God's Spirit. And you and I will be able to also if we do same.

JESUS SAYS 35

*“When you go without eating, don’t try to look gloomy as those show-offs do when they go without eating. I can assure you that they already have their reward. Instead, comb your hair and wash your face. Then others won’t know you are going without eating. But your Father sees what is done in private, and He will reward you”
(Matthew 6:16-18, CEV).*

Should a time come when we are led by the Spirit of God to go without eating for a while (i.e. to fast), Jesus says we mustn’t do it to put on a show for others. Those who make their fasting evident to all will receive as their reward the attention/praise of men and forfeit any reward from God.

How then do we fast right? Jesus says instead of making it evident that you’re fasting by looking sad/

miserable/unkempt, groom yourself, act normal, don't make it obvious that you're fasting. Just because people won't know doesn't mean God won't. And when your fasting is between you and God, then and only then will you be eligible for a reward from Him.

A fast that is evident for all to see, or a fast that's between you and God, which one have you been doing? Anyone who fasts and makes it evident for all has misplaced priorities. No one doing that should be fasting in the first place. Why do we fast? In the law, fasting is commanded for the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16:29, 31; Numbers 29:7). Before Jesus fasted (Matthew 4:1-11), Moses fasted (Deuteronomy 9:9, 18, 25; 10:10); and if we are to draw conclusion from all three examples, fasting was (and still is) a way of spiritual discipline which can be a necessary preliminary exercise before communicating with God/ receiving from God. There's absolutely no room for showmanship in it.

You ask, Is Jesus discouraging group fasting? To this I say no. Two or three will always gather and agree concerning a matter and decide to fast and pray about a matter; even then, Jesus' instructions can still be adhered to.

JESUS SAYS 36

*“Don’t store up treasures on earth! Moths and rust can destroy them, and thieves can break in and steal them. Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy them, and thieves cannot break in and steal them. Your heart will always be where your treasure is”
(Matthew 6:19-21, CEV).*

Jesus commands and warns the Christian against accumulating treasures on earth. Why? He says for obvious reasons like moths and rust destroying them and thieves breaking in to steal them. He then encourages the Christian to accumulate treasures in heaven. And why? Again, for obvious reasons like moth and rust not being able to destroy them and thieves not able to break in and steal in heaven. But just as He rounds off His command, He reveals a less conspicuous reason for His command, it’s so that we won’t be preoccupied with

the things of this world but instead our thoughts will be filled with spiritual things and about heaven.

We've heard Jesus' command and warning, but I'm sure you're wondering what the treasures on earth are and if those can be stored in heaven. Earthly treasures are anything valuable like money, riches, jewels and gems like gold, silver, other precious metals and assets. None of these can be stored in heaven because they have no spiritual value. The treasures Jesus is asking us to store up in heaven are actions that have spiritual value and attract spiritual reward. For instance, devoting yourself to God, His will and ways, and serving humanity. Now, this sort has spiritual value, attracts spiritual reward and can be stored in heaven.

Choosing to store up treasures on earth carries a price tag though we hardly consider it. Jesus makes it clear; it's either you are storing treasures on earth or you're storing treasures in heaven. It's either you are preoccupied with the things of the world or your thoughts are filled with the spiritual things of God and heaven. The result of one is an accumulation of things with no eternal value, and the other is actions that lead to accumulation of rewards with eternal value. The choice remains ours, what we embrace and what we forfeit! When our lives on earth are over, what will we be left with? I believe Jesus' command is a call for us to set our priorities right.

To balance things, it is important that we address the elephant in the room: Does Jesus not want us to be rich? So we don't fall into error, let's read Jesus' command/warning again: "*Don't store up treasures on earth!*" By this He means do not accumulate treasures on earth. And the reason He gives, apart from the fact that we can be separated from our treasures, is that we will be preoccupied with earthly things; trusting in them, and always looking to increase them. Or haven't you heard that those who love money and wealth will never be satisfied with what they have?

People who desire to be rich and accumulate wealth are the ones who fall into all sorts of temptations and traps. They give up their faith and cause themselves a lot of pain. So here's what I believe: If God brings you into financial prosperity, be thankful for it and be content with it. Don't go seeking for more; instead, spend your time focusing on God and how you can be a blessing to others with what you have.

JESUS SAYS 37

*“Your eyes are a window for your body. When they are good, you have all the light you need. But when your eyes are bad, everything is dark. If the light inside you is dark, you surely are in the dark”
(Matthew 6:22-23).*

The eye is the organ through which we see. Jesus calls it the window for the body. Then He reveals two qualities of the eye: good and bad. The good eye continues to serve its owner, giving the light he/she needs; but the bad eye can't serve its owner as it should, and plunges the owner into darkness outwardly and inwardly. One thing is for sure, our eyes are important; we need them to be in the best shape/condition they can be so they continue to serve us as they should. Right?

How do we do this? You'll be surprised that from physical eye-care tips, we can get spiritual eye-care tips too. Let's get into it:

λ The first is eating balanced diet consisting of a variety of different food nutrients that provide the body adequate amounts of health values. It's widely accepted that eating balanced diet helps the eye. For the Christian, there's no other balanced diet like the word of God. It contains all the spiritual nutrients we need. "Eating" it daily with the help of the Holy Spirit, and meditating on it will indeed help keep our spiritual eye in good condition.

λ The second is maintaining a healthy weight, because being overweight increases risk of having diabetes, which can put one at higher risk of eye diseases. For the Christian, maintaining a healthy weight will involve developing and maintaining a habit of feeding the spirit and starving the flesh. A Christian who is "overweight" spiritually is the one who spends their time feeding the flesh watching, listening to or reading things that aren't godly. It's important that we remember that being spiritually overweight will leave us with bad spiritual eyesight.

λ Then there's also regular exercise. Exercising can lower the risk of eye problems. There are tons of spiritual exercises more profitable than the physical ones; e.g. praying and fasting. It's not for nothing the Bible admonishes us to pray without ceasing; and adding fasting

to our prayer, by skipping food for a period: half a day, full day, a few or as many days without hurting one's health, will always help our spiritual wellbeing.

λ The use of sunglasses. Sunglasses block out radiations that are harmful to the eyes! When we decide to see the world and the things in it through God's lenses, we will be surely protecting our spiritual eyes from going bad.

Good eyes are not obtained by wishful thinking, but by deliberate actions by the owner, actions that I have already attempted to list out. Bad eyes on the other hand are largely due to the inaction of the owner. But the reason why we can't afford to have bad eyes is that bad eyes lead to corruption. Here's how. The owner sees the things of this world; this creates a desire in his/her heart, and following through with that desire leads to sin. Be careful what you see on TV, social media of all shapes on the Internet and what you read or preoccupy your heart with.

Now you see why we must aim for good spiritual eyes; it's because we will not only be guarding our hearts from negative influences, we will be preserving ourselves from corruption of body, spirit and soul.

JESUS SAYS 38

*“You cannot be the slave of two masters! You will like one more than the other or be more loyal to one than the other. You cannot serve both God and money”
(Matthew 6:24, CEV).*

Jesus states an impossibility for the Christian: *“You cannot be the slave of two masters!”* He gives His reasons: *“You will like one more than the other or be more loyal to one than the other.”* He then reveals who these two masters are: *“You cannot serve both God and money.”* Jesus’ words in the end leave us with a choice to make. Whose slave are you, God or Money?

The Christian is expected to choose to serve God, but not with words alone. Our choice is expected to reflect in our thoughts, decisions, ambitions, conversations etc. But just because Christians are expected to choose God over money doesn’t mean everyone who professes to be Christian does that. There are many who claim to be Christians but it’s evident whose slave they are: their master is money. I say it’s obvious because you can tell by

the thoughts that fill their minds, where their confidence lies, by the decisions they make, by their goals and the tenor of their conversations. If this is you, you've got to repent and rededicate your life to God.

Choosing to serve God over money not only brings upon us God's blessings in different forms here on earth, it also has eternal rewards. Money on the other hand offers only temporary happiness because of the things it can afford us to buy here; but that's just it, our lives end up being devoid of contentment. Serving money not only separates us from God here on earth, it also robs us of what should be our eternal reward. What a cruel master!

I should add that just because we have chosen God doesn't mean that we won't be faced with challenges that will seek to lure us to change our decision. The right approach to such situations is to stand by our decision no matter what, trusting that God will keep His word that says if we put Him first, other things will be given to us (Matthew 6:33).

JESUS SAYS 39

*“I tell you not to worry about your life. Don’t worry about having something to eat, drink, or wear. Isn’t life more than food or clothing?”
(Matthew 6:25, CEV).*

Jesus warns those with Him (and us) against worrying. This verse is the beginning of a couple of verses against worry. It might seem a long read, but I think it’s important we take it all in.

“Look at the birds in the sky! They don’t plant or harvest. They don’t even store grain in barns. Yet your Father in heaven takes care of them. Aren’t you worth much more than birds? Can worry make you live longer? Why worry about clothes? Look how the wild flowers grow. They don’t work hard to make their clothes. But I tell you that Solomon with all his wealth wasn’t as well clothed as one of them. God gives such beauty to everything that grows in the fields, even though it is here today and thrown into a fire tomorrow.

God will surely do even more for you! Why do you have such little faith? Don't worry and ask yourselves, "Will we have anything to eat? Will we have anything to drink? Will we have any clothes to wear?" Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things. Your Father in heaven knows you need all of these. But more than anything else, put God's work first and do what He wants. Then the other things will be yours as well. Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You have enough to worry about today" (Verse 26-34, CEV).

Why do people, 'Christians' inclusive, choose to serve money instead of God? Why do we have internal conflict over whose slave to be? I'll tell you why; it's because of concerns about basic needs. Jesus knows this, and is why He warns us not to worry about our life, about having something to eat, something to drink or wear. He tells us that there's more to life than these things. To a lot of people, that can't be sufficient assurance; so Jesus goes on to talk about the birds, hoping that by observing how God, who is our Father, takes care of them, we would be certain that since we are worth more than birds to Him, He will take care of us.

Worry can't lengthen our days nor improve the quality of our lives by providing our basic needs, e.g. clothing; so it's a futile venture. Jesus also gives the example of the wild flowers which are so well clothed without any input

from their end. Even Solomon with all his wealth couldn't match up to the flowers. If God gives as much attention and care to mere grass and things that grow in the wild, surely we can be assured that He will do even more for us.

Worrying equals little faith. It disguises itself as concerns about basic needs when in actual sense it really proves that you don't know or trust God. We ought to trust Him as our Father: my Father, your Father; and that He knows all our needs. So, rather than worry, let's choose faith; instead of money, let's choose God and put Him and His work first, doing what He wants. Then we will get to see all the other things (our needs) become ours by His providence.

The genuine Christian is not a 'worrier', but one who believes that tomorrow will take care of itself (because God has gone ahead), and would live each day at a time, preoccupying ourselves only with the present, with concrete assurance that God is in it with us.

While Jesus' words minister to people in general, but Christians especially, I'd like to also single out those called into full time ministry, those already in it and those considering answering the call. To the former, I hope Jesus' words speaks peace to your heart if it's anxious/uneasy about your needs; and to the latter, I hope Jesus' words, encourage you to take the step you've been hesitating to take. To both groups, please never forget that God wants to take care of you, and He will, if you let Him. Do let Him!

4

JUDGING OTHERS DISHONESTLY

JESUS SAYS 40

*“Don’t condemn others, and God won’t condemn you. God will be as hard on you as you are on others! He will treat you exactly as you treat them”
(Matthew 7:1-2, CEV).*

THIS CHAPTER OPENS with Jesus’ teaching on our treatment of others. By others, I believe, He meant not just believers but non-believers too. *“Don’t condemn others,”* He says, meaning, if you are in the habit of pointing out the flaws and faults of others, you have to stop doing it. And if you are in the habit of passing ‘spiritual’ judgment on others, you also have to stop doing that. If you continue with that behaviour, then you must be prepared for God’s condemnation too, because the standard you use in judging others is what God will use on you as well. That’s scary! Don’t you think so, considering we hold people to such high standards!

Jesus has stated the main reason why we must respond differently to the flaws and faults of others; but I think there are two more important ones:

λ Those who are in the habit of pointing out people's flaws/faults and passing judgment on them often think they are spot-on, since they do so after what they consider a careful evaluation of the person they condemn, and their assessment of the person's flaws/faults is accurate; but they miss out on discerning the person's spiritual needs. Not just that, but also the opportunity to lead the person to, and help them embrace the One who can meet that need: Jesus. Every Christian is expected to be a soul-winner; and soul-winners focus on the needs, not the flaws/faults of the one who is lost.

λ Those who are in the habit of pointing out people's flaws/faults and passing judgment on them do so because they believe they are spiritually/morally superior to others. This is dangerous. Having a wrong perception of your spiritual state blinds you to your own flaws and faults; and if you're blinded that way, how can you repent and realign yourself with God's word, will and ways? Every Christian must do well to avoid the trap of self-deception; and the way to do that is to have the right perception of yourself and your spiritual state.

Because of how we can be beneficial to others and for our own spiritual well-being, it's best we heed Jesus' command.

JESUS SAYS 41

*“You can see the speck in your friend’s eye, but you don’t notice the log in your own eye. How can you say, “My friend, let me take the speck out of your eye,” when you don’t see the log in your own eye? You’re nothing but show-offs! First, take the log out of your own eye; then you can see how to take the speck out of your friend’s eye”
(Matthew 7:3-5, CEV).*

Earlier, Jesus had commanded the crowd, including you and me, not to condemn others. Still teaching, He tells us that though it’s easy to see what’s wrong in the life of others, focusing solely on that will only lead to us failing to pay proper attention to our own flaws. It is only natural that when a Christian sees what’s wrong in the life of another Christian or an unbeliever, we want to call their attention to it in an attempt to correct what’s wrong in their lives; and there’s

nothing wrong with that provided we aren't completely blinded to our flaws. Going by Jesus' words, those who attempt to correct what's wrong in the life of others but are completely blinded to their own flaws are nothing but show-offs, another word for posers. A poser is a fake. Are you a fake Christian? I hope not.

Jesus says this is the correct order of things, that each of us Christians be aware of our own spiritual state if we are to help others at all. Before Christ we were sinners in need of the Saviour. After our initial encounter with Christ, we remain debtors to His grace as we actively yield to His Spirit while He does the work of transformation in us. With that level of self-awareness and dedication to one's spiritual growth and maturity, we will be better equipped at helping others. How? Only then would we be able to show those in the wrong the same compassion and patience Jesus continues to show us. There will then be no airs about us! Besides, doesn't this just remind you that God is interested first in saving you before using you? It should.

I have often heard some professing Christians, including unbelievers quote the verses above, especially the opening ones when they are caught in sin and do not want to be held accountable. We need to know that that is misconstruing Jesus' words. From time to time God does send our fellow Christians our way, even though it's the Holy Spirit's job to convict one of sin. God does use

them to point out our wrongs. The Holy Scripture is full of such instances.

So, instead of being defensive and attempting to avoid reprove, we ought to open our hearts to wise counsel; then confess and repent of our sins, receive God's forgiveness, and not continue in sin. If we fail to do this, we won't be spared the negative consequences of our actions. Our God is loving; but He is also a righteous judge. Let's keep that in mind.

JESUS SAYS 42

*“Don’t give to dogs what belongs to God.
They will only turn and attack you.
Don’t throw pearls down in front of pigs.
They will trample all over them”
(Matthew 7:6, CEV).*

‘Dogs’ and ‘pigs’ were used figuratively by Jesus, but the general message is direct: Jesus is teaching us how to dispense sacred or valuable things.

When a person is referred to as a dog, it’s not a term of endearment; it describes the person’s behaviour, which is generally unpleasant, contemptible or wicked. And when a person is referred to as a pig, it also describes the person’s behaviour, which will be generally unpleasant as well. One thing we can agree on is that people who fall into these categories have behaviours that need correcting; but the transformation must first begin on the inside before it reflects on the outside. And should we choose to believe that such people don’t know God, we must then go ahead to introduce the gospel to them and

offer them the pearls of the forgiveness of God and peace with God. This is where Jesus' words come in.

When we share with them the gospel and offer them the forgiveness of God and peace but they reject it, we must not force it on them. Why? It's because one more thing dogs and pigs have in common is that they have a tendency of being hostile. Forcing them to treat the gospel as truth might earn you insults and injuries. And, forcing them to value the pearls of forgiveness of God and peace with God will incite them to treat it with contempt. So why bother? We must be discerning, knowing when to stay or move on from people and situations.

From Jesus' words, we know who we should spend time sharing the gospel with, offering them forgiveness and peace of God; it's those whose welcome you and are receptive towards the message you preach. Others who spurn the word may be left for another time.

JESUS SAYS 43

*“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened for you. Everyone who asks will receive. Everyone who searches will find. And the door will be opened for everyone who knocks”
(Matthew 7:7-8, CEV).*

Ask, search and knock are all ways by which Jesus encourages us, believers and non-believers, to communicate with God and involve Him in our affairs. And when He says *“everyone who asks will receive. Everyone who searches will find. And the door will be opened for everyone who knocks,”* He is assuring us that we will get a response from God, whether as non-believer or as a believer. Though the needs are different, everyone means every person; no one is left out.

But Jesus isn't done speaking on this topic. He continues to say, *“Would any of you give your hungry child a stone, if the child asked for some bread? Would you give your child a snake if the child asked for a fish? As bad as you are, you*

still know how to give good gifts to your children. But your heavenly Father is even more ready to give good things to people who ask” (verses 9-11, CEV).

Asides from revealing how God responds to us, which is like earthly fathers do, only that He does it better, Jesus also addresses the issue of our requests in His illustration. From His illustration we see a child who is in need of food and recognizes who can meet that need: the father, and approaches him with the right request. The child requests for bread and fish (which will meet that need). It was a good request, the right request. If the child had asked for anything else, it would be considered a stone/a snake (it can't meet that need and might only cause harm). The father sees the child, knows the need, hears the request and responds favourably to the child. He/she has asked for a good thing and should receive it. It is the Father's will to provide the child's basic needs.

Do you see how this applies to us too? We have been assured that God will respond to us when we communicate with Him and involve Him in our affairs. And the response will be favourable depending on the kind of requests we make. There are obvious conditions for a favourable response: make a good/right request, a request that must align with the Father's will.

For example, a non-believer that realizes their spiritual hunger and cries out to God for His forgiveness and peace (these are good things to ask for), can expect a favourable answer from God because it is His desire for them to be

saved and reconciled to Him. He will readily forgive the penitent and repentant sinner and grant him/her the pardon they need and acceptance into God's family of saints.

Then to the believer who realizes they've been spiritually lethargic and comes crying to God for revival, this too is a good thing to ask, for it is God's desire for us to grow and mature in the faith and be strong and do exploits in His name. So, He will readily give to us all things pertaining to this present life and the life to come. Do you get it now?

What then have you been asking God? Have you been asking according to His will? You know, to know God's general will for your life, you've got to read the Bible and know His specific will for your life; along with that, you've got to spend some time in private prayer.

In conclusion, I should add that in Jesus' illustration, we aren't told when the child gets the bread and fish from the father; we're only given the assurance that the child will get it. What this means for us is that if we can trust God with our needs, we must also be willing to trust in His timing, even if it isn't disclosed to us.

JESUS SAYS 44

“Treat others as you want them to treat you. This is what the Law and the Prophets are all about” (Matthew 7:12, CEV).

*“T*reat others as you want them to treat you,” Jesus says. This is what the Old Testament teaches. And I believe it gives the believer the initiative. We’re to take the initiative to challenge the norm and set a new standard. And when Jesus talks of ‘others’, let’s take it to mean people in general regardless of their gender, race, background, status, religious beliefs etc.

We’re in some very hard times today; these are the times the Bible referred to as last days, a time when *“people will only love themselves and money. They will be proud, stuck-up, rude and disobedient to their parents. They will also be ungrateful, godless, heartless, and hateful. Their words will be cruel, and they will have no self-control or pity. These people will hate everything good. They will be sneaky, reckless, and puffed up with pride. Instead of loving God, they will love*

pleasure. Even though they make a show of being religious, their religion won't be real" (2 Timothy 3:2-5a, CEV).

I wrote this all out, so we can see the kind of people we will be dealing with. Do you think having any interactions with people with such behaviour/attitude will be easy? Of course it won't. Jesus' words prepare our minds for such interactions. But beyond that, heeding it equips us to challenge the norm and set a new standard and pattern.

Our natural instinct is to treat people how they treat us; but when we do that, what's the difference between us and non-believers? Remember, we can't afford to act like the people we are sent to help transform.

JESUS SAYS 45

*“Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it”
(Matthew 7:13-14, CEV).*

Here in life, every individual is presented with two options of eternal destiny: life in heaven and destruction in hell. In Jesus' words is wise counsel that we choose to “go in through the narrow gate,” and His reason is because the narrow gate leads to life while the wide gate leads to destruction. He however tells us that a lot of people will go in through the wide gate because the road that leads there is easy to follow (and if I may add, doesn't need ‘finding’); but only a few will go in through the narrow gate because the road that leads there is so hard to follow, and only a few people seek it out and find it.

The narrow gate is Jesus. As God the Son, Jesus leads us to God (The Father) who is the Source of life and who guarantees our eternal happiness. The road which Jesus speaks of that'll lead us to God that is narrow gate implies His teachings; they are "hard" to follow because they require our effort and commitment. But this is the very reason only few will spend time exploring it, and even less people end up discerning it and making use of it.

The wide gate is every other way the world offers. And you will find that there are many of those. The road that leads there implies the world's ideals and opinions, which you will discover are quite enjoyable. This is the reason a lot of people will 'go through that gate', only to discover in the end that all these other ways lead to destruction of not just the body but the soul.

For the non-believer, when Jesus says "*go in through the narrow gate*," He means come to me! He is extending an invitation to you. Accept it. For the believer reading this, when Jesus says "*go in through the narrow gate*," He means continue to proceed in My way! It's true that the narrow gate leads to life, but it's not that that reward can't be forfeited. We are eligible or ineligible for what is due us based on our actions and inaction.

JESUS SAYS 46

*“Watch out for false prophets! They dress up like sheep, but inside they are wolves who have come to attack you”
(Matthew 7:15, CEV).*

Jesus commands us to be on the lookout for false prophets. Prophets are often regarded as inspired teachers and proclaimers of the will of God. False prophets are persons who claim to be all of these things but are actually not; they’ve convinced themselves that they are, and are out to deceive others. They’ll wear a disguise and appear as ‘sheep’ – true followers of God – to everyone, meanwhile on the inside their intentions are like those of wolves. Wolves are motivated to attack for many reasons, one of which is hunger. In the same manner false prophets are out on the prowl waiting to “attack” you, and it’s for what they can gain. It’s all in pursuit of the fulfilment of their own selfish desires.

On how to identify them, Jesus says “*you can tell what they are by what they do. No one picks grapes or figs from thornbushes. A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a*

bad tree cannot produce good fruit. Every tree producing bad fruit will be chopped down and burned. You can tell who the false prophets are by their deeds” (Verses 16-20, CEV).

False prophets are known by what they do; since we can’t read people’s minds, we can watch out for how they act or behave. Just like you’ll never pick grapes or figs from thornbushes, you can’t expect to find the work which the presence of the Holy Spirit within accomplishes in a false-prophet. For instance:

λ They will only love themselves and money, and aren’t capable of being genuinely loving towards God’s people.

λ Their happiness won’t find its root in anything godly.

λ They aren’t peace-makers, patient, kind, good or faithful.

λ They are neither gentle nor have any self-control.

As Jesus rightly said, *a good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit.*

Since we’ve been armed with this information on how to identify false prophets, there’s no excuse for falling prey. A Christian who falls prey chose to do so by failing to do what is required of us all, which is to examine them properly.

Jesus’ words aside helping us discern who is real and who is fake, they also declare a sentence on those who

continue on the path of self-deception and lure others too; just like a bad tree which produces bad fruit is chopped down and burned, they too will have an eternal fate that's in no way enjoyable nor enviable.

JESUS SAYS 47

“Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in. On the day of judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, “We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles.” But I will tell them, “I will have nothing to do with you! Get out of my sight, you evil people!” (Matthew 7:21-23, CEV).

The question now is, “so you identify with Jesus; but does Jesus identify with you?” It’s important you know the answer to this question and be sure of it because it is only those who Jesus identifies with (that meet His standard) that will get into the Kingdom of heaven. Bear in mind, Jesus had just warned against false prophets when He added the words

in our anchor verses. Already we know what the fate of those false prophets will be on the Day of Judgment; they will be unmasked and denied entry into the Kingdom of heaven (See verses 22-23).

But Jesus' words also reveal a weightier matter about those who profess to be Christians but Jesus doesn't consider them His. The heart is deceitful indeed; we can fool ourselves into believing that we are Christians but in actual sense we aren't. And if we fool ourselves, we will call bad good and good bad, and won't see any need for change. But even if we fool ourselves, we can't fool God. He searches the heart and knows our deeds, and is determined to give each one of us what we truly deserve.

His words urge us to take the blinders off and become more aware of what's happening in our Christian walk. How obedient are you to God's laws? If you are not striving towards obeying God in your day-to-day life, you might want to see this as a wake-up call and start to do so. His words also help redirect our focus; instead of getting carried away with 'works', we must now pay full attention to our spiritual walk, and our lives must show that we are fully submitted to the will of God.

You don't know when Judgment Day will come for you; you wouldn't want to be denied entry into the Kingdom of heaven now, would you?

JESUS SAYS 48

*“Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock. Rain poured down, rivers flooded, and winds beat against that house. But it was built on solid rock, and so it did not fall. Anyone who hears my teachings and doesn’t obey them is like a foolish person who built a house on sand. Rain poured down, rivers flooded, and the winds blew and beat against that house (built on sand). Finally, it fell with a crash”
(Matthew 7:24-27, CEV).*

I call it the Tale of the Two Builders. Since Jesus uses the word ‘anyone’, we can’t assume He is speaking directly to only Christians. This is an open address for all. Everyone should pay attention to His words. He reveals that there are two kinds of builders: a

wise one and a foolish one. The wise one hears and obeys Jesus' teachings, and the result is a house built on solid rock, that doesn't collapse despite the adverse conditions it is exposed to. The foolish one hears but doesn't obey Jesus' teachings, the result is a house built on sand, and collapses when exposed to adverse conditions.

Since Jesus' teachings can't be used as foundation for a physical house, we must know by now that when He says 'house' He is referring to our lives. A wise person hears and obeys Jesus' teachings and so gives his/her life the right foundation – a solid rock. A foolish person hears and doesn't think it necessary to obey Jesus' teachings and so gives his/her life a faulty foundation – mere sand. When the tribulations and trials of life come, only the person with the right foundation survives.

Jesus' words beg us to ask ourselves a very important question: "What kind of builder am I?" The way to know is pretty straightforward: Do you carry out the commands/instructions in the word of God? Do you behave in accordance with the principles in the word of God? When you've got the answers to these questions and discover your wrongs, quickly work on making them right before the final rain, flood and winds of judgment come upon you.

The Bible records that *"when Jesus finished speaking, the crowds were surprised at his teaching. He taught them like someone with authority, and not like their teachers of the Law of Moses"* (See verses 28-29). But astonishment and

comparison isn't the appropriate response to all of Jesus' teachings; for their own good, and for ours too, the appropriate response ought to be introspection and alignment; better put, realisation and repentance.

Jesus' teachings ought to urge us to examine our own thoughts, feelings and how they lead to our actions. When that is done, we must begin to make adjustments where necessary.

5

JESUS THE HEALER

JESUS SAYS 49

“Jesus put his hand on the man and said, “I want to! Now you are well.” At once the man’s leprosy disappeared” (Matthew 8:3, CEV).

THE STORY OF Jesus healing the man with leprosy was so significant that three out of four gospels recorded it. The account can be found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. I believe it appeared three times so we can pay extra attention to the lessons that can be learnt from that encounter. Let’s read the preceding verses to get the full picture.

“As Jesus came down the mountain, he was followed by large crowds. Suddenly a man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus. He said, “Lord, you have the power to make me well, if only you wanted to.” Jesus put his hand on the man and said, “I want to! Now you are well.” At once the man’s leprosy disappeared!” (verses 1-3)

There are certain situations that we find ourselves that erode our confidence, making them appear like designed and allowed to happen to keep us humble, like the case of the man with leprosy. Leprosy is a disease that affects the skin, mucus membrane and nerves. It causes discoloration and lumps on the skin and, in severe cases, disfigurement and deformities. Since it's a contagious disease, this man would have been isolated from society. You can imagine what that would do to the man's self-esteem and what sort of mental state he was probably in.

Mustering all his courage, he approaches Jesus because he believes He had the power to make him well. But then, from his words we know that he wasn't sure Jesus would be interested in using His power to heal him. But Jesus touches the leper, an act that must have surprised the leper greatly. He then informs him that it is His desire to see him healed before going ahead to heal him.

As Christians, when we face situations that erode our confidence and fill us with shame, whether it's losing a job, falling into sin, or having an embarrassing health condition, we are often tempted to believe we might not be eligible for God's help, forgiveness and healing; and though we know we can approach Him, we just don't think He would be willing to use His mighty power on our behalf. Whenever you are in that sort of pickle, remember Jesus' words to the man with leprosy: *"I want to!"*

What Jesus' words reveal is God's desire to see us at our best, and His willingness to help us get there, wherever "there" means for us, whether it's securing another job, freeing us from the shackles of sin or healing our minds and bodies.

Let's read the concluding verse. *"Jesus told him, "Don't tell anyone about this, but go and show the priest that you are well. Then take a gift to the temple just as Moses commanded, and everyone will know that you have been healed"* (Matthew 8:4, CEV). I have often wondered why Jesus told the man whom He had just healed not to tell anyone about his healing but instead to go show the priest, and then take a gift to the temple. Drawing my conclusions from the accounts in Mark and Luke, it's safe to say Jesus just didn't want to draw too much attention to Himself too soon. But was His instruction for the benefit of the man as well? And is there any lesson for us to learn from this?

Being with leprosy meant the man had been isolated from society and unable to worship in the temple; but now that he had been healed, Jesus was concerned with helping him ease back into society the right way. He had to first obey the laws in Leviticus 14:4-8; after doing so the priest will confirm his healing, receive his sacrifice and declare him ceremonially clean again, then he can go back to his family and friends and also worship with them. So, the instruction was mainly for the man's benefit even though he was too excited and didn't do things as Jesus instructed.

I'm sure someone is wondering: So what's the lesson for us in all this? I'd get to it. As someone who has read the gospels, I have seen many instances where Jesus instructed the people who had been touched by His miraculous power not to tell anyone. Sadly, I have also seen Christians misinterpret Jesus' motives and take it to mean they aren't supposed to share their testimonies. Well, you should know that even though Jesus initially tells the man not to tell anyone, He ends His words with "and everyone will know".

When God uses His miraculous power on your behalf, you should share your experience with others; this way you'll have an opportunity to turn people's focus to God. Opening up about your life will help others open up their lives to God.

JESUS SAYS 50

*“When Jesus was going into the town of Capernaum, an army officer came up to him and said, “Lord my servant is at home in such terrible pain that he can’t even move.” “I will go and heal him,” Jesus replied”
(Matthew 8:5-7, CEV).*

Jesus never discriminated when it came to using His miraculous power. He was even willing to serve servants. An army officer had approached him concerning his sick servant and Jesus had shown willingness to heal him. We too should take a cue from Jesus and not discriminate when it comes to using our God-given resources to help people. Serving without bias is the Jesus way to be good stewards of our blessings.

If your goodness is only reserved for people of high status and people who can repay you, then you are far from following Jesus’ example, and need to retrace your steps.

“But the officer said, “Lord, I’m not good enough for you to come into my house. Just give the order, and my servant will get well. I have officers who give orders to me, and I have soldiers who take orders from me. I can say to one of them, ‘ Go!’ and he goes. I can say to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes. I can say to my servant, ‘Do this!’ and he will do it.” When Jesus heard this, he was so surprised that he turned and said to the crowd following him, I tell you in all of Israel I’ve never found anyone with this much faith!” (verses 8-10, CEV).

It may seem as though the army officer had a glimpse into the future and gave us notes on what will be required of us. Unlike them, we do not have the privilege of seeing Jesus walk in our midst, visiting our homes to heal our sick; we simply have to have faith in His word, leaving behind scepticism and cynicism before we can see a miracle. It was in this level of faith we are required to operate now that the army officer operated in back then; and that got Jesus (who is God but operating in the human form as well) surprised, declaring that the man’s faith was rare!

From Jesus’ reaction and words, you can tell that He was pleased. The man’s faith had made Jesus pleased! We too should strive to please God by having faith in His power and word.

“Many people will come from everywhere to enjoy the feast in the Kingdom of heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the ones who should have been in the kingdom will be thrown out into the dark. They will cry and grit their teeth in pain.” Then Jesus said to the officer, “You may go home now. Your faith has made it happen” (verses 11-13, CEV).

The Gentile army officer expressed absolute faith in the power of Jesus and authority in His word, and because of that partook in what was reserved at that time for the Jews only: healing. His servant was healed. Jesus used that as an opportunity to reveal what will happen in the future. By reason of their faith, more Gentiles (this means non-Jews) will be part of God’s family and enjoy the blessings that will be made available; meanwhile due to their unbelief, the Jews will be excluded from God’s family and suffer an eternal fate not enviable nor enjoyable.

If you paid close attention to Jesus’ words, then you’ll agree with me that faith gives us access to all of God’s best, but unbelief hinders us from them. This is a quote to live by: Just by having faith or continuing in unbelief, we get to decide the quality of life we will live on earth and what our eternal fate will be. Let’s choose to live having faith; let’s choose wisely.

JESUS SAYS 51

*“Jesus went to the home of Peter, where he found that Peter’s mother-in-law was sick in bed with fever. He took her by the hand, and the fever left her. Then she got up and served Jesus a meal”
(Matthew 8:14-15, CEV).*

Jesus was a guest at Peter’s home, and because of the miracle that happened there, we learn that Peter was a family man. Yes, the verses above say Peter had a mother-in-law. What this also reveals is that he had a wife, and permit me to add, children too. Peter had a family, yet Jesus called him to be a disciple and an apostle. Peter had a family yet he answered God’s call upon his life, left his career and spent less time with his loved ones. I stress these truths so I can write this: married folks get called by God too; and using your family and family responsibilities as excuse will not be tenable.

Jesus was a guest at Peter's home, and since He was welcomed there, it can only mean Peter's family held no animosity towards Jesus for calling Peter away from his previous job and away from the family. I dare say they were believers too! Peter's family should serve as a model for families of those called by God into fulltime ministry and into different career paths. The right response is to release and support them. Why? It's because though these people are your family, truth is, they belong to God first before you.

As for the second reason, let's note what happened in Peter's home. In Peter's home, Jesus found Peter's mother-in-law sick in bed with fever. He took her by the hand and the fever left her. The healing was so complete that immediately she got up and began her hosting duties. It's easy to breeze through the healing and miss out on what's important: who was healed.

The person who was healed was Peter's mother-in-law, Peter's family. The reason many people refuse to answer God's call upon their life is their legitimate concerns about their family's welfare. By paying attention to Peter's family member, Jesus shows that God will take care of our families while we attend to His business. I dare say this because I am a pastor's child. In my mother's absence (and father's too), I learnt God could be a parent.

Looking back now, I see how He was looking out for me, guiding my choices and helping me get good

outcomes even in bad situations. Seeing how I'm serving Him now should tell you I turned out okay. So if your worry is about your family, you have to learn how to submit those worries to God. He will do a better job than you can. And if you won't release those called by God because of concerns about the family life, know that if you don't release them to do God's work, you'll only be short-changing yourself, as there are miracles you won't get to see and experience in your life and family unless you do so.

JESUS SAYS 52

*“That evening many people with demons in them were brought to Jesus. And with only a word he forced out the evil spirits and healed everyone who was sick. So God’s promise came true, just as the prophet Isaiah had said, “He healed our diseases and made us well”
(Matthew 8:16-17, CEV).*

Jesus set-free those that were brought to Him who were demon-possessed and He also healed those who were sick. With just a word! And He still sets-free and heals today. His miraculous power He made available to us via His sacrifice on the cross and is made accessible to all who believe in Him and have faith in His power. While watching Jesus set-free the demon-possessed and heal the sick, Matthew began to recognize Jesus as fulfilment of prophecy.

Following Jesus closely and daily gave Matthew a front row seat to the teachings and miracles of Jesus; but beyond that, following Jesus closely and witnessing all His miracles was a major factor in sealing Matthew's faith. Do you want to secure your faith in Jesus? Then you can't afford to follow Him from afar or whenever convenient. You've got to follow Him closely and daily; then you will hear, see and experience things that will secure your faith.

JESUS SAYS 53

*“When Jesus saw the crowd, he went across Lake Galilee. A teacher of the Law of Moses came up to him and said, “Teacher, I’ll go anywhere with you!” Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens, and birds have nests. But the Son of Man doesn’t have a place to call his own”
(Matthew 8:18-20, CEV).*

One of the things I love about Jesus is His refusal to sugar-coat things. A teacher of the Law of Moses promised to follow Him, and His response was to reveal the truth of His voluntary austere life. ‘It won’t be comfortable nor can I guarantee material wealth,’ Jesus told him. Notice, first, Jesus didn’t turn the man away. His answer simply posed a question to the man: Would you be comfortable with being uncomfortable, and not being successful according to the world’s standard? If his answer was yes, then he could come along. We aren’t told how the man answered.

The world might thrive in deception and many might use it as a means to get things to work in their favour, or get people on their side; but we mustn't pick up the ways of the world. Instead, like Jesus, we must be comfortable with being honest in all our dealings, especially when evangelizing.

Do you know the dangers of making Christianity superficially attractive or acceptable? I'll tell you. The soul you seek to convert and save, you'll end up losing. If Jesus hadn't been completely honest about the inconveniences and challenges that accompany being His follower, the teacher of the Law of Moses would still have ended up finding out, anyway, even if he wasn't told the truth upfront. The only difference would be that his mind wasn't prepared for it as part of the package, and so doesn't respond to such difficulties as he should. Instead, he runs away from God and the gospel, choosing the comforts, beliefs and lifestyle he's previously accustomed to over God; something we call backsliding. The results of making Christianity superficially attractive or acceptable are many; but I tell you, there's not one that is good.

Jesus told the truth and gave the man a chance to make an informed decision. We must be careful not to use deception as a tool for evangelism. Never rob people of their informed choices. To the 'Christian' who evangelizes with lies, do you think God will reward you for the souls you've 'won'? Are your actions worthy of reward or punishment? Let's endeavour to serve in a way that will please God and earn us a good reward.

JESUS SAYS 54

“Another disciple said to Jesus, “Lord, let me wait till I bury my father.” Jesus answered, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead” (Matthew 8:21-22, CEV).

A teacher of the Law of Moses had declared that he would follow Jesus anywhere. Perhaps he had done so with selfish motives. Seeing that, Jesus had responded by revealing how uncomfortable and less than glamorous following Him would be. Now another man is invited by Jesus to follow Him; and he responded by giving an excuse. What was his excuse? He wanted to be near enough to his family so that when his father died he could fulfil his family obligation and cultural expectation. You see, for the Jewish people, a proper burial of their dead was an important duty. Jesus' response implies that God's revealed will for our lives must take priority over everything else.

Someone might say, rather than what Jesus' words imply, what do they mean literally? Jesus' words meant

the spiritually dead could bury the physically dead. It was almost like Jesus gave him a “way out” of his stated predicament. If he was truly spiritually alive, then he would have taken the way out. But some Bible scholars say he wanted to be close to his family and expressed interest in being near enough to bury his father because he was interested in the inheritance. If we go by this, then we can assume he was spiritually dead.

But, wasn't this man already a disciple, why was Jesus asking him to follow Him? Perhaps the word ‘disciple’ was used loosely in this context. Some Bible scholars say since he wasn't part of the twelve, he was likely one of the people who admired Jesus and claimed to believe in Jesus' teachings, and Jesus was inviting him to a closer walk. Others believe this disciple was none other than Philip. Want to know what I think? I think focusing on whether he was a disciple already or not is a distraction from the main lesson here.

The main lesson here, I believe, is knowing how not to respond to God's call upon our lives or His revealed will for our lives. Giving excuses for why we are not able to do what God wants us to do and choosing when we will do what God wants us to do aren't the right responses at all. The right response is to obey the call, to follow God's revealed will for your life as soon as you know it.

Being reminded that we don't own our lives and that God expects to be our number one priority should help us make the right decision at the right time.

I know all this talk about prioritizing God and obeying His call is easier said than done; but that's the reason why we must train our hearts to always say yes to God, beginning with our everyday lives. Start out by saying yes in little things like being truthful, being gentle, being kind, sharing with others etc; then when the big commands, say, being a missionary, comes, saying yes will roll off your tongue because obedience to God is already a part of you.

The good thing about saying yes to God is that it's always for our own good. You can't do wrong saying yes to God; but saying no or saying maybe later will definitely do you no good.

JESUS SAYS 55

“But Jesus replied, “Why are you so afraid? You surely don’t have much faith.” Then he got up and ordered the wind and the waves to calm down. And everything was calm” (Matthew 8:26, CEV).

One of my struggles as a Christian is responding to challenging situations in a spiritual manner, do you have the same struggles too? From the above Scripture, it seemed the disciples had the same struggles. They were in a boat with Jesus when a terrible storm suddenly struck the lake, and waves started splashing into their boat. Meanwhile Jesus was sound asleep; but not for long because they woke Him up. They feared for their lives and needed Him to save them before they drowned (Read verses 23-25). We have just read His response in the verse above.

Let’s discuss Jesus’ response and what it truly means for us. His first response was, *“Why are you so afraid? You*

surely don't have much faith." The disciples were afraid because they were responding to the situation before them in the natural. Jesus on the other hand who was always in the Spirit (though 100 percent human), responded in the spiritual. The situation they were in didn't cause Him to panic. His sleeping was, I dare say, a posture of faith, because, He already knew what was happening before they woke Him up.

Christians are expected to walk in the Spirit. One reason is so we can respond in the Spirit when faced with challenges. The first rule when you are faced with challenges is not to panic; that's a natural response. Instead, assume a posture of faith and stay calm.

Jesus' second response was that *"He got up and ordered the wind and the waves to calm down. And everything was calm."* While the disciples were consumed with thoughts of the effect the storm would have on them, Jesus got up and addressed the root of the issue (the wind and waves that caused the storm). He ordered the wind and the waves to calm down. And they responded. The Bible records that everything became calm.

After taking a posture of faith by being calm, the next thing expected of us is to address the root cause of the issue by faith. Jesus addressed the wind and waves, instructing them to calm down. We're to address the root cause of whatever adverse situation we face, commanding it to respond in a way that's favourable to us.

Many read this passage and translate it to mean, we should run to Jesus with all of our problems. But, what if I told you that that's not why we are told this event? Jesus had rebuked the response of the disciples and modelled the right response to the situation; and by this I believe the real interpretation we should give this event is learning how to respond in faith to life's challenges. You can keep running to God in fear; but you ought to take a stand in faith, exercise your spiritual authority in Christ and God will back you up.

“The men in the boat were amazed and said, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him” (verse 27).

When the storm was no more just at the command of Jesus, the men with Him couldn't help but be (more) curious about Him. This was a new side to Him. And there were many more sides to Him they were soon to discover in the course of their walk with Him. But I wonder if they gave any thought to Jesus' words about faith. Were they just as curious about what God could do through them? Did they take the posture of faith going forward? If only you would take the posture of faith going forward! I know God is ready to do exploits through you.

JESUS SAYS 56

*“After Jesus had crossed the lake, he came to shore near the town of Gadara and started down the road. Two men with demons in them came to him from the tombs. They were so fierce that no one could travel that way. Suddenly they shouted, “Jesus, Son of God, what do you want with us? Have you come to punish us before our time?” Not far from there a large herd of pigs was feeding. So the demons begged Jesus, “If you force us out, please send us into those pigs!” Jesus told them to go, and they went out of the men and into the pigs. All at once the pigs rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned”
(Matthew 8:28-32, CEV).*

Jesus and His disciples had faced the storm for the sake of two men, it seems. The story we just read is the deliverance of two demon possessed men. There are several things to note from it: one of which is the work of demons. We aren't told how these men got possessed by demons, but we know the result thereafter. These men had been robbed of their minds! They had lost it completely to the demons who made them aggressive towards others. They were alive but the demons had turned them to social outcasts and made them to live among the dead, at the tombs; and whatever purpose God had for their lives had been (temporarily) destroyed. And their fate, had they not been delivered, would have been worse still.

Another thing to note is the fate of demons. These wicked spirits spoke through the men they had possessed. Their words revealed they knew Jesus' true identity and knew their fate by Him, which is punishment. Finally, the situation provided Jesus the opportunity to show His work. Jesus gave the men back the control of their minds and lives when He forced the demons out of them and gave the evil spirits permission to go instead into the large herd of pigs feeding nearby.

The demons came to rob, kill and destroy, but Jesus came to give these men life, not the type the demons forced them to have, but full life. Mind you, demons haven't stopped possessing men and women, boys and

girls today; but thankfully Jesus continues to offer life to us. It is our duty as Christians to tell the world about the life Jesus offers. Or did you not know that those who do not have the life that Jesus offers are only living the one that demons allow?

Anyway, the demons had been granted permission by Jesus to go into the large herd of pigs feeding nearby, and they had done just that; only thing is the demons caused the pigs to rush down the steep bank into the lake and drown. What then happened? *“The people taking care of the pigs ran to the town and told everything, especially what had happened to the two men. Everyone in town came out to meet Jesus. When they saw him, they begged him to leave their part of the country”* (See verses 33-34).

The people taking care of the pigs witnessed the entire thing; yes, including their pigs drowning. But what’s surprising is that when they recounted the events to everyone in town, they stressed the deliverance of the two men. However, what that only succeeded in doing was bringing them to meet Jesus so they could reject Him. These people didn’t come out to thank Jesus or worship Him; they came out in their number to tell Him face to face that they didn’t want Him around. Can you tell why?

What had Jesus done that was so wrong? He did a good thing, didn’t He? Have you ever had people respond in a negative way to some good that you’ve done? I have! It’s happened for different reasons, but one of those reasons is that what I call good and what they call good

were two entirely different things. We were not on the same page.

Jesus being there was a good thing. Jesus delivering those men was a good thing. But those “good” things didn’t matter to the people of this town. The only “good” thing by their definition was their business, the pigs, which was their source of income, which had all perished in the lake.

I can imagine they were thinking: “If this man could let the large herd of pigs drown, who knows what other losses we will suffer on His account?” So they chose the money they knew over the man who is in fact God that they didn’t know. Something that possessed earthly value only blinded them from receiving someone that offered things both of earthly and eternal value. This too was the work of demons.



HANDLING REJECTION

JESUS SAYS 57

Following the rejection from the people of the town of Gadara, “Jesus got into a boat and crossed back over to the town where he lived. Some people soon brought to him a man lying on a mat because he could not walk. When Jesus saw how much faith they had, he said to the man, “My friend, don't worry! Your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:1-2, CEV).

D ID YOU SEE how Jesus handled rejection? He moved on from it. Despite what He and His disciples had faced just to get to that town, and in spite of the deliverance He had wrought there, when they begged Him to leave, He didn't force Himself on them. He left!

God is still like that in His dealings with us. He won't force Himself on us. We have and will always have the

choice of accepting or rejecting Him. I hope we are like that in our dealings with others. Let's not force ourselves on people. Give people room to choose you. And if they don't, be okay with it. It's the Jesus' way. Anything outside of this, is linked with the devil.

Jesus moved on from the rejection of the people of the town of Gadara, and didn't let it stop Him from continuing His ministry. When some people soon brought a paralytic to Him, He ministered to him. Some of us, after one rejection in ministry, we are ready to throw in the towel. We can't afford to be like that, living for people's approval; we ought to live for God's approval. And, for as long as God is still pleased with us, we can't be fazed by people's disapproval and rejection. We must continue to do the work He expects us to do.

That being said, let's look closely into the paralytic's encounter with Jesus. The first thing Jesus noticed about them (the paralytic and the people with him) was their faith. Matthew records that Jesus "*saw how much faith they had.*" Faith can be seen. So too unbelief can be seen. If Jesus checked your faith level now, what do you think He'll see? Anyway, these people had sufficient faith for a miracle; so Jesus said to the man, "*My friend, don't worry! Your sins are forgiven.*"

Why did Jesus call this man His friend? There are different reasons why we call someone friend; in most cases the person is well known to us and we have a bond with them. In other cases, the person is on the same side

as we are, sharing our beliefs and supporting the same causes we are; and in rare cases, the person is a stranger whom we are trying to get acquainted with, so we call them ‘my friend’ in hope they become just that.

It’s not stated that this man knew Jesus before this encounter; it’s not even stated that the man was a disciple. What we can assume is that this man was someone Jesus didn’t mind getting acquainted with. So, in hope of their becoming fully acquainted, Jesus calls him “My friend”, after which, He tells him not to worry. But no sooner had Jesus called this man His friend, He reveals that the man is a sinner. Jesus had by His own words declared Himself the friend of a sinner!

For the sake of winning a soul, Jesus didn’t mind being known as the friend of a sinner, something an overly righteous person would never be caught doing, choosing rather to hold on tightly to their principles of holier than thou than lay it aside for God’s purpose. Jesus’ action tells us there’s absolutely no need to be overly righteous and avoid people we know as sinners; because if we keep avoiding them, how would we minister to them? Jesus drew close in order to minister to sinners, and so should we. It is my prayer that we have the same compassion as Jesus, and follow the plan of God as He did. Please don’t get me wrong, I’m not implying you should get so intimate with sinners that you fall into their sin. The point is, be close enough that sinners will listen to you when you speak to them concerning God (1 Corinthians

10:12). Notice too, if Jesus mentioned the man's sin, it was so He could offer him His forgiveness. That's exactly what He did.

Someone might say, but wasn't the man there for healing of his physical ailment? Why was Jesus talking about sin and forgiveness first? I'll tell you why. What goes on on the inside is just as important as what goes on on the outside, if not more. To Jesus, the inside was more important. This man was a sinner and carried the burden of guilt. Jesus' words even imply that the man's sins were the cause of his physical ailment. It was wise that Jesus should deal with his sin first before ministering to his body. Maybe this is a cue for you and me, to pay more attention to our soul, and not just only our physical bodies?

Before we move on, let's address the question on everyone's mind. Does sin cause physical ailment? Yes, sin causes physical ailment. A popular example can be found within the plagues the Egyptians suffered, and some of the conditions Israel suffered, especially in their wilderness journey to Canaan. Yet, not all physical ailments are caused by sin (See Job 1-2 & John 9:1-12). But since the paralytic's sinful choices landed him in that situation, we must be careful how we live and what we do. We can learn from people's errors and not repeat them.

Another thing to note is, we are not expected to try to decipher whether or not a person's sin is what's led to their health deteriorating, because, the fact that Jesus

mentioned the man's sins doesn't give us the license to do same since we don't have the power to forgive sins; doing that might cause more harm than good.

JESUS SAYS 58

“Some teachers of the Law of Moses said to themselves, “Jesus must think he is God!” But Jesus knew what was in their minds, and he said, “Why are you thinking such evil things? Is it easier for me to tell this man his sins are forgiven or to tell him to get up and walk? But I will show you that the Son of Man has the right to forgive sins here on earth.” So Jesus said to the man, “Get up! Pick up your mat and go on home.” The man got up and went home. When the crowds saw this, they were afraid and praised God for giving such authority to people” (Matthew 9:3-8, CEV).

Before the actual healing of the man's body took place, Matthew tells us about the reaction of the teachers of the Law of Moses to Jesus' words, the part about forgiveness. The teachers of the Law believe that only God had the authority to forgive sins; so when Jesus told the paralytic that his sins were forgiven, His words didn't sit well with them; and they said to themselves, "*Jesus must think he is God!*" But being God isn't something Jesus thought up; it is true! Jesus, knowing what was on their minds responded to them, no ordinary man could save the soul and heal the body; even if he claimed to, he will have a hard time proving it. Thankfully, Jesus goes ahead to prove the authority He has on earth over sin and all diseases by healing the paralytic right before the eyes of His critics. His critics were not the only onlookers, a crowd of people was there too! They were taken aback but responded better because they praised God.

Till date people still have a hard time believing that Jesus is God. By people, I mean non-believers; they call Him prophet, teacher and even from time to time admit that He is a healer, and that's as far as they go. In a way, it's understandable because they lack revelational knowledge of Him. However, there are certain professing Christians who don't yet know how Jesus is God. The easiest way to understand this truth is the Trinity.

The Trinity means one God in three persons: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The three Persons of the Trinity

are of equal status. This means each of the three Persons of the Trinity is God. God the Father, God the Son, this is Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus was born a human being and walked amongst us, preaching, teaching and performing miracles. He suffered for our sins, died on the cross, was buried in a tomb, and was brought back to life again. Now He lives for ever more. While He was on earth, Jesus emptied Himself of His outward glory (Philippians 2:6-7). A true Christian must know this truth, stand by it and share it with the world.

JESUS SAYS 59

“As Jesus was leaving, he saw a tax collector named Matthew sitting at the place for paying taxes. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Matthew got up and went with him” (Matthew 9:9, CEV).

Now Matthew by whom the Holy Spirit has authored this book (the gospel according to Matthew) introduces himself as one of Jesus’ disciples. He however started out as a tax collector. Jesus had seen him and had asked him to follow Him, and he obeyed. The rest they say is history. It may seem as though Matthew didn’t reveal much about himself; but I say he did reveal what was most important, that he was a tax-collector, and upon hearing Jesus’ call, he obeyed.

By declaring that he used to be a tax collector, he was admitting that back then he had done things that caused people to hate him. Tax collectors were hated. And part of the reasons tax collectors were hated were that, one, they worked for the Roman government; two, they took from

the Jewish citizens more than was required by the Romans, and the extra they took was used to line their own pockets, thereby making themselves wealthy at the expense of the hapless people. So, by declaring that he was a tax collector, Matthew was basically admitting that he was a sinner.

Matthew also revealed that Jesus called him, and he obeyed. This means he didn't remain in his sin; he was willing to leave it behind; he was not just willing but was courageous enough to actually do it. He shared his past and the courage he demonstrated with us; this is more than what a lot of Christians are willing to share. But why do we hold back? Are we still afraid of the past we have moved past? Why do we hesitate to share our journeys with others? How can we not see that the courage we downplay is able to inspire others to draw near to God?

If you didn't know, now you know that your testimony is powerful. So powerful that the enemy is crippling you with fear and would rather you did not share your journey with others. Your journey is not a secret to be kept; we are expected to go public with our testimonies. By opening up to others, we will illuminate their paths to God.

JESUS SAYS 60

*“Jesus heard them and answered,
“Healthy people don’t need a doctor,
but sick people do. Go and learn what
the Scriptures mean when they say,
‘Instead of offering sacrifices to me, I
want you to be merciful to others.’ I
didn’t come to invite good people to be
my followers. I came to invite sinners”
(Matthew 9:12-13, CEV).*

Jesus had not only called Matthew (also known as Levi), He also finds time to have dinner with His disciples at Matthew’s house, where in attendance were also many tax collectors and other sinners. The Pharisees observed it all from a safe distance. Some were however bold enough to ask Jesus’ disciples what their teacher was doing eating with tax collectors and other sinners (See verses 10-11). Our leading quote contains Jesus’ response to them.

“Healthy people don’t need a doctor, but sick people do”.
Since sick people need a doctor to treat and help heal

them, the tax collectors and sinners needed Jesus too for His preaching and teaching; and if they would follow Him, He would treat their soul's diseases and heal them. This is why He was in their company in the first place.

While the Pharisees only saw the faults of these men, Jesus saw their needs, and was in their company with plans of meeting those spiritual needs. How do you react to those whose moral standards differ from yours? When next you're tempted to act towards them in the same manner of the Pharisees, remember Jesus' words. *"Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do,"* and minister to them as Jesus would.

Jesus, still speaking to the Pharisees said, *"Go and learn what the Scriptures mean when they say, 'Instead of offering sacrifices to me, I want you to be merciful to others.'"* Jesus was quoting Scripture, see Hosea 6:6, in order to rebuke the Pharisees judgmental spirit, reminding them that the kind of worship that pleases God, is showing compassion to others.

Is the one who professes to be a Christian but lacks compassion for lost souls really a Christian? If your own Christianity is devoid of compassion for others, especially the lost, then you need to retrace your steps, because you're not in alignment with Christ who is the author of our faith.

JESUS SAYS 61

“Jesus answered: The friends of a bridegroom aren’t sad while he is still with them. But the time will come when he will be taken from them. Then they will go without eating” (Matthew 9:15, CEV).

Who was Jesus speaking to? Let’s read the preceding verse. *“Some followers of John the Baptist came and asked Jesus, “Why do we and the Pharisees often go without eating, while your disciples never do?” (verse 14).* The question was about fasting. Fasting means abstaining from all kinds of food or drink, especially as a religious observance. The followers of John the Baptist fasted, the Pharisees did too, but Jesus’ disciples never did at the time. The followers of John noticed and were curious about it, and so asked Jesus.

Jesus’ response had characters like friends of a bridegroom and bridegroom in it; but don’t be confused. This was His way of referring to His disciples and Himself, even though there was no actual wedding going on. And He said all that to signify that while He was with

His disciples in person, it was a happy time for them, and just like fasting was prohibited at weddings and feasting encouraged, they didn't need to fast for now, but a time would come when He will be taken from them; then they'll fast. In summary, His answer revealed that it wasn't that His disciples will never fast; it was more like it wasn't time yet (See Acts 13:2-3; 14:23, and 2 Corinthians 11:27).

But Jesus wasn't done speaking. Let's read the next verse. *"No one uses a new piece of cloth to patch old clothes. The patch would shrink and tear a bigger hole"* (verse 16). I'm reading Jesus' response here and I'm wondering: Why an old cloth with a hole in it should be patched at all, when there's a new cloth available? Why not set that old cloth aside and use the new?

Bible scholars have different interpretations for what Jesus' words in this verse mean, and as always they are really insightful. But you know what I think? I believe Jesus said these words to open the eyes of the followers of John the Baptist who had asked Him the question. They had asked about His disciples never going without food, while they and the Pharisees did, and in response, Jesus had talked about a new cloth and an old cloth with holes in it and the absurdity of mixing both with claims of wanting to patch a hole in the old cloth.

This should have revealed to them that something was wrong with their religious practices and observances. It wasn't as effective as it should be. Jesus didn't want His disciples continuing with these traditions just to fit in.

And as for the new cloth, He was referring to the new ways of worship He was going to introduce and establish. And just like the new cloth and old clothes with holes shouldn't be mixed so as not to make things worse, His way alone, when followed, will make things better.

Finally, Jesus adds: *"No one pours new wine into old wineskins. The wine would swell and burst the old skins. Then the wine would be lost, and the skins would be ruined. New wine must be put into new wineskins. Both the skins and the wine will then be safe"* (verse 17). This time, Jesus' illustration has new wine and containers, the old wineskin and the new wineskin. Since the desire of the owner of the new wine and wineskins is to preserve both the skins and the wine, then the best way to go is to put the new wine into the new wineskins.

The controversy was about Jesus' disciples never going without food, and Jesus had replied, firstly, they would go without food but not yet; secondly, some things were wrong with the religious practices and observance known to John's disciples and the Pharisees, and a new way was about being introduced. Now, Jesus revealed the work He was doing with His disciples since He's not allowing them to continue with the old traditions. The new wine represents His teachings, which also include new ways of worship, effective ways. This is what Jesus poured daily into His disciples who represented the new wineskins. Their work later on will be to teach the people of all nations everything Jesus told/taught them.

Want to know what the old wineskins represent? People who were committed to the past, and whose minds are stiff, not flexible enough to receive what God was doing presently, for instance those who strictly observe the traditional and written laws, rejecting Jesus and opposing Him. Imagine Jesus forcing them to accept His teachings and the new way of worship? It would be a waste of time; worse still, it would only incite them to react aggressively. Their evil actions will attract consequences that will result in their destruction. Jesus was better off investing that teaching in His disciples.

Let's go back to the beginning, do you remember that all of Jesus' responses had been because of the curiosity of the followers of John the Baptist? Did you notice how Jesus handled their curiosity? He didn't shun them; instead He welcomed their question and answered them. When people get curious about Christianity and why we think, speak and act the way we do, don't get defensive. Don't evade them either; instead, see it as a teaching moment, and use the opportunity wisely. Some people are just an explanation away from accepting the truth that is Jesus and the gospel.

JESUS SAYS 62

*“Jesus turned. He saw the woman and said, “Don’t worry! You are now healed because of your faith.” At that moment she was healed”
(Matthew 9:22 CEV).*

Lately I’ve been watching “Body Bizarre”. It’s a show like no other. With each episode you are introduced to people with rare and mysterious medical conditions. In some cases, the doctors are able to do some research, make a diagnosis and even prescribe medication or surgery; but there are cases where the doctors do as much research as they can but still don’t know much about the case, and end up prescribing medications only to manage the symptoms. The people afflicted with these conditions usually grant a personal interview; and if you are like me, you’d get misty just hearing them explain how these conditions have affected the quality of life they’ve lived.

The story of the woman whom Jesus was responding to in our leading verse seemed to me like something I’d learn about from an episode of “Body Bizarre”. She had been

bleeding for twelve years; and although Matthew doesn't record it, the other gospels, Mark and Luke tells us she's been to many doctors. Her encounters with the doctors however didn't result in her healing. But one day, everything changed. She was in the same space as Jesus, though she had come up behind Him (possibly out of fear of being rejected since she was ceremonially unclean), and barely touched His clothes, in the end, her encounter with Jesus left her healed. When Jesus turned and came face to face with her, He told her her faith had been essential in her healing (Read verses 20-22).

Her story ended on a very happy note. It reminds us of the privileges we have as Children of God, with access to the miraculous power of Jesus; that, even in the face of cases that doctors can't seem to help with. We can still find hope for healing in God. If we continue to have faith, God will heal our bodies and make us whole again.

Someone might ask, so does this mean that all you need in order to get healed as a Christian is faith? What about cases where you have faith and still don't get healed? Truly all we need in order to get healed as Christians is simple faith in Jesus' miraculous power. But I have also seen situations where people have faith and still live with the condition, or worse, die as a result of the condition.

In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul lets us in on Timothy's medical condition, a recurring issue with his stomach. What's interesting is that Timothy is a man of faith. Yet there's no mention of Paul praying for his healing (even though he

might have); instead, he teaches Timothy about how to manage his condition and live with it.

I'm also reminded of someone I knew. She was young and vibrant, always busy for the Lord. I always admired her. We had recently been acquainted when she fell ill. We all assumed she would be fine in a couple of days and after she was admitted in the hospital. I remember talking to her on the phone a few days after she had been admitted. I had been praying for her and wanted her to know that she wasn't alone. That call had ended with us laughing and being goofy. The pastors kept going to see her and praying with her. We all had faith she would be healed.

On the following Wednesday evening, we were gathered in church praying for her; she was supposed to undergo a surgery but before we could finish praying, our prayers were interrupted by the pastors coming into the church. They didn't come bearing good news. Our sister in the Lord had passed. The church grew so silent, we all had questions in our heart. Didn't we pray enough? Didn't we believe enough?

A few days after she had died, a few people had revelations. One saw our sister in the Lord singing with angels. One saw her telling her she was fine and people should rejoice with her. Another saw her rebuking them for crying. All those revelations made it easy on us to send her off with hope; hope that she was in a better place. It was later revealed to us by her family that she had been battling that medical condition for a while, which left her

sad, tired and frustrated. With the revelations people had had, we concluded that God wanted to give her permanent release from that medical condition. She was in a place where there was no longer sickness nor pain, and God had wiped away every tear from her eyes.

What I'm trying to say is, many times we do get healed by having faith, other times what we receive is grace to manage and live with the situation here on earth while we receive our healing on the other side of life. As Christians which ever God wills for us, we must be willing to accept it, trusting that He knows best and all that He does/ allows in our lives is for a greater good.

JESUS SAYS 63

*“He said, “Get out of here! The little girl isn’t dead. She is just asleep.” Everyone started laughing at Jesus”
(Matthew 9:24, CEV).*

What had happened here is this. An official had approached Jesus, pleading on behalf of his daughter who had just died. The father believed that Jesus could make her live again. Jesus and his disciples got up and went with the man. At the his house, they found musicians and a crowd of mourners (most probably making a noise and crying over the dead child). It was to them that Jesus spoke the words of the verse under consideration (Read verses 18-19, 23-24 for the full story).

Jesus said, *“The little girl isn’t dead. She is just asleep.”* Though the people laughed when Jesus spoke these words, it didn’t make it less true. They had laughed because they didn’t understand. They should have asked Him why He said that. For you I say, stay curious!

Jesus called death “sleep”. It was sleep because she would soon be resurrected. In Lazarus’ case too, Jesus

called death “sleep” just before He brought him back to life (see John 11:11). What I’m trying to say is that for the believer, death doesn’t have to be a scary fatal end anymore.

There are believers who still fear death. But of what reason is there to fear death when you know Jesus who is the Resurrection and the Life? Jesus says in John 11:25-26, *“I am the one who raises the dead to life! Everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die. And everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die...”* (CEV).

Not every believer will live to see Jesus return; some of us will die. Death is a part of life. Of course I know that losing a loved one can be hard, even for believers. But when our time comes to die, we have no reason to fear death; because, we know the One who can raise us back to life, whether we are to be resurrected from the grave, or suddenly transformed at the Rapture as we ascend into heaven. So we see, death is never final for the believer. Let these words minister courage to you.

The official who had lost his daughter went to Jesus with hopes of seeing his daughter live again. Jesus granted him his desires. Yes, *“after the crowd had been sent out of the house, Jesus went to the girl’s bedside. He took her by the hand and helped her up. News about this spread all over that part of the country”* (verse 25-26). If you have lost a loved one and they were believers too, then you too can draw comfort from Jesus’ words; your loved ones “are not dead; they are just asleep,” and in due course, some day, you will see them alive and well again.

JESUS SAYS 64

*“After Jesus had gone indoors, the two blind men came up to him. He asked them, “Do you believe I can make you well?”
(Matthew 9:28a, CEV)*

The blind men had followed Jesus shouting, “Son of David, have pity on us!” By this they acknowledged Jesus as Messiah (Son of David is a Messianic designation). Yet when Jesus was indoors and the two men came up to Him, He asked them, “Do you believe I can make you well?”

Why did Jesus ask them such a question? Didn't they just go after Him in hope of their healing? Could it be because certain people pay lip service when approaching God as though they believe in Him when in actual fact their hearts are far from truly believing in His ability? Asking them if they believed was Jesus' way of giving them a chance to express their faith. Thankfully, the blind men did believe; and in the end, their faith birthed their healing (See verses 27-29).

So you call yourself a Christian, but do you sincerely believe in Jesus and His power? Or you're just an unbelieving believer? Jesus' question to the two blind men

should prompt us to do some soul-searching. A self-aware Christian has a greater chance of spiritual growth and maturity than the one babbling in self-deception. The world might not believe in Jesus, but not us. We must fully believe in Him and in His ability.

Before the men left Jesus, *“Jesus strictly warned them not to tell anyone about him. But they left and talked about him to everyone in that part of the country”* (verses 30-31). Why do you think Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him? There might be one reason or several reasons. Jesus had healed the men indoors even though when they started calling out to Him they were outdoors. Now, after healing them He warns them not to tell anyone about Him. Some think Jesus said that because He was hiding, though not out of fear, and not even to rest, since He still attended to those men. The more probable reason would be that He wanted to contain His growing popularity. There was no need being too famous too soon. He knew He would suffer the evil effects of fame (e.g. death by the hands of those who envied Him). But there was no reason for it to happen before the set time. The men didn’t listen though. They blazed His fame abroad.

I wrote all of that just so I could say, there’s a time for everything, a time to be in the public space, and a time to hide. If God’s leading you to hide, do so; in due time, He’ll lead you right out again.

JESUS SAYS 65

*“After Jesus had forced the demon out,
the man started talking”
(Matthew 9:33, CEV).*

What demon? Which man? Let’s read a few more verses to get the full context.

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, some people brought to him a man who could not talk because a demon was in him. After Jesus had forced the demon out, the man started talking. The crowds were so amazed they began saying, “Nothing like this has ever happened in Israel!” But the Pharisees said, “The leader of the demons gives him the power to force out demons” (32-34).

A demon had made a man unable to speak. Although the demon was unwilling to leave, Jesus forced it out. How? We aren’t told, but since Jesus’ words aren’t recorded nor any of His actions (e.g., like touching the man), we can assume His very presence made it happen!

Proof that the demon had left was that the man began to talk. This left the crowd amazed. They had never seen anything like it before! Even the Pharisees were amazed; they began to search for reasons why Jesus could possess such powers and do such a miracle. But what they came up with was absolutely ridiculous!

You know what I learnt from that? I learned that some people tend to reject what they don't understand.

But what does this all mean for us? Yes, that Jesus' very presence is powerful enough to make darkness tremble and put an end to their evil works in our lives. One more thing, that when there's a demonstration of the power of God in our lives, it attracts different responses: the good, just like the crowd, and the bad, like the Pharisees. When this happens, what we ought to do is focus on the good and not the bad, just like Jesus who didn't let the assumptions of the Pharisees deter Him. The Bible records that *"Jesus went to every town and village. He taught in their synagogues and preached the good news about God's kingdom. Jesus also healed every kind of disease and sickness"* (verse 35).

JESUS SAYS 66

*“When he saw the crowds, he felt sorry for them. They were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, “A large crop is in the fields, but there are only a few workers. Ask the Lord in charge of the harvest to send out workers to bring it in”
(Matthew 9:36-38, CEV).*

When Jesus taught in the synagogues, preached the good news about God’s Kingdom and healed the sick, His driving force was compassion. He could see the people’s spiritual state that they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd; and He felt genuine concern. He didn’t have any self-serving motive. Unlike many Christians today, yes, ministries abound, but not enough of them are established on the right foundation.

Why do you do what you do? Any time you're serving God and humanity, always ask yourself, Why am I doing this? Your answer will reveal your motives, what drives you. And if your motives are far from genuine concern for others, then you might need a pit stop, time to re-evaluate what truly matters and align with them.

Anyway, after revealing the driving force behind Jesus' service, Matthew tells us what Jesus says, He said to his disciples, "*A large crop is in the fields, but there are only a few workers. Ask the Lord in charge of the harvest to send out workers to bring it in.*" The large crop in the fields that Jesus spoke of refers to souls, people in the world at large whose hearts are ready to accept Him as Messiah and follow Him (they are a hearing away). And when He mentioned workers, He was referring to people (Christians) who will carry on the work He was already doing, like teaching and preaching the good news. And the Lord in charge of the harvest is God.

Jesus' words help the disciples see the scope of work laid up for them; they would be sent to people of all nations. His words also reveal a need, and how they could be part of the solution. There was a shortage of workers, but they could pray so God would prepare and equip those who would be willing to do the work of the great spiritual harvest.

But you and I know Jesus' words, that even if directed at the early disciples, still, you and I who are Christians,

yes, Christians in all our denominations and churches, are now sent into the world. There are people who are just a teaching/preaching/healing away from receiving Jesus as Messiah; but how will they receive Him if we don't do the work that's laid out for us?

We must assume our responsibility. The need is still there, like in the time of the early disciples. So even as we set out to do our bit, we must continue to pray that God, raises more people, prepare and equip them to carry on the work.



DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY

JESUS SAYS 67

*“Jesus called together his twelve disciples. He gave them the power to force out evil spirits and to heal every kind of disease and sickness”
(Matthew 10:1, CEV).*

IT WAS BECAUSE of the need that Jesus had stated at the end of Matthew 9 that He called together His twelve disciples, as we will soon see, with the intention of sending them out. But before sending them out, Jesus endues them with power; this was a necessary support for the mission ahead.

There's a name the Yorubas (people of south-western Nigeria) call God that I can't stop thinking about as I write this. It's *“Oranmo nise fayati”*. God is described as a Father who sends out His child on a mission and provides all the support needed. Jesus' action in our verse above proves this to be true. What does this mean for you and me? It means whoever God calls, He supports; whom God calls, He equips.

Every believer is enlisted in the ministry of reconciliation, and we are all given right to operate under Jesus' authority and with His power; but it doesn't end there. Whatever other assignment He also calls us to, we can be rest assured that He will support and equip us so we can step out confidently and carry it out as well.

“The first of the twelve apostles was Simon, better known as Peter. His brother Andrew was an apostle, and so were James and John, the two sons of Zebedee. Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew the tax collector, James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus were also apostles. The others were Simon, known as the Eager One, and Judas Iscariot, who later betrayed Jesus” (Matthew 10:2-4, CEV)

From what we know, Peter and his brother Andrew were ordinary men, not well educated; and so were James and John, the two sons of Zebedee. There's no record to prove that Philip, Bartholomew or Thomas ever occupied positions of power. And from what we know about Matthew the tax collector, because of his previous profession, he was hated by many. James, Thaddaeus, Simon and Judas weren't said to have come from important families either. Hardly will anyone call Jesus' twelve disciples turned apostles an impressive bunch (at first glance). Yet Jesus chose them.

By the men He chose, Jesus makes it pretty clear that He doesn't care for the world's standards nor does He work with its approval. This is good news for anyone who has been called worthless, useless and nothing. Jesus calls you to Himself, answer His call, surrender your life to Him; then watch what He does with your life. You're sure in for a surprise.

And for the believer who already knows this but struggles with low self-esteem from time to time, here's a reminder: people might call you worthless but Jesus has chosen you. People might call you useless but Jesus has chosen you. People might say you're nothing at all, yet Jesus has chosen you. He has chosen you for Himself and chosen you to do good works. The world might have a lot of opinions about you, but only God's opinion matters. And in His opinion, you're worth having a relationship with and the best person to do the works He has prepared.

And finally, for the believer that has become prejudiced, let Jesus' choice of disciples/apostles fix your prejudiced views. God continues to call and use people who are less privileged than you and who have lived unimpressive lives, instead of avoiding them or judging them. Why not see through God's lens and show them the same compassion God showed you? It's what He'll expect of you.

JESUS SAYS 68

“Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with these instructions: Stay away from the Gentiles and don't go to any Samaritan town. Go only to the people of Israel, because they are like a flock of lost sheep” (Matthew 10:5-6, CEV).

The disciples turned apostles were about to be sent out, but not without instructions. The first of which was that their mission was limited to the Jews; but this would only be for a while, because later on, they were commissioned to go to all the world with the good news.

There are two valuable lessons for us to learn from these verses: the first is that those who want to serve God and humanity must be willing and patient enough to receive His instructions. Jesus said to the apostles, “stay away from... don't go (yet) to.... and go only to...” And they listened, and ran with it, as we will soon find out,

even though He didn't give detailed reasons why He instructed them in that manner. God's missions always come with instructions. Question is, are we willing and patient enough to receive God's instructions, and would we run with them despite what we don't understand?

The second is that, when our steps are ordered by God, it can sometimes look like limitations. See, Jesus placed a (temporary) restriction on their freedom. He told them the people to avoid, the places they couldn't go and the people they could interact with. Why? God had a plan, and an order in which the plan was to unfold. Also, though the disciples were privileged to participate in this plan, it was important that they were in alignment; if they refuse to, they would tamper with the order. And who knows, it could have led to early persecution for them.

Not all limitations/restrictions are from the devil; some are from God. They could be temporary like in the case of the disciples, and sometimes permanent; whichever the case is, when you discern the limitations you're facing is from God, embrace them. Why? It's because God's wisdom can be trusted and His instructions serve a good purpose.

JESUS SAYS 69

*“As you go, announce that the kingdom of heaven will soon be here”
(Matthew 10:7, CEV).*

Jesus’ earlier instruction to the apostles and now this, could be summarized like this: Begin small and with the simple truth.

Someone might ask, Did Jesus want the disciples to repeat His words verbatim? Well, I doubt that. If the disciples repeated Jesus’ words verbatim, sooner than later, someone who hears will get curious and seek the disciples out for clearer understanding. What then? Would they just keep repeating the same words over and over? Here’s what I think. Jesus’ words were supposed to serve as guide for their preaching. The focus was about the Kingdom of Heaven. Their message would be aimed at raising awareness about it, and encouraging people to respond favourably to it.

Jesus’ instruction back then is still valid today. Unfortunately not many Christians believe so. The message that’s supposed to be simple has become

complicated; and what's supposed to make people heaven-conscious has made people overly obsessed with the things of the world. It's sad! Sad, but it's not a hopeless situation. Just because the foundations of the preaching these days are compromised doesn't mean they have to remain so. That old pattern can be broken and a new one started.

A new foundation can be laid to replace the faulty one, by you and I who have resolved to do only what Jesus say. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the new foundation will be laid properly in the hearts of people as we centre it on the Kingdom of heaven: on Jesus, His mission, death, burial and resurrection; then on true Christian character, Christian service etc.

JESUS SAYS 70

*“Heal the sick, raise the dead to life,
heal people who have leprosy, and
force out demons. You received
without paying, now give without
being paid”
(Matthew 10:8 CEV).*

Earlier on, Jesus had endowed the disciples now apostles with power to force out evil spirits and to heal every kind of disease and sickness. Now He teaches them how to be good stewards of their gift. He instructs them to use their delegated authority and power in order to authenticate their preaching. To ‘authenticate’ is to prove or show something, especially a claim to be true or genuine. The demonstration of power was intended to be a support to the main preaching, never to be the main preaching.

Unfortunately, many preachers have turned the demonstration of power into the main preaching; and the people, Christians inclusive, no longer have any desire to

hear the main truth being preached either; all they want to see is a show. If you are that preacher, you need to retrace your steps; and if you are that Christian I mentioned, you have your priorities all jumbled up. You need to re-set them before you end up a prey to false preachers/teachers.

Someone might say, But not every Christian can heal the sick, raise the dead to life, heal people who have leprosy, and force out demons; what should such people do? My answer is, How do you know not everyone can? Did you hear God say only a select few can? Just because you aren't doing the aforementioned yet doesn't mean you won't ever be able to do so. Or, has God told you directly that you won't ever be capable of doing so? Until the time when you will manifest such miracle working power, continue to preach the simple truth with the gifts you do have. The demonstration of power is expressed in diverse ways; it's definitely not limited to those mentioned above.

Mind you, the power the disciples were endowed with was a gift. Jesus wanted them to know it too, seeing that He said to them, *"You received without paying, now give without being paid."* A gift is a thing given willingly to someone without payment. Since the disciples had received power without payment to Jesus, they must give and use His power to save and serve others without being paid. If they demanded and received payment, it would be a disservice to the people they ought to serve freely. If they demanded and received payment, it would cause a

stumbling block in the faith of others, and if they demanded and received payment, their focus will be divided.

What does this mean for us? The same as it did then to the apostles. We must not allow people try to buy God's gift from us, and we too must not be willing to sell God's gift. Because these situations will present themselves to us, we must be prepared to reject such suggestions. Those who attempt to buy the gift are often ignorant; they aren't true believers. They don't know God nor understand His ways. Take the odious example of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8:11-13, 18-19. All those who sell God's gift are not just ignorant, by attempting to serve God and Mammon – an impossibility – they are utterly wasting their time! We know who they are really serving and we know that they will have no part in the eternal reward God has prepared for those who love Him and walk according to His purpose.

You may ask, How do you know when you're selling God's gift? Trust me, you'll know. When your priority becomes making money, and you've begun to exploit people's desire to know God in order to fulfil this goal of yours, then you've begun to sell God's gift.

JESUS SAYS 71

*“Don’t take along any gold, silver, or
copper coins”
(Matthew 10:9, CEV).*

The apostles weren’t allowed to sell the gift Jesus freely gave them, and now we learn they weren’t also allowed to take along any money: gold, silver or copper coins. Wouldn’t they need money? That’ll be the question on everyone’s mind. I wish I was there to witness the look on the faces of the apostles after Jesus said this. I want to know if their initial excitement was replaced with worry. The apostles would need money, and the reason they’ll need money would be for life’s daily necessities. So how were they supposed to meet this need?

The answer is in the why. Why did Jesus give them such an instruction? It must be to create a need, which was in fact an opportunity for them to learn dependence on God who was more than ready to give them the good things they needed and would ask of Him. Yes God will do the providing, but the people He will use was left for Him to decide, that and the way the resources will flow in. Has

God called you into ministry? If what's stopping you is the lack of full resources, then here's a word for you: obey the call; leave God to take care of all your needs.

The disciples will soon see God providing their needs by using different people for them, just like He still does today for many pastors and others in ministry. But the one mistake the twelve (even including Judas Iscariot at the time) didn't make that many pastors/people in ministry make today is that they soon shift their focus from God who is their Source of help to the people He uses as channels to meet those needs. This is a grave mistake. People who do this end up ruining the Christian experience for others and short-changing their own experience of God as provider.

Please note that we mustn't take this to mean that we can't work in order to gather resources to meet ministry demands; we should, unless God specifically says not to.

JESUS SAYS 72

*“And don’t carry a traveling bag or an extra shirt or sandals or a walking stick. Workers deserve their food”
(Matthew 10:10, CEV).*

Bible scholars say Jesus asked the apostles not to take extra provisions for themselves because it would weigh them down; they needed to travel light. Maybe they are right, but after also reading that He said *“workers deserve their food,”* I began to think differently. The workers that deserve their food are the apostles, and though Jesus mentions “food,” it goes beyond bread and water needed for sustenance; it could be an extra shirt or sandals or even a walking stick.

Here’s what I believe. When Jesus said the apostles shouldn’t take extra provisions with them, it was because He expects the people whom they were going to minister to reciprocate and minister to them too. It wouldn’t be payment for their services, but support. The apostles will use their preaching and gifts to enrich the lives of those who they minister to and the people will in turn have an

opportunity to use their resources to minister to the needs of the apostles, as God lays it in their hearts. Perhaps this instruction from Jesus is an opportunity for the disciples to learn that no one is self-sufficient. God designed us all to need each other.

If as a Christian you have a hard time receiving help from others, you will have to pray for a renewed spirit, and intentionally work on that attitude because it has pride at its root. Children of God should be humble enough to help others and receive help from others too.

But what happens when the people whom the apostles minister refuse to give them their deserved “food”? We don’t know if that ever happened back then, but we know that today, it happens. The law of reciprocity which Jesus set in place back then has been ignored by many Christians today who take, take and take from their ministers and give nothing in return; they never minister to God’s servants. You know the effect of that? It creates hungry ministers, and hungry ministers tend to use manipulation to get their needs met. Those are the ones who are even interested in continuing in ministry; the others become so discouraged, they quit!

One of the reasons many Christians refuse to minister to their ministers is because of how controversial giving has become. Usually, it’s the world’s people that oppose it. I’m left bemused how increasing number of church folks became so opposed to giving and supporting ministers of God. One thing I believe is this; one who is truly saved

and truly surrendered to the Lord will obey His voice
when He leads them to give to ministers and to church;
they will not care what the world says about giving.

JESUS SAYS 73

“So when you go to a town or a village, find someone able and willing to have you as their guest and stay with them until you leave” (Matthew 10:11, CEV).

The apostles must have wondered about their living conditions because Jesus told them how that could be sorted. They were to find someone able and willing to have them as guests; and they're to stay with their hosts until they leave. When Jesus said “find someone,” it didn't mean persuade or coerce anyone; but instead, be observant and discerning of those with the gift of hospitality among the believers. And even then, from the number of those with the gift of hospitality, they were only to stay with those who were able and willing to have them as guest.

Can I share with you some peace that I have received from this verse? I will anyway. Jesus' words reveal that not everyone is sent to help us. So, there's no need staying mad

at those who didn't come through for you when you were in need. Yes, it's true that you prayed about it and them specifically; but it's also true that they weren't the ones God sent to help you. Now, you might have to find those God sent to help you. Be certain that in the end, you'll discover/recognize them; they will be able and willing to share their resources with you. Please note that those who didn't help you aren't bad people; you're just the one with misplaced expectations. When your expectations are properly placed, you won't be disappointed.

Let's give people a chance to do what God has sent and equipped them to do. Just because they won't help you with, say, accommodation, doesn't mean they can't help you in other areas.

JESUS SAYS 74

“When you go to a home, give it your blessing of peace. If the home is deserving, let your blessing remain with them. But if the home doesn’t accept you, take back your blessing of peace”

(Matthew 10:12-13, CEV).

In the previous verse Jesus had said, “When you go to a town or a village, find someone able and willing to have you as their guest and stay with them until you leave.” ‘Until you leave’ means what? A period without end? Of course it means ‘for the duration of your evangelistic assignment there,’ counted in hours, days, maybe a week or two,’ or your period of welcome. The signals are usually pretty obvious once you have overstayed your welcome. Even then, as the apostles entered that home, they are to release a blessing of peace upon it. This “blessing of peace” could be a statement of faith, or the gospel itself, or both. The home that accommodated the

apostles was expected to be spiritually enriched by the apostles. Yet, whether or not the blessing remained upon that home and its inhabitant depends solely on them; that is, if they continued to receive the apostles or not.

For a moment, I wondered to myself, why would people who have accepted the apostles suddenly change? After thinking long and hard, I realized such a situation is not impossible really; after all, there is “*a time to love, and a time to hate*” (Ecclesiastes 3:8), and even hospitality could turn into hostility, depending on various reasons: one of which could be conflict of views leading to disagreement, hatred and hostility. If the apostles are thrown out, the home from which that happened would lose what it gained by their presence.

Imagine losing a blessing just because you didn't know how to handle those with opposing views properly. The opposing view in this context is even the truth. How do you handle those with opposing views? For one, our compassion towards them shouldn't be dictated by how much we agree with them. Secondly, let's be encouraged to tolerate them. Who knows, just like the apostles, they could even be telling us the truth. Their presence in our lives could be a blessing too.

JESUS SAYS 75

*“If someone won’t welcome you or listen to your message, leave their home or town. And shake the dust from your feet at them. I promise you the day of judgment will be easier for the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town”
(Matthew 10:14-15, CEV).*

The Lord’s servant must conform to His character. Jesus is gentle and humble, and does not expect His disciples to use force to get the people to welcome them or listen to their message. If they weren’t accepted, they mustn’t pridefully remain; instead, they must humbly depart from there. Dealing with the wrong behaviour and choice of that town or village must be left to God who will deal equitably on the Day of Judgment. And they could be sure the judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah will be lesser than that town

because at least they didn't have the same opportunity as them.

In case you missed it, I'd like to state the obvious: that rejection is one of the hazards of evangelism. And when that happens, remaining with those who have rejected you is pride, but leaving is humility. Pride is very subtle and it has many ways it disguises itself. In this context, it could disguise itself as concern for lost souls, meanwhile it's really about you; your ego is bruised because you and your message have been rejected, and you can't bear the thought of it. So you stay to prove a point... to yourself. Anything for an ego-boost.

Humility on the other hand is knowing and accepting the reaction of those who rejected you, and understanding that if Jesus could face such, then you can't be exempt. You thank them for their time, thank Jesus for making you share in His suffering, then you move on.

JESUS SAYS 76

“I am sending you like lambs into a pack of wolves. So be wise as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16, CEV).

Lambs and wolves refer to different viewpoints. The world would view the apostles as lambs, because of their gentleness and innocence; but the apostles would come to view the people of the world as a pack of wolves, because of the hostility that will be shown to them and the persecution they’ll face at their hands.

However, Jesus’ command to the apostles is that they be as wise as snakes and innocent as doves. What does this mean? It’s about their mindset. Since in His earlier words He had predicted hostility and persecution for the disciples, He tells them now that in their minds they must anticipate these challenges and apply cautionary wisdom when responding. That’s not all, in all of their responses, they must be careful not to mar their testimony.

Are you one of those Christians that believe you are sheltered from hostility and persecution? Or have you come to terms about these things since they are part of the Christian experience? I hope your answer is affirming the latter. Hostility, persecution are what Christians suffer in the world, whether physically, spiritually, financially, health-wise etc. Our comfort is that God is always with us since we carry His Spirit in us. We are never alone in it, and certainly there will be an end to these things eventually.

Meanwhile, Jesus' words offer us a way to handle opposition while on earth; and even if you won't provoke it intentionally, expect it. Expect it and prepare for it; then respond to it using godly wisdom. While responding to it, make sure that you do not let the actions of your persecutors influence you, making you speak or act out of character.

Lastly, you know what I love? The wolves that view the lambs as easy prey for food would be in for a surprise when they realize the seeming vulnerable lamb has a shepherd who is Jesus. What I'm trying to say is that though Christians are often targets for oppression and affliction, we have Someone who will handle those who trouble us in this world. His name is Jesus.

JESUS SAYS 77

*“Watch out for people who will take you to court and have you beaten in their synagogues”
(Matthew 10:17, CEV).*

Amongst the people of the world whom the apostles will contact will be religious people who would be like a pack of wolves. Yes, these would be religious folks who appear to worship God, always praying to God, but will hear the good news of Jesus Christ and be offended by it. They will be offered the gift of salvation and will reject it. They won't stop at that, they will take the apostles to court with charges of blasphemy and make sure they are punished for it, even though before God they are innocent.

Jesus told the apostles to be on the lookout for these religious folks, and the persecution they will suffer at their hands. When Jesus said “watch out”, He was simply preparing the minds of His servants. If their minds were prepared for such opposition, then they will be able to endure and overcome it when the persecutions come.

Imagine being told that for doing good you will not be applauded but persecuted. Well, to date, Christians are still suffering persecution by the hands of religious folks. Only, this time, these religious folks also claim to be Christian, but cause problems for others who are trying to conform to the character of Christ and are walking according to the purpose of God. I call these persecutors religious folks because they aren't true believers/Christians. No true Christian will persecute another true Christian, nor want to be the reason another Christian backslides. Or do you not know that many have turned away from Christ on account of the words and actions of other 'Christians'?

If you've suffered persecution by the hands of religious folks, my prayer is that God heal your wounds and give you courage to continue to pursue a relationship with Him. It's my uttermost desire that you move past those painful experiences, and in your walk with God reach the point of exploits for Him. And if you are one of those who claim to be Christian and yet persecute Christians, I pray the scales covering your eyes fall off, in Jesus' name (Amen).

JESUS SAYS 78

“Because of me, you will be dragged before rulers and kings to tell them and the Gentiles about your faith. But when someone arrests you, don’t worry about what you will say or how you will say it. At that time you will be given the words to say. But you will not really be the one speaking. The Spirit from your Father will tell you what to say” (Matthew 10:18-20, CEV).

Next on the list of the people of the world who will be like a pack of wolves to the apostles are rulers and kings. While preaching the gospel, the apostles will be apprehended, Jesus says, and dragged before rulers and kings who are supposed to hear the claims of their accusers and pass judgment on the apostles. Jesus says, God will allow such situations to

happen because it will serve His purpose (that all men hear the good news and be saved). Their trial before the rulers and kings, and the Gentiles present, will be an opportunity to tell them about their faith. Doesn't this affirm what you already know, that there's a purpose for your pain, opportunities even in suffering? It shows how God can bring out the best results out of the painful situations we go through.

One thing the apostles all had in common was that they had no training in Scripture; and because of this, after hearing Jesus' words they might have been worried about what they will say and how they will say it. But Jesus quickly reassures them that the Holy Spirit will be present to give them the words to say. I read these words and I'm reminded that when we go through painful situations, God's Spirit is there with us; even when we can't see Him, He is there, and not just there, He is present to work in us, helping us maximize those moments well.

JESUS SAYS 79

*“Brothers and sisters will betray one another and have each other put to death. Parents will betray their own children, and children will turn against their parents and have them killed. Everyone will hate you because of me. But if you remain faithful until the end, you will be saved”
(Matthew 10:21-22, CEV).*

Another group of people in the world who will be like a pack of wolves to the apostles will be their relatives. And, because Jesus said “everyone will hate you because of me,” we know for sure that the cause of hostility, persecution and even death at the hands of relatives will be differences in opinions about religion. Jesus’ advice to the apostles is that they “remain faithful until the end.” By this He means they should show courage and endure it till that phase is over, even until

their lives on earth are over; because, in doing so they will end up discovering that it was the most rewarding and fulfilling choice they could have ever made.

Today, Jesus' prediction of persecution at the hands of relatives is the reality of many Christians. A very painful reality, painful enough to make one want to give up on the faith just to be accepted again by one's loved ones. But Jesus says if the cost of following Him involves estrangement and threats of death from one's family, the choice with the best result is to choose Him over them.

People dealing with such realities often face intense loneliness, and have to subdue thoughts of bitterness. If this describes what you're facing, please take comfort in knowing that though you might be estranged from your biological family, God is able and willing to place you in a different kind of family. He will lead you to the company of other committed disciples of Jesus, while He is at work in the lives of members of your biological family.

There's one more thing: you have to forgive them (members of your biological family); 'have to' because forgiving others is what Jesus expects us to do. Bitterness, malice and grudges should have no place in the life of a true Christian. Forgiving them might come easy, if you look past their faults and recognize their needs. Their need? Yes, they are ignorant of what the truth really is. And in due time, God will make it known to them.

JESUS SAYS 80

“When people mistreat you in one town, hurry to another one. I promise you before you have gone to all the towns of Israel, the Son of Man will come” (Matthew 10:23, CEV).

One last group of people who will be like a pack of wolves to the apostles is people in different towns. The reason for this is truly because the earth and its peoples are covered with darkness. By this I mean there's high level demonic activities in the world, and specifically in some areas. And with such high level demonic activities, the apostles who attempt to illuminate such darkness and put an end to demonic activities in these towns will face hostility and persecution. Jesus says when that happens in one town, the disciples must hurry and move to the next one. He even says, before they visit all the towns in Israel, His second coming would have happened.

I know what you're thinking, because I'm thinking the same. Why doesn't Jesus just put an end to the persecution

the apostles will face as well as Christians in general? Want to know the conclusion I arrived at? It's that Jesus doesn't stop it because, as the apostles (all Christians inclusive) continue to scatter around the world, moving from town to town, the good news will get a chance to spread, and many who hear it will be saved! God doesn't wait for the situation to be perfect before He can work; even in dire situations, He works! Amazing, isn't it? Even our persecution serve His purpose.

But, isn't it cowardly to go from town to town just because you are being mistreated? Well, I don't think it's cowardly at all, especially because it's God telling you to do so. Tell me, where is the wisdom in dying when you can live to preach another day?

Does knowing that God wouldn't be disappointed or mad at you for moving from a place where you could be injured or caused to suffer because of your beliefs change your perception about suffering in Christianity? While it is true that persecution and suffering are a part of a Christian's fate, it is important for us to know that divine protection and preservation are also part of a Christian's privileges.

So, every Christian must be willing to receive God's guidance so as to be under His protective care; and if that means leaving a hostile environment and moving to a less hostile place, we must comply. Refusing to comply means you're attempting to force the hand of God into protecting you even when you're clearly living in

disobedience. This isn't likely to end the way you want; so don't test God!

Due to false teachings out there, some Christians might find this hard to believe and accept; but you will do well to read about the acts of the apostles and see how much Kingdom work they accomplish simply because they took Jesus' advice and chose to stay alive and remain useful to God. Moving is stressful. Moving from place to place just to stay alive will even be more stressful; but Jesus says before we are able to visit all of the towns in the world, He would have returned. Does knowing that there will be an end to all the painful processes you have to endure as a Christian fill you with joy? It should.

JESUS SAYS 81

“Students are not better than their teacher, and slaves are not better than their master. It is enough for students to be like their teacher and for slaves to be like their master. If people call the head of the family Satan, what will they say about the rest of the family?”

(Matthew 10:24-25, CEV)

The students Jesus is referring to here are the apostles; and He, the teacher. The slaves are also the apostles, and the master, Jesus. It is required that the apostles be like Jesus and the requirement sufficiently met when they eventually do. One of the ways this transformation will take place is in their suffering the same fate as He. Fate such as name-calling and being misunderstood are part of the deal. You see, Jesus had been called Satan, and His mission misunderstood. The disciples/apostles were to look

forward to such treatment. In the verse that follows, which we will soon explore, He tells them how to conduct themselves in such situations.

Have you been called names? Have your intentions been misunderstood and your good deeds rejected? I know words hurt; they hurt and have a way of altering the truth. Jesus might not have addressed directly how the disciples would feel from hearing the hurtful words people will say to them, but I'm certain He believed that they knew better than to let the opinions of others about them override the truth.

Only the truth should matter.

And learning to internalize only the truth is key to our transformation.

JESUS SAYS 82

*“Don’t be afraid of anyone!
Everything that is hidden will be
found out, and every secret will be
known”
(Matthew 10:26, CEV).*

Earlier on, Jesus had hinted that the apostles will have to endure name-calling and being misunderstood; it was something He went through, and they must be prepared to go through as well. However, when it happens, they are not to be afraid of the opposition whose intention is to intimidate them into silence; instead, they must continue to preach and teach the truth. The reason for the opposition is ignorance. Those who opposed them did so because they were blinded to the truth (it was hid from them, made secret to them and they didn’t have full understanding of it, so they weren’t able to embrace it or the messengers). But in due time as the light of understanding seeps through the minds of their listeners, God will vindicate the apostles

before their accusers; they will be known as true worshipers and servants of God.

Intimidation into silence is a tactic the enemy still uses today. But perhaps we fall prey because our fear is misplaced. What if instead of fear of man and what man can do to us, we reserve our fear for God? If we magnify God and not those who are opposed to us and the message we preach, then we can truly obey Jesus' command not to be afraid. Jesus' promise of vindication still stands as well, but it might happen later rather than sooner. One thing however will be required of us: it is that we persistently sow the seeds of truth in the hearts of all those who we come in contact.

JESUS SAYS 83

*“Whatever I say to you in the dark,
you must tell in the light. And you
must announce from the housetops
whatever I have whispered to you”
(Matthew 10:27, CEV).*

Jesus had said/revealed certain things to the disciples turned apostles, including things He had earlier commanded them to keep secret from other people. Such confidential information must now be told to all people, announced at His command. There are two takeaways from this, perhaps more; but I'll share two.

The first takeaway from this is the privilege of the apostles. They had an advantage over the public. In this verse, Jesus revealed that there were certain information He shared with just them. The same privilege the apostles had, genuine Christians have too; we have such a relationship with God that He confides in us. Isn't this something beautiful? If you didn't know this, now you do; your relationship with God gives you access to His secrets,

confidential information about Him, about what He is doing/will do, about the world, and even about you. Is there something you'll like to know? Go ahead and ask Him. But bear in mind that He has the prerogative of what to share and when to share it.

The second takeaway is the importance of timing in God's plans. There's really no room for over-zealousness. At one time, what Jesus shared with the apostles was to be kept confidential, then at another time He was telling them to go ahead and share it with the public. Do you see that? There's a time to listen and keep things secret, and there's a time to share. There's an opportune time to do things, and only God determines these times. An overzealous apostle will have no respect for these times, but will end up interfering with God's plans and exposing themselves to danger. We all know that interfering in God's plans doesn't ever bring the best results. Since God's plan and God's timing go together, we must submit to God's timing and continue to trust in it always.

I'd add a bonus takeaway, which is that there's no room for hypocrisy in Christian service. Jesus' command to the apostles is that they tell what He says to them, and announce what He whispered to them. They were not permitted to add to the truth. They were charged to faithfully dispense only the truth to the public. Every Christian is charged with this duty as well. What then shall we say about Christians these days who embellish God's word, or worse, dismiss it and replace it with their

own teachings? I say, they aren't true Christians. A true Christian will obey Jesus' instruction and shun deceit.

Sadly, there are many such professing Christians out there who consistently misrepresent God and His word. The message Jesus' words hold to the genuine Christians reading this is, there is a need for us all to make a reform. The change we all want to see must begin with you and me. Let's continue to speak and teach the truth and encourage others to do so. We can't afford to keep waiting on God to make these changes when He is waiting for us to do so. If we do our part, He will do His.

JESUS SAYS 84

*“Don’t be afraid of people. They can kill you, but they cannot harm your soul. Instead, you should fear God who can destroy both your body and your soul in hell”
(Matthew 10:28, CEV).*

The previously confidential information Jesus was charging the apostles to share was capable of inciting hostility and persecution against them; but Jesus commands them once again not to be afraid of the reactions of the people.

His command wasn’t given lightly. He knew what extent people were capable of going; yes, that they could go as far as making martyrs of the disciples, yet His stance was that that shouldn’t be enough reason for the apostles to fear people. Jesus gives a salient reason for His command, that being murdered for a righteous cause will only reveal one thing: that people could harm the body but can’t harm the soul. Fear should be reserved for God

who had power to determine the fate of both body and soul.

Did you notice that Jesus' words didn't hold any promise of aversion of death for the apostles? When He said "*they can kill you*," He really was saying they are able to, they may be permitted to, and that being martyred was typically the case. Aren't you curious to know why Jesus didn't guarantee their lives at all? I believe He didn't want the threats of death to be a deal breaker for them; instead, He speaks of death as though it's nothing, and assures them that even if their bodies were harmed, their souls wouldn't and couldn't, for their souls were preserved by God. His words however holds a warning for those who will make martyrs of His apostles, if they didn't repent, they will end up destroyed, body and soul in hell.

Jesus didn't want the apostles to fear people with the power to put to death, or permit me to add this, death by any means. He doesn't want that for us too. When we think of people, what we should feel is love and not fear, and when it comes to deal breakers in Christian service, we mustn't have any; but when fear of death creeps in and wants to cripple us, we must master it. How? By remembering that even if we die for our beliefs, it's only our bodies that will be harmed; our souls are preserved by God.

JESUS SAYS 85

*“Aren’t two sparrows sold for only a penny? But your Father knows when any one of them falls to the ground. Even the hairs on your head are counted. So don’t be afraid! You are worth much more than many sparrows”
(Matthew 10:29-31, CEV).*

Jesus had mentioned that death by the hands of the opposition was a possibility to the apostles; we don’t know how they responded to that information. Or we do, and like any average human, they were filled with dread. But quickly Jesus reassures them of God’s mindfulness. He said though sparrows were sold for cheap – proof that humans don’t value them much – God does, and is aware of what happens to them. The hairs on the heads of the apostles, Jesus stressed, were counted. This was to prove to them how much attention God paid to them, and that nothing could happen to them without God’s knowledge. Jesus then rounds off His

encouragement by commanding them not to be afraid because God valued them, even much more than He did many sparrows. Jesus wasn't speaking to just the apostles, He's speaking to you and me too!

Just as quickly as fear can fill us and threaten to overwhelm us, if we let Him, Jesus is available and ready to speak words that will silence fear and leave us confident in the care of God! The key thing to remember is to let Jesus' words in; let it take root in your heart so it can bear fruit in your life.

JESUS SAYS 86

*“If you tell others you belong to me, I will tell my Father in heaven you are my followers. But if you reject me, I will tell my Father in heaven you don’t belong to me”
(Matthew 10:32-33, CEV).*

Should it cross the minds of the apostles that they could avert hostility, persecution and death by being secret disciples and apostles of His, Jesus quickly addresses such thought. He says *“if you tell others you belong to me, I will tell my Father in heaven you are my followers.”* Then, introducing a conditional clause, He tells them that those who tell others they belong to Him (for instance declaring openly their belief in Him and standing up for Him against the world’s opinions) are the ones whom will be called His followers before the Father.

What Jesus’ words reveal is that confessing one’s belief to the public and taking a stand for Christ before the

world is a necessity for every follower of His. Now that we know this, can we all agree that being a secret disciple is a misnomer? Because, sooner than later, you'll have to fulfil the requirement, come what may.

The second part of Jesus' statement goes like this: *"But if you reject me, I will tell my Father in heaven you don't belong to me."* To reject Jesus is to fail to embrace Him as Saviour, to turn down His offer of salvation, to continually refuse to be identified with Him/pay attention to His teachings, blatantly disobey His commands, and to not stand with Him against the world's opinions. This is a life-long rejection and resistance against Christ. People who indulge in such rebellion truly do not belong to Christ, and this is the report He will give to the Father.

If you've at one time denied Jesus and the gospel because you were scared of persecution or because you wanted to fit in or even because of wealth and fame, bad as that is, you can retrace your steps back to God and repent. There is still room for you today in the family of God. But if you choose to keep rejecting Jesus, then you will be left with the consequences.

JESUS SAYS 87

*“Don’t think I came to bring peace to the earth! I came to bring trouble, not peace”
(Matthew 10:34, CEV).*

Before you say in alarm, “Is this a thing for the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) to say?” let’s quickly read a few verses that follow.

“I came to turn sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. Your worst enemies will be in your own family” (verses 35-36, CEV).

Jesus was quoting Scripture, Micah 7:6 to be precise; and according to Bible Scholars, the Rabbis taught that this predicted conflict will happen in the days of the Messiah. And since Jesus quoted it, He was claiming to be the Messiah.

Jesus truly is the Prince of Peace; and make no mistakes about it, His death, burial and resurrection do

afford the world an opportunity to be at peace with God and to experience the peace of God. However, it is also true that embracing the opportunity Jesus offers, will set us up for trouble, enmity with the world; one of which will express itself as family feuds. Jesus was aware of the conflict the gospel would cause, even within families, and He wanted the apostles whom He was about to send out to preach and teach to know it too. He wanted them to know it and be okay with it. It was just an inescapable result of the gospel.

Christians are expected to be people of peace. Be certain about this. But this doesn't mean we should refrain from preaching/teaching the gospel because we are afraid of causing conflict in a family/tribe/group etc. Tell me, what kind of peace surpasses peace with God and the peace of God? If you agree that no other kind of peace does, then we must do what God expects of us, even if it results in conflict.

JESUS SAYS 88

“If you love your father or mother or even your sons and daughters more than me, you are not fit to be my disciples. And unless you are willing to take up your cross and follow me, you are not fit to be my disciples. If you try to save your life, you will lose it. But if you give it up for me, you will surely find it”

(Matthew 10:37-39, CEV).

Many would hear the preaching and teaching of the apostles who were to be sent out, and there would be those who desire to be Jesus' disciple; to them Jesus lays out some necessary conditions. One of such is loving Him more than our immediate family. It made sense that Jesus would state this as a necessary condition just after He had revealed that embracing Him as Messiah might result in disunity

within the family and estrangement from the family, for the believer. For some, seeing their biological family disunited and being estranged from them might be too much sacrifice. Others will be okay with it since they will be adopted into God's family. The latter will be the ones who would qualify to be disciples and enjoy the benefits and privileges of being disciples.

Why does Jesus make loving Him more than our immediate family a necessary condition? It's beyond just a condition; it's a commandment. God created us; so before we belonged to our families, we belonged first to Him. Isn't this enough reason for Him to demand that we love Him more? Anyway, before we were born into our families, God already had a purpose for us to fulfil; and in order to do that, our love must be more to Him than anyone or anything else.

Loving God more will result in us esteeming His word and will more. This will help us make godly choices always and not be deterred from the path He has crafted for our lives. And also, we are required to love Him more because of the tests of discipleship. They will come and only those who love God more and put Him first, pass those tests. Jesus says *"unless you are willing to take up your cross and follow me, you are not fit to be my disciples."*

The cross Jesus talks about isn't a literal one, but a symbol of sacrifices. It means being willing and ready, eager and prepared to give up something you value for the

sake of Christ who you regard as more important and worthy. In summary, it means losing to win. Those whom Jesus will consider as His disciples must fulfil this requirement in order to follow Him, whatever it might mean for them, even if it's estrangement from their families.

Some will hear the words of Jesus and back-track from desiring to be a disciple. This is their effort at avoiding to make sacrifices. They are the ones He was referring to when He says *"if you try to save your life, you will lose it. But if you give it up for me, you will surely find it."* Their efforts at 'saving' their lives will be futile. Though they will succeed in avoiding the sacrifices required to follow Jesus and becoming a disciple, they will lose their lives eventually, as the fate of those who are separate from Christ is hell. However, those who meet the necessary conditions for being Jesus' disciple have given up/are giving up their lives for Him, and will find the real purpose of life here on earth and have an enviable fate in eternity.

A summary of all of this is this: Want to be a disciple of Jesus? Love Him more and be willing to make sacrifices for Him whom you claim to love. If you choose not to, you will end up discovering when it's too late that choosing the natural wellbeing at the expense of the spiritual and eternal is never worth it.

JESUS SAYS 89

*“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me. And anyone who welcomes me also welcomes the one who sent me. Anyone who welcomes a prophet, just because that person is a prophet, will be given the same reward as a prophet. Anyone who welcomes a good person, just because that person is good, will be given the same reward as a good person. And anyone who gives one of my most humble followers a cup of cool water, just because that person is my follower, will be rewarded”
(Matthew 10:40-42, CEV).*

Jesus says to the apostles “anyone who welcomes you welcomes me. And anyone who welcomes me also welcomes the one who sent me.” No lies detected!

The disciples would preach and teach the good news, and those who welcomed them would in fact be welcoming Jesus, not only because the apostles are His representatives but also because of their message! The kingdom of heaven might be the general theme of their message, but Jesus is the centre of it. And since Jesus and God are one, you can't welcome Jesus without having God come in as well.

People generally have different reactions to those claiming to be sent by God, but those who are able to discern those who are genuinely sent by God, treat them well and support their ministry are eligible for a reward. Jesus says they will *"be given the same reward as a prophet"* (we can take this to mean, those sent by God). But His next words though they support the first statement, also hold a warning, He says *"anyone who welcomes a good person, just because that person is good, will be given the same reward as a good person."* What then happens when you welcome a bad person who is posing to be good? And support their cause? Instead of rewards, punishment should be expected then.

Someone might say, what if we end up welcoming and supporting unintentionally those claiming to be ministers but really aren't, what happens then? Truthfully, I don't know. What I do know is that, we have been warned of their existence, the evil they perpetrate and how to spot them. It is left to us to use the information wisely. Why

disregard the information and stand the risk of sharing in their fate?

Rounding off the lengthy discourse, Jesus says, *“and anyone who gives one of my most humble followers a cup of cool water, just because that person is my follower, will be rewarded.”* By this He means, even the smallest gesture – an act of kindness – rendered to those who are His disciple/apostle will be noticed by God and will be duly rewarded. Jesus’ apostles will be receiving from those they were sent to minister to, instead of being weighed down by feelings of indebtedness. Jesus makes it clear that God will take note of how they are treated and those who treated them well and supported them will be rewarded by Him.

That being said, Jesus’ words hold a clear message for all believers, that how we treat those genuinely sent by God matters, seeing that He takes notice of our response to them and rewards support offered to them. Let’s commit ourselves to ministering to those sent to minister to us, not necessarily because of the reward but because Jesus expects us to.

8

A MODEL OF COMMITMENT

JESUS SAYS 90

*“After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he left and began teaching and preaching in the towns”
(Matthew 11:1, CEV).*

WE HAD SPENT the entire Matthew chapter 10 exploring Jesus’ instruction to the twelve disciples who were to be sent out as apostles, or better yet, workers sent out to bring in a great spiritual harvest. Now this chapter opens with information on what Jesus did afterwards. Matthew says Jesus didn’t sit back, fold His hands and cross His feet, He worked too! He taught and preached in towns!

Jesus didn’t take advantage of the fact that He had apostles out there doing the work, then slack off; His quantity of work and intensity didn’t decrease. Why? His words in Matthew 9:37-38 had revealed a need, and though He had conscripted His disciples to be part of the solution to that need, He Himself continued to work... modelling commitment.

Jesus was dedicated to the work; the apostles needed to see it and be inspired by it. Jesus' action reveals to us an important virtue a Christian leader must possess – commitment, and how a Christian leader should handle the work entrusted in his/her hands. Like Jesus, leaders must demonstrate ever growing passion and intensity, not only as proof of their own love for the Lord, but also for the sake of those who are working with them, including the silent watchers too, like John the Baptist.

“John was in prison when he heard what Christ was doing. So John sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one we should be looking for? Or must we wait for someone else?” (Matthew 11:2-3, CEV).

Matthew had mentioned John's imprisonment briefly in chapter 4 verse 12 but now feels the need to revisit it. Thankfully so because of what we stand to learn from this mention.

While John was imprisoned Jesus was busy and active with His ministry; He taught, preached and worked many miracles, all of which John had heard about in prison, but this had left him with a question he now sent his followers to ask Jesus. John wanted to know if Jesus was really the Messiah or if the wait for the Messiah must continue.

You'll have to go back and read Matthew 3:11-17 from the Bible to see for yourself John's attitude towards Jesus

before the imprisonment. When you're done, come back and read John's question again, to see John's attitude towards Jesus after his imprisonment. Doesn't it remind you of you? It does remind me of me.

Our attitude towards Jesus before something untoward happens and afterwards tells a lot about us. We all wonder, though. What would make John ask such a question? Perhaps the answer can be found when we look inwards and examine our own character. I know that if I were to ask Jesus such a question while in John's shoes, it would be because of unmet expectations.

But enough of wondering why John questioned Jesus about His Messiahship. Let's discover if it's okay to ask God questions, by reading about how Jesus reacts/responds to John's question.

JESUS SAYS 91

*“Jesus answered, “Go and tell John what you have heard and seen. The blind are now able to see, and the lame can walk. People with leprosy are being healed, and the deaf can hear. The dead are raised to life, and the poor are hearing the good news. God will bless everyone who doesn’t reject me because of what I do”
(Matthew 11:4-6, CEV).*

I love the first two words: *“Jesus answered”*. They provide the information we are seeking. John’s followers had met up with Jesus and asked Him John’s (seemingly embarrassing) question, and Jesus answered. Permit me to make the obvious, even more obvious, it’s okay to ask God questions. A true desire to know about Him will not be ignored by God and He will answer a heart that is desperately in need of reassurance.

So, go ahead and speak honestly with God, be vulnerable with Him.

Also, the fact that Jesus answered John's question shows us how to react to people's doubts about Jesus and their other vulnerabilities. We don't turn people away or shame them because they asked a seeming doubtful question; instead, we answer their questions patiently and handle their fragile hearts with gentleness.

Anyway, back to John's question. John, despite what he heard about Jesus; His teaching, preaching and miracles, wanted to know if Jesus was really the Messiah. This made it easy to conclude that perhaps John had some expectations of the Messiah that Jesus, the one whom he believed earlier to be the Messiah, hadn't met. What Jesus was spending His time doing wasn't what John expected... or so it seems.

Jesus answered John's question saying, "*Go and tell John what you heard and seen,*" then He goes on to list the works He's been doing, which in the actual sense were works predicted by the prophet Isaiah in the Scripture that the Messiah would do. See Isaiah 35:5-6a; 61:1. Indirectly, Jesus was telling John that He really is the Messiah. And rounding off His answer, Jesus adds this: "*God will bless everyone who doesn't reject me because of what I do.*" By His words, our assumptions about the reason behind John's question are affirmed.

But what do Jesus' words mean to us? It seems the case that John's earlier strong conviction about Jesus had

dwindled till all he had left was doubt; if it sunk any lower, what will be left would be complete rejection of Jesus. And the reason for all that was what Jesus was doing. What Jesus was doing appeared not to be conforming to the 'works' of the Messiah John had in mind. Jesus' final words in addressing John's question reveals one thing to us all: We have to be careful we who believe, because God is not likely to conform always to our expectations of Him, and that in itself can be a trap for us; it can sink our strong convictions and leave us with doubt which could result in complete fatalistic rejection of the Lord.

What then should we do? Accept that there are many sides to God; one, that He can decide which side to show and when to do so. But more importantly, prepare your heart to believe God in spite of what He does or doesn't do. If you do all of this, then you will receive the blessing from God for doing so. Jesus guarantees it.

Jesus had answered John's question, but as John's followers were going away, Jesus turned to the crowd to speak about John.

JESUS SAYS 92

“What sort of person did you go out into the desert to see? Was he like tall grass blown about by the wind? What kind of man did you go out to see?

Was he someone dressed in fine clothes? People who dress like that live in the king’s palace. What did you really go out to see? Was he a prophet?

He certainly was. I tell you that he was more than a prophet. In the Scriptures God says about him, “I am sending my messenger ahead to get things ready for you. I tell you no one ever born on this earth is greater than John the Baptist. But whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John”

(Matthew 11:7b-11, CEV).

John was in prison wrestling with doubt, and we know this to be true because of the nature of the question he sent some of his followers to ask Jesus. Jesus had in turn patiently responded to John's questions but also felt the need to speak to the crowd about John. Compare the question John asked Jesus to the things Jesus had to say about John. John's words were filled with doubt, but not Jesus' which were full of conviction. John was low in spirit, yet Jesus attributed steadiness to him. In case anyone forgot, Jesus reminded them of how John stood out with his simple yet unique dressing. And even though many rejected John's ministry, Jesus acknowledges John's status as prophet, going as far as declaring that John was more than a prophet, quoting Malachi 3:1.

But Jesus isn't done speaking. He also adds that "No one ever born on this earth is greater than John the Baptist, but whoever is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John. What does this mean?"

Jesus wasn't flattering John when He said no one ever born on this earth is greater than John. He was revealing the truth. Of all the people who ever lived before John, including those who were prophets, none had the privilege John had. John was Jesus' forerunner and met Jesus who is the fulfilment of prophecy. Such honour did God bestow on John. But yet John with his privileged position and honour was no greater than Jesus who was born also on this earth yet was the Messiah, neither is he

greater than all of us who have come to believe in Jesus, have been re-born and are now part of God's Kingdom (see John 3:5-7), even those of us with the least degree of faith.

How do you think John would have felt if he had heard how highly Jesus spoke of him? I'm almost certain he would have been emotional. But not just that, I think he would have been greatly encouraged, thankful even that Jesus saw the best in him and spoke about it. Unfortunately John didn't hear all this; or, maybe he did because someone in the crowd related it to him. Anyway, how does it feel to know that God is not just the God of the highs but also of the lows, that even while you're low in spirit and wrestling with doubt, He sees the best in you, is convinced about it and won't hesitate to reveal it?

I know how that makes me feel: relieved! My feelings doesn't change how God feels about me. Your feelings doesn't change how God feels about you. But you know what else? Jesus' attitude towards John also serves as a challenge to us. We love the thought that when we are low in spirit, someone is there for us, seeing, believing and speaking the best about us. But you know what's not a bad idea at all? Striving towards steadfastness in our faith.

Taking a stand for God always comes with a personal cost; by now every believer should know this, and this knowledge should form our resolve that we will hold on to our beliefs about God regardless of the hardships we will have to endure, and the things He just won't do. We

can have more highs than lows, even sinking lows. I believe we will just have to be more intentional about being in control of our feelings instead of letting them control us.

Someone may ask, would repentance be required of John, seeing that he had earlier been in doubt about Jesus? If faith pleases God, how do you think doubt would make God feel? Less than pleased, I'm sure. Jesus didn't chide John. However, we mustn't make it a habit to be doubtful about God. If we ever find ourselves guilty of such, let's return to God, full of repentance; then be assured that He will forgive and restore us.

JESUS SAYS 93

*“From the time of John the Baptist until now, violent people have been trying to take over the kingdom of heaven by force”
(Matthew 11:12 CEV).*

Jesus, still speaking about John said the words in this verse. But what does He mean? We all know that John is Jesus’ fore-runner. Though we didn’t discuss John’s message in this book, the Scripture reveals that the general theme of John’s message was turning the people back to God (challenging them to turn away from a lifestyle of sin in order to be a part of God’s kingdom: see Matthew 3:2). And from the time John started preaching in the desert of Judea up until Jesus came on the scene and continued the message, Jesus says those who are violent have tried to be a part of the Kingdom of heaven (or God’s kingdom/God’s family).

Jesus had mentioned ‘violent people’ but He wasn’t referring to those who are of a violent nature who go about hurting people, damaging things and killing people,

no. Those He was referring are the ones who have wholeheartedly embraced the message of John and Jesus, and possess an earnest desire to be a part of the Kingdom of heaven, so much so that they are willing to turn away completely from their sins and turn to God.

They repent of their sins and change their conduct/ how they live. Or did you not know that although God does the saving, we too must earnestly want to be saved? That earnestness (meaning sincere and intense conviction) to be saved is what makes up the ‘violent’ person in this context.

For us Christians today, Jesus’ words hold a deeper meaning. As you go on in your faith walk, you will realize that Jesus’ words are not only wisdom for the new convert, but for those also who have been converts for a while. What do I mean? That, that earnestness that was required for you to be saved at first, will be required in your Christian faith walk as well. For we believers must continue to be earnest about remaining a part of the Kingdom of heaven. So even when faced with temptations or tribulations, we strive to overcome.

JESUS SAYS 94

“All the Books of the Prophets and the Law of Moses told what was going to happen up to the time of John. And if you believe them, John is Elijah, the prophet you are waiting for. If you have ears, pay attention. You people are like children sitting in the market and shouting to each other, “We played the flute, but you would not dance! We sang a funeral song, but you would not mourn!” John the Baptist did not go around eating and drinking and you said, “That man has a demon in him!” but the Son of Man goes around eating and drinking, and you say, “That man eats and drinks too much! He is even a friend to tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is shown to be right by what it does” (Matthew 11:13-19, CEV).

To those who were non-believing and passive about John and Jesus' message, Jesus directed His next words. The people claimed they believed the books of the Prophets and the Law of Moses, so Jesus refers to those in order to exhort them to accept the truth. He tells them John was the fulfilment of one of the prophecies recorded in the Scriptures (see Malachi 4:5-6). Please note that John isn't the reincarnation of Elijah; however, he operated in the same spirit and power.

Imagine still waiting for someone who has already come, and missing him because you couldn't recognize him! I'm not just referring to John, but Jesus also. Makes me wonder how many fulfilment of prophecies we've stared at but couldn't recognize, how many times we've missed out on God's best because we couldn't discern them. Good thing is, if we agree to rely on God the Revealer, the past doesn't have to repeat itself.

After revealing John as the fulfilment of prophecy, Jesus says *"if you have ears, pay attention."* By this we know that some of those who heard Jesus that day would continue in their ignorance because it's one thing to hear, it's another thing to pay attention to what you hear, or have heard. To pay attention means to consider, to think about something carefully, even to look into it; examine the facts in order to establish the truth. Even though Jesus only spoke the truth, those who heard Him that day will only recognize it if they spent some time on it. What's that truth God is asking you to pay attention to? You'll

increase in knowledge and understanding and other spiritual blessings only if you do so.

Next, Jesus talks about the general reception John and He had got from the people; hence the illustration of children whose playmates didn't join them when they played flutes and held a mock funeral in the market place. Both John and Jesus had to endure rejection and slander from the people who stood aloof from John because, to them, he appeared to be demon-possessed, and Jesus, because He appeared to be a glutton, a drinking man who befriended sinners. They had their excuses for rejecting John and Jesus; they even believed they were showing good judgment. But what they didn't know was that they were actually rejecting every proposition from God.

Now that we've gotten the literal interpretations out of the way, let's do some reading between the lines. Did you notice the uniqueness of John and Jesus? None was quite like the other in their personality and approach to ministry. John abstained from all social life; he lived a separated life, spending all his time boldly preaching. Jesus on the other hand, accepted invitations and had a lot of 'friends', some of whom were the worst kind of sinners. We know He did this in order to preach to them and help them turn to God.

You know what this teaches us? It teaches us to embrace our uniqueness. John embraced His uniqueness, and Jesus didn't copy John's personality or approach.

Each, though different, was essential in God's plan. You and I have different personalities, skills and abilities carefully deposited in us by God so we can fulfil our special and individual roles. Let's embrace all that we are, knowing full well that God will use us just as we are.

JESUS SAYS 95

*“In the towns where Jesus had worked most of his miracles, the people refused to turn to God. So Jesus was upset with them and said...”
(Matthew 11:20, CEV).*

Jesus was upset (unhappy and disappointed) and with good reason too. The people who lived in some towns where He had worked most of His miracles refused to turn to God. And if you ask me, I believe Jesus was upset with them because He cared too much. He knew the potential problems they'll face if they continued to refuse to return to God. And so, hoping that if they knew what was to befall them they'd choose to change direction, in one last attempt Jesus says to them:

“You people of Chorazin are in for trouble! You people of Bethsaida are in for trouble too! If the miracles that took place here had happened in Tyre and Sidon, the people there would have turned to God long ago. They would have dressed in sackcloth and put ashes on their heads. I tell you on the day of judgment the people of Tyre and Sidon will get off easier than

you will. People of Capernaum, do you think you will be honored in heaven? You will go down to hell! If the miracles that took place in your town had happened in Sodom, it would still be standing. So I tell you on the day of judgment the people of Sodom will get off easier than you” (Matthew 11:21-24 CEV).

Jesus openly predicted judgment for the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida who had witnessed the demonstration of Jesus’ miraculous power and still had refused to turn to God; they had been privileged but didn’t see themselves as such. He compares their unresponsiveness to the responsiveness Tyre and Sidon would have shown if they had been privileged as they had been! He could say this because He was gifted, He knew these things. Jesus then tells the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida that on the day of judgment their inability to discern and respond appropriately to their privilege will attract a sterner punishment for them than what the people of Tyre and Sidon will get for their sins.

Next, Jesus addresses the people of Capernaum, who were of the opinion that their eternal fate was enviable and certain. Jesus tells them that they are wrong. Instead of being honoured in heaven, they were going down to hell. And it was all because of their unresponsiveness to the miracles they had witnessed. They too had been privileged but didn’t see themselves as such!

Isn’t it lopsided for anyone to think that just witnessing miracles will earn one honour in heaven, when to even be allowed into heaven one has to first turn to

God, something these people had refused to do? Jesus tells them the purpose of their witnessing those miracles was to help them turn to God. Those were opportunities they had refused to maximize, opportunities that would have been well maximized if the people of Sodom had witnessed them. In fact, their town would still be standing! Jesus tells the people of Capernaum that on the day of judgment their inability to discern and respond appropriately to their privilege will attract a sterner punishment for them, more than what the people of Sodom will get for their sins.

For the unbeliever reading this, you ought to know that you didn't stumble on this book and have read it to this point by accident. It's God's plan, and you are privileged to be reading the words of Jesus. Now it's time to acknowledge your privilege and maximize this opportunity by turning away from sin and turning to God.

For the believer reading this, do you see how these verses we've read show that God invests in us and has expectations of us? Since Jesus spent a lot of time in the earlier mentioned towns, He had expectations of them; but when those expectations weren't met, He denounced the people and openly predicted that they will have a degree of punishment higher than other towns.

Believers are privileged! God's investments in our lives through His teaching, miracles etc. must be accounted for by the way we live and what we are living for! His

expectations of us must be met. We can't afford to waste His investments and not meet His expectations.

JESUS SAYS 96

“At that moment Jesus said: My Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I am grateful that you hid all this from wise and educated people and showed it to ordinary people. Yes, Father, this is what pleased you” (Matthew 11:25-26, CEV).

Jesus was denouncing the unbelieving towns when suddenly, and unexpectedly, He broke into prayer. His prayer forms the words of the verses here.

From Jesus' words, we see the involvement of God in the ways the gospel is received by different groups of people. For instance, though the gospel is preached to all, discernment and comprehension of it is a gift given only to the ordinary: this is a Kingdom standard that God delights in upholding. Please don't take this to mean that God is prejudiced towards those who are knowledgeable and literate, or that He shows favouritism towards those

who have none of these privileges. Because, thinking that way is erroneous. Instead, understand this to mean that in order to receive this gift of discernment and comprehension of the gospel and in general, revelation of the ways of God, you must approach Him with the correct heart's posture. The 'ordinary' people Jesus refers to are those whose hearts are unassuming (i.e. not pretentious or arrogant).

If you knew something you possessed would hinder you from receiving God's gifts, wouldn't you get rid of it? If you will do so, then you must get rid of every proud and haughty spirit; and humble yourself before God.

God wants everyone to be saved. He wants us all to receive the gifts of discernment and comprehension of the gospel. And when we are saved, He wants to reveal things to us so we can increase in revelational knowledge about Him and His ways. He hasn't released all of these gifts yet because He's waiting on us to quit being know-it-alls, and admit our limitations.

JESUS SAYS 97

*“My Father has given me everything, and he is the only one who knows the Son. The only one who truly knows the Father is the Son. But the Son wants to tell others about the Father, so they can know him too”
(Matthew 11:27, CEV).*

Jesus goes back to talking to those around Him. Now, He talks of God and Himself as separate entities while yet revealing the relationship between them, and then His mission. He speaks of God's involvement in His mission; which is why He says the Father has given Him everything. All that's required for His mission on earth was made available to Him by God. Jesus also mentions that He is intimately known by the Father, just as He is the only one who truly (i.e. accurately, to the fullest degree) knows the Father. Finally, He reveals what His desire and mission was, to tell us about the Father, so we can know Him too! Have you told anyone this truths recently?

What message does this have for the believer reading this? I'll list a few.

λ If God has called you to serve, He will present you with, provide you with, and supply you with everything you need.

λ We must all be committed to an intimate relationship with God; this is how we make it possible for ourselves to grow and keep growing in the knowledge of God. And we know that knowing God is essential for our Christian walk and service.

λ Whatever God has called us to do, the foundation of it must mirror Jesus' words, which is to tell others about God so they can know Him too.

JESUS SAYS 98

*“If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me and I will give you rest. Take the yoke I give you. Put it on your shoulders and learn from me. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest. This yoke is easy to bear, and this burden is light”
(Matthew 11:28-30, CEV).*

Still addressing the people, Jesus extends an invitation to those who are tired from carrying heavy burdens. The invitation wasn't to all, only those who were ready to admit that they were in need of 'spiritual' rest from shouldering their heavy (spiritual) burdens.

What are some of these heavy spiritual burdens? One is the burden of proof. And another is the burden of guilt. The burden of proof is the obligation of meeting unbearable religious demands, e.g. rules and obligations given out by religious leaders. The burden of guilt on the

other hand is the negative feelings that accompany failure to meet religious demands.

After extending the invitation, Jesus makes a promise of ‘spiritual’ rest to those who accept it. What does Jesus mean by this promise? To help us understand further, He says, *“Take the yoke I give you.”* Those who come to Jesus will get to drop the former heavy spiritual burdens, be they of proof or guilt or even both, that they’ve shouldered; and then receive from Jesus a yoke.

Someone might say, How is this rest? Dropping burdens and taking on a yoke? It is rest, an end to one phase of your spiritual journey, and the beginning of a new one, one which you’d realize upon comparing the two is better. Although Jesus doesn’t offer zero spiritual obligations, taking on His yoke means being joined with Him so He (who is equipped and qualified) can tell you about God. You can then know Him and what truly pleases Him. And God’s Spirit will work in you to make you willing and able to obey Him.

Speaking of His nature, Jesus assures those who accept His invitation and conditions that He is gentle and humble, as opposed to the insensitive and proud nature of the religious leaders. He could guarantee the spiritual rest they couldn’t. His yoke will be easy to bear and His burdens will be light.

“Come to Me.” Jesus’ words weren’t only for those who were present back in his day; it’s still very valid today. Jesus continues to extend this invitation to the non-

believer and believer who have been on a totally unproductive (spiritual) path. His promise to give rest can be trusted, for He has a track record of keeping His word; that, and nobody loves and cares for you more than He does. Accept His invitation today. Don't stay apart from Him anymore. Fulfil the conditions, and you'll discover the rest that only He can give.

I really feel the leading of God's Spirit to add that Jesus' words call for an intimate relationship with Him. For the non-believer who is to be a new convert and for those who have been in the faith for a while, you need an intimate relationship with God. It's in this place of seating quietly with Him, in prayer and study of the word that the spiritual exchange happens and transformation continues to take place. Please don't trivialize this information at all. Make out time to sit quietly with Jesus every day.



LORD OF THE SABBATH

JESUS SAYS 99

*“One Sabbath, Jesus and his disciples were walking through some wheat fields. His disciples were hungry and began picking and eating grains of wheat. Some Pharisees noticed this and said to Jesus, “Why are your disciples picking grain on the Sabbath? They are not supposed to do this! Jesus Answered...”
(Matthew 12:1-3a, CEV).*

SOMETIMES WE ARE like John the Baptist, asking the Lord questions because we have a genuine desire to know and be reassured; at other times, we are like the Pharisees in the Scripture above, asking the Lord questions with an undertone of accusation, telling Him what He ought to be doing and shouldn't allow. Which group do you fall into lately, John the Baptist's or the Pharisees?

Jesus had honoured John's desire to know, and now we read how Jesus sometimes handles our questions, I mean those ones which are really accusations. The Pharisees had noticed one Sabbath (which was a day of religious observance and abstinence from work kept by Jews) that Jesus' disciples were picking grains of wheat to eat (Read Deuteronomy 23:24-25). They accosted Jesus, who was with the disciples at that time and asked why His disciples were doing that on the Sabbath, stressing they weren't supposed to do so.

Jesus' response is instructive. *"You surely must have read what David did when he and his followers were hungry. He went into the house of God, and then they ate the sacred loaves of bread that only priests are supposed to eat. Haven't you read in the Law of Moses that the priests are allowed to work in the temple on the Sabbath? But no one says they are guilty of breaking the law of the Sabbath. I tell you there is something here greater than the temple. Don't you know what the Scriptures mean when they say, 'Instead of offering sacrifices to me, I want you to be merciful to others?'" If you knew what this means, you would not condemn these innocent disciples of mine. So the Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath"* (Mathew 12:3-8, CEV).

We'll dissect Jesus' response in a bit, but after the first reading, you'll agree with me that Jesus treated the Pharisees question/accusation as emanating from lack of knowledge/information. He concluded that they spoke in ignorance, and didn't get offended; instead, He took the

pains to educate them. Aren't you just thankful to God that He isn't easily angered, and tolerates our accusations, sees it for what it truly is – ignorance – and takes the pains of educating us? Shouldn't we treat people's accusations the same way instead of always taking offence and staying offended? We definitely should.

Before we delve into Jesus' response, let's first read God's command about the Sabbath which the Pharisees had accused Jesus' disciples of breaking. *“Remember that the Sabbath Day belongs to me. You have six days when you can do your work, but the seventh day of each week belongs to me, your God. No one is to work on that day—not you, your children, your slaves, your animals, or the foreigners who live in your towns. In six days I made the sky, the earth, the oceans, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That's why I made the Sabbath a special day that belongs to me”* (Exodus 20:8-11, CEV).

God prohibited labour on the Sabbath. It was clear as day, but the Pharisees had added another observance to it – don't pick grains of wheat to eat, even when hungry on the Sabbath. They believed their added rules helped people obey God's command well. Were Jesus' disciples guilty of breaking God's law? Not at all; the only ones guilty were the Pharisees. They were guilty of adding to God's law. Blame it on their over-zealousness.

But we too have to be careful when handling God's law. We must resist the urge to add to it, or go about demanding that people adhere to our additions, and

shaming them when they don't. If we do, then we are just another Pharisee, overzealous about the law. The danger with adding to God's law is that it doesn't reveal the true nature of God to people; and in most cases, it turns people away from God.

God had designed the Sabbath for the people; it was supposed to be a day they would take rest from work, devoting the day to worship Him, so that when they go back to work they would be refreshed. But what kind of God would He be if after designing the Sabbath for the people, He then insists that personal needs like eating be ignored just because it was the Sabbath? This was what Jesus tried to help the Pharisees see with the first instance He shared in His response.

David, in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, had eaten the sacred loaves. The sacred loaves of bread were presented as an offering to the Lord on each Sabbath. When the time came for the new batch, the old ones were eaten by the priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). Yet, God didn't insist on upholding the law in David's case; instead, He permitted him and his followers to eat the sacred loaves at a time of need. In the second instance, Jesus mentioned the priests whom both God and the people, the Pharisees included, didn't hold accountable when it came to the no work law on the Sabbath. They spent time preparing the many sacrifices offered on that day. Want to know why they were exempt? They were serving, making it possible for the people's spiritual needs to be met. With both instances, Jesus

aimed to prove to the Pharisees that God made the Sabbath for the people.

The Pharisees didn't really know who they had accosted, that He wasn't just Jesus, the man who went about teaching, preaching and working miracles, but He was indeed, and greater than the temple. He also revealed God's will to them by quoting Hosea 6:6. The Pharisees' approach to worship was to offer sacrifices only. However God wanted them to see that there were other ways to worship, for instance, having a godly attitude like being merciful, and showing mercy to others, all of which pleased God. Jesus believed that if they had understood the desires of God as revealed by the prophet Hosea, they wouldn't have added to God's law nor accuse His disciples of breaking the law. How often do you consider these other opportunities for worship?

Jesus rounds off His response to the Pharisees by declaring that He was Lord over the Sabbath, meaning He had power, authority or influence over the Sabbath. I believe He said this so they know that He can overrule whatever law they've added to God's law for the Sabbath.

Here's a challenge for you. When next you're tempted to assume the role of a know-it-all and accuse God, try to humbly ask Him to help you know Him and His ways better.

JESUS SAYS 100

As soon as He was done addressing the Pharisees that had accosted Him, “Jesus left and went into one of their synagogues, where there was a man whose hand was paralyzed. Some Pharisees wanted to accuse Jesus of doing something wrong, so they asked him, “Is it right to heal someone on the Sabbath?” Jesus answered, “If one of your sheep fell into a ditch on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you lift it out? People are worth much more than sheep, and so it is right to do good on the Sabbath.” Then Jesus told the man, “Hold out your hand.” The man did, and it became as healthy as the other one”

(Matthew 12:9-13, CEV).

Let's take "their" synagogue to mean one that had a large number of Pharisees. Personally, I believe Jesus went into such a one intentionally. He knew what would happen there and was ready to make the occasion serve His purpose.

When Jesus was sighted by the Pharisees, they set their plan to catch Him in doing something wrong in motion. In that synagogue was a man whose hand was paralyzed, he would be perfect for bait but they don't present him to Jesus since that would make it obvious, instead they ask Jesus a question about healing on the Sabbath.

As a response to their question, Jesus asks them how they'd respond if their sheep needed their help coming out of a ditch on the Sabbath. The answer was obvious: they wouldn't ignore their sheep by waiting till the Sabbath was over to help it. How much more a human being! Jesus made it clear that to Him – this also meant to God – people are worth more than sheep! And so He wouldn't withhold doing good, i.e. meeting people's needs just because it was the Sabbath. Then to prove His claim of valuing people, Jesus healed the man's paralyzed hand right there and then on the Sabbath!

Can you imagine a world where God listened to us and helped us only on Mondays through Friday afternoons? If that's unimaginable, then how about a world where we Christians were only good to others on Mondays through Friday afternoons? It's ridiculous! Oh, the chaos that would ensue! This is why we mustn't neglect Jesus' words;

we must value people as God does, and be good to people every day, all day.

After Jesus healed the man's hand, "*The Pharisees left and started making plans to kill Jesus*" (verse 14). They didn't argue with Jesus any further on the matter but seeing what they did next, it was clear that they were offended by His response. Perhaps it's in order to avoid making enemies and dealing with threats of death that we avoid those who have opposing religious views; but we must learn from Jesus who knew what their response will be and still went ahead to tell the truth. When led by God's Spirit, we mustn't hold back from telling the truth to those with opposing views; we must tell it as it is if it will afford some of our hearers who have developed destructive habits an opportunity to turn to God and embrace His ways.

JESUS SAYS 101

*“When Jesus found out what was happening, he left there and large crowds followed him. He healed all of their sick, but warned them not to tell anyone about him”
(Matthew 12:15-16, CEV).*

The Pharisees had heard the truth concerning the Sabbath from Jesus and their resolve was to kill the messenger! Hopefully this isn't how any of us who are Christians respond when we are confronted with the truth. Instead of 'shooting/killing' the messenger, we must pay attention to the message. Anyway, when Jesus learns about the plot to kill Him, He leaves there; which is wisdom on His part. Wisdom says, don't act recklessly; if there's a way to avoid being in harm's way, take it. Wisdom also says, don't linger in the company of know-it-all's; they have their minds made up, and it's a waste of time trying to teach or correct them.

How do you respond when God decides to preserve your life by revealing threats of death to you? Do you leave

or stay when those who you know need correction the most act deaf to your correction/advice? Jesus' action shows us the right way to respond in both instances.

Jesus was rejected by the Pharisees but the crowds were enthusiastic about Him; so much so that as He left they followed Him. And He was kind enough to heal their sick; but warned them not to tell anyone about Him. After observing Jesus, His character and ministry, Matthew makes reference to the words of the Prophet Isaiah recorded in Isaiah 42:1-4.

“So God’s promise came true, just as Isaiah the prophet had said, “Here is my chosen servant! I love him, and he pleases me. I will give him my Spirit, and he will bring justice to the nations. He won’t shout or yell or call out in the streets. He won’t break off a bent reed or put out a dying flame, but he will make sure that justice is done. All nations will place their hope in him” (Matthew 12:17-21, CEV).

Matthew coming to his conclusions via the Prophet’s words, helps us to know that:

- λ Jesus is appointed by God.
- λ Jesus is beloved of God.
- λ Jesus possesses the Spirit of God.
- λ Jesus worked for God’s every purpose to be fulfilled on earth, e.g. divine justice.
- λ He didn’t shout, not as a way to get His message

across, to get people on His side or as a means to defend Himself.

λ He loved people so much He was continually hopeful about their complete restoration, even if their circumstances weren't looking favourable.

λ He will not fail in His mission to bring justice to the nations of the world.

λ Jesus will become and has now become a name that people could trust.

Don't you think that from this list arises areas we Christians can challenge ourselves? We already know that we are chosen and loved by God, and that we have His Spirit dwelling on the inside of us. But how about our works? Are they directed towards fulfilling God's every purpose? Do we contend with the people God has sent us to? Do we love people and are we proving so by believing the best for them and not giving up completely on them? Do we faithfully commit to the works God has given us to do? What kind of reputation do we have?

JESUS SAYS 102

*“Some people brought to Jesus a man who was blind and could not talk because he had a demon in him. Jesus healed the man, and then he was able to talk and see. The crowds were so amazed they asked, “Could Jesus be the Son of David?”
(Matthew 12:22-23, CEV).*

The verses above reveal one of the operations of evil spirits, and part of Jesus’ mission on earth. While demons seek to hold people captive in a prison of medical conditions amongst others, Jesus came to present freedom to those who have been held captive! He did it for the man in the verses above, and till date He continues to set captives free! Do you want this freedom? Then go ahead and ask Him in faith for it.

The miracle we read that Jesus worked left the people so surprised, and had such an impression on them, that they started to consider if Jesus could be the Messiah! But “When the Pharisees heard this, they said, “He forces out

demons by the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons!” (verse 24). But, what drove the Pharisees to making such a slanderous statement? Their feelings. Jesus’ presence unnerved them. His claims, preaching and teaching irked them; and the miracles He worked made them envious. And you know what they say about misery, that it loves company! They couldn’t bear the thought of the people accepting Jesus as Messiah, so quickly they jumped in and shared their erroneous assumptions. The Pharisees were certainly villains in Jesus’ story. But do you know who the chief villain was? Of course it was the devil who worked in and through them, hardening their hearts against the truth and inciting them to cause others to reject the Truth.

We all have feelings; they are an important part of who we are. As a matter of fact, anyone of us can feel the way the Pharisees did and repeat their actions. So it becomes important that we do not give room for such negative emotions nor let our feelings drive us to act in such a way towards others, especially those whom God uses in a mighty way. Those who entertain such negative emotions and let them drive them stand the risk of being taken advantage of by the devil. The Pharisees assumed Jesus worked miracles using the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Let’s read what happens next.

“Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he said to them: Any kingdom where people fight each other will end up ruined. And a town or family that fights will soon destroy itself. So if Satan fights against himself, how can his kingdom last? If I use the power of Beelzebul to force out demons, whose power do your own followers use to force them out? Your followers are the ones who will judge you. But when I force out demons by the power of God’s Spirit, it proves that God’s kingdom has already come to you. How can anyone break into a strong man’s house and steal his things, unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can take everything. If you are not on my side, you are against me. If you don’t gather in the harvest with me, you scatter it. I tell you any sinful thing you do or say can be forgiven. Even if you speak against the Son of Man, you can be forgiven. But if you speak against the Holy Spirit, you can never be forgiven, either in this life or in the life to come” (Matthew 12: 25-32, CEV).

The Pharisees had shared an erroneous assumption about Jesus with the people; but Jesus probably out of earshot didn’t get to hear them. Yet He knew what was on their minds by His gift of discernment! Doesn’t knowing that Jesus knows what you’re thinking challenge you to always think pure thoughts? Anyway, instead of getting mad, Jesus exercises restraint and explains certain truths to them. When people wrong you, do you often exercise

restraint? If you've never, you can start now by asking God to help you through His Spirit to exercise restraint when necessary.

While Jesus' words reveal the result of conflict within a kingdom, a town and a family, and stresses the need for unity, it also addresses the assumptions of the Pharisees, by telling them that Satan won't fight against himself because he'd want his kingdom to last. He was asking them to consider His power was from God rather than Beelzebul. Also, when He named theirs and their followers' practice of exorcism, He was daring them to accept what was true. That He was indeed working using the power of God.

If the Pharisees dared to believe that Jesus' power had its source in God, then they would have been closer to believing that God's Kingdom had arrived, and Jesus was Messiah, wouldn't they? But that didn't happen. Since the Pharisees didn't know how the principles of deliverance worked, Jesus painted a picture for them. Satan is the strong man in Jesus' illustration, the strong man's house is not a particular location but Satan's hold on his captives. Now, for deliverance to happen, a stronger power must be on the scene, a power so strong that it can render Satan powerless; only then will those whom he has held captive be set free!

Aren't you just thankful that Jesus is the stronger man? That He has the greater power? And He is always ready to deliver and set free? I'm grateful that He is the God I

serve! Anyway, clearly the Pharisees were not on Jesus' side, so they were against Him. They wouldn't work with Him to gather in the harvest of souls, since they spent their time opposing and accusing Him. They sought to scatter the harvest, so He gives them a warning. He tells them that though it's true that we can be forgiven for our actions and words, even things said against Him can be forgiven, but speaking against the Holy Spirit like the Pharisees did when they gave credit for His work to Beelzebul, can never be forgiven, not now or ever.

You might ask, What if the person is later sorry? Would God pardon the person? Perhaps. But since God made it clear through Jesus' words that though He is forgiving, slander against the Holy Spirit will not be tolerated, then that's where He draws the line. It should send a clear warning to us about what we say, especially when it involves discerning spirits. Just because we might be wrong in our assumptions, should make us all the more cautious with what we say. Why run the risk of committing an "unforgivable" sin?

One more thing Jesus' words hint at is for us to know when to draw the line in our interactions with people. Just because we want to be merciful people doesn't mean we should go about endorsing wrong behaviour. When obvious right and wrong are being ignored, we must be willing to speak up like Jesus did.

JESUS SAYS 103

*“A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. You can tell what a tree is like by the fruit it produces. You are a bunch of evil snakes, so how can you say anything good? Your words show what is in your hearts. Good people bring good things out of their hearts. I promise you on the day of judgment, everyone will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. On that day they will be told they are either innocent or guilty because of the things they have said”
(Matthew 12:33-37, CEV).*

Still addressing the Pharisees' accusation, Jesus talks about the good and the bad tree. A good example of a bad tree are the Pharisees; and one example of the bad fruits they produce were the words they spoke about Jesus and their blasphemy against the

Holy Spirit. There were no doubts! Their words gave them away! Even if they pretended to be good trees, their words revealed their identity as bad trees. Stating the obvious, Jesus says that just as good trees produce good fruit, good people bring out good things out of their hearts. He then reveals something scary, that on the day of judgment we will all account for every careless words we have spoken! Our words will prove us innocent or find us guilty!

We've already discussed bad trees; let's talk a little about good trees. What is a good tree, and what are good fruits? About a good tree, it's more of whom than what. A good tree represents a good person, and good fruits represent good works. Yes, even good words. So here's the next question: Are you a good tree, a good person? You might hesitate in answering that question because we know that "good" is a title reserved for only God. But what if I told you that since every child of God has God's Spirit living on the inside of them, they have the capacity of being good?

Yes, one of the things God's Spirit does is help us to be good, not evil, and to think good and speak good. Since we will be held accountable for the words we speak, that's all the more reason we should continue to live our lives surrendered to God's Spirit so He can continue to work in us.

JESUS SAYS 104

“Some Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses said, “Teacher, we want you to show us a sign from heaven.” But Jesus replied: “You want a sign because you are evil and won’t believe! But the only sign you will get is the sign of the prophet Jonah. He was in the stomach of a big fish for three days and nights, just as the Son of Man will be deep in the earth for three days and nights. On the day of judgment the people of Nineveh will stand there with you and condemn you. They turned to God when Jonah preached, and yet here is something far greater than Jonah. The Queen of the South will also stand there with you and condemn you. She traveled a long way to hear Solomon’s wisdom, and yet here is something much greater than Solomon”
(Matthew 12:38-42, CEV).

When the Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses approached Jesus calling Him teacher and requesting for a sign from heaven, one might think they wanted some demonstration to help them believe Jesus was who He claimed to be. But Jesus' response quickly puts that assumption to rest. Want to know why God sometimes doesn't give in to our requests? Keep reading.

Jesus could see through the Pharisees! They weren't really looking for some demonstration to help them believe, even though they pretended that that was the case. If it were as they claimed, then they could choose from the several miracles Jesus had worked; but what they really wanted was that, at their command, Jesus would make a sideshow of His power. You know what real faith isn't? Deciding that only when God does so and so will you believe Him and or receive Him. When we make the mistake of making such demands of God, just like the Pharisees, we are most likely to get our requests turned down.

Jesus refused the request of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses outright. If they wanted a sign, He tells them, they could wait till the end of His ministry when, just like the prophet Jonah who was in the stomach of a big fish spent three days and nights before re-emerging, He too will be deep in the earth for three days and nights before resurrecting! By this He predicted His death and resurrection. But did they get it? I doubt it.

Furthermore, He tells them they could also wait till judgment day when the people of Nineveh who responded well to Jonah's message would condemn them for having someone greater than Jonah preach to them, yet they refuse to respond well to Him and the message. One more person who would condemn them in the court of heaven would be the queen of the south who had such an appreciation for wisdom and a desire for it that she travelled a long way to hear Solomon's wisdom. Meanwhile, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law had the wisdom of God Himself walking among them and sharing His knowledge with them; yet they wouldn't appreciate Him nor care to pay good attention to the words He spoke.

Now imagine having the Bible which gives us access to the identity and character of Jesus, the details of His death and resurrection, with the true stories of the lives He touched, and still not completely believe Him. In that case, what's left is for the sceptic to wait till judgment day. Only that then it would be too late to believe, and what will await such a person is God's punishment, the one He reserved for non-believers.

JESUS SAYS 105

“When an evil spirit leaves a person, it travels through the desert, looking for a place to rest. But when the demon doesn’t find a place, it says “I will go back to the home I left.” When it gets there and finds the place empty, clean and neat, it goes off and finds seven other evil spirits even worse than itself. They all come and make their home there, and the person ends up in worse shape than before. That’s how it will be with you evil people of today”

(Matthew 12:43-45, CEV).

By now, we ought to already know that demon-possession is real and deliverance from demon-possession is possible. But that’s not all, now

from Jesus' words we know that re-possession by more than one demon after initial deliverance is also a thing!

Now that we've established those truths, let's dissect Jesus' words. Though we aren't told what led to the person in Jesus' story being demon-possessed, what we do know is that being demon-possessed left the person in a state of chaos. And because we know that demons don't leave on their own, we can go ahead to believe the person in Jesus' story received God's mercy and encountered Jesus who forced this evil spirit out. Now what happens next is what's really important. Though the person had been delivered from demon possession, and their life is now in order, he/she left some things undone that gives access to the evil spirit which had been driven out to return. Unfortunately, it doesn't even return alone but with worse spirits, leaving the person in a worse off shape than before.

But who was Jesus speaking to? Many have come to believe that He was speaking to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses or better yet addressing the entire nation of Israel, informing them of their privilege, warning them of a worse of state should they continue to reject Him. Perhaps He was, but I believe He was done responding to them and was now addressing those who have come to believe in Him because of what they had seen/heard and encountered themselves. His words hold a warning to them: though they had been set free, to remain

free and not end up in a worse off state than before, they couldn't afford to remain empty!

To be empty is to contain nothing; not filled or occupied, having no value or purpose etc. What Jesus is saying is that, we must fill up whatever void was in our lives, by being occupied with following Him, making it our goal to learn from Him, how to live a life that honours God, so that we can always please Him by doing good deeds and come to know God even better.

We run the risk of backsliding and ending up in a worse off state than we were when Jesus delivered us, if we remain empty. Refuse to give the enemy a foothold in your life. You already know what you ought to do and stay doing.

JESUS SAYS 106

“While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and brothers came and stood outside because they wanted to talk with him. Someone told Jesus, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside and want to talk with you.” Jesus answered, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Then he pointed to his disciples and said, “These are my mother and my brothers! Anyone who obeys my Father in heaven is my brother or sister or mother” (Matthew 12:46-50, CEV).

At the time when Mary and her other children came to see Jesus, requesting to speak with Him, He was busy still speaking to the crowds. And honouring their request immediately would

mean giving in to distractions. Jesus made a wise decision by choosing God and refusing to respond to distractions. Sometimes, our families can be a distraction, and when you find yourself in a situation where you don't know whether to honour a family request for your attention or to continue with the work God has committed into your hands, if like in the case of Jesus it's not an emergency, then you must choose to continue serving in the capacity God has called you to. Even in the case of emergencies, you must trust God to give you wisdom to make the right decision.

God's work requires commitment and our undivided attention, and giving in to every distraction will leave us giving God less than our best. Don't get me wrong, we are expected to care for our loved ones; but still we mustn't forget who has the most claim on our lives, that person is God. But aside that, Jesus' response to His family's request also addresses a certain misconception about their relationship. It's common belief amongst some religious groups today that Mary, the mother of Jesus had and still has a special influence over Jesus; and they erroneously pray to Mary to implore and influence Jesus on their behalf. But from the way Jesus responds to her request here, we can see that she wasn't given priority over those listening to Jesus' preaching. If anything at all, those who were His disciples and obeyed God were revealed to have the same position as hers in His heart. I won't dwell too much on that, but instead move on to my next point.

Jesus' words also reveal to us another important relationship that every Christian ought to have. Yes, we have earthly relationships, but spiritual relationships are just as important and valid, at least in the eyes of God. The criteria we must use in forming these important spiritual relationships with others are just two: whether or not they follow Christ and obey God. If the said individuals meet these standards after we have observed them, then we must proceed to ask God about them. If He gives a go ahead, then great! Though I am tempted to delve into the benefits of having a spiritual family, I'd resist the urge and just say instead, the taste of the pudding is in the eating. Perhaps you should taste and see for yourself!

10

THE STORIES OF JESUS

JESUS SAYS 107

“That same day Jesus left the house and went out beside Lake Galilee, where he sat down to teach. Such large crowds gathered around him that he had to sit in a boat, while the people stood on the shore. Then he taught them many things by using stories. He said: A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field. While the farmer was scattering the seed, some of it fell along the road and was eaten by birds. Other seeds fell on thin, rocky ground and quickly started growing because the soil wasn’t very deep but when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and dried up, because they did not have deep roots. Some other seeds fell where thornbushes grew up and choked the plants. But a few seeds did fall on good ground where the plants produced 100 or 60 or 30 times as

*much as was scattered. If you have ears,
pay attention!”
(Matthew 13:1-9, CEV).*

MATTHEW OPENS THIS chapter by informing us that Jesus was having a very busy day in ministry, yet He still had the strength to keep going! And we know the source of His strength: God. It's good to know that regardless of the kind of day we're having, God's right there with us, ready to provide us with necessary support so we can keep being productive! So if you're feeling overwhelmed today with your schedule, may I propose that you say a prayer and request for support? God's always willing to fill you with His mighty and glorious strength so you can keep going no matter what. Maybe you've not received because you've not asked in faith.

Anyway, back to the text! Jesus had moved from the house where He was earlier and was now beside Lake Galilee teaching from a boat while the crowds stood on the shore. Matthew records that He taught them many things with stories. One of the stories He told is recorded in the verses above, and it's the story about a farmer. When Jesus was done telling the story, He says to the crowd, *“If you have ears, pay attention!”* By this He urged them to not just hear the stories but give special thought

to His words, implying that the stories had deeper meanings!

“Jesus’ disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you use stories to speak to the people?” Jesus answered: I have explained the secrets about the kingdom of heaven to you, but not to others. Everyone who has something will be given more. But people who don’t have anything will lose even what little they have. I use stories when I speak to them because when they look, they cannot see, and when they listen, they cannot hear or understand” (verses 10-13).

Matthew and the other disciples were curious about Jesus’ teaching style and so they asked Him about it, and He responds, informing them it was intentional. Explanations, i.e. clarity and insight, were given by Him to the disciples but not to the crowd. It was His way of sorting out those who went about with Him. Those who were truly His disciples and genuinely interested in learning will receive clarity and insight; but those who aren’t His followers and are content with just hearing stories will not receive anything.

We can be tempted to think Jesus was being partial; but it’s best to see it this way, that Jesus’ action reveals to us what we need to be and do if we want to also enjoy the privileges the chosen few enjoyed. In order to receive clarity and insight about the secrets of the Kingdom of

heaven, let's whole-heartedly be committed to following Jesus; secondly, let's work up an appetite to learn more about spiritual things.

Matthew, after hearing Jesus' response to their question, then comes to a conclusion: he says; *"So God's promise came true, just as the prophet Isaiah had said, "These people will listen and listen but never understand. They will look and look, but never see. All of them have stubborn minds! They refuse to listen; they cover their eyes. They cannot see or hear or understand. If they could, they would turn to me, and I would heal them" (verses 14-15, CEV).*

Hearing Jesus' response had reminded Matthew of an Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 6:9-10). "These people" referred to those of Jesus' generation; but it can also mean people today. There will always be people who will never understand though they listen to God's word, and will never see the truth though they look continually into the Scriptures; and the fault wouldn't be God's but theirs. Their hearts just aren't right!

Aside lack of sincerity in following Jesus and a genuine desire to learn, another reason why people will face this blockage in spiritual knowledge and understanding is their set of beliefs that they stubbornly protect, leading them to resist any teaching that challenge their beliefs or attempt to correct them or force them to change. If you fall into this last category, you know what you need to do; stop hardening your heart! Listen to the truth and ponder

on it so you can gain understanding; then act on it so you can be saved, grow and change in positive ways.

“But God has blessed you, because your eyes can see and your ears can hear! Many prophets and good people were eager to see what you see and to hear what you hear. But I tell you they did not see or hear” (verses 16-17).

Returning back to the words of Jesus, Matthew tells us what Jesus says next: that the disciples were indeed blessed! The blessing He was speaking of wasn't material blessing but another kind of blessing – the blessing of knowing Christ and having clear understanding of His teachings! Jesus goes on to inform the disciples that they were indeed privileged because many prophets (of old) and many good people were eager to see Him, who is the fulfilment of prophecy, and His works, and to hear from Him in real time but were not privileged to (because it wasn't time).

Did you know that just as the disciples were blessed, you and I who are Christians are also blessed? However, our blessings should serve as motivation for us to have consistent discipline in our relationship with God. God forbid that after we have received such blessings from God, we lose it on the account of our inconsistency.

Moving on, Jesus Himself gives the needed explanation to the story about the farmer He earlier told. He said to the disciples, *“Now listen to the meaning of the story about the*

farmer: The seeds that fell along the road are the people who hear the message about the kingdom, but don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches the message from their hearts. The seeds that fell on rocky ground are the people who gladly hear the message and accept it at once. But they don't have deep roots, and they don't last very long. As soon as life gets hard or the message gets them in trouble, they give up. The seeds that fell among the thornbushes are also people who hear the message. But they start worrying about the needs of this life and are fooled by the desire to get rich. So the message gets choked out, and they never produce anything. The seeds that fell on good ground are the people who hear and understand the message. They produce as much as 100 or 60 or 30 times what was planted" (Matthew 13:18-23, CEV).

Truly the story Jesus told, just like He earlier implied, held a deeper meaning. Did you catch it? In case you missed it, Jesus is the farmer in the story He told. Like the farmer scatters seed in a field, He too goes about teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God. The different places the seeds fall on represent the different classes of hearers that encounter His message. If I were listening to Jesus right there, I'd start wondering which class I fall in. Which class do you fall in?

Are you surprised I asked? Till date, these classes of hearers are what we have out there in the world; yes, even amongst Christians! Christians are expected to increase in the knowledge of God; that's one of the reasons we are encouraged to read the Bible daily. However, there are

those who read their Bibles daily but don't understand. If you read your Bible daily and don't understand what you're reading, don't be silent about it. Open up to Jesus about your struggles. He'll send His Holy Spirit to help you understand. If you don't open up to Jesus about your study-struggles, slowly your zeal to learn and understand will decline until it's completely gone. Don't let the devil win. He wins when your zeal is gone completely.

When we are exposed to God's word, it's not enough for us to accept it; we are to challenge ourselves to believe it as truth. By this I mean let it take root in our hearts so we can draw up daily nourishment from it, even strength during hard times. If we fail to do this, we are closer to giving up than we know.

The word of God has a series of special works it's supposed to do in us and for us when we read it with clear understanding; one of which is to help us know God with real certainty. This is expected to produce in us a regard for His will and ways as well as faith in Him. When we have faith in God, we can trust Him with each day's problems and no longer let our needs or the seduction of riches choke out God's word or make us unproductive in different areas of our lives.

Every Christian's desire should be to fall into the class of hearers that are the "good ground". These are the people who not only hear God's word but have a clear understanding of it, so much so that it leads them to be productive in every area of their lives: first being

spiritually, of course. The way to be in this category has been spelt out; what's left is to practice what we've discussed.

It will be unfair for me to round off on this story without adding that although Jesus is the farmer in the story, every Christian involved in Evangelism is also a farmer! And the classes of hearers Jesus mentioned are majorly some of the classes of hearers you and I will encounter as we go about spreading the good news. What I however hope is that since we've explored how we too aren't all there yet and are actively working towards being "good grounds" ourselves, we can feel compassion towards others who aren't there yet. Not just feel compassion but put our compassion into action by spending more time helping people get "there".

JESUS SAYS 108

*“Jesus told them this story: The kingdom of heaven is like what happened when a farmer scattered good seed in a field. But while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and scattered weed seeds in the field and then left. When the plants came up and began to mature, the farmer’s servants could see the weeds. The servants came and asked, “Sir, didn’t you scatter good seed in your field? Where did these weeds come from?” “An enemy did this,” he replied. His servants then asked, “Do you want us to go out and pull up the weeds?” “No!” he answered. “You might also pull up the wheat. Leave the weeds alone until harvest time. Then I’ll tell my workers to gather the weeds and tie them up and burn them. But I’ll order them to store the wheat in my barn”
(Matthew 13:24-30, CEV).*

Though this story of Jesus and the explanation that follows are a bit apart in the Bible, I have put them side by side for easy reading and quick comprehension.

“After Jesus left the crowd and went inside, his disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the story about the weeds in the wheat field.” Jesus answered: The one who scattered the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed are the people who belong to the kingdom. The weeds are those who belong to the evil one, and the one who scattered them is the devil. The harvest is the end of time, and angels are the ones who bring in the harvest. Weeds are gathered and burned. That’s how it will be at the end of time. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom everyone who does wrong or causes others to sin. Then he will throw them into a flaming furnace, where people will cry and grit their teeth in pain. But everyone who has done right will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom. If you have ears, pay attention!”
(See verse 36-43).

Here again, the crowd gets to hear the story, but the disciples receive the explanation. The story of the weeds among the wheat was explained clearly by Jesus. Did you get it? I hope you did. One thing that you can’t afford to miss from Jesus’ words is the awareness He raises about

the presence of “weeds” amongst God’s people. In the world, and especially amongst Christians, there are people who profess to be Christians but in the actual sense belong to the Devil. Theirs is a lifestyle of sin, and they also cause others to sin with their philosophies, wrong and shallow teachings built on their thoughts and ideas instead of what Christ has said.

Jesus is aware of the presence of “weeds” in the church and the evil they perpetrate; and while He clearly reveals their fate if they choose to continue on this destructive path, we owe it to ourselves to take a hint from His words and apply caution in our interactions with people. Yes, I’m talking about professing Christians. We don’t have to stumble and end up like them; the Holy Spirit can help us identify them, and if we take the pains of studying the Bible, we won’t fall for their false teachings.

Did you also notice the silent assurance the words of Jesus bring? Here is what I notice. Although the farmer in Jesus’ story sows and goes to sleep, He is unaware of the works of the enemy. Jesus is aware of everything that goes on with each and every one of us believers. He is mindful of us and the present situation in the world, i.e. the mixture of good and bad; and there’s already a set time when a separation will happen and each person will get what they truly deserve.

This is assurance for Christians all over the world who get into trouble for being Christians. God is aware of your present reality and there’s a set time for persecutions to

end, yes in eternity on judgment day, but I dare say, even in this world too. But until that time comes, pray for strength to be persevere as you continue to fulfil your Christian role and responsibilities.

JESUS SAYS 109

*“Jesus told them another story: The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a farmer plants a mustard seed in a field. Although it is the smallest of all seeds, it grows larger than any garden plant and becomes a tree. Birds even come and nest on its branches”
(Matthew 13:31-32, CEV).*

By this story of the mustard seed, Jesus illustrates the kind of impressive growth the kingdom of heaven will have! Likening it to a mustard seed, He shows us how little in size it starts out; but by telling us that after being planted it grows larger than any garden plant and becomes a tree that birds even come and nest under its branches, He reveals not only the hidden potential of the kingdom of God, as regards growth, but paints a picture of it after those potentials

have been maximized from small beginnings to great growth.

Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, but I put it to you that you can apply His words to whatever God has committed into your hands. It has potentials from small beginnings to great growth! Do you believe it? If you're still in the phase of small beginnings, don't despise it; rather, treasure every moment, learn every lesson from it, and continue to serve in God's grace. In due time, before your very eyes, you'll begin to see the growth happen!

The season of great growth is a season not many see; else they won't worry too much and talk themselves into giving up. That mustn't be you and me. Instead of worrying, we should continue to pray about our concerns and receive God's peace to continue moving on in His work.

I wish we knew how Jesus' disciples responded to His words; surely, they must have wondered how these things will happen, just like you're wondering too how this great growth will happen. Instead of thinking about the how's, just believe! Jesus' words eventually proved to be true. Can you tell how many believers are all over the world, or how many we will see in heaven? I'm sure you can't!

JESUS SAYS 110

*“Jesus also said: The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a woman mixes a little yeast into three big batches of flour. Finally, all the dough rises”
(Matthew 13:33, CEV).*

By likening the kingdom of heaven to the workings of a little yeast when added into three big batches of flour, which in turn causes the dough to rise, Jesus reveals the level of influence and global relevance the Kingdom of heaven will have.

Yeast always seem insignificant until it's not. Once mixed with the right ingredients, its influence over them can't be denied. Can't you see the difference before and after you joined God's Kingdom? The transformation surely is visible, even if it takes place first and mainly on the inside.

Do you know what else Jesus' words reveal? That you mustn't underrate anything God has called you to do! Like yeast, it might seem small and insignificant; but as you obey and continue in it, God will make sure the people who need your ministry come across your teaching/preaching/book/song/drama etc, and just like that, the influence you thought couldn't be realized, will happen!

Remember, there will be people who will be worried about you and your assignment because according to them, it's not reaching the people it should, and they will have various advice on what else you can do for God in order to make impact, or how else you can do what God has called you to do so you can reach a wider audience; usually their options will include ways and manner of earthly wisdom. But don't drop what God has called you to do, or stop doing it how He told you to do. Trust His word, the vision will speak for itself in its own time. Wait patiently for it.

JESUS SAYS 111

*“Jesus used stories when he spoke to the people. In fact, he did not tell them anything without using stories. So God’s promise came true, just as the prophet had said, ‘I will use stories to speak my message and to explain things hidden since the creation of the world’
(Matthew 13:34-35, CEV)*

Matthew feeling the need to reiterate that Jesus used stories when He spoke to the people, might be because he wanted to link the method with one of the Old Testament prophecies foretold by the Prophet Isaiah. It also brings to mind the topic of special abilities, seeing how people back then were enraptured listening to Jesus’ stories, with some turning towards God on account of those stories. Just like today; we’re just as enthused reading and exploring those

stories in order to build ourselves in the faith. It shows that Jesus was indeed gifted in the area of storytelling. Thank God He used His gift to serve. I'm sure that you already know what I'm about to write next, yes, that we use our gifts to serve too, even if it's something that could be easily trivialized. Stories told with words inspired by God can change lives.

Every one of us is given a special ability by God; some even have more than one. But whether you have one or many, one thing remains true: God has given us special abilities so we can serve with them. Your special abilities are your unique ministerial tools. Don't overlook them. Jesus didn't overlook His. He used them, and see what God did through them. Use yours too; you can't even begin to imagine what God can and will do through them in your day and even after your time on earth is up.

JESUS SAYS 112

*“The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when someone finds a treasure hidden in a field and buries it again. Such a person is happy and goes and sells everything in order to buy that field”
(Matthew 13:44, CEV).*

In the story Jesus told, there’s a treasure in a field but it’s concealed; however not for long, because one day someone who happened to be on the field discovers this treasure, then conceals it again. That too is not for long, the finder was happy and determined to buy the field in order to own the treasure; and he does just that even though it cost him everything.

What do you think happened to the treasure in the first place, do you think the owner of the field had no knowledge about it? What do you think this treasure represents? And, the field too? Who is this person who happens to be on the field and makes the discovery? And

why bury the treasure again? These are questions Bible scholars attempt to give answers to. You should read it up; they are very informative. But here's my opinion.

The attitude of the finder who discovers the hidden treasure is too much like ours. I'd explain. It's typical human behaviour to discover something that's valuable but doesn't belong to us and decide to have it all to ourselves. With little or no concern for the owner of the field who probably is also the legitimate owner of the treasure, we pretend not to know about the treasure, because telling the owner means losing the treasure or having to pay more for the field. So, instead, we act like we are paying the cost of the field when in fact we are paying less if we consider what the treasure cost with the field. Did you think of it this way?

That being said, this is what I believe Jesus was trying to say, that if the average human can discover something valuable and do everything in order to possess it, including feigning ignorance and cheating, then how much more the kingdom of heaven? Can we discern its value? It sure has an eternal value. Would we rejoice at discovering it, be consumed with thoughts of it and willingly take action in order to possess it or, rather, be a part of it, even if it means giving up everything else?

Don't get me wrong, Jesus isn't implying that we pretend and cheat like the finder in the story; He is rather pointing us towards what's more valuable and worth giving up everything else for.

JESUS SAYS 113

*“The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a shop owner is looking for fine pearls. After finding a very valuable one, the owner goes and sells everything in order to buy that pearl”
(Matthew 13:45-46, CEV).*

Unlike the last story where someone accidentally finds a treasure hidden in a field, this time around, a shop owner goes out looking for fine pearls. The man, the seeking, the finding, and the purchase price, all remind me of Christ. Don't they remind you of Christ? Jesus comes into the world, not by happenstance; it's been pre-planned. He comes seeking for sinners who He insists are valuable, with a plan to transform us all into fine “pearls” through His atonement. He finds us and gives up everything, which is His life, in order to have us to Himself. Jesus was, is, and will always be, the hope of the condemned.

I like how both stories follow each other; it helps us know that though sacrifices are required of us in order for us to make room for God in our lives, He too made a sacrifice. He did it first, and His is the biggest of all sacrifices. He gave up His life! Since this is so, how then can we ever think that anything that's required of us in order to continually make room for God is ever too much?

Jesus serves as a good model of selfless surrender for the soon-to-be Christian and the growing Christian. Let's follow His example and do what's required of us by God.

JESUS SAYS 114

“The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a net is thrown into a lake and catches all kinds of fish.

When the net is full, it is dragged to the shore, and the fishermen sit down to separate the fish. They keep the good ones, but throw the bad ones away. That’s how it will be at the end of time. Angels will come and separate the evil people from the ones who have done right. Then those evil people will be thrown into a flaming furnace, where they will cry and grit their teeth in pain”

(Matthew 13:47-50, CEV).

Just like the net in Jesus’ story that is thrown into a lake and catches all kinds of fish, the gospel will be preached all over the world and be used to

gather people, i.e. men and women, young and old, people of different races, from different backgrounds and from all walks of life, into God's Kingdom on earth – the church. Jesus says, when the net is full, i.e. when the gospel has been preached all over the world, which will also be at the end of time, just like the net is dragged to the shore, so the fishermen can separate the fish; keeping the good and separating the bad, angels will come and separate impostors and pretenders from truly born again Christians, God's true children. The fate of the evil people will be the eternity place of torment in hell fire; but we know that won't be the portion of God's *ecclesia* – God's called out ones.

Learning that at the end of time, there will be a sorting out of Jesus' followers is not news, seeing we've already discussed the story about the weeds among the wheat. However, what we didn't discuss back then is that Jesus' words hold an admonishment for every believer. He admonishes us to continue in good practices and shun evil practices. You and I can't afford to abound in good works only for now; we must continue in them until our lives here on earth is over, that is if we want the reward of those who are purified and lived for Christ on earth.

For those who are tired and discouraged, let Jesus' words encourage you. Don't allow yourself to get tired of living the right way and doing the right things; certainly you will receive a good reward at the proper time.

JESUS SAYS 115

“Jesus asked his disciples if they understood all these things. They said, “Yes, we do.” So he told them, “Every student of the Scriptures who becomes a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like someone who brings out new and old treasures from the store room” (Matthew 13:51-52, CEV).

Jesus had been teaching and it was only right that He checked in with His disciples to see if they understood; it's what any good teacher would do. Having got a favourable response from His disciples, Jesus then gives an illustration in which, there is the student of the Scriptures who becomes a disciple in the kingdom of heaven; this person He likened to someone who brings out new and old treasures from a store room.

What does this mean? Let's use Matthew as an example. Since we began to read his writings, he has referenced the Scriptures (the Law and the Prophets)

proving that he is knowledgeable in that aspect; he has also been privileged to learn from Jesus the deeper truths which he shares with us. But most importantly, he has been able to fit them together; he brings portions from the Law and the Prophets and finds their fulfilment in Jesus. He brings portions from the Law and the Prophets and find their true meaning explained in Jesus' teachings.

Permit me to say, Matthew was a student of the Scriptures and became a disciple in the Kingdom. He was like that wealthy person in Jesus' illustration who had old and new treasures in the store room. But it doesn't end there, because Matthew shares what knowledge he had from the Law and the Prophets and from Jesus' teachings with others through his writings. We can also say he brings out new and old treasures from his store room.

The Old Testament (which contains the Law and the Prophets) and the New Testament which contains the teachings of Jesus and other inspired writings, are treasures, old and new. When you and I set out time to study both the Old and New Testaments and gain insight, we're enriching our storerooms, and when we now decide to share what we know with others, helping them also to understand and embrace the truth they contain, we're bringing out treasures (old and new) from our storerooms.

It's most likely Jesus mentioned this illustration to the disciples so they would value all the learning and understanding they were doing. And all of that so to point

them to the work they were to do, which is to show people what they must do to live right through God's law.

Are you a wealthy person like Matthew? Do you have old and new treasures in your storeroom? Are you willing to share these treasures with others? Every Christian is supposed to be exactly like the man in Jesus' illustration.

JESUS SAYS 116

*“But Jesus said, “Prophets are honored by everyone, except the people of their hometown and their own family.” And because the people did not have any faith, Jesus did not work many miracles there”
(Matthew 13:57b-58, CEV).*

Here's the context of this Scripture. “When Jesus had finished telling these stories, he left and went to his hometown. He taught in their synagogue, and the people were so amazed that they asked, “Where does he get all this wisdom and the power to work these miracles? Isn't he the son of the carpenter? Isn't Mary his mother, and aren't James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers? Don't his sisters still live here in our town? How can he do all this?” So the people were upset because of what he was doing” (verses 53-57a, CEV).

In Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, He taught, and His teaching left the people amazed! It caused them to ask

amongst themselves the source of His wisdom and power. They wondered how someone whose (earthly and adoptive) father, mother, half brothers and sisters they knew could do all that He was doing. Since they couldn't find the answer to their question amongst themselves, they were left puzzled by what He was doing.

Jesus read the room and concluded that being too familiar with Him was what was hindering their acceptance of Him and their acknowledgment of His authority. For this same reason the Nazarenes didn't have any faith in Jesus and He didn't work many miracles there. Jesus' comment on how He was treated in Nazareth reveals to us one major reason why a lot of Christians have stunted spiritual growth: overfamiliarity.

We mustn't be too familiar with the people God uses that we can't open our hearts to listen to them and accept the message He speaks to us through them. We mustn't be too familiar with God that we make the mistake of assuming we know how He will work all of the time. What will we do when He chooses to work in a way we do not know? We mustn't be too familiar with God's word that we think we know it all. Do you know that the wisdom in the Bible is inexhaustible? How can you know it all? Those who continue to be overfamiliar with the things of the Spirit always end up short-changing themselves.

That being said, the Nazarenes also teach us how not to interact with others. From them we learn that we must not:

λ Judge anyone's present by their past: The people of Nazareth were stuck in the past; when they looked at Jesus, all they could see was who they knew, not who was now standing in front of them, preaching, teaching and proving Himself to be the Messiah. We too mustn't judge people based on what we've known about them. Approach people with an open heart; give them a chance to re-introduce themselves to you. Who knows, God might even have an assignment for them in your life.

λ Conclude about a person's life: To the people of Nazareth, Jesus was a carpenter's son; that's all they cared to know about Him and that's all He was allowed to be with them. They concluded about Him in their hearts and He wasn't given room to evolve into another version. Concluding about a person's life is a terrible thing to do. Times and seasons change, and people evolve. We must be willing to let people become who God has designed them to be, and accept them as such.

λ Become upset by other people's achievements: When the people of Nazareth heard Jesus teach with unusual wisdom and saw Him work miracles with supernatural powers, it upset them; and that became their stumbling block. We must celebrate people's achievement and seek to understand what we don't, and even more, we

must not harbour negative emotions against others.

While the people of Nazareth teach us what not to do, Jesus demonstrates to us how to handle rejection on account of our faith, especially when it comes from those who are very familiar with us. They were upset with Him but He wasn't upset with them; instead, He gave reason for their actions. What this means for us is that we mustn't hold people's actions against them, and keep no grudge. Though we might be hurt and feel disappointed, we must move towards forgiving those who reject us.

11

HANDLING HEROD'S SUPERSTITION

“ABOUT THIS TIME Herod the ruler heard the news about Jesus and told his officials, “This is John the Baptist! He has come back from death, and that’s why he has power to work these miracles” (Matthew 14:1-2, CEV). Let’s read a few more verses.

“Herod had earlier arrested John and had him chained and put in prison. He did this because John had told him, “It isn’t right for you to take Herodias, the wife of your brother Philip.” Herod wanted to kill John. But the people thought John was a prophet, and Herod was afraid of what they might do. When Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests. She pleased Herod so much he swore to give her whatever she wanted. But the girl’s mother told her to say, “Here on a serving plate I want the head of John the Baptist!” Herod was sorry for what he had said. But he did not want to break the promise he had made in front of his guests. So he ordered a guard to go to the prison and cut off John’s head. It was taken on a serving plate to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. John’s followers took his body and buried it. Then they told Jesus what had happened” (verses 3-12).

It was important we read the lengthy passage for two reasons: the first being that we needed to know the reason for Herod’s (misinformed) declaration about Jesus which, in case you missed it, was guilt riddled with superstition. And also because it provides us with a first-hand opportunity to observe how people called by God and who serve God whole-heartedly (i.e. good people) get

treated badly for living right and doing right even till the end.

John bore witness to the truth, yet he was treated badly for doing right. He was murdered and beheaded, and God didn't stop it from happening. John was buried and Jesus was told; but He didn't even attempt to raise John from the dead and give him a new head with His power. I tell you, at least once in your Christian walk, you'll ask these questions: "Why does bad things happen to good people?" And "Why does a loving God allow such things and not use His power to make things better?" I'll attempt to provide us with answers to these questions and hope that as we go on in our Christian walk, experiences such as John's won't be a deal breaker for us.

The first thing we need to know about bad things happening to good people is that being good doesn't automatically exempt any of us from experiencing bad things. In fact, good people should expect it! Satan is going all over the earth, watching what's going on and noticing those who are good and waiting for opportune time to persecute them. The story of Job paints a perfect picture, and Jesus' words in John 16:33 affirm these facts.

Also, remember Jesus' words: "*God blesses the people who are treated badly for doing right. They belong to the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:10). Jesus knows this is how it is, and it's why God already has comfort and consolation in store for good people when they experience such hard times.

Secondly, it's important that we know that good people will continue to experience bad things because of the times we're in. Apostle Paul gives us a list of the kinds of attitudes people will possess in the last days in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. Since we will continue to live in the world with people who possess such attitudes, it will be hard to not be affected one way or another. I mentioned these two reasons with hope that once we understand that being good doesn't exempt us from unpleasant experiences, and that having a hard time for being good won't be a one-time thing, our minds can be prepared for the worst; and even when it happens, we won't be fazed, and can keep on being good.

On to the next question, which is why does a loving God allow bad things to happen to good people and why does He not use His power to make things better? Well, while we don't know for sure why God allowed John to be murdered and beheaded, and not even attempt to resurrect him on earth, we can trust that God had a reason, even if it is undisclosed; and we know for sure that John didn't remain dead. He will be made alive in heaven. The hard truth that we must accept is that God will continue to allow bad things to happen to good people if it serves a good purpose, like teaching us endurance, and helping us mature spiritually (Read James 1:2-4).

And, concerning the use of His power, we can't dictate to God when and how best to use His power; instead, we can take our concerns and desires to Him in prayer and

trust that He will intervene as He deems fit. I should add that although God might not always make things better in the way and manner we expect, one thing we can be sure of is that He is always at work for our good. It might take a while for us to see it, but in the end, we will see His way was best.

JESUS SAYS 117

*“After Jesus heard about John, he crossed Lake Galilee to go to some place where he could be alone. But the crowds found him on foot from the towns”
(Matthew 14:13, CEV).*

Jesus hears about the gruesome death of John, who is in fact family (John was His earthly relative and part of God’s family), and decides to look for some place where He could be alone. Why? Bible scholars lean towards preventive measures, to which I agree; but it’s hard not to think that He did so with hope of having some time to express His grief. You know Jesus could feel, right?

Choosing to believe Jesus wanted time alone to express His grief over John’s death makes me happy. I’ll tell you why. For me it means, just because God allows bad things to happen to good people doesn’t mean He is rejoicing when they do. Doesn’t this make you happy too? It’s good

to know we serve a God who understands grief and is able to empathize when I'm grieving. So when we find ourselves in a situation where we are faced with grief, we don't have to do it alone; we can invite Him in our grieving and He'll know how best to comfort us. What a relief!

"When Jesus got out of the boat, he saw the large crowd. He felt sorry for them and healed everyone who was sick" (verse 14).

Despite feeling how He felt after learning about the death and burial of John, and failing to find some place and time alone, Jesus knew He couldn't ignore the assignment God had committed into His hands. It was pretty hard to ignore, if I may say, seeing that once He got out of the boat large crowds were waiting for Him. Jesus set His feelings and desire aside and fulfilled His responsibility. If it were you, how would you have responded to the crowd? I doubt I'd have responded like Jesus did with compassion. I'd be annoyed and irritable, but don't judge me. I'm a work in progress.

Our feelings are important; the same with our desires. But so also is the assignment God has called us to do. And if there's a priority list, God's assignment must come first. Jesus shows us how to respond when we are faced with this sort of situation; we must choose to do what God asks us to do first.

JESUS SAYS 118

“That evening the disciples came to Jesus and said, “This place is like a desert, and it’s already late. Let the crowds leave, so they can go to the villages and buy some food.” Jesus replied, “They don’t have to leave. Why don’t you give them something to eat?”

(Matthew 14:15-16, CEV).

The crowds had spent quite some time with Jesus that day, and now it was evening. The disciples approach Jesus with a situation report, as if He wasn’t aware of what’s going on around Him. They tell Him the condition of their location, the time of day and the need, for which they had already found a solution. But of all the things they told Jesus, the one thing that didn’t sit well with Him was their solution to the people’s needs. So He comes up with another

suggestion and says to them, *“They don’t have to leave. Why don’t you give them something to eat?”*

I wish I could see the looks on the disciples’ faces; but I’d have to make do with how they responded to Jesus’ suggestion. *“But they said, “We have only five small loaves of bread and two fish” (verse 17)..* Jesus had suggested the disciples do the seemingly impossible, and their response was an excuse, a valid reason why they couldn’t do what He had suggested to them. But did Jesus really ask them to do the impossible? Or was He simply asking them to make use of the power and authority He had given them? Why turn away a problem when they were equipped to be problem solvers? Remember, He had already endued them with power and given them a right to operate under His authority (Matthew 10:1). So no, He wasn’t asking them to do the impossible.

Just like Jesus said to the disciples, till date, He continues to call us to do things we think are impossible. But now, after having read this, I believe we can now do away with our excuses and instead say to Him, if You ask me to do this, then I believe You’ve equipped me for it and You’ll show me how to go about it. Too many Christians are doing less than God expects of them when it comes to exploits for the Kingdom. You and I must not add to the number.

After He was told about the limited resources available, *“Jesus asked his disciples to bring the food to him, and*

he told the crowd to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish. He looked up toward heaven and blessed the food. Then he broke the bread and handed it to his disciples, and they gave it to the people. After everyone had eaten all they wanted, Jesus' disciples picked up twelve large baskets of leftovers. There were about 5,000 men who ate, not counting the women and children" (verses 18-21, CEV).

What a miracle! The need of the crowd was met and the disciples got to witness a miracle and be a part of it. But I wonder if they learned anything from it? Did you learn anything from it? Let me share a few of the things I've learnt:

λ By feeding the large crowds when the disciples suggested they be asked to leave and fend for themselves, Jesus modelled to the disciples and us what real leadership is about. When God entrusts us with His people, we are expected to care for them, not turn them away when it seems inconvenient.

λ By feeding the large crowds with such limited resources, Jesus showed the disciples and us that there is no need to worry about having enough of life's daily necessities for ourselves and even to help others with. God is mindful of our needs and committed to meeting them.

λ By feeding the large crowds and making the disciples a part of the miracle, Jesus showed the disciples and us, the exploits we are capable of doing with Him for the Kingdom and humanity in His power and authority.

If only we dare to believe.

The lessons abound, but are you willing to even put these three into practice? It's what Jesus would expect anyway.

JESUS SAYS 119

“At once, Jesus made his disciples get into a boat and start back across the lake. But he stayed until he had sent the crowds away. Then he went up on a mountain where he could be alone and pray. Later in the evening, he was still there. By this time the boat was a long way from the shore. It was going against the wind and was being tossed around by the waves. A little while before morning, Jesus came walking on the water towards his disciples. When they saw him, they thought he was a ghost. They were terrified and started screaming. At once, Jesus said to them, “Don’t worry! I am Jesus. Don’t be afraid.” Peter replied, “Lord, if it really is you, tell me to come to you on the water.” “Come on!” Jesus said. Peter then got out of the

boat and started walking on the water toward him. But when Peter saw how strong the wind was, he was afraid and started sinking. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted. At once, Jesus reached out his hand. He helped Peter up and said, "You surely don't have much faith. Why do you doubt?" When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the wind died down. The men in the boat worshiped Jesus and said, "You really are the Son of God!"
(Matthew 14:22-33, CEV).

What we just read is a true life event, a miracle, not a parable. And there are so many important lessons to glean from it. The first lesson is from what Jesus did. The Scriptures tell us that when the crowds had been ministered to, Jesus made His disciples get into a boat and start back across the lake, while He stayed back to send the crowds on their way. When that was done, He went up on a mountain where He could be alone and pray. His initial plan to find a place to be alone had been deterred by the crowds; but that much needed time alone which His soul craved for,

He now had, and He savoured those hours of freedom (from ministry demands) and solitude.

What Jesus' action tells us is that it's okay to take a break from time to time. And be free from ministry demands or our unending to-do lists. That time away gives us an opportunity to refresh and restore ourselves, and quite frankly help us return more productive. But, I guess returning more productive depends on what activities we fill our breaks with. As for Jesus, He enjoyed the freedom and silence, and evidently He prayed! To return refreshed, restored and more productive, it's best we choose activities that will take care of our physical health and spiritual well-being.

But while things were calm where Jesus was, the disciples on the other hand were in their boat now a long way from shore and were fighting the wind and being tossed around by the waves. On the insides of the disciples and outside, around them, nothing was calm. And this brings us to the second lesson to learn. Do you remember that it was Jesus who made His disciples get into a boat and got them to start back across the lake? Would you agree with me if I told you that Jesus knew what they would encounter in their journey? Yet He still sent them out? I hope you do.

I said all of that so I could say that just because God has called us to do something doesn't necessarily mean we won't face challenges while obeying God and doing His bidding. And He allows us to face those challenges for a

reason. Though sometimes, like in the case of the disciples, He doesn't give us a heads up on the kind of challenges we are about to face, it's not because He wants to see us trapped and destroyed, it's because many times instead of us to take the information and stay alert, we lose courage and abort the mission.

Proof that Jesus didn't set the disciples up for destruction is seen by His appearance on the scene. Scriptures record that Jesus walked towards them even while everything was still chaotic. Though they thought He was a ghost, and were terrified and screaming, He quickly speaks to them. And this brings us to our third lesson. Once Jesus was within view of the disciples, the first thing He does is calm the storm going on in the inside of them. He tells them not to worry nor be afraid, and reveals His identity. Many times, we would rather God just handled our problems and solved them first. But God's priorities are different from ours. Instead of hysteria, He'd rather we responded in faith to what we are up against; and if there's an absence of faith, He works on restoring that first before any other thing.

One would think, what would happen next would be Jesus calming the winds. But there's a twist. Peter impulsively makes an unusual request that Jesus prove that it was really Him by asking him, Peter, to walk to Him on the water! Jesus agrees, extends the invitation. Peter accepts, gets out of the boat and walks on water while the other disciples looked on. And that brings us to

our fourth lesson. What initially seemed like a situation designed to take their lives, in a twist turned out to be an opportunity to do the seemingly impossible! And while Peter catches on and maximizes the opportunity, the other disciples watched on, like spectators. Did it occur to them they too could do the impossible? Well, the situations we think will end our lives are actually opportunities for us to experience the miraculous and do things we thought were impossible! And when we finally come to that understanding, we must never choose to be spectators. Like Peter, and many other Christians out there, we must join them to “walk on water”.

At the initial stage, Peter doesn't walk on water for long, because he broke an unspoken rule. He broke his focus. Momentarily, his gaze was no longer on Jesus but on the strong wind. Then fear replaced faith and he started to sink. Thank God he didn't stay silent. He cried out to Jesus to save him; and at once, Jesus reached out His hand and did so. And this is the foundation for our fifth lesson. While Peter boldly made a request of Jesus, Jesus was standing on water. When Peter, full of faith, stepped out of the boat, Jesus was still standing on water; and when Peter broke his focus, became fearful and began to sink, Jesus was still on water, and was able to save him. Peter is where we're at; Jesus should be where we're aiming to be. Every Christian must strive of course with Christ's help to obtain that constant-ness Jesus had in our faith walk.

After – not before – helping Peter up, Jesus informs Peter that if he wanted to keep walking on water and not sink, he needed to have much faith. Doubt was what had him sinking. After saying that, Jesus and Peter walked on water back to the boat, then the wind died down. And then we discover the spectators weren't left out in this learning experience. What they had witnessed had left an impression on them. Once Jesus and Peter got into the boat, they worshiped Jesus and acknowledged His divine status.

This brings us to our final lesson, at least for now. The men in the boat might not have walked on water, but they grew through the experience they had, what they saw. They increased in what they now knew about Jesus. Perhaps this was one of the reasons Jesus allowed them face that challenging situation, so they could increase in knowledge. We ought to keep this in mind when we are faced with challenges. Instead of asking why me, let's try thanking God for choosing to increase us in our knowledge of Him; for we know that after a while, the situation will end while we would have entered into another realm of worship of God.

“Jesus and his disciples crossed the lake and came to shore near the town of Gennesaret. The people found out he was there, and they sent word to everyone who lived in this part of the country. So they brought all the sick people to Jesus. They begged him just to let them touch

his clothes, and everyone who did was healed”
(Matthew 14:34-36, CEV).

Jesus and His disciples eventually reached their destination. This should encourage those who are at the verge of quitting in their God-given assignments because of challenges all around to persevere. In God’s plan, you will eventually reach that place called “there”. You just have to see it ahead and keep moving, knowing you’re not alone, and that the Lord is with you to get you safely there.

And without even drawing attention to Himself, people find out about Jesus’ presence. Compared to the reception in Nazareth, the reception here in Gennesaret is way better! People came to Jesus with their sick, begging Him to let them touch His clothes; by doing so, they prove that they had faith in His power; and Jesus in turn honoured their faith by letting them touch His clothes and making sure His healing power flowed into those who did.

In case you’re wondering why they begged Jesus to let them touch His clothes, Bible scholars say it’s because in that same region a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years had been cured and made whole in that same manner (Read 9:20-22). The news must have spread. I agree, in fact, because Jesus agreed to heal people in that manner again and again, even when He had other ways of

healing makes me believe that God sometimes indulges us and meets us at the level of our faith. This too is reason for us to be thankful.



RELIGIOUS OPPONENTS

JESUS SAYS 120

“About this time some Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses came from Jerusalem. They asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples obey what our ancestors taught us to do? They don’t even wash their hands before they eat.” Jesus answered: Why do you disobey God and follow your own teaching?” (Matthew 15:1-3, CEV).

JESUS’ MINISTRY was always under scrutiny by His chief opponents. Matthew takes the initiative to tell us about one of such times, and the confrontation was about religion. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses had observed that Jesus’ disciples weren’t following one of their customs, and so they approached Jesus wanting to know why. But He responds with an inquiry of His own. He wanted to know why they go against God’s law, preferring instead to obey their customs.

Jesus' accusation would have taken them aback seeing that they prided themselves in the strict observance of the traditional and written law. But before they could refute His claim, Jesus gives them an instance. He says to them, *"Didn't God command you to respect your father and mother? Didn't he tell you to put to death all who curse their parents? But you let people get by without helping their parents when they should. You let them say that what they have has been offered to God. Is this any way to show respect to your parents? You ignore God's commands in order to follow your own teaching"* (verses 4-6, CEV).

God's law concerning 'respecting' parents, was clear as day, including all the aspects it covers. But the exemptions the Pharisees and teachers of the law of Moses provided those who claimed to have pledged their money to God, proved Jesus' accusation. But Jesus wasn't done replying them, still addressing them, He says: *"And you are nothing but show-offs! Isaiah the prophet was right when he wrote (Isaiah 29:13) that God had said, "All of you praise me with your words, but you never really think about me. It is useless for you to worship me, when you teach rules made up by humans"* (verses 7-9, CEV).

Jesus called them show-offs, which is best understood as fakes; and the reason for calling them fakes, Jesus gives when He quotes the words of God through prophet Isaiah. They were a group that said one thing and thought another. They weren't really concerned with worshiping God as they were with teaching their own made up rules.

In case you're wondering if Jesus ever addresses the accusation of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses, He does, and we will get to that shortly. Before then, I'd like to encourage you to do something. Examine your walk with God. Many of us are no different from the Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses. We go about with superior sanctity judging others when in the actual sense we aren't even in right standing with God. We've ignored the rules that count, and have been obeying only man-made ones. But how will we know if we don't take time to examine our walk with God?

When Jesus accused the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses, He wasn't doing it just to let them know He will always have an answer for them; what He was really doing was giving them an opportunity to examine their walk with God and recognize areas they needed to change. As you examine your walk with God, here is one vital question to ask yourself: Do I prioritize God's command or the teachings of men, a.k.a customs?

“Jesus called the crowd together and said, “Pay attention and try to understand what I mean. The food you put into your mouth doesn’t make you unclean and unfit to worship God. The bad words that come out of your mouth are what makes you unclean” (verses 10-11, CEV).

Do you remember what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses had said at the beginning of the chapter

to Jesus? They asked Him, *“Why don’t your disciples obey what our ancestors taught us to do? They don’t even wash their hands before they eat.”* The Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses believed that not washing the hands and not observing the dietary rules made one unclean and unfit to worship God. Jesus shared His thoughts on the matter. He taught the crowds what really made one unclean; it had little to do with (washing of hands or) observing dietary rules, and had more to do with the words we speak which reveal the content of our hearts.

As you examine your walk with God, here is another question for you to ask yourself: What are the meditations of my heart, do the words I speak express my reverence, love for God and love for others?

“Then his disciples came over to him and asked, “Do you know you insulted the Pharisees by what you said?” Jesus answered, “Every plant my Father in heaven did not plant will be pulled up by the roots. Stay away from those Pharisees! They are like blind people leading other blind people, and all of them will fall into a ditch” (verses 12-14, CEV).

The disciples most likely took note of the reaction of the Pharisees to what Jesus had been saying, and informed Him about it. But Jesus in many words reveals that He wouldn’t be careful in answering them. His duty wasn’t to be mindful of their feelings but to address their false

teachings! He then commanded the disciples to stay away from the Pharisees; and with good reason too. They were blinded to the truth of God's word and had chosen to remain blind to it by rejecting Jesus' teachings. They could easily be bad influences on them too. Why run the risk of suffering their fate?

Jesus' response offers us more questions to ask ourselves as we examine our walk with God: Do I concern myself more with people's negative reaction to the truth than I should? Do negative responses influence me to keep silent or water down the truth or do I keep speaking the undiluted truth anyway? In the company I keep and the external influences I allow, are there people who are blinded to Scriptural truths?

“Peter replied, “What did you mean when you talked about the things that make people unclean?” Jesus then said: Don’t any of you know by now what I am talking about? Don’t you know that the food you put into your mouth goes into your stomach and then out of your body? But the words that come out of your mouth come from your heart. And they are what make you unfit to worship God. Out of your heart come evil thoughts, murder, unfaithfulness in marriage, vulgar deeds, stealing, telling lies, and insulting others. These are what make you unclean. Eating without washing your hands will not make you unfit to worship God”
(Matthew 15:15-20, CEV)

Jesus had earlier talked about what really made one unclean but Peter didn't understand Him then. And so he sought clarity on the matter. How often do you seek clarity from God on Scriptural truths? Increasing in knowledge is good but increasing in understanding is what will prove way more instrumental in your spiritual maturity.

After Peter's question, Jesus reiterates the points made in His earlier speech but expounds on it a little more. When it comes to being clean and being fit to worship God, it is not following dietary rules or washing of hands that matter but a clean heart which is often revealed by words spoken. Jesus then goes ahead to list out some of the contents of the heart that can make one unclean and unfit to worship God. In His list are *“evil thoughts, murder, unfaithfulness in marriage, vulgar deeds, stealing, telling lies, and insulting others.”*

Still examining your walk with God, I hope. If yes, then you ought to search your heart. Which of those sins are lodged in it? When you identify them, begin to take steps to rid your heart of them. Being inwardly pure must be something every Christian should strive for.

JESUS SAYS 121

“Jesus left and went to the territory near the towns of Tyre and Sidon. Suddenly a Canaanite woman from there came out shouting, “Lord and Son of David, have pity on me! My daughter is full of demons.” Jesus did not say a word. But the woman kept following along and shouting, so his disciples came up and asked him to send her away. Jesus said, “I was sent only to the people of Israel! They are like a flock of lost sheep.” The woman came closer. Then she knelt down and begged, “Please help me, Lord!” Jesus replied, “It isn’t right to take food away from children and feed it to dogs.” “Lord, this is true,” the woman said, “But even puppies get the crumbs that fall from their owner’s table.” Jesus answered, “Dear woman, you really do have a lot of faith, and you will be

*given what you want.” At that moment
her daughter was healed”
(Matthew 15:21-28, CEV).*

Jesus now outside Jewish territory is sought out by a Canaanite woman. Let's look closely into their interaction. It's most likely that this woman was meeting Jesus for the first time; but her faith in Him didn't begin that day. It probably began after she had heard about Him and some miracles He worked. And she didn't just have faith in His ability to work miracles but also in His compassion. She believed if she approached Him with her need He wouldn't turn her away but help meet her need (See Hebrews 11:6).

The day then came when she had the opportunity to meet Jesus. She approaches the Lord full of faith, calls Him “Lord and Son of David” and presents her request for her daughter's healing. But Jesus did not say a word. She seemed to be doing and saying everything right but Jesus didn't respond to her. Why do you think that is? What thought crosses your mind when you pray full of faith and God seems to be quiet?

Some Bible Scholars say Jesus was quiet because the woman used empty words; she called Him Lord and Son of David, when He wasn't truly Lord over her life, nor had

she accepted Him as Messiah. And others seem to believe He kept quiet because He wanted to see the extent of her faith. It could be one or both or even other reasons. I'm not sure. What I'm sure of is that sometimes we will do and say everything right in prayer, yet God can choose to be silent; for a moment, that is. And we may never truly know why. That too, we must be okay with. We mustn't let it be a deal breaker for us in how we relate with Him.

Jesus didn't say a word yet, but the woman didn't turn away either. Scripture records that she kept following along and shouting. God might be silent, but we must continue to follow Him and offer our faith-filled request to Him. Jesus' disciples most likely didn't know what to make of the drama that was unfolding between the silent Healer and the persistent mother. So they came up with a solution on how to handle it; they told Jesus to send her away. But Jesus' silence had been mistaken for lack of interest.

When Jesus finally speaks, it was not to send the woman away like the disciples suggested; instead, proving that He had heard and listened to her plea all this time though He had been silent, He reveals something important to all who were with Him. The timing was the issue; and timing is important to God. Jesus was sent only to the people of Israel at that time. The woman heard that but it didn't make her turn away. She came closer to Jesus, knelt down and presented her request to Him. But Jesus seemed to turn her down. In reply He tells her healing is

the food for the children (Israelites) and it wasn't right to take it away from them and feed it to dogs (Gentiles).

Still, she doesn't get offended and turn away, but affirms what Jesus had said and says to Him, Seeing that the Father of the children is also the owner of the dogs, though He is set on His plan to give food to the children, but because His puppies are hungry too, wouldn't He be willing to let them have crumbs that fall from His table? Jesus was moved. He calls her beloved, acknowledges her faith, and grants her request. So what changed? Contrary to popular opinion, it wasn't her faith that was the game changer, because she had had that all along; the answer can be found in their last interaction.

Jesus had showed her the clear distinction between the Israelites and the Gentiles. How the Israelites were more privileged than the Gentiles at that time. She heard Jesus and understood her lesser position. She even accepted it. But she took it a step further when she appealed to "the Guardian of the children, who is also owner of the dogs," pleading that He not deny her crumbs when she was clearly hungry. Timing is important to God, but you know what else is? Fathering. He is a sensitive and generous Father. And so for that moment, He broke protocol for her sake, and held both Jews and Gentiles on an equivalent level and granted her request. The story ends with the Canaanite woman receiving her request.

It's a shame, we don't know if she becomes a proselyte after that encounter. God's Fatherhood is still from time

to time being enjoyed by non-believers who cry out to Him, even without them meeting the full requirements. However, the reason God indulges them will always be to move them closer into making a commitment with Him and becoming a part of His family.

“From there, Jesus went along Lake Galilee. Then he climbed a hill and sat down. Large crowds came and brought many people who were paralyzed or blind or lame and unable to talk. They placed them, and many others, in front of Jesus, and he healed them all. Everyone was amazed at what they saw and heard. People who had never spoken could now speak. The lame were healed, the paralyzed could walk, and the blind were able to see. Everyone was praising the God of Israel” (Matthew 15:29-31, CEV).

Jesus is now in another location, and chooses a hill which He climbs most likely with the intention of resting, because He sits after climbing. But soon large crowds find Him out, (Bible scholars claim Gentiles were part of this crowd). And bring with them many people with different infirmities. By this they proved their faith in His power. The Scriptures record that Jesus healed them all.

No case proved too difficult, leaving the crowd amazed at the miracles He did. But it didn't end there, the Bible records that everyone was praising the God of Israel. And this is the expected result. Whenever we use our gifts/

talents to serve God and humanity, everyone's focus is turned towards the Giver of that gift/talent, offering Him praise. The message is simple: serve God and humanity with your gifts and talents; don't hide them away. It's deposited in you to help turn people towards God.

JESUS SAYS 122

“Jesus called his disciples together and told them, “I feel sorry for these people. They have been with me for three days, and they don’t have anything to eat. I don’t want to send them away hungry. They might faint on their way home.” His disciples said, “This place is like a desert. Where can we find enough food to feed such a crowd”? Jesus asked them how much food they had. They replied, “Seven small loaves of bread and a few little fish.” After Jesus had told the people to sit down, he took the seven loaves of bread and the fish and gave thanks. He then broke them and handed them to his disciples, who passed them around to the crowds. Everyone ate all they wanted, and the leftovers filled seven large baskets. There

were 4,000 men who ate, not counting the women and children. After Jesus had sent the crowds away, he got into a boat and sailed across the lake. He came to shore near the town of Magadan” (Matthew 15:32-39, CEV).

With the setting of the scene so familiar to the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21), are you a little disappointed with how the disciples responded to the crowd’s needs? If you are disappointed, then I’m sure you can imagine how God feels when you’re faced with a situation He has handled before with you. But you’re acting like it’s new: panicky and thinking solving it is impossible. You ask, but why does God allow us go through some situations over and over? It’s the same reason why in school, teachers often repeat a topic, so we will have a certain message/image imprinted into our minds. Jesus was reiterating His former message about leadership, repainting an image of Himself as a willing and able provider, and reminding them of the exploits they can do together, provided they trust Him.

This is why we must pay attention to the situations God takes us through; they are designed to help us grow

spiritually and strengthen our faith. Don't just go through them, grow through them. Take notes and keep your notes. You might need them later. Bible scholars say this miracle took place on the south east shore of Galilee, near Gentile Decapolis; therefore many Gentiles would be in the crowd. But is there any significance with Jesus feeding a crowd with Gentiles present? Of course, whether it's the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter or the feeding of the crowd here, or both, in each instance, Jesus gives an illustration of the blessings that would be made available via Him to the Gentiles, and a picture of how God's family will consist of both Jews and Gentiles.



LOST
OPPORTUNITY
WITH JESUS

JESUS SAYS 123

“The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tried to test him by asking for a sign from heaven. He told them: If the sky is red in the evening, you say the weather will be good. But if the sky is red and gloomy in the morning, you say it is going to rain. You can tell what the weather will be like by looking at the sky. But you don’t understand what is happening now. You want a sign because you are evil and won’t believe! But the only sign you will be given is what happened to Jonah. Then Jesus left”

(Matthew 16:1-4, CEV).

THIS WASN'T THE first time Jesus would be asked for a sign by the religious leaders. In Matthew 12:38-42, some Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses had asked Him for a sign from heaven. Back then, He had given them an answer,

but not the kind they wanted to hear. And even now, it seemed nothing had changed; Jesus still wasn't giving them an answer they expect. Since they had come hoping to test Him, they weren't in need of a sign to help them believe, so there really was no need for Jesus to indulge them.

But should they truly want to believe, Jesus' response did provide some clues for them. After chiding them for being able to only give weather forecasts, He directs their focus to what's happening in their time, by this He referred to all He had been doing, which were what had been written in the Scriptures about the Messiah. Truly, if they paid attention to those, arriving at the conclusion that Jesus was Messiah would have come easy. But they wouldn't pay attention, because they didn't want to believe, Jesus knew all of that and couldn't be bothered with giving them a sign for their entertainment. So after telling them they could wait for what happened to Jonah to happen again, He left. I'm sure you know that He didn't mean that in the literal sense, He was referring to His death and resurrection which will happen at the end of His public ministry.

The request of the Pharisees and Sadducees remind me of how sometimes we live for the future and can't be present in the moment. We're so preoccupied with what God should do (for us) that we don't pay the required attention, seek proper acknowledge of and appreciate what He has done and is doing. Do you know what that

does? It robs us. That sort of attitude robbed the religious leaders; they couldn't recognize the work of God nor rejoice in it. And it will do the same to us, blind us from seeing the handiwork of God. It could steal the joy and other benefits we ought to get from the present. To reclaim your joy and other lost benefits, spend some time looking into the past and looking around you.

Meanwhile Jesus, consistently turning down the requests of the religious leaders for a sign, showed firmness. He knew what saying no to them meant, that they would continue to disapprove of Him; but He was no people pleaser and could handle not being in everyone's good books. As Jesus was, so should we be too. When we need to say no, we must say it and not hesitate to say it as many times as necessary. We mustn't be intimidated into giving in. Our concern should be pleasing God and not people.

Notice that as soon as Jesus was done speaking, He left. Lingering would have done more harm than good. Jesus was in the company of scoffers; staying longer than necessary would have led to more back and forths, which is a complete waste of time. We can save ourselves too from getting into arguments and suffering needless pain by taking the right action when in the wrong company. Don't spend all your time trying to make them right. Say (or do) what you must and then leave.

JESUS SAYS 124

“The disciples had forgotten to bring any bread when they crossed the lake. Jesus then warned them, “Watch out! Guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” The disciples talked this over and said to each other, “He must be saying this because we didn’t bring along any bread.” Jesus knew what they were thinking and said: You surely don’t have much faith! Why are you talking about not having any bread? Don’t you understand? Have you forgotten about the 5,000 people and all those baskets of leftovers from just five loaves of bread? And what about the 4,000 people and all those baskets of leftovers from only seven loaves of bread? Don’t you know by now that I am not talking to you about bread?”

Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees! Finally, the disciples understood that Jesus wasn't talking about the yeast used to make bread, but about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:5-12, CEV).

Jesus' words might have not been plain and direct, but you'll agree with me that the disciples thinking it had something to do with bread was quite comical; especially when Jesus had added the words Pharisees and Sadducees to the mix. I can imagine Jesus staring at them in disbelief, clearly frustrated with their line of thought. But did you notice that still, He didn't change His initial command? He left it to them to figure out what He meant; and thankfully they did. How much attention do you pay to God's words? For some of us who are struggling to understand His words, perhaps like the disciples, you just need to sit with it a little bit more, giving it some more thought might be all you need to do. Try it.

Jesus' command to the disciples first raises an awareness of the presence of error in the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And, since there was error in their teaching, the disciples must be careful how they

handle their teaching. They couldn't afford to swallow whatever the Pharisees and Sadducees taught hook, line and sinker. Jesus' command is for us too, even if we might never meet a Pharisee or Sadducee. We have many religious leaders in our space who are peddling false doctrines as did the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Yeast might not look like much, but wait till it's added to flour; its impact cannot be denied. Slowly its inward influence spreads until the evidence becomes visible as the dough rises. Perhaps this is why Jesus uses yeast to represent wrong teachings in His warning to the disciples. One wrong teaching that is accepted and followed is capable of influencing (negatively) one's entire belief system and life. This is why we who are believers too must guard against false doctrines.

But how can you tell false doctrine apart from the truth? To be able to identify false doctrines, you must be familiar with the truth. And one sure way to be familiar with the truth is to study the word of God daily. God's word is truth. Secondly, be friends with the Holy Spirit. He is the one who guides one into all truths.

JESUS SAYS 125

*“When Jesus and his disciples were near the town of Caesarea Philippi, he asked them “What do people say about the Son of Man?”
(Matthew 16:13, CEV).*

Did Jesus really care to know people’s opinion about Him? Let’s read a few more verses.

“The disciples answered, “Some people say you are John the Baptist or maybe Elijah or Jeremiah or some other prophet.” Then Jesus asked, “But who do you say I am?” Simon Peter spoke up, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus told him: Simon, son of Jonah, you are blessed! You didn’t discover this on your own. It was shown to you by my Father in heaven” (verses 14-17).

The disciples supplied Jesus with a few of the public opinions, but He wasn’t a re-incarnation of John, Elijah or Jeremiah; and although He operated in the prophetic, He

wasn't just some other prophet. So the public opinion wasn't accurate. Wanting to know if the public opinion and that of His disciples were one and the same, He asks them their own opinion about His identity. Simon Peter gave an accurate answer. Jesus affirms this by pronouncing a blessing upon him, and telling them all that God was the One who revealed His true identity to Peter.

For as long as we rely on public opinion or trust our own judgment on the things of God and spiritual matters, we will end up in error. But if we take our naïveté to God, we can be sure that what He will reveal to us about Himself and other matters will be the absolute truth.

Back to the question I asked earlier, no, it doesn't seem that Jesus cared for the public opinion of Him, but more likely He asked the questions for the sole purpose of comparing the answers of the public and that of His disciples. If the public was wrong, at least those closest to Him had to be right about His true identity, right? Because, of what use would following Him so closely have been except they had accurate knowledge of Him.

Do you have a revelation of Jesus' true identity? As a Christian, you've got to know the truth and stand firmly by it because out here in the world are various opinions of Him; and if you aren't clinging to the truth, it will be exchanged for a lie.

JESUS SAYS 126

*“So I will call you Peter, which means “a rock.” On this rock I will build my church, and death itself will not have any power over it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and God in heaven will allow whatever you allow on earth. But he will not allow anything you don’t allow”
(Matthew 16:18-19, CEV).*

Peter, formerly known as Simon (which means reed), via divine revelation had given Jesus an accurate answer about His true identity, and Jesus in turn gave Peter an accurate description of who he will be and the work he will do. That’s why He named Him Peter, which means a rock.

Later on in Peter’s life, he will see Jesus’ words to him unfold as he evolves from being one who denies Jesus to someone who stands by his conviction even to the point

of death. He would also remember Jesus' words when he does the work of building the Church with Jesus, who is the foundation of the Church (not of the physical building but of all believers who have the same conviction and confession as Peter). He will be busy with providing structure and edification for the ever increasing number of Christians after Pentecost. Jesus will defeat death and give the Church victory over its chief opponent. And one of the tools Peter will use in his work is the authority Jesus provides for him; this is the key Jesus mentioned. Whatever decision Peter (and the rest, see Matthew 18:18) take in accordance to God's will, will be backed by Him.

Did you know that as a believer, you ought to have access to some information, especially the ones about you? Information such as, who you were created to become, the work you ought to do and the provisions laid up for you?

If you didn't know, now you do; and if you've been trying to figure it all out on your own, you can stop and ask God instead. And He will tell you these secret things that you do not know. Believe it. If Jesus willingly revealed these things to Peter, why would you be denied?

Jesus ends His response to Peter's declaration by telling His disciples not to tell anyone he was Messiah (Matthew 16:20, CEV). Why? Timing. If He told them to be silent about it, it was because the time wasn't right. They were being raised to be witnesses; so it was

imperative that they witnessed about Him and what He was sent to do, but only when the time was right.

You know what's not a popular opinion in the church? That God can tell you to hold off a little while on something He has revealed to you that He would have you do for Him; and that that delay or postponement is for a greater good. And no, I haven't always known this. I learnt it the hard way.

Here's my advice to you: As much as you're fired up to know and do what God will have you do, make room in your heart for God's timing, because with God, timing is everything. And you get the best results (at least in God's view), when you work with His timing. Jesus emphasized God's timing; His disciples submitted to it and so should we.

JESUS SAYS 127

“From then on, Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him.

He said, “I must go to Jerusalem.

There the nation’s leaders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law of Moses will make me suffer terribly. I will be killed, but three days later I will rise to life”

(Matthew 16:21, CEV).

Jesus told His disciples everything that would happen to Him. It’s important that we lay emphasis that this was God’s plan, yes, that Jesus suffer terribly at the hands of the nation’s and religious leaders, and that He die; but also that He be raised up after three days.

But of all the things Jesus said, two things leave me awestruck, and sharing it will be beneficial to us all. The

first is Jesus' attitude towards God's plan. Up until His last words in the verse above, which were "*three days later I will rise to life*," nothing about God's plan seemed palatable; yet Jesus' first words when revealing God's plan is "I must go." You can either take this to mean Jesus was under compulsion or that Jesus had submitted to God's plan and had agreed to be a willing participant in it. I hope you know it's the latter. The attitude Jesus had had to all of God's leading, and not just this one, has always been submission and obedience.

The second thing is the trust Jesus had in God's plan. He said as a matter of certainty "*I will be killed, but three days later I will rise to life*." With complete conviction He spoke about His death, and with the same conviction He spoke about His resurrection. He was sure that each phase of the plan will happen. He wouldn't go through one and be denied the other.

Do you already see why I had to lay it all out? In case you don't, I'd make it plain. Whether in bits or in whole, God's plan concerning different things will be revealed to us; and many times with a part for us to play. When that happens, what's expected of every true child of God is the attitude Jesus displayed: submission and obedience. Yes, even if it means we will be greatly inconvenienced.

This brings me to my next point. It's possible to submit to God's plan and obey His instructions but not trust in His plan. We must wholeheartedly trust God's plan whether or not He reveals the expected end of that

plan to us, although in most cases He does, and that expected end is always good. This too is reason enough to trust His plan, just like Jesus did. Have this mindset that God wouldn't let us go through all of that inconvenience for nothing; it will always serve a good purpose. God makes sure this happens.

JESUS SAYS 128

“Peter took Jesus aside and told him to stop talking like that. He said, “God would never let this happen to you, Lord!” Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Satan, get away from me! You’re in my way because you think like everyone else and not like God”
(Matthew 16:22-23, CEV).

Peter had listened to Jesus, Someone whom he had come to love and care for speaking about His destiny which included suffering and (most likely in Peter’s opinion), premature death. So he decided to speak privately with Jesus on the matter. And he does just that. He takes Jesus aside and tells Him matter-of-factly that God wouldn’t let that happen to Him.

It was clear that Jesus and Peter had different views about suffering. Jesus recognized that it was part of God's plan for His life, while Peter couldn't accept that it could be. Are there still Christians who don't believe suffering can be a part of God's plan?

When Jesus responded to Peter, it wasn't pretty. And I believe things might have been a little awkward between them for a while. But was Jesus really calling Peter Satan? Of course not. "*Satan, get away from me*" reminds me of Jesus' last retort at the tempter during His testing in the desert: see Matthew 4:10a. It's safe to say, He saw Peter's words as temptation, an offer for Him to take the easy way out and avoid suffering and death. And like His previous response to all the offers in the desert, He simply was saying no. He was okay with taking the hard way, and even though it was hard to believe, the truth remains that it was God who was leading Him down that path.

Peter's reaction to Jesus' destiny reveals to us the times when we ourselves do the tempter's work. Yes, we may be speaking out of love and care but in the actual sense, we are nudging people out of their divine destiny. So, we must be careful how we respond when people share things with us, especially when it's about what God is saying concerning their lives and the ideas He's impressed on their hearts. Don't fall into the error of loving someone out of their divine destiny. Don't be a hindrance in God's plan.

Meanwhile, Jesus' response reveals the attitude one must have when presented with any ideas that might negate God's plan for our lives; we reject it immediately and stand by our conviction. There will always be temptations and sometimes, the tempter works through our closest friends, family members or people we hold in

JESUS SAYS 129

high regard, yet it is expected of us not to alter our stance before them.

*“Then Jesus said to his disciples: If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find it. What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What would you give back to get back your soul?”
(Matthew 16:24-26, CEV).*

Now addressing the disciples, Jesus shares some truths with them. The first is about the requirements for being His follower. And if

you truly want to be a part of Jesus's followers and not just identifying with Him professing to be Christian, it's important you take His words serious. Jesus says, "*you must forget about yourself*". The word "*must*" expresses insistence. He is saying that though it goes against natural instinct, forgetting about one's self must be done. When Jesus says, forget about yourself, He isn't saying ignore personal hygiene, but stop thinking about your own interests, something He was already doing by prioritizing God's commands, submitting to it and following His instructions to the letter. I dare say that it's obvious how someone who hasn't forgotten themselves, and is preoccupied with self might find it hard to follow.

Next He says, "*You must take up your cross and follow me.*" The cross Jesus speaks about, even though His was literal, is a symbol of suffering and all the hassles that comes with being affiliated with Him (a concept that had seemed foreign to Peter). When He says, "your cross," it means each and every one will have our own fair share of suffering and hassles. Taking up your cross means, willingly accepting the sufferings and hassles that come with being affiliated with Him, something He had been doing from the start of His public ministry, during it and will do at the end of it. If we don't take up our cross, how would we prove to Him, to ourselves and the world that He is our model?

I should add that if Jesus was given a cross, it was so He'd die on it; we too are allowed to suffer and go through hardships so we can die to self. If Jesus was resurrected by

God after death on the cross, we too have hope of being transformed to better versions of ourselves, the Jesus-like versions, by God's Spirit, through our suffering and hardships.

The second truth: He shared what happens next, whether or not we decide to fulfil the requirements for being His follower. He says, *"If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find it."* He addresses first what happens next if we decide we want to save our lives. Those who want to "save" their lives are those who have come to the conclusion that the requirements for being a follower of Jesus are impractical and unreasonable, and believe they know what's best for them. What then happens is that slowly they self-destruct. The very life they tried to "save" they end up destroying through their decision and actions, even though many don't discover this until much later when it's too late to change their decision.

Next up are those, I mean you and I, who are willing to "give up" our lives for Him, choosing to let go of our personal interests to submit to God's commands, taking our fair share of suffering and hardships, and allowing all of that to change and transform us. Jesus says, what happens next is that in this world, we will find out the true meaning of living and when our life on earth is over, we will have eternal life. This is why non-believers are not to be envied, regardless of their status, level of influence

or what possessions they have or, might I add, what seemingly interesting lives they lead. Any path outside of Christ leads to destruction. This is also why true followers of Christ must be full of joy. We have life, we have it fully.

The third truth He shares is a thought-provoking question. He says “*What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What would you give back to get back your soul?*” While Jesus will encourage us to stop thinking about our own interests and be about God’s business, the world calls us to pursue those interests and lay hold of all we desire. Jesus’ words put into perspective what truly matters; they beg us to think about the costs and implications of heeding the world’s call. The cost is

JESUS SAYS 130

our soul and the implication is that it might be lost forever as the soul which sins shall die.

“The Son of Man will soon come in the glory of his Father and with his angels to reward all people for what they have done. I promise you some of those standing here will not die before they see the Son of Man coming with his kingdom”
(Matthew 16:27-28, CEV).

Now, Jesus is talking about the future, a time when He will return: this time in glory, and with His angels to reward everyone according to their works. This is a prediction of judgment for those who reject Jesus and His teachings, and attempt to “save” their lives; but for those who take the pains of

giving up their lives to follow Jesus, this is an event worth looking forward to, a time of rejoicing.

The whole point of revealing this upcoming event to His listeners is so they are aware that they get to decide what their fate at that time will be, and hopefully they make the right decision; also to encourage those who were doing things Jesus' way to keep holding on until that time comes, knowing full well that if they remained faithful till the very end, their faithfulness will be rewarded by God.

In the second part of our anchor verse, Jesus said, "*I promise you some of those standing here will not die before they see the Son of Man coming with his kingdom*" (Matthew 16:28, CEV). Jesus mentioned that a select group out of those who were with Him at that time will be alive to see Him coming with His kingdom. But who are those He was referring to? And what did they do to qualify to stay alive long enough to witness this event? And, was Jesus still talking about His second coming?

It's hard to accept that Jesus was speaking of His second coming because none of those who were alive at His time are recorded to still be alive or to have translated into heaven in the manner of Enoch and Elijah. So they've all tasted death. That being ruled out, it's easier to accept that Jesus was talking about another event, or perhaps series of events only a select group will be privileged to witness in their lifetime. We don't know what qualifies them for this experience(s), except that God had His

reasons, and we aren't privy to them; and that too is okay. It's okay for God to have secrets, right? And it's okay for Him not to divulge everything to us. He reveals what He wants and keeps some things to Himself. We have to come to the understanding that we can't understand all the things God does, and He might not provide an explanation even if we ask.

Now, the take home from this is pretty obvious, and it's that we are a blessed generation and ought to be thankful. Each and every one of us Christians is privileged to have experiences, and encounters with God, and very unique ones at that. And we also have the Bible, which gives us access to all of the experiences and encounters many before us had with God. How good can it get? So instead of being consumed with questions about the select group Jesus was talking about, let's appreciate the group we Christians fall in right now, and all the blessings we have access to.

14

JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION

JESUS SAYS 131

Six days later Jesus took Peter and the brothers James and John with him.

They went up on a very high mountain where they could be alone.

There in front of the disciples, Jesus was completely changed. His face was shining like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. All at once Moses and Elijah were there talking with Jesus”

(Matthew 17:1-3, CEV).

MATTHEW INFORMS US that the event that took place in the verses above happened six days after Jesus had revealed that some of them standing with Him on that day He was speaking, wouldn't die before they witness a particular supernatural event that involved Him. Apparently this was the event Jesus was speaking of?

Jesus selected Peter, James and John to go with Him to the top of a very high mountain where unknown to them they were about to witness something supernatural. But why just them? One of the most accepted reasons is that these three will occupy leadership roles in the early Church; but maybe Jesus chose them for reasons best known to Him. And the important thing to note is that Jesus chose from amongst His disciples those who will witness such an event. This should tell us that certain experiences are reserved for only some amongst the true followers of Jesus. Let me ask you this, when God wants to select those whom He will reveal certain things to about Himself, do you think you will be considered? The answer should be yes, if you are a true follower of Jesus.

Peter, James and John agreed to accompany Jesus to the top of a very high mountain; the climb couldn't have been easy, but they were about to realize that it was worth it. No one ever followed Jesus without seeing the benefits. Anyway, at the top of the mountain when they were alone, Jesus was completely changed, along with His clothes. He was also seen speaking with Moses who had been dead several millennia ago, but had been made alive in heaven; so too was Elijah who had been translated into heaven hundreds of years earlier.

If you're like me, I'm sure you have some questions. Questions like, What was the real reason for the transfiguration? What was the significance of Moses and Elijah appearing on the scene? Jesus revealing His true

glory wasn't just for show; the disciples were constantly learning who Jesus truly was, and this supernatural visuals would aid their learning, leaving no room for scepticism.

Also, since they had now seen Moses, when Jesus talked about resurrection, it would no longer be a foreign concept. But there are also deeper lessons you and I can take home from this, first being that everyone who belongs to Jesus is made new spiritually. And our new form is more beautiful! But this transformation is retained and preserved only when we refuse to comply with the rules, standards and laws of this world but instead consistently submit to God's Holy Spirit (Read 2 Corinthians 5:17; 3:18 and Romans 12:2).

Second is that resurrection is one of the benefits of the believer! Sometimes in this life but mainly in eternity, those who have faith in Jesus will live, even if they had died. There's absolutely no reason to fear death (Read John 11:25). And third, that God's word can be counted upon to come to pass. It might not happen when we want it to, but it will happen eventually (Read Isaiah 55:11).

"So Peter said to him, "Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While Peter was still speaking, the shadow of a bright cloud passed over them. From the cloud a voice said, "This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him. Listen to what he says!" (Matthew 17:4-5, CEV).

Peter suggested they built three shelters so that going forward people could recall, perhaps visit, but also show respect for what had happened there. But while Peter was still speaking God interrupted him with a visible evidence of His presence and a much better suggestion, rather a command which all the disciples heard with their own ears. When God spoke He reveals Jesus as His Son, announces His approval of Him and commands the disciples to concern themselves, not with building a shelter, but with listening to what Jesus says.

Come to think of it, Peter was suggesting just another Old Testament way of worship, which was characterized by many mindless performative acts; meanwhile God commanded authentic worship, one which would involve conscious actions on our part, of course with Jesus as our guide. God's command to the disciples is still valid today, for us all who are Christians. From it we know and should embrace what's truly important to God.

“When the disciples heard the voice, they were so afraid they fell flat on the ground. But Jesus came over and touched them. He said, “Get up and don’t be afraid!” When they opened their eyes, they saw only Jesus”
(Matthew 17: 6-8, CEV).

The disciples were most likely hearing God the Father's audible voice for the first time, and this left them afraid, fallen on the ground, which is an expected

reaction. And as it was back then so it still is. God still chooses to speak in an audible voice to His children, to reveal things and give commands. And you can have this experience too as a child of God by simply asking Him to open your ears so you can hear from Him. It is a good prayer to pray because one thing those who hear directly from God don't have to worry about is being deceived by anyone.

Afraid and fallen to the ground, the three disciples lay but not for long. Jesus reaches out to them and tells them to get up because they had to be on their way, and not to be afraid. Of all the emotions they should feel after such an experience, fear shouldn't be one of them.

Now that we've got to the point where the disciples and Jesus are leaving the mountain top, let me share with you an unpopular opinion of mine. Those mountain top experiences are not reserved for literal mountain tops. Yes, it's true Jesus chose the top of a very high mountain for the transfiguration; but it doesn't mean that it is only on literal mountain tops that we can get such experiences. Some Christians, especially in Nigeria, tend to believe it is.

Jesus chose that location, just like He could have chosen another location. Instead of obsessing over the location, let's focus on the reason for the location. It was so they could be alone with Him. I believe except God directly says to meet Him at a location, we don't have to climb mountain tops. He is everywhere and we are likely

to have an experience such as this when we spend time alone with Him, be it the bedroom or wherever exclusive.

JESUS SAYS 132

*“On their way down from the mountain, Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had been raised from death”
(Matthew 17:9, CEV).*

Over and over Jesus reveals that timing is an important factor in God’s plans. If the disciples did as He instructed, it would enable God’s plan unfold as intended, and give the experience a chance to have more impact on the people. But do you know what else Jesus’ words reveal? It is that the experience the three had on the mountain top was not only a visual aid in their learning experience but also for the purpose of effective witnessing. Remember that evangelism and building up other believers would be their work after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Every Christian has their unique experiences with God; and they aren’t given to us only so we can increase in

our knowledge of God, but also for the benefit of others. Will you be willing to practice generosity with your experiences with God when prompted by Him when you witness? It is what He will expect of you anyway.

JESUS SAYS 133

“The disciples asked Jesus, “Don’t the teachers of the Law of Moses say Elijah must come before the Messiah does?” Jesus told them, “Elijah certainly will come and get everything ready. In fact, he has already come. But the people did not recognize him and treated him just as they wanted to. They will soon make the Son of Man suffer in the same way.” Then the disciples understood Jesus was talking to them about John the Baptist” (Matthew 17:10-13, CEV).

During their mountain top experience, the three disciples had seen Elijah; but just as quickly as he had appeared, he also did disappear, and that got them thinking about an Old Testament prophecy. See Malachi 4:5-6. They, alongside

other Jews, were expecting Elijah, the Old Testament prophet to reappear on the scene and live and walk amongst them before the Messiah arrived. It didn't make much sense that he would appear for such a short time as he had on the mountain top. Their wrong interpretation of prophecy had led to an expectation that would never be met. Fortunately, they shared their thoughts with Jesus who affirmed that Elijah had come to do what was required of him. And when He continues to speak, even predicting His own suffering in a similar manner, the disciples got the true interpretations of the prophecy, and saw there was no need to keep waiting.

There are many Christians who still find God's word had to discern. If you fall into this category, you can ask God's Spirit for the right interpretations; and I urge you to begin to do so immediately. One danger of wrong interpretation is seen in the confused state of the disciples and the perpetual waiting of majority of the Jews. Why go through that when you can have access to the right interpretation, receive clarity for every confusion, and be put out of the misery of waiting for something that has already happened?

JESUS SAYS 134

“Jesus and his disciples returned to the crowd. A man knelt in front of him and said, “Lord, have pity on my son! He has a bad case of epilepsy and often falls into a fire or into water. I brought him to your disciples, but none of them could heal him.” Jesus said, “You people are too stubborn to have any faith! How much longer must I be with you? Why do I have to put up with you? Bring the boy here.” Then Jesus spoke sternly to the demon. It went out of the boy, and right then he was healed. Later the disciples went to Jesus in private and asked him, “Why couldn’t we force out the demon?” Jesus replied: It is because you don’t have enough faith! But I can promise you this. If you had faith no larger than a mustard seed, you could tell

*this mountain to move from here to there.
And it would. Everything would be
possible for you”
(Matthew 17:14-21, CEV).*

U pon returning from the mountain top, Jesus was brought up to date on what had happened in His absence; the inability of the nine remaining disciples to cure an epileptic. And He was quite frustrated by it, and rightly so, because He had already endued them with power to work miracles, including healing the sick! Jesus' frustration with the disciples proves that God has expectations of us. Yes, especially those who are His. And when those expectations aren't met, He isn't pleased. I hope this isn't a foreign concept to you. It really shouldn't be. If you have access to the Bible, then you should be familiar with God's expectations of us; and because we are familiar with God's expectations, we have no excuse for not striving to meet them.

Anyway, back to the issues with the disciples: Since they had attempted to heal the epileptic, it meant they hadn't forgotten that Jesus had endued them with power. What then was the problem? Before Jesus healed the epileptic, He says to them, *“You people are too stubborn to have any faith!”* But the disciples didn't catch on. Later,

after Jesus had healed the epileptic, the disciples met with Him to know the reason for their failure, and Jesus didn't hesitate to tell them that it was because they didn't have enough faith. He assured them that if they had faith, even the size of a mustard seed, everything would be possible for them.

What if I told you that the authority and power to do the works of Christ that the disciples possessed is promised all believers! Yes, you and I possess it; but just like the disciples, the reason we have the power but can't activate it is due to the same reason as theirs: we don't have enough faith. I imagined what would have happened if Jesus hadn't arrived on the scene, the concerned parent and the sick boy would have returned home disappointed, and the demon responsible for the epilepsy would have continued putting the boy's life in danger until it finally succeeds in killing the boy. Not a pretty outcome, right? That's the reason you and I can't remain in the spiritual state we're in; we must strive to grow our faith so we can activate the power deposited inside of us and serve God and humanity as we ought to.

Concerned with how to grow your faith? Begin with trusting God for the little things you need. If you continue in this practice, in no time, you'd be able to trust Him with big things, not only for yourself but for others as well.

Though it's not recorded in these verses, the disciples did grow their faith. And the miracles worked by some of

them using Jesus' power and authority are recorded in Scriptures. These verses only show their humble beginnings. I'm sure even though here Jesus was frustrated with them, later on He was pleased and rejoiced over them. You and I must grow too in faith so we can please God and give Him opportunity to rejoice over us.

JESUS SAYS 135

*“While Jesus and his disciples were going from place to place in Galilee, he told them “The Son of Man will be handed over to people who will kill him. But three days later he will rise to life.” All of this made the disciples very sad”
(Matthew 17:22-23, CEV).*

This is the second time recorded by Matthew where Jesus foretells His death and resurrection. The first time He spoke of these things to the disciples (Matthew 16:21), He reveals Jerusalem as the location where He would suffer terribly and listed the nation's leaders: the chief priests and teachers of the Law of Moses as those who would be behind His suffering; and now, He reveals that He would be handed over to those who will kill Him. By this He hinted at a betrayal. Did the disciples catch on? Possibly, because they were sad afterwards. But was it just the news of His death and resurrection that caused their sadness?

Well, as for us, now we know that God can be depended upon to reveal important things to us, even things about the future, when we ask, even if we do not ask. So we don't have to run from pillar to post looking to people who claim to see into the future to tell us things. Just as seen in the verses above, the way and manner in which God might choose to reveal information to us might be gradual; but at least we can be sure that it's the truth that will be revealed to us. God won't deceive us.

The disciples had heard the truth and were sad. This is normal, because the truth doesn't always make us happy, at least not in that moment. But it does in the long run. Let's choose to embrace the truth that makes us sad now and happy later instead of the lies that will eventually fail to deliver happiness to us.

JESUS SAYS 136

*“When Jesus and the others arrived in Capernaum, the collectors for the temple tax came to Peter and asked, “Does your teacher pay the temple tax?” “Yes, he does,” Peter answered. After they had returned home, Jesus went up to Peter and asked him, “Simon, what do you think? Do the kings of this earth collect taxes and fees from their own people or from foreigners?” Peter answered, “From foreigners.” Jesus replied, “Then their own people don’t have to pay. But we don’t want to cause trouble. So go cast a line into the lake and pull out the first fish you hook. Open its mouth, and you will find a coin. Use it to pay your taxes and mine”
(Matthew 17:24-27, CEV).*

The temple tax was a half shekel every Jew over twenty was expected to pay for the upkeep of the temple (See Exodus 30:11-16). When some officials asked Peter whether or not Jesus obeyed that law, Peter said yes, He did. Jesus wasn't a lawbreaker, and we Christians ought to imitate Him. The verses above also reveal that later on, Jesus had a conversation with Peter about taxes and fees, possibly because He was aware that Peter had been questioned earlier, but more because He wanted to pass a message across. Jesus reveals to Peter that by reason of status, He was exempt from paying taxes and fees but because He didn't want to cause trouble, He'd pay and keep paying.

How far are you willing to go to maintain peace? Jesus chose not to insist on His right. Christians are encouraged to prioritize peace and not engage in every battle. Sure, there are some battles worth fighting, but there are others that we are better off conceding because it will help maintain peace and prove our reputation as Christians. May God's Spirit help us discern one from the other!

Just as Jesus was rounding off His conversation with Peter, Jesus gives him a set of instructions that when followed would provide him the means to pay his taxes and Jesus'. It was a notable miracle, a personal favourite. The miracle, however, didn't happen so we can be encouraged to go fishing and hope to find a fish with a coin in it, but instead so we can be assured of God's provision when we need it for doing the right thing.

15

GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM

JESUS SAYS 137

“About this time the disciples came to Jesus and asked him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus called for a child to come over and stand near him. Then he said: I promise you this. If you don’t change and become like a child, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. But if you are as humble as this child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”

(Matthew 18:1-4, CEV).

THE DISCIPLES WERE anxious about the social scale in heaven and asked Jesus about it. It is always good practice for every Christian to turn their worries over to the Lord. He’ll listen to us as and won’t chide us, just like He did with the disciples. In response to their question, Jesus provided insight into the

Kingdom of heaven. He says, *“I promise you this. If you don’t change and become like a child, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.”*

Jesus first addresses entrance into the Kingdom of heaven. To get in one had to change and become like a child. Jesus’ language here resembles the one He used while speaking to Nicodemus in John 3:3. And just like Nicodemus, the disciples should have asked more questions. To change is to alter the norm. One who desires to be a part of the Kingdom of heaven must be willing to alter their lifestyle of sin, not temporarily but permanently. A child doesn’t only mean a young human but also symbolizes naïveté, innocence, virtuousness. To become like a child is to embrace a new spiritual state, accepting that one has no knowledge or experience and is in need of guidance in all things pertaining to the Kingdom.

Next Jesus says, *“But if you are as humble as this child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* Finally, Jesus answers their question. He doesn’t give them a name of a disciple from amongst them, which was what they would have liked; instead, He shares with them how things work in the Kingdom of heaven. The basis for attaining greatness in the Kingdom of heaven is humility like a child’s on earth. Children, except tutored to think differently, mostly have a modest or low view of their importance. To be the greatest, the disciples had to adopt this way of thinking.

In many words, Jesus was informing the disciples and Christians all over the world that the society we live in is different from the Kingdom of heaven. The way you get in is different. Same with the way you attain any position in it. Even the priorities and behaviours of those who are a part of the Kingdom of heaven are different.

Do your desires and character reflect the kingdom you belong to? Aligning our desires and character with God's Kingdom standards might come with more knowledge and deliberate efforts on our part. So, let's take time out to read portions of Scripture that teach about the Kingdom and put what we've learnt into practice.

“And when you welcome one of these children because of me, you welcome me” (Matthew 18:5, CEV).

Speaking to the disciples, who have been with Him for a while now, Jesus laid emphasis on the good treatment of new converts/young believers. Welcoming new converts goes beyond friendly greetings, but looking away from their past to focusing on their present; being aware of their spiritual state and treating them accordingly. Since they have no knowledge of the ways of the Kingdom, we who do must not take advantage of their ignorance or shame them, instead take up the responsibility of sharing our knowledge with them. Since they are immature in faith, we must not overlook this, it now beomes the responsibility of those who have attained some level of

maturity to encourage their growth, and so on. How do you treat the new converts around you? Jesus' words imply that rejection and indifference is not acceptable.

JESUS SAYS 138

*“It will be terrible for people who cause even one of my little followers to sin. Those people would be better off thrown into the deepest part of the ocean with a heavy stone tied around their necks! The world is in for trouble because of the way it causes people to sin. There will always be something to cause people to sin, but anyone who does this will be in for trouble”
(Matthew 18:6-7, CEV).*

Still speaking to the disciples, Jesus reveals an offence that will attract a dreadful punishment and, it's causing new converts to sin. He says, the world is already full of temptations for them but anyone who is the reason why they sin will be in for trouble. Since Jesus is addressing the disciples, then Christians, especially those who have been in the faith for

a while must take this to mean He is addressing us. There are two ways we can cause others to sin, either directly or indirectly.

We cause others to sin directly when we fail to comply with the standards God has laid out for every child of His, and command/encourage others (especially new converts) to do same. We cause others to sin indirectly when we fail to comply with the standards God has laid out for every child of His. Our actions often leave the wrong impression of Christians and Christianity on the minds of others, especially new converts, and is the reason many have renounced Christianity, opting for their life of sin.

The summary of it all is that Jesus is encouraging the believer to be mindful of their spiritual walk. If we walk in the truth, we won't lead others into error whether directly or indirectly. How much importance do you give your spiritual walk?

JESUS SAYS 139

“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, chop it off and throw it away! You would be better off to go into life paralyzed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the fire that never goes out. If your eye causes you to sin, poke it out and get rid of it. You would be better off to go into life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fires of hell”

(Matthew 18:8-9, CEV).

Jesus shared such wisdom with the disciples. He urged them to take sin seriously, and do all they can to avoid falling into sin, even if those preventive measures seem drastic, and uncomfortable; in the end, it'll be worth it. Meanwhile a life of sin might

seem convenient, but in the end it will lead one straight into the fires of hell.

When God shares His wisdom with us, it is important that we pay attention to His words and do as instructed. Now, though Jesus talks about chopping off and throwing away a hand or foot if it causes one to sin, or poke out one's eye if it caused one to sin, He isn't asking us to maim ourselves. I believe He is rather emphasizing that actions need be taken against anything that can lead one to sin, even if it causes us pain and discomfort. Momentary pain and discomfort on earth beats suffering for all of eternity.

What's your attitude towards sin? Do you take preventive measures to avoid sin or do you have a laid back approach towards it? I'm hoping it's the former rather than the latter because Jesus has already made it clear that in the Kingdom, sin won't be tolerated, and those who indulge in it will have to face the consequences.

For those genuinely struggling with bad habits and cutting off from some things and people that tempt them to sin, may I suggest you invite the Holy Spirit into your struggle? Speaking from personal experience, when I talk to Him about my struggles, He does come and help out. The struggles don't go away magically; but I am empowered to deal with them and overcome them. What He did for me, He will certainly do for you.

JESUS SAYS 140

*“Don’t be cruel to any of these little ones! I promise you their angels are always with my Father in heaven. Let me ask you this. What would you do if you had 100 sheep and one of them wandered off? Wouldn’t you leave the 99 on the hillside and go look for the one that had wandered away? I am sure that finding it would make you happier than having the 99 that never wandered off. That’s how it is with your Father in heaven. He doesn’t want any of these little ones to be lost”
(Matthew 18:10-14, CEV).*

Cruelty isn’t a godly behaviour, and no Christian is expected to wilfully cause anyone pain and suffering, let alone do so to another

Christian, especially if they are new converts who are very vulnerable. Jesus mentioned that the new converts have angels assigned to them. Why? Most likely to encourage the disciples to conduct themselves properly when dealing with them, but more so to show the disciples that God is interested in their welfare. And with the story Jesus told, He helped the disciples see how God viewed and valued the new converts, only wanting the best for them. But I believe you know that Jesus isn't just speaking to the disciples right there with Him, but to all of us Christians all over the world.

Christians today only pay attention to new converts when we are out for evangelism and told to win a certain number of souls that day, or there's an altar call and we hope the pastor giving the call doesn't get embarrassed when no one responds. We don't really see them the way God sees them, nor value them as He does; so we can't properly rejoice that they've come to Christ and treat them the way we ought to. Hopefully, Jesus' words help address all these issues, and going forward we can see through God's lenses and do better.

JESUS SAYS 141

*“If one of my followers sins against you, go and point out what was wrong. But do it in private, just between the two of you. If that person listens, you have won back a follower. But if that one refuses to listen, take along one or two others. The Scripture teach that every complaint must be proven by two or more witnesses. If the follower refuses to listen to them, report the matter to the church. Anyone who refuses to listen to the church must be treated like an unbeliever or a tax collector”
(Matthew 18:15-17, CEV).*

Jesus teaches the disciples how to handle dispute among believers. The first step is for the offended party to be willing to talk it out. But in private. However that could go two ways. The one who has committed the offence may listen and make amends. If that happens, then the relationship will be restored; but in the case the person refuses to listen, then the one who has been offended must involve one or two other believers in the matter. Why? So they can hear the whole story and prove the validity of the accusation. If after proving it, they fail to persuade the guilty party to make amends, then the church should be involved. Yet if after the church is involved and the guilty party refuses to listen to their ruling, then the entire church must cease to see the guilty party as one who is a believer. And instead introduce them to the gospel afresh and pray for the salvation of their souls; because, a true believer wouldn't act that way.

After reading Jesus' words, I advise you do some introspection. Ask yourself these questions: When I'm offended am I always willing to take all the necessary steps towards dealing with my hurt and restoring my relationship with the one who has offended me? When I offend people, do I prioritize my pride over the feelings of those I have hurt? When confronted with my faults do I take responsibility and pursue reconciliation or not? If you answer these questions truthfully, you just might see areas the Lord is calling you to work on.

In case you missed it, Jesus' teaching rules out for the believer bottling in feelings of hurt, letting resentment fester, seeking vengeance, displaying pride when confronted with one's faults, and refusal to submit to the correction of other believers and the church's authority. Someone might ask, What then happens to the offended party when the guilty one refuses to be accountable for their actions, and doesn't take steps to make amends?

This scenario, unfortunately, is the reality of some people, as it has been mine a few times. In those cases, I simply talk about everything with God, like I would with a diary entry. I relate the entire thing to Him, even though He already knows it. Then I would ask Him to help me forgive them and heal my heart. Then, though not immediately, and mostly slowly, I let go of the hurt and find out my heart's been healed. You should try this too.

JESUS SAYS 142

“I promise you God in heaven will allow whatever you allow on earth, but God will not allow anything you don’t allow”

(Matthew 18:18 CEV).

Jesus had earlier instructed that Christians who are rebellious should be seen and treated like unbelievers and sinners. Now, He says God will endorse the church’s decision when they do this. Jesus’ words should serve as a warning for those who claim to be Christian but are treading the path of rebellion.

What God expects of us is to be responsive towards Him, His commands, the correction of other believers and those He has put in authority, especially in the church. Continuing in rebellion will only do more harm than good. Why suffer the fate of unbelievers when you already know the way to life?

JESUS SAYS 143

*“I promise that when any two of you on earth agree about something you are praying for, my Father in heaven will do it for you. Whenever two or three of you come together in my name, I am there with you”
(Matthew 18:19-20, CEV).*

Initially Jesus had shown how instrumental two believers could be in validating accusations and reconciling believers, and even how powerful their testimony against a guilty party will be to the church. Now He tells of how effective the prayer of two believers can be; that it moves God to act on their behalf (when of course, they ask according to His will). He also assures them of His presence (though invisible).

Seeing that Jesus talks about how effective the prayer of (at least) two believers can be after declaring that a rebellious Christian should be seen and treated like an unbeliever and sinner, I believe He says this to reveal an

important course of action for the believers around, which is prayer and the focus of the prayer by the believers should be the conversion of the unbeliever and restoration into the church fold. Such prayer won't be outside of the will of God.

How often do you engage in the prayer of intercession for unbelievers? Every Christian has a responsibility towards them, and when we come together to fulfil this responsibility via prayers, we can be sure that God will be moved to act on our requests.

Aside the obvious, Jesus' words also reveal that God doesn't discriminate against small gatherings of believers to favour larger ones. He answers prayers of agreement offered in our gatherings when of course, they ask according to His will, and His presence is felt in both. Are you one of those believers that discriminate against small followings, small gatherings and small churches? This is an attitude you must drop. If God doesn't discriminate against the few, even just two members, then who are you to?

JESUS SAYS 144

*“Peter came up to the Lord and asked,
“How many times should I forgive
someone who does something wrong to
me? Is seven times enough?” Jesus
answered: Not just 7 times, but 77
times!”*

(Matthew 18:21-22, CEV).

Peter bringing up forgiveness isn't out of the blue, considering what Jesus had talked about in verses 15-17. He had caught on that if he was ever the offended party and the guilty party were to ask for forgiveness, it would be required of him to forgive. What he wanted to know, seeing that he had given a finite number, was the extent to which he had to be merciful. But with Jesus' response, he learnt his mercy towards others had to be infinite.

What are your thoughts on forgiveness? How do you handle a habitual offender? Forgiveness is expected of every child of God, and mercy mustn't be denied even the

habitual offender. Do you agree? I hope so because it's the truth. Now with that being said, let's be mindful not to confuse forgiveness with tolerating bad behaviours/abuse.

Forgive the offender but don't condone the offense; address it. If someone is in the habit of hurting you, set boundaries to protect yourself from their actions; and if their actions are harmful, take godly and lawful measures to ensure your safety.

Still responding to Peter, Jesus says, *"This story will show you what the kingdom of heaven is like: One day a king decided to call in his officials and ask them to give an account of what they owed him. As he was doing this, one official was brought in who owed him 50,000,000 silver coins. But he didn't have any money to pay what he owed. The king ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all he owned, in order to pay the debt. The official got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you every cent I owe!" The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the official that he did not have to pay back the money.*

"But as this official was leaving, he happened to meet another official, who owed him 100 silver coins. So he grabbed the man by the throat. He started choking him and said, "Pay me what you owe!" The man got down on his knees and began begging, "Have pity on me, and I will pay you back." But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed. When some other officials found out what had happened, they

felt sorry for the man who had been put in jail. Then they told the king what had happened.

“The king called the first official back in and said, “You’re an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you did not have to pay back a cent. Don’t you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?” The king was so angry that he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed. That is how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don’t forgive each of my followers with all your heart” (Matthew 18:23-35, CEV).

Jesus had told the story to show Peter what the Kingdom of heaven is like; and truly many things in the story are similar to the Kingdom of heaven. For instance, we have God as King, to whom we all owe a huge debt because of our sins, a debt we can’t pay. And although judgment has been passed on us (seeing the wages of sin is death), when we ask for mercy from God (on the foundation of Jesus’ sacrifice) He is compassionate towards us, reverses His judgment and cancels our debt.

But Jesus didn’t tell the story just for the sake of comparison but to deliver a message, not just to Peter, but to all of us who belong to the Kingdom in general. What is this message? It is that there will be those who will offend us from amongst ourselves, but we must keep in mind that their offense will always pale in comparison to how we offended God. And, like we asked for mercy, there will be those who will ask for mercy from us; and just as

we obtained mercy from God, we must show it to those asking us of it. This is what is expected of us. But in the case that we refuse to show mercy and insist on our pound of flesh, God won't overlook it. He will hold us accountable for our action and mete out the necessary punishment.

As He rounded off His story, Jesus lays emphasis on forgiving fellow Christians with all of one's heart. Please don't take it to mean, our wholehearted forgiveness should be offered to only Christians, it's for everyone. The emphasis is more likely to promote unity within the family of God. And, in case you're wondering what wholehearted forgiveness looks like, it is not only saying you pardon someone with your lips, but truly meaning it in your heart and proving it by not harbouring any anger or resentment against the guilty party. That is what our forgiveness should look like.



JESUS ON DIVORCE

JESUS SAYS 145

*“When Jesus finished teaching, he left Galilee and went to the part of Judea east of the Jordan River. Large crowds followed him, and he healed their sick”
(Matthew 19:1-2, CEV).*

LET’S READ WHAT happens next. “Some Pharisees wanted to test Jesus. They came up to him and asked, “Is it right for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason? Jesus answered, “Don’t you know in the beginning the Creator made a man and a woman? That’s why a man leaves his father and mother and gets married. He becomes like one person with his wife. Then they are no longer two people, but one. And no one should separate a couple God has joined together” (Matthew 19:3-6, CEV).

Although the Pharisees had approached Jesus with a question on a need-to-know basis, we must bear in mind that since they sought to test Jesus, they weren’t really asking so they could learn, but with ulterior motives. Anyway, let’s look into their question, and Jesus’ response.

They asked Jesus if it was morally good, justified or acceptable for a man to divorce his wife for any reason. And if they were asking such a question, then we must take it to mean, divorce on any grounds was the order of the day back then. I'm sure no one reading this is surprised; because, it is the same practice today, even amongst professing Christians. Hopefully we take Jesus' words seriously and make necessary adjustments.

What does Jesus say? Seeing the need to re-educate, He takes the Pharisees, and us, back to the very beginning. Here's what Jesus' words reveal:

λ God created man and woman and designed that the marriage institution be between these two genders only.

λ The man which is the adult male is expected, at some point, to have left his father and mother before becoming married to a woman, who should be an adult female herself, with a different set of parents.

λ The married couple (those united in marriage) are no longer two but one person. The law joins them together, and so also does God.

λ No one is allowed to take any actions in order to dissolve a marriage.

Let's read a few more verses to discover what happens after Jesus' response.

"The Pharisees asked Jesus, "Why did Moses say a man could write out divorce papers and send his wife away?"

Jesus replied, “You are heartless! That’s why Moses allowed you to divorce your wife. But from the beginning God did not intend it to be that way. I say if your wife has not committed some terrible sexual sin, you must not divorce her to marry someone else. If you do, you are unfaithful” (Matthew 19:7-9, CEV).

Upon hearing Jesus’ response, the Pharisees bring up Moses’ teaching. Jesus had said no one was permitted to separate a couple God had joined together but Moses had permitted divorce (See Deuteronomy 24:1-2). So what were they to make of that? In response, Jesus declares them heartless! And says that was the reason Moses permitted divorce. But, was it just the Pharisees He referred to as heartless or was it more about the condition of the hearts of the men of their generation? I believe it’s the latter.

To be heartless means to be unfeeling, unsympathetic, unkind, uncaring, unconcerned, insensitive etc. This is not to say the women then were saints; but the afore mentioned described the conditions of the hearts of men back then. Now imagine a woman trapped in a marriage with someone without a regenerated heart! She would have been subjected to untold cruelty. Moses had permitted divorce as a means of protecting the women. Even though divorce was, and still is, never part of God’s intention for marriage.

Like in Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus repeats Himself and says, *“I say if your wife has not committed some terrible sexual sin, you must not divorce her to marry someone else. If you do, you are unfaithful.”* We already know He wasn’t permitting divorce between a married couple on the grounds of adultery, but permitting a dissolution of the marriage agreement between those engaged to be married on the grounds of something as serious as pre-marital sex, even with another party. If and when those already united in marriage dare to get divorced, in God’s eyes they will still be considered married and their involvement with another party will be considered as “unfaithfulness”, better put, adultery.

Someone might say, if Moses had permitted divorce to protect the women, since the conditions of the heart of men were still the same during Jesus’ time, why doesn’t He permit divorce too? Doesn’t He care for the women? Moses did what seemed right to him. Meanwhile, Jesus is re-introducing us to God’s original plan for marriage; and that means no divorce. If you ask me, I’d say Jesus is challenging us to conform to God’s ideal, which is, marriage is a permanent bond, a life-long commitment, and that starts with being united in marriage with the right person.

If back then people got divorced for just any reason, we can assume they got married to just anyone for just any reason too. Now if we bear in mind that God’s ideal is no divorce, won’t this be the motivation we need to not

marry just anybody for just any reason? Being married to a person with a regenerated mind will be a must, that and it could also be the driving force behind married people putting in the work to make their marriages work.

Jesus cares about you and me, men and women alike, and if He insists on God's original plan for marriage, we have to bear in mind that He isn't asking us to do something that isn't possible or isn't designed to be for our good.

“The disciples said, “If that’s how it is between a man and a woman, it’s better not to get married.” Jesus told them, “Only those people who have been given the gift of staying single can accept this teaching. Some people are unable to marry because of birth defects or because of what someone has done to their bodies. Others stay single in order to serve God better. Anyone who can accept this teaching should do so” (Matthew 19:10-12, CEV).

The disciples present for the back and forth had heard both sides and concluded that being single was way better than being married. Some people share their opinion. Do you? But what was Jesus' opinion on the matter? He says, not everyone will be able to stay single. Among those who are single will be those gifted to stay single, those forced to stay single due to birth defects/mutilation, and those who choose to stay single for the sake of their service to

God. Those who don't fall into these categories will prefer to be married.

If you're single, you should know this: whether you are called to stay single, forced to stay single, or have chosen to stay single, Jesus doesn't disapprove of you, neither will He favour the married over you. And most importantly, you are not unfit to serve God. And if God approves of you, no one else can disapprove of you; and if God doesn't declare you unfit to serve Him, no one else can declare you unfit. So do not let your confidence be eroded nor allow yourself to be relegated to the side-lines.

JESUS SAYS 146

“Some people brought their children to Jesus, so he could place his hands on them and pray for them. His disciples told the people to stop bothering him. But Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and don’t try to stop them! People who are like these children belong to God’s kingdom.” After Jesus had placed his hands on the children, he left”
(Matthew 19:13-15, CEV).

It wasn’t uncommon in Jesus’ time for parents to take their children to devoutly religious men for blessings and prayers; yet, when some parents attempted to take their children to meet Jesus for same reason, the disciples interfered. Why? It’s likely they believed Jesus had more important things to do. But when Jesus spoke up, He told them children should be allowed

to come to Him and not be stopped. He reiterated that people with similar characteristics as children belong to God's Kingdom. Then He did as the parents had requested.

Today, the church knows better than to interfere with children coming to Jesus, (here's a special shout out to every children church teacher! You ought to know your service aligns with God's desire! Thank you for your service and may God reward you bountifully for it). Today, it's the parents that need to be reprimanded for failing to take their children to Jesus. It's a shame that the children of many Christian parents are yet to meet Jesus. Sure, they go to church but that's just about it, they don't know Him and so are denied all the blessings that come with knowing Him. Parents should keep in mind that Jesus is very much interested in meeting their children, and they should take the necessary steps to helping them meet Him, beginning today.

JESUS SAYS 147

“A man came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? Only God is good. If you want to have eternal life, you must obey his commandments.” “Which ones?” the man asked. Jesus answered, “Do not murder. Be faithful in marriage. Do not steal. Do not tell lies about others. Respect your father and mother. And love others as much as you love yourself.” The young man said, “I have obeyed all of these.

What else must I do?” Jesus replied, “If you want to be perfect, go sell everything you own! Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and be my follower.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he was very rich”

(Matthew 19:16-22, CEV).

The man who approached Jesus wanted to be told what exact thing he needed to do there and then to obtain eternal life; and Jesus informed him that it wasn't one thing but several things that needed to be done, and one act of obedience wouldn't cut it but a lifestyle of obedience to God. When the man argued that he had lived such a life and insisted on knowing what else he needed to do, the next words Jesus spoke hit a nerve. Upon hearing that he needed to sell everything he owned for the purpose of charity and in order to have treasures in heaven and become eligible to follow Jesus, he freaked out, and went away sad.

It's important that we note that this man's encounter is peculiar to him. However, there are lessons we who are believers can learn from it. And what are the lessons? The first is that we are encouraged to adopt a lifestyle of obedience; all of God's commands should be obeyed every day of our lives. The second is we must be willing to do away with anything that will hinder us from receiving from God the best He has for us. For the man it was his riches. For you and I it could be something else. But when the specific thing is revealed to us, we must not hesitate to let go of it. Finally, following Jesus is a must; so, all that's required to make one eligible to do so wholeheartedly must be done.

At the end, the encounter with the man proved one of my theories to be true: that we choose how our story ends. His story ended on a sad note, with him not receiving

what he desired because he let it happen that way. If he had embraced the truth Jesus shared with him and done as advised, there would have been a happily ever after. Let's decide our stories to end on a better note, and do everything (Jesus says) to ensure it does.

Please note: If you are a non-believer reading this and you're interested in obtaining eternal life, here's what you must do. Have faith in Jesus, in His identity, sacrifice and ability to save even you from your sins (John 3:16). Going forward, be committed to obeying God's commands, and be intentional about following Jesus daily, letting go of whatever might hinder you from doing these.

JESUS SAYS 148

*“Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you, it’s terribly hard for rich people to get into the kingdom of heaven! In fact, it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into God’s kingdom”
(Matthew 19:23-24, CEV).*

Jesus knew the man who had walked away sad from Him had been hindered by his riches. Let me rephrase that since riches in itself don’t have the ability to hinder anyone, Jesus knew the man who had walked away sad from Him had been hindered by his love for his material wealth, which was more than his love for God and his desire to obtain eternal life; and He made sure to mention it. But Jesus’ words do not only reveal that, they also sound a warning to the rich.

Jesus says, it will be terribly hard for rich people to get into the Kingdom of heaven. He reiterates His point by adding a Jewish proverb used to express great difficulty or

impossibility. What's the warning? For the non-believer and the believer to guard against the love of material wealth, as it causes all kinds of trouble, one of which is hindering one from being a part of the Kingdom of heaven. Another is to cause one to give up one's faith.

“When the disciples heard this, they were greatly surprised and asked, “How can anyone ever be saved?” Jesus looked straight at them and said, “There are some things people cannot do, but God can do anything” (Matthew 19:25-26, CEV).

If it would be terribly hard for the rich to be saved (converted), who then can ever be saved? This seems to be the way the disciples thought. But Jesus had said it would be terribly hard, not impossible, right? The rich will only find it terribly hard to get into the Kingdom of heaven and remain a part of it, if they fail to rely on God. For with God, what seems a great difficulty or impossibility would be made possible. For God can do anything, even help them keep their hearts off their riches.

Jesus might have been addressing the rich in material wealth, but it also goes for all of us. We all have that one thing or another in abundance and we are often tempted to rely on. Let's keep in mind that these things will only serve as hindrance in our relationship with God; and the best defence posture we can have against such is to rely on God instead.

After Jesus' response, *"Peter replied, "Remember, we have left everything to be your followers! What will we get?" Jesus answered: Yes, all of you have become my followers. And so in the future world, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, I promise you will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. All who have given up home or brothers and sisters or father and mother or children or land for me will be given 100 times as much. They will also have eternal life. But many who are now first will be last, and many who are last will be first"* (Matthew 19:27-30 , CEV).

Did Peter get the answer he was hoping for? If he was thinking about the here and now, then he would have been disappointed, because the reward Jesus had for the disciples for their sacrifice was reserved for a specific time in the future. And they had to be okay with it. What are your thoughts on delayed gratification?

Moving on, Jesus addresses everyone who has made sacrifices for His sake. He assures us our sacrifices are recognized and will be duly rewarded many times over. We will also have eternal life.

As Jesus rounded off His response to Peter, He says *"But many who are now first will be last, and many who are last will be first."* What does this mean? If we put into consideration all that had happened so far in this chapter from verse 16 up until now, then Jesus' words can be understood to mean encouragement to His followers who

had left everything behind. In the world, they might be considered least important, but in the kingdom of God, they are the ones who will be the most important, meanwhile the rich (who are unsaved) though they might be considered the most important by the world, a time would come, if they remain unsaved, that they will be referred to as the least important.

17

THE REWARD
SYSTEM IN
HEAVEN

JESUS SAYS 149

“As Jesus was telling what the kingdom of heaven would be like, he said: Early one morning a man went out to hire some workers for his vineyard. After he had agreed to pay them the usual amount for a day’s work, he sent them off to his vineyard. About nine that morning, the man saw some other people standing in the market with nothing to do. He promised to pay them what was fair, if they would work in his vineyard. So they went. At noon and again about three in the afternoon he returned to the market. And each time he made the same agreement with others who were loafing around with nothing to do. Finally, about five in the afternoon the man went back and found some others standing there. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here

all day long doing nothing?” “Because no one has hired us,” they answered. Then he told them to go work in his vineyard. That evening the owner of the vineyard told the man in charge of the workers to call them in and give them their money. He also told the man to begin with the ones who were hired last. When the workers arrived, the ones who had been hired at five in the afternoon were given a full day’s pay. The workers who had been hired first thought they would be given more than the others. But when they were given the same, they began complaining to the owner of the vineyard. They said, “The ones who were hired last worked for only one hour. But you paid them the same that you did us. And we worked in the hot sun all day long!” The owner answered one of them, “Friend, I didn’t cheat you. I paid you exactly what we agreed on. Take your money now and go! What business is it of

yours if I want to pay them the same that I paid you? Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Why should you be jealous, if I want to be generous?" Jesus then said, "So it is. Everyone who is now last will be first, and everyone who is now first will be last" (Matthew 20:1-16, CEV).

T HE STORY JESUS told gives us a glimpse into the reward system of heaven and the uninformed assumptions we have about it. Here are a few truths, in case you missed them:

I. About the reward system of heaven:

- λ Those who are called into Christian service and obey will be rewarded.
- λ There is a set time for the said rewards.
- λ The rewards are equal.
- λ The order in which the rewards are given out is determined by God.
- λ And the reward system is based on the generosity of God.

II. Our uninformed assumptions:

λ The duration of service will be a determinant in the reward system.

λ The reward system can be contested.

Again Jesus says, *“everyone who is now last will be first, and everyone who is now first will be last.”* From the story Jesus told, we see how this plays out: the workers who were hired first were ordered to be paid last and the workers hired last were paid first and also given the same pay as those hired first. Jesus’ words hold a warning for His followers who concern themselves with ranks (like the workers who were hired first). They will be in for a surprise in heaven, because God doesn’t care about such things. Before Him we are all equals and will be treated as such.

How do you know if you’re one of those Christians who care about ranks? See if you tick at least one of the things listed:

λ You compare yourself with others in order to find ways you can be more advantageous.

λ You complain when people you believe are inferior to you in one way or another receive the same recognition and compensation as you.

λ And your jealous eye over the recognition and compensation of others rob you of joy over yours and every feeling of gratitude.

If you ticked at least one thing off the list provided, it's established that you concern yourself with ranks, and such a mindset is rooted in pride; and we all know how God feels about pride. Why wait to be humbled by God? Why not take a cue now and prayerfully ask Him to help you focus on humbly serving Him and continuing to do so with the right spirit? Let's never forget that in the life of a believer, especially in our service to God and humanity, there's no room for pride, only humility, contentment and gratitude.

JESUS SAYS 150

*“As Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he took his twelve disciples aside and told them in private: We are now on our way to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses. They will sentence him to death, and then they will hand him over to foreigners who will make fun of him. They will beat him and nail him to a cross. But on the third day he will rise from death”
(Matthew 20:17-19, CEV).*

This is the third time (according to Matthew’s account) that Jesus foretells His death and resurrection (See 16:21 and 17:22, for the first and second announcements). And as usual, He adds bits of information that weren’t revealed earlier. Now, He

gives details on His suffering and death. He adds that He will be handed over to foreigners, be mocked, beaten and crucified.

Why did Jesus feel the need to share this disturbing information with the disciples? I believe He did so for two reasons: the first being that they were already on their way to Jerusalem, the ending of the Lord's public ministry and life on earth was near. It was important for the disciples to be well informed so as not to be taken unawares. The second reason is this: I believe the Lord talked unashamedly about His suffering, and didn't fail to mention His resurrection as well, so that in future, the disciples could emulate Him in their attitude towards suffering and in their hope for the good that would follow. Till date, God does His bit by revealing things in details to us; but how often do we respond like Jesus did towards suffering and in hoping?

JESUS SAYS 151

“The mother of James and John came to Jesus with her two sons. She knelt down and started begging him to do something for her. Jesus asked her what she wanted, and she said, “When you come into your kingdom, please let one of my sons sit at your right side and the other at your left.”

Jesus answered, “Not one of you knows what you are asking. Are you able to drink from the cup that I must soon drink from?” James and John said “Yes, we are!” Jesus replied, “You certainly will drink from my cup! But it isn’t for me to say who will sit at my right side and at my left. This is for my Father to say”

(Matthew 20:20-23, CEV).

Isn't it surprising that despite the number of times that Jesus set the disciples straight on the matters of status and ranking in the Kingdom of heaven, the disciples still found it hard to unlearn that particular way of the world? Well, maybe not all of them, maybe it's just James and John. How about you? Are you taking in the words of Jesus into your heart and allowing it change the way you think? Or do you remain like James and John, persistent on the ways of the world and continuing to let it influence you?

The mother of James and John could be excused for her ambition if we reason that she didn't spend as much time following Jesus and being present for all of His teachings like her sons, but what excuse did James and John have for agreeing to meet Jesus with their mother and present such a request to Him? What is your excuse, dear Christian, after being exposed to Jesus' teachings; yet, you're still holding on to the ways of the world and allowing them to shape your desires? I tell you, there's no excuse tenable. Let's be intentional about our transformation.

After Jesus listened to their request, the first thing He says is, *"Not one of you knows what you are asking."* He said this because they were asking amiss, and were only ambitious, not knowledgeable. And although James and John readily agreed to pay the price required for such honour and position after Jesus mentions that there is such a thing, He affirms they will share in His fate but

does not give them the answer they'd have liked in response to their request.

The encounter James and John, alongside their mother, had with Jesus should also help us in our asking. When we ask, we must make sure we aren't praying for selfish reasons, and that our prayers align with God's word, ways and will; otherwise, we end up with unanswered prayers. Yes, even if our mothers or anyone else we believe will have special access to God and will get automatic answers from Him prays along with us.

I wonder how all three of them would have felt after hearing Jesus' response. We can assume they were sad and downcast. Unfortunately many of us will continue to leave God's presence like that if we do not let God's Spirit influence our desires and choices as well as guide our prayers, and we do not trust that God's no – i.e. He overriding our request – is from a place of love and full understanding.

Too bad we don't know if there was a conversation afterwards between this mother and her sons. I would have loved to read it. What we however do know is that somehow news of their request reached the other disciples. Let's read about what happened when they heard.

“When the ten other disciples heard this, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called the disciples together and said: You know foreign rulers like

to order their people around. And their great leaders have full power over everyone they rule. But don't act like them. If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others. And if you want to be first, you must be the slave of the rest. The Son of Man did not come to be a slave master, but a slave who will give his life to rescue many people" (Matthew 20:24-28, CEV).

Perhaps the reason for such a reaction by the ten other disciples was because they too were still interested in status and rank. Did they fear that James and John's request might have been granted and they were now above them in status/rank? I imagine James and John being at the receiving end of this backlash, and never imagining that their interest and action would have this much impact on the others, especially on the peace and unity of the group. Contrary to what we often think, our interests and actions do have an impact on others. And sometimes, these impacts are negative and can lead to irreparable damages. This is why it is very important that we run our dreams/interests by God, and in all the steps we take afterwards we avoid any that will cause others to stumble.

Fortunately for James and John, Jesus steps in and helps restore the peace and unity in the group. He does this by addressing the motives for the request of James and John, and showing them what their real concerns ought to be.

Why would any of them be ambitious for honour and position in God's Kingdom? It was because they still thought like the people of the world, wanted to be like them, and were dying to do things the way they did. Christians who think this way and have such desires are carnal. We must move from carnality to becoming heavenly minded. Christians who are heavenly minded think about what is up there and not about what is here on earth (Colossian 3:1-2). And if this describes you and me, then instead of chasing honour and position, we must concern ourselves with serving God and humanity.

I can imagine what you're thinking: that Jesus doesn't say to them (and us) not to desire honour, position and power. True. While He might not have discouraged them from seeking honour, position and power outright, He indirectly had done so. Jesus knew the reason the average human wants any of these three things; it is to order people around and rule. And that's what He addressed. Take that away and you'll see that the desire to have these three things will no longer be there; even if it's still there, it won't be strong enough to push one to compromise in order to obtain them. Jesus knew exactly what He was getting at when He said, *"If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others. And if you want to be first, you must be the slave of the rest."* Do you get it?

That being said, there will be Christians amongst us who will be privileged to occupy leadership positions, and

it will come with power and authority. Jesus' words should serve as a code of conduct for us. When in such offices, we must avoid taking advantage of our position, power and authority, and not oppress others. Instead, see the office as a platform for service; and serve, following Jesus' very example (He reveals that His death would be for the salvation of others).

Majority of the disciples do end up in leadership positions eventually; but by then they knew what the positions were for and what they weren't for. Are you in a leadership position, or do you believe God is preparing you for a leadership position in the body of Christ, or is it in the secular? Do you know what's required of you? By now you should. I'm praying you become an amazing Kingdom model for leadership. I stay rooting for you! Next up is a miracle! Let's read about it.

JESUS SAYS 152

*“Jesus was followed by a large crowd as he and his disciples were leaving Jericho. Two blind men were sitting beside the road. And when they heard that Jesus was coming their way, they shouted, “Lord and Son of David, have pity on us!” The crowd told them to be quiet, but they shouted even louder, “Lord and Son of David, have pity on us!” When Jesus heard them, he stopped and asked, “what do you want me to do for you?” They answered, “Lord, we want to see!” Jesus felt sorry for them and touched their eyes. At once they could see, and they became his followers”
(Matthew 20:29-34, CEV).*

The men shouted because they wanted to get Jesus' attention, and though they were seen as a nuisance by the crowd and asked to be quiet, they shouted even louder, desperate for His attention. But when Jesus finally stops, He asks them, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" But wasn't it pretty obvious what their utmost need was? Why was Jesus asking this question?

You see, although Jesus knew what they needed most, He wasn't going to rob them of an opportunity to express their desire; and so, He asks them that question; and they could go ahead and specify what they wanted. And this is why till date, we are allowed to pray, even though God knows what we need before we say a word. He still allows us to say what it is we want Him to do for us. Thankfully, the men use the opportunity well and ask for the right thing, their sight, and Jesus full of compassion restores their sight.

Though these men believed Jesus could heal them and had called Him "Lord" and "Son of David," they didn't really know Him; and so they weren't only physically blind, but spiritually blind too! After Jesus restores their physical sight, they became so thankful that they became His followers. And in following Him, they will get to know Him and their spiritual blindness would be healed too! These men maximized their opportunity to the fullest.

And so should we. When we pray, we know we have God's full attention. It's a privilege that shouldn't be taken

lightly; and when He displays His miraculous power in our lives, as He always does, we must see it as a cue to draw nearer to Him, more than ever before.

18

JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM

JESUS SAYS 153

When Jesus and his disciples came near Jerusalem, he went to Bethphage on the mount of Olives and sent two of them on ahead. He told them, "Go into the next village, where you will at once find a donkey and her colt. Untie the two donkeys and bring them to me. If anyone asks why you are doing this, just say, 'The Lord needs them.' He will at once let you have the donkeys." So God's promise came true, just as the prophet had said, "Announce to the people of Jerusalem: 'Your king is coming to you! He is humble and rides on a donkey. He comes on the colt of a donkey.'" The disciples left and did what Jesus had told them to do. They brought the donkey and its colt and laid some clothes on their backs. Then Jesus got on"

(Matthew 21:1-7, CEV).

IN THE VERSES we've read, Matthew introduces us to a rare occurrence: Jesus being in need. Jesus had been careful to do things according to what had been written concerning Him and was intent on doing so to the very end. Now He was about to enter into Jerusalem and needed to do it right too, riding on the colt of a donkey as God had revealed through the prophet (See Zechariah 9:9). The challenge was, He didn't physically own any donkeys. But that doesn't stop Him, knowing that provisions were laid up for Him already. He gives His disciples instructions on how to claim them. They did as they were instructed and Jesus' need was met. The donkeys were decorated and Jesus got on the colt.

While I am tempted to talk about how even a colt was instrumental in God's plan, I'd choose to believe that we already know God has a purpose for each one of us, and that purpose, many a time, has no respect for our age or lack of experience. So instead, let's talk about Jesus' mindset and action during His time of need.

The mindset: I earlier mentioned that Jesus had a need. He needed donkeys for His entry into Jerusalem and He didn't physically own one; yet He didn't change His mind about entering into Jerusalem, nor settle for any other animal available, and reason that the end justifies the means. His mind was still set on going the right direction and doing it the right way. This is the mindset every Christian must have. We must not use what we lack

presently as an excuse to not continue on the path God has crafted for us or make compromises in order to meet those needs when we know what God's standards are.

The action: Jesus wasn't in denial about what He lacked in that very moment. He was very much aware of it. But that wasn't all He was aware of. He was also aware of the provisions laid up for Him; and this is why He confidently gave instructions to two of His disciples on how to claim the donkeys. Now, this is how we can emulate Jesus' action: we too must not only be aware of our needs, but believe that God has made provisions to meet those needs. And then just like Jesus, allow our belief to drive us to act in faith. For Jesus, He claimed the provisions by giving out instructions to two of His disciples. But for us, we will have to claim ours by offering faith-filled prayers, and waiting for our expectations to materialize. And because Jesus' expectations materialized in the end, we can be sure that ours will too.

Jesus is a sterling example to us in many ways, one of which, as we've read over and over and even now, is problem solving. But His example will have no impact on us if we don't follow His example. Let's commit to solving our problems His way, not how the world says we should.

“Many people spread clothes in the road, while others put down branches which they had cut from trees. Some people walked ahead of Jesus and the others followed

behind. They were all shouting, “Hooray for the Son of David! God bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hooray for God in heaven above!” When Jesus came into Jerusalem, everyone in the city was excited and asked, “who can this be?” The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matthew 21:8-11, CEV).

Riding on the colt of the donkey Jesus finally comes into Jerusalem, but not without some pomp. His entry which had the semblance of the entry of Israel's kings, caused some to enquire about Him. But sadly, the answer given by the crowds proved that Jesus' mode of entry which should have helped the people consider Him as Messiah and not just some prophet, hadn't delivered the desired effect, but at least, it fulfilled Scriptures.

Why were the people stuck with the image of Jesus as a prophet and nothing more? It's simple. It's because they weren't paying close attention to what Jesus was doing at the moment. There were many sides to Jesus, not just one; and He was willing to reveal them, but the people had to keep up or else miss them. Same goes for us. There are many sides to God that He is usually willing to reveal to His children, especially through our experiences; but we have to be in the present to receive the revelation.

And what if I told you that there are many sides to you too! Capacities you were made to operate in that you

don't know about, and God is willing to reveal to you! You already know what you have to do to discover what they are, right? It's easy, start with paying close attention to God's work in your life. He'll drop clues for you. Make sure not to miss them.

JESUS SAYS 154

*“Jesus went into the temple and chased out everyone who was selling or buying. He turned over the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of the ones who were selling doves. He told them, ‘The Scriptures say, ‘My house should be called a place of worship.’ But you have turned it into a place where robbers hide”
(Matthew 21:12-13, CEV).*

Jesus was clearly frustrated with the choices of the people who were in the temple and their attitude towards what was supposed to be a place of worship. But He didn't just grumble and walk on by, like many Christians do today. He put His frustration to good use; He confronted those who were doing wrong, announced God's original purpose for the Temple and denounced man's perversion of it. (Read Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11).

Who were those who were doing wrong? Everyone buying and selling, clearly turning the Temple into a marketplace, the money-changers who were overcharging foreigners for their services and those selling doves, who were guilty of selling in the Temple and doing it at an unreasonable high price.

But what if I told you that many of us Christians today are guilty of the same practices in the church? Turning the church into a marketplace and overcharging people for services rendered, and also other practices that violate God's command. If this describes you, then you ought to know that just as Jesus was frustrated back then over this matter, He still will be now when He observes what you do in the church. Let Jesus' displeasure inspire you to make better choices going forward, and encourage you to have the right attitude towards the church.

Let me ask you a question: Do you think the priests knew or didn't know about all of these atrocities happening in the Temple? You're wrong if you think they didn't know. They most likely knew and were mute about it all because it was beneficial for them. But not Jesus! Jesus wasn't that type of priest that will chase and accept wealth that was independent of God and His ways; and He proves it by speaking up against such practices. If you are a leader in the church, or just a Christian leading in the secular reading this, I implore you to let Jesus be your model. Imitate His way of thinking. Refuse to accumulate

wealth in ways that do not honour God, then stand up and speak up for the right things always.

Jesus must have looked crazy when He did what He did in the Temple. But that didn't matter to Him. He was set on making things right. You see, too many Christians care too much about how they come off to others, and so when they see wrong they turn and look away, wishing that things that are wrong will be made right. But I tell you, nothing changes by wishful thinking. And things will remain the same except something, or in this case, someone alters them. Let God use you to set things right.

JESUS SAYS 155

*“Blind and lame people came to Jesus in the temple, and he healed them. But the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses were angry when they saw his miracles and heard the children shouting praises to the Son of David. The men said to Jesus, “Don’t you hear what those children are saying?” ‘Yes, I do!’ Jesus answered. “Don’t you know that the Scriptures say, ‘Children and infants will sing praises’?” Then Jesus left the city and went out to the village of Bethany, where he spent the night”
(Matthew 21:14-17, CEV).*

Instead of exploiting people, Jesus served people. He gave more to people than He ever took from them. Matthew records that He healed the blind and lame that came to Him in the Temple. When it came to the right way to view and treat people, the religious leaders couldn't stand next to Jesus. Did you see how they reacted to Jesus serving and giving back to the people? How do you view people, how do you treat them? Like Jesus, or like the religious leaders? I hope we all continue to strive to be like Jesus in this manner as well.

The religious leaders could care less that people were being healed. They were consumed with envy because the spotlight was on Jesus, and children were shouting praises to Him and ascribing to Him the Messianic title. What misplaced priority! How do you react when God is using someone else in a mighty way? Do you give in to envy, or do you rejoice with those who benefit from the move of God's power and appreciate the grace of God upon the life of the one whom He is using? For a Christian, only the latter is acceptable. If it's the former, then you should ask God to renew the right spirit within you.

When Jesus was confronted for not reprimanding the children for shouting praises to Him while ascribing Him the Messianic title, He simply quoted Scripture (Psalm 8:2), implying that the children were not in the wrong, and He was really the Messiah. Again, what misplaced priority for the religious leaders who concerned themselves with things they ought not to, and ignored

weightier matters like the atrocities going on in the Temple. Sometimes, like the religious leaders, we let our feelings blind us from what's truly important and that we ought to be doing. Going forward, let's do things differently. Let's no longer allow our feelings lead us, but God's Spirit; this way we can be sure that things that truly matter will have our attention.

JESUS SAYS 156

“When Jesus got up the next morning, he was hungry. He started out for the city, and along the way he saw a fig tree. But when he came to it, he found only leaves and no figs. So he told the tree, “You will never again grow any fruit!” Right then the fig tree dried up. The disciples were shocked when they saw how quickly the tree had dried up. But Jesus said to them, “If you have faith and don’t doubt, I promise you can do what I did to this tree. And you will be able to do even more. You can tell this mountain to get up and jump into the sea, and it will. If you have faith when you pray, you will be given whatever you ask for” (Matthew 21:18-22, CEV).

It's true Jesus was hungry, but He knew that the fig tree didn't have any fruit that will fill Him. Walking to the fig tree and checking for figs was just a formality, mere formality before judgment, because afterwards He pronounced judgment on the tree which soon after dried up. Though Jesus speaks nothing about this, He spoke instead about faith. Upon closer look you'll see that what happened between Jesus and the fig tree paints a picture of God's expectations of us and the consequences when those expectations aren't met.

For instance, part of God's expectations of us who are Christians is that we have a godly lifestyle. But when we fail to meet God's expectations despite the presence of the Holy Spirit and all the other resources He makes available for us to be capable to do so, and instead choose to adopt the ways of the world, we are like that fig tree that upon inspection has only leaves and no figs, and will suffer the consequences if steps towards repentance isn't quickly taken. If this describes you, then you must already know what you must do. Be encouraged to change your ways because God is gracious and will forgive you if you truly repent and ask for His forgiveness.

That being said, let's move on from reading between the lines to what Jesus actually says. While the disciples were shocked at the sight before them, Jesus uses the opportunity to tell them of their capabilities provided they had faith. But do you know that the same power Christ had to do the things He did and the disciples learnt

they have, you and I who are believers also have? It's true, we do. The question however remains, do we have faith to activate that power?

In conclusion, Jesus told the disciples, *"If you have faith when you pray, you will be given whatever you ask for."* Let's keep in mind that this is not a blank cheque; all of our faith-filled prayers are still subject to God's will and timing.

JESUS SAYS 157

“Jesus had gone into the temple and was teaching when the chief priests and the leaders of the people came up to him. They asked, ‘What right do you have to do these things? Who gave you this authority?’ Jesus answered, ‘I have just one question to ask you. If you answer it, I will tell you where I got the right to do these things. Who gave John the right to baptize? Was it God in heaven or merely some human being?’ They thought it over and said to each other, ‘We can’t say God gave John this right. Jesus will ask us why we didn’t believe John. On the other hand, these people think John was a prophet, and we are afraid of what they might do to us.

That’s why we can’t say it was merely some human who gave John the right to baptize.’ So they told Jesus, ‘We don’t

*know.” Jesus said, “Then I won’t tell you
who gave me the right to do what I do”
(Matthew 21:23-27, CEV).*

Here’s a recap of the things Jesus has done so far in this chapter: He entered Jerusalem riding on the colt of a donkey with people shouting praises, He went into the Temple and chased out everyone who was buying or selling, not forgetting the money-changers whose tables He threw away; He also healed the blind and lame people who came to Him in the Temple. Then He let children shout praises to Him. Then now He put a curse on a fig tree before entering the Temple to teach. Jesus had been busy and amongst those who observed all His doings and were not impressed with Him were the chief priests and leaders of the people. A confrontation was inevitable.

But it is how the confrontation goes that is interesting. Since Jesus didn’t have their approval and backing, they wanted to know whose He had. Now, when Jesus responds He answers a question with a question. One can be tempted to think Jesus dodged answering them, but do you think if He had answered them directly and told them it was God’s approval and backing He had, they would have believed? Isn’t it best to let them arrive at the conclusion themselves? I think it is, and that’s exactly

what Jesus did. He asked them a question that forced them to consider John's ministry and recognize that the source of his authority was God. And since John was affiliated with Jesus, not only through earthly family ties but also in ministry, it becomes obvious they had their authority from the same Source.

Now, here's why I say the confrontation was interesting. After being cornered by Jesus' question and reviewing the answers they could give along with the possible outcomes, the Pharisees tell Jesus they don't know the source of John's authority. Jesus too, tells them He wouldn't answer them directly either. They were playing dumb and Jesus was playing their game with them. You know what this means? That sometimes God deals with us according to our character. He really does know how to meet us on our level. This can be a good thing but this can also be a bad thing depending on the kind of lives we lead and the kind of attitudes we put out there while relating with Him and others.

If God were to meet you on your level, would it be for good or for bad?

JESUS SAYS 158

“Jesus said: I will tell you a story about a man who had two sons. Then you can tell me what you think. The father went to the older son and said, “Go work in the vineyard today!” His son told him he would not do it, but later he changed his mind and went. The man then told his younger son to go work in the vineyard. The boy said he would, but he didn’t go. Which one of the sons obeyed his father?

“The older one,” the chief priests and leaders answered. Then Jesus told them: You can be sure tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you ever will! When John the Baptist showed you how to do right, you would not believe him. But these evil people did believe. And even when you saw

*what they did, you still would not change
your minds and believe”*
(Matthew 21:28-32, CEV).

Jesus told the story about two sons in order to condemn the actions of the chief priests and the leaders of the people. They claimed to have a high regard for God’s will and presented themselves as though they had a willingness to obey Him, meanwhile they refused to acknowledge John was sent by God. They didn’t believe in John’s preaching and did not follow in the footsteps of those who had turned their lives around through his message. They had chosen instead to cling stubbornly to their beliefs and ways.

We also can learn a thing or two from the sons in Jesus’ story. It’s about how we respond to God’s will. In my opinion none of the sons responded as they should to their father’s will and command. As Christians, our ideal response to God’s revealed will and command is to say yes outright, and then get busy. But in the situation whereby we are either one or the other of the two sons, I’d rather we are the older who eventually honours the father’s will and obeys the command.

Let me ask a question, Why do we often say we will obey God and then eventually not make good on our

word? I'm sure that just as our faces vary, so will the answers we will give. But you want to know the truth? I firmly believe that at the root of all of this is an attitude of irreverence towards God. As long as we don't take God as seriously as we ought, there's always something else we ascribe our reverence, say our flesh. Let's give God His rightful place in our hearts and avoid the sin of rebellion.

JESUS SAYS 159

“Jesus told the chief priests and leaders to listen to this story: A land owner once planted a vineyard. He built a wall around it and dug a pit to crush the grapes in. He also built a lookout tower. Then he rented out his vineyard and left the country. When it was harvest time, the owner sent some servants to get his share of the grapes, But the renters grabbed those servants. They beat up one, killed one, and stoned one of them to death. He then sent more servants than he did the first time. But the renters treated them in the same way. Finally, the owner sent his own son to the renters, because he thought they would respect him. But when they saw the man’s son, they said, ‘Someday he will own the vineyard. Let’s kill him! Then

we can have it all for ourselves.” So they grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Jesus asked, “When the owner of that vineyard comes, what do you suppose he will do to those renters?” The chief priests and leaders answered, “He will kill them in some horrible way. Then he will rent out his vineyard to people who will give him his share of grapes at harvest time” (Matthew 21:33-41, CEV).

To aid your understanding of Jesus’ story about the renters of a vineyard, here are some things you must know; the land owner is God, the vineyard is the nation of Israel, the servants of the landowners are prophets, the renters of the vineyard are the spiritual leaders, and the son of the landowner is Jesus. This story Jesus told reveals not only how God’s expectations concerning the spiritual leadership in Israel had not been met, but also the abuse the prophets He had sent, and soon the killing of His Son by their hands as well. Why did Jesus tell the story? Both to reveal the above

truths and to foretell the consequences of the actions of the spiritual leaders, which they too affirmed was unfair.

The spiritual leaders served as a model of what not to do for every Christian reading this. When God entrusts us with things or people, we must strive to fulfil our obligations according to His standards; meeting His expectations must be our priority. And in the case where He says we've fallen short, we must be open to correction and take the necessary steps to get back on the right track. We mustn't shun correction or attack those God has sent to us to keep us in check and help us re-align with His purpose. The spiritual leaders did things wrong, but thankfully, we can learn from their mistake and do things right.

To the poser Jesus gave those religious leaders, they gave the right answer. How did Jesus respond afterward?

“Jesus replied, You surely know that the Scriptures say, ‘The stone the builders tossed aside is now the most important stone of all. This is something the Lord has done, and it is amazing to us.’ I tell you God’s kingdom will be taken from you and given to people who will do what he demands. Anyone who stumbles over this stone will be crushed and anyone it falls on will be smashed into pieces.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard these stories, they knew Jesus was talking about them. So they looked for a way to arrest Jesus. But they

were afraid to, because the people thought he was a prophet” (Matthew 21:42-46).

Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23, implying that though He had been rejected by the chief priests and the leaders of the people and in general the majority of the Jews, by God’s intervention He will be instated and the period of rejection will give way to that of acceptance and praises. If they (the Jews) continued to reject Him, God’s Kingdom will be open to others (the Gentiles) who accept Him and are willing to meet all His requirements.

Jesus’ response to them ended with a warning: those that attempted to do anything against Him will find out in the end that they only succeeded in bringing harm upon themselves. The stories Jesus told were directed at the chief priests and the leaders of the people and though it took them a while, they figured it out; but instead of repenting, they occupied their minds and time with looking for ways to arrest Jesus. What a shame!

We must allow Jesus’ words nudge us to keep doing all that God demands in order to keep being a part of God’s Kingdom. And let’s never forget that our right living is always for our own good.



THE KING'S WEDDING

JESUS SAYS 160

“Once again Jesus used stories to teach the people: The kingdom of heaven is like what happened when a king gave a wedding banquet for his son. The king sent some servants to tell the invited guests to come to the banquet, but the guests refused. He sent other servants to say to the guests, “The banquet is ready! My cattle and prize calves have all been prepared. Everything is ready. Come to the banquet!” But the guests did not pay any attention. Some of them left for their farms, and some went to their places of business. Others grabbed the servants, then beat them up and killed them. This made the king so furious that he sent an army to kill those murderers and burn down their city. Then he said to the servants, “It is time for the wedding

banquet, and the invited guests don't deserve to come. Go out to the street corners and tell everyone you meet to come to the banquet." They went out on the streets and brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike. And the banquet room was filled with guests. When the king went in to meet the guests, he found that one of them wasn't wearing the right kind of clothes for the wedding. The king asked, "Friend, why didn't you wear proper clothes for the wedding?" But the guest had no excuse. So the king gave orders for this person to be tied hand and foot and to be thrown outside into the dark. That's where people will cry and grit their teeth in pain. Many are invited, but only few are chosen" (Matthew 22:1-14, CEV).

TOWARDS THE TAIL end of the just concluded chapter, Jesus had said to the chief priests and the leaders of the people *“I tell you God’s kingdom will be taken from you and given to people who will do what he demands.”* Now with this story, He expounds on His words.

The invited guests in Jesus’ story represent the Jews who refused and continue to refuse God’s invitation to the gospel programme made available through Jesus. They not only refused God’s invitation but mistreated God’s prophets like the invited guests did to the king’s servants. But just as there were consequences for those actions in the story, the same will happen in reality; those who maltreat God’s prophets won’t be spared the consequences of their actions. And because of Israel’s rejection, their city, Jerusalem, will be destroyed (This happened in A.D 70).

But that’s not all, just like the king turns from the invited guests to extend his invitation to everyone else who readily accepts the invitation, the Jews lose whatever exclusivity they had to the gospel, as it now extended to Gentiles who, as we saw in the story, would be more than happy to accept God’s invitation. As the story ends, Jesus mentions that one person among the newly invited guests didn’t wear the right kind of clothes for the wedding, and since there was no excuse for this, at the king’s command he was tied and thrown out into the dark. He rounds off

the story by saying “Many are invited, but only few are chosen.” This addendum is a warning for the newly invited guests, the Gentiles; if they will be allowed to continue to be a part of God’s programme, they had to do it on His terms, failure to adhere will lead to a dismissal from the programme, with all the eternal consequences that follow.

If you’re wondering how all these things you’ve just read can be applied in your Christian walk, here are a few lessons from the story you might have missed.

From the first group of invitees:

λ **You can be replaced.** When the first group of invitees refused to honour the king’s invitation even though it was extended to them a number of times, and they maltreated the servants of the king, they were punished and replaced. Everyone else was invited in their stead. When God calls us (which is often times repeatedly) to be a part of what He has provided or what He is doing, we must respond differently than these first invited people did, rearrange our priorities and honour the invitation, else risk being replaced. In the grand scheme of things, nobody is irreplaceable except God.

From the second group of invitees:

λ **Know and apply God’s rule(s).** Each of the newly invited guests knew that being a part of the wedding banquet wasn’t their right but a privilege. And so they had to be careful to know and do what will please the king. It

was common knowledge, and every one of them did so except one who neglected doing what was required, and was thrown out of the banquet. We must avoid making this grave mistake. All of us who have been invited to be a part of what God has laid up and is doing must see it as a privilege and therefore take the pains of learning what pleases God and doing it. Why partake in eternal punishments when you can have eternal rewards?

JESUS SAYS 161

“The Pharisees got together and planned how they could trick Jesus into saying something wrong. They sent some of their followers and some of Herod’s followers to say to him, “Teacher, we know that you are honest. You teach the truth about what God wants people to do. And you treat everyone with the same respect, no matter who they are. Tell us what you think! Should we pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” Jesus knew their evil thoughts and said, ‘Why are you trying to test me? You show-offs! Let me see one of the coins used for paying taxes.’ They brought him a silver coin, and he asked, “Whose picture and name are on it?” “The Emperor’s,” they answered. Then Jesus told them, “Give the Emperor what belongs to him

*and give God what belongs to God.” His answer surprised them so much that they walked away”
(Matthew 22:15-22, CEV).*

The Pharisees had a plan to entrap Jesus and they enlisted their followers and Herod’s to set their plan in motion. Sadly these followers agreed to participate in the plan. Let me just quickly say two things: first, when we’re in positions of leadership, we must be careful about our conduct. It’s a terrible thing to walk in error, but what’s worse is using ones influence to cause others to walk in error too. And we already know that God has punishment prepared for those who not only sin but cause others to sin. Second, it’s true that one might ignorantly follow someone whom we really shouldn’t. But we all know right from wrong, so, in a situation where we’re ordered or cajoled to do wrong by those whom we follow/look up to, we must reject blind loyalty and choose to do right instead.

The minions of the leaders follow through with the plan. But first, they ask Jesus about paying taxes. It was His answer they were after. He was expected to speak carelessly and choose sides so they can either cause Him to lose favour with the people or accuse Him of treason.

But Jesus saw through their flattery, and easily discerned their evil intention. He even calls them out on it. Flattery is a tool used to manipulate people and further the interests of the flatterer. Like Jesus did, we must do; we must reject flattery and not allow ourselves to be manipulated.

Jesus didn't dodge the question, but didn't speak carelessly either. Though He had been asked to choose sides, not only that He didn't do that, instead He presents a solid argument using a coin that carried the image and name of the ruling government and that was required for the payment of tax. The summary of Jesus' words is that the ruling government should be obeyed as long as what they are asking doesn't interfere with God's commands. In the end those who set out to entrap Jesus, left disarmed. And though the Scriptures record that Jesus' answer had surprised them, I dare say that it was more about the way or manner He answered, not just that He answered.

Jesus' answer was a display of wisdom, which not only reminded those present of their earthly and spiritual obligations but also disarmed those seeking to ensnare Him. Believers are promised divine wisdom too (See James 1:5 and Luke 12:11-12). We don't have to always run from conflict if facing it could serve a good purpose. When we find ourselves in such situations, we can rely on God to tell us what to say and be assured that our words will not only prove beneficial to those who listen but will be potent enough to vindicate and preserve us from harm.

JESUS SAYS 162

“The Sadducees did not believe people would rise to life after death. So that same day some of the Sadducees came to Jesus and said: Teacher, Moses wrote that if a married man dies and has no children, his brother should marry the widow. Their first son would then be thought of as the son of the dead brother. Once there were seven brothers who lived here. The first one married, but died without having any children. So his wife was left to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brothers and finally to all seven of them. At last the woman died. When God raises people from death, whose wife will this woman be? She had been married to all seven brothers. Jesus answered: You are completely wrong! You

don't know what the Scriptures teach. And you don't know anything about the power of God. When God raises people to life, they won't marry. They will be like angels in heaven. And as for people being raised to life, God was speaking to you when he said, "I am the God worshiped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." He isn't the God of the dead, but of the living. The crowds were surprised to hear what Jesus was teaching" (Matthew 22:23-33, CEV).

The Sadducees did not believe in life after death, yet they came to Jesus to talk about it. They brought up the law and the concept of resurrection in the same scenario and asked Jesus a question about it. Their unspoken plan was to prove the ridiculousness of the concept and leave Jesus embarrassed. Did they succeed? Of course not. The One to whom they came is the One who is called the Word, and the One who raises the dead to life. Jesus tells them they didn't understand the Scriptures, neither did they know the power of God. He didn't lie.

Contrary to what the Sadducees believed and taught, there is a resurrection! God's power raises people to life, and in the resurrected state there won't be need for sexual union or procreation, just like angels in heaven. In conclusion Jesus pulls the ultimate wool off the eyes of the narrow-minded Sadducees by using the Scripture to prove the concept of resurrection. In the end, Jesus not only proved their question was ridiculous, He left them embarrassed.

And as for the crowds who were present to hear Jesus' teaching, they were surprised. And why? Were they hearing a new thing? Possibly so! What about you? What are your beliefs about resurrection, and your thoughts about angels and heaven? If your beliefs are not in alignment with what the Scripture teaches, then you will have to realign them, so your views and beliefs with God's can be in sync.

In the encounter between the Sadducees and Jesus, we see how limited human knowledge is/can be, and God's unlimited knowledge. This is why, we can't place any religious leader/teacher, or their knowledge/wisdom above God's. It will be a grave error to do this. I can't stop imagining how those who followed the Sadducees must have felt if they were present for the back and forth.

Another thing is that we cannot afford to be narrow-minded about anything concerning the Scriptures and the power of God. You know what you know but you don't know all there is to know. We must keep ourselves open

and our minds flexible in order to gain new insight from God's Holy Spirit, and discover new things about the power of God!

Lastly, I know our paths might never cross with a Sadducee or their followers, but there are religious sects around us who claim to use the Bible and believe in the power of God but are not completely walking in the light. Prayerfully inquire of the Lord about them and when He leads you to one, boldly point them to the light.

“After Jesus had made the Sadducees look foolish, the Pharisees heard about it and got together. One of them was an expert in the Jewish law. So he tried to test Jesus by asking, “Teacher, what is the most important commandment in the Law?” Jesus answered: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is the first and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like this one. And it is, “Love others as much as you love yourself.” All the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets are based on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:34-40, CEV).

The Pharisees stayed plotting against Jesus. This time they got one of their experts in Jewish law to try to test Jesus. He asked Jesus about the most important commandment, with hopes that He would give an unorthodox answer, as He often did, giving them the

opportunity to draw Him into an argument. When Jesus answers, He stays within the boundaries of Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:5 Leviticus 19:18), giving an answer none of the Pharisees could resist or gainsay.

According to Jesus, the theme for the first and most important commandment and the second most important commandment is love. And the recipients of this love, in this order, are God, self and others (this means people of both genders, all ages, all races, different religions and from all walks of life). However, the love we have for God must supersede all others, and be with the whole of our being.

Here are a few ways we can love God, love ourselves and others:

λ By having and showing feelings of affection for God, ourselves and others.

λ By developing and showing a great interest in the things of God, in the things He does through us and others.

λ By enjoying and showing appreciation for God's handiwork, the good things we are able to do and the ones others do too.

λ By being compassionate towards ourselves and others.

λ By building a relationship with God, and a healthy one with ourselves and others.

λ By thinking good thoughts concerning God, believing the best for ourselves and others.

The list is endless (Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 for more practical ways to love). And if you ask God, He will show you many other ways you can show your love.

I should emphasize that loving God, ourselves and others is a command. This means it is an order from God; and His expectation is that we obey. It's not enough to know what God wants us to do and plan to do it, we must do it. God values obedience more than our good intentions. And in case you're wondering if you will be able to do this, know that God has put His Spirit within us to make us capable of doing many things, including being able to love. So let's practice loving God, ourselves and others.

“While the Pharisees were still there, Jesus asked them, ‘What do you think about the Messiah? Whose family will he come from?’ They answered, ‘He will be a son of King David.’ Jesus replied, ‘How then could the Spirit lead David to call the Messiah his Lord? David said, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right side until I make your enemies into a footstool for you.’ If David called the Messiah his Lord, how can the Messiah be a son of King David?’ No one was able to give Jesus an answer, and from that day on, no one dared ask him any more questions” (Matthew 22:41-46, CEV).

Jesus had entertained a lot of questions even though they had been asked with malicious intent. Now in the

verses above, He takes the lead. Though it was common knowledge that the Messiah will be from the family of David, Jesus still asks the Pharisees about it. They give Him an answer that's expected which reveals that the people were expecting the Messiah to be from the lineage of David, and to be greater than David in His assignment and nothing else. However, with the argument Jesus presents from Psalm 110 (see verse 1) which David authored under the Spirit's influence, and the people had accepted as relating to the Messiah, Jesus proves that the Messiah would be in communion with God, enjoy God's backing and will have a far greater position, honour and power. When Jesus was done speaking, none of the Pharisees could dispute what He had said. But did they accept what He had said?

Even though they didn't ask Him any more questions going forward, I doubt that was Jesus' intention when He brought up the subject of the son of David. I believe He did so to expand their views about the Messiah. And possibly link what He had said to Him. He was telling them He was Messiah.

The Pharisees just like many of us Christians today are constantly looking into God's law, yet its sealed from us. Whatever we think we know doesn't even convey the total truth. But we mustn't remain like that; if we do, how will we grow? How can we be effective witnesses to the truth? If Jesus took the time to reveal the truth to the Pharisees,

this means He wants us to know the truth. God's word doesn't have to be sealed from you anymore; you can abound in revelation. You just have to involve the Holy Spirit in your study time (John 16:13).



HYPOCRITICAL RELIGIOUS LEADERS

JESUS SAYS 163

*“Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law are experts in the Law of Moses. So obey everything they teach you, but don’t do as they do. After all, they say one thing and do something else”
(Matthew 23:1-3, CEV).*

JESUS’ COMMAND REVEALS to us two things, the first being that those who are religious leaders often make the mistake of gathering knowledge about the word of God, teaching it and enforcing it without applying any to their lives – they don’t practice what they preach. The second is that those doing the learning from them have a tendency to look away from what they are being taught, which is the word of God, and fixing their gaze on the person doing the teaching, and then begin to replicate their actions in their lives. What category do you fall into, the first or the second?

Jesus had been speaking to the crowds and the disciples when He spoke in the opening verses, but the command He gave was to His disciples and Christians everywhere. So, if you are occupying a leadership position in the church, this is for you; and if you are not yet occupying a position of leadership in the church, this is still for you.

If you are a leader/teacher in the church, you have to beware of the sin of hypocrisy. Jesus said about the religious leaders and teachers of the law that they say one thing but do something else – that was God’s assessment of their lives. And if we’re to be honest, it’s the same attitude many who are religious leaders and teachers of the word have today. Hypocrisy lives comfortably in the church – in the people and in the building, hidden in the very heart of it. Every day the number of pastors/leaders in church being called out on social media for not doing what they preach increases, and so does the number of those who turn away from Christ on account of their misdeeds. The challenge is this: don’t add to the number, not by covering your tracks, but by forever remaining a hearer and doer of God’s word yourself.

And even if you are not yet a leader/teacher in the church, your duty is to obey God’s word, yes, even if it comes out of the mouth of hypocrites. I am only echoing Jesus’ words. You mustn’t leave the word of God and fix your gaze on the leaders/teachers in the church; if you do so, you are setting yourself up for failure because, as Jesus

rightly said, many of them say one thing and do something else. If you replicate their actions, you will end up being guilty of their sins as well. Many have fallen into the same sins as those they look up to; but you don't have to join the number. You can choose to do things differently. And if you need someone to imitate, imitate Christ.

When Jesus spoke the words in our opening verse, He wasn't misinformed. He spoke as one who knew the heart of man and who was aware of deep and secret things. Sometimes we tend to forget that part about God. I'm hoping Jesus' words will motivate us to live differently going forward, and maintain the standard God expects of us. Jesus says of the hypocritical religious leaders:

“They pile heavy burdens on people’s shoulders and won’t lift a finger to help. Everything they do is just to show off in front of others. They even make a big show of wearing Scripture verses on their foreheads and arms, and they wear big tassels for everyone to see. They love the best seats at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues. And when they are in the market, they like to have people greet them as their teachers” (Matthew 23:4-7, CEV).

Jesus had earlier said of the Pharisees, *“they say one thing and do something else,”* now, He tells us some of the things they do which displeased Him.

λ *“They pile heavy burdens on people’s shoulders and won’t lift a finger to help.”* Jesus’ words should not be understood in its literal sense; instead, like this: The Pharisees and teachers of the Law had taken their roles as interpreters of the law too far, as they not only interpreted the law but added more rules. Now the rules were many and everything had become complicated. The religious leaders were supposed to help make things easy through their service but.... The Pharisees and teachers of the Law aren’t the only ones guilty of such behaviour. Today in the church and amongst Christians are people who engage in the same practices. If this is you, you ought to repent. You’re working against God’s purpose if you make following God appear difficult and impossible through your input. Jesus isn’t pleased with your actions.

λ *“Everything they do is just to show off in front of others. They even make a big show of wearing Scripture verses on their foreheads and arms, and they wear big tassels for everyone to see.”* These words could be taken in the literal sense. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law might have valid reasons for being so conspicuous about their faith, but Jesus had taken a closer look to ascertain their motives and had found them guilty of seeking the attention and approval of others. It’s always important to check our motives for doing what we do, especially when they have to do with our spiritual walk. It’s not enough that we have valid reasons for doing them, the important question to always ask is, Am I seeking to please God or is this for self-

glorification through the attention and approval of others? If self-glorification is the motive, then know that Jesus wouldn't be pleased.

λ *“They love the best seats at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues. And when they are in the market, they like to have people greet them as their teachers.”* These too can be taken literally. The religious leaders loved to be honoured and offered front seats and respectful public greetings. They're interested in it, demand it, and derive pleasure from it. This displeases Jesus who is a sterling example of humility, and who preaches humility as one of the godly attitudes of those who serve God must possess. It is important that we bear in mind that those who seek to be honoured by men prove that they prefer the recognition and reward of men for their services over God's. This mindset and attitude must be far from you and me.

JESUS SAYS 164

“But none of you should be called a teacher. You have only one teacher, and all of you are like brothers and sisters”

(Matthew 23:8, CEV).

While still denouncing the actions of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, Jesus suddenly turns to His disciples/followers and says to them the words in our anchor verse. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law might love to be acknowledged publicly as teachers but the disciples/followers of Jesus are commanded not to accept the title, whether it's intended as flattery or a form of respect. Then Jesus declares that amongst His followers, there's only one Teacher, that's Him; all else are like siblings; better still, equals in status.

You may say, but in the New Testament the title persists? It's true that in Acts 13:1, Ephesians 4:11 and James 3:1 the title teacher does come up. However, it was to signify the gift/grace certain individuals within the

church possessed. It wasn't used as a form of flattery or for respect. They knew better than to do that; and those with that gift/grace were more involved in the work of shepherding, guiding and instructing in the ways of the Lord than in conferring titles on themselves.

The title must be treated as sacred, seeing that it's reserved for Jesus, and rightly so because He birthed faith within us and is the only One capable of leading us into faith's perfection. Sure He shares His wisdom with us all, and some in more degrees than others; still, it would be a grave error for anyone of us, even those who have the gift/grace to teach, to shift the focus of their heart from Jesus.

JESUS SAYS 165

*“Don’t call anyone on earth your father. All of you have the same Father in heaven”
(Matthew 23:9, CEV).*

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law might refer to some individuals as patriarchs and even confer the title ‘father’ on an individual amongst them for various reasons, but this was not to be a practice amongst Christians. Jesus told His disciples/followers that (asides from a male biological/adoptive parent), only God is to be called Father. God is the Father of Christians all over the world. His abode is in heaven.

That being said, I believe it’s okay to assume that those who still go ahead to call certain individuals ‘Father’ according this title and honour that’s supposed to be reserved for God only, are not Christians. Christians accept and obey Jesus’ teachings.

Did you ask why Jesus is against this title being conferred on anyone asides God? It’s because, truly, God is the Father of all Christians. The title is His, and the

honour as well. Also, because He has already declared that our status, as Christians, is equal. Therefore, bestowing such title and honour on any individual, regardless of what they've achieved and how outstanding they are, will mean elevating one person's status over others. And this does harm, not good. Those who confer this title and honour on individuals set themselves up to be prey, because more often than not, those who accept this title and honour get intoxicated by it and end up lording it over others. They also are in danger of the sin of hypocrisy.

JESUS SAYS 166

“None of you should be called the leader. The Messiah is your only leader. Whoever is the greatest should be the servant of the others. If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself, you will be honoured”
(Matthew 23:10-12, CEV).

Still addressing His disciples/followers, most likely in the presence of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, Jesus continues to tell them what the practice must be amongst them. Now, He says none of them is to be addressed as the leader. By saying the Messiah is their only leader, He meant that the title is for Himself, who is not only the deliverer for the Jews but for all mankind, especially Christians, since He is the head of the Church.

Jesus does acknowledge that there will be amongst them, people who are outstanding in the areas of their

abilities; they are the ones often considered for and given leadership titles/positions. But Jesus says, instead of coveting those titles and honour, the person ought to see their exceptional abilities as a call to serve. If this individual refuses to do so and instead want to lord over others, God will intervene and humble the person. But if they heed the instructions and serve others, God will recognize and reward them.

Are there still Christians who seek titles and demand for them? Are there still Christians who need to be told that whatever gifts/abilities they have are for the sole purpose of serving God and humanity and not for domination? If such Christians exist then you and I must not be part of the number. And if you are, then you must know by now that Jesus isn't pleased with your actions. Take the necessary steps to make things right.

JESUS SAYS 167

“You Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses are in for trouble! You’re nothing but show-offs. You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You won’t go in yourselves, and you keep others from going in” (Matthew 23:13-14, CEV).

Jesus is back to addressing the religious leaders, specifically the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses. This time He warns them that they will be in trouble if they continued to do the things they were doing. He doesn’t cover their wrongdoings, He specifies them, the first is seen in the verses above. Jesus accused them of being pretentious in their worship to God, and for being obstacles in the conversion of others and themselves.

The worship of these religious leaders was pretentious in God’s view because true worship of God requires submission on our part; but they were more interested in

outward show of religion. When God's will was revealed via the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus, they didn't accept it nor yield to it. So far as we've studied the book of Matthew, we've seen how they refused to acknowledge John's ministry was authorized by God, how they set themselves up as Jesus' chief opponents and were upset over Jesus' views and teachings. Unfortunately for them, it is their views and teachings that hindered them from being part of God's Kingdom.

Do you now see how sometimes we can be the ones in our own way and in the way of others, hindering ourselves and them from receiving God's best? Oh, the danger associated with lack of understanding! Oh, the danger of stubbornness and false doctrine! We will do well to submit ourselves completely to God, humbly seek the help of the Holy Spirit who is capable of making us wise, and helping us to understand what God is like so we can know Him better and better, and not be eager to instruct others about God's Laws or accept being called a guide into God's word. Imagine being incorrect and instructing people to walk in error!

JESUS SAYS 168

“You Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses are in for trouble! You’re nothing but show-offs. You travel over land and sea to win one follower. And when you have done so, you make that person twice as fit for hell as you are”

(Matthew 23:15, CEV).

Another wrongdoing of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses which will attract trouble for them if not discontinued concerns their “service” to God. Though they went to great lengths to make a convert (i.e. from Gentile to Judaism) these converts were not really won over for God, but to increase the number of people in their sect. And these converts end up not only as clones of the religious leaders but are even more zealous than them; and if they are more zealous than them in their wrongdoing then they are twice as fit for hell.

This same hypocritical service is seen in some churches today. Under the guise of soul-winning, certain professing Christians go out in their numbers with the real intention of increasing the number of attendees during their services and population of their denomination. The situation is even worse in some “churches” because the new converts are not taught the undiluted word of God nor encouraged to know and accept the teachings of Christ for their transformation, but are instead taught the word of the pastor, and encouraged to follow their traditions and enforce them. The result is a clone of the pastor, the reward for pastor, but the soul of the so-called convert is damned.

It is in our own interest to allow Jesus’ words show us the way to right service.

JESUS SAYS 169

“You are in for trouble! You are supposed to lead others, but you are blind. You teach that it doesn’t matter if a person swears by the temple. But you say it does matter if someone swears by the gold in the temple. You blind fools! Which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred?”

(Matthew 23:16-17, CEV).

Though the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses were in charge of the written law and saddled with the responsibility of instructing others in it, they lacked full understanding of it. This is why Jesus says they are blind. And if they lacked full understanding of the Law, wouldn’t there be error in their teaching? Of course there will; and Jesus condemns their erroneous teachings, one of which is in the verses above.

The religious leaders taught that making a solemn statement or promise is not binding when it's done by using the Temple; and, it's only binding when it's done by using the gold in the Temple. Jesus proves their teaching to be erroneous because the Temple of God is greater than the materials that were a part of it. The materials were only considered sacred because of the Temple they were placed in.

Jesus cancels out the distinction the religious leaders had allowed regarding promises, and teaches the people how to avoid walking in error going forward. Do you now see how only Jesus deserves to be rightfully called teacher?

“You also teach that it doesn’t matter if a person swears by the altar. But you say it does matter if someone swears by the gift on the altar. Are you blind? Which is more important, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Anyone who swears by the altar also swears by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple also swears by God, who lives there. To swear by heaven is the same as swearing by God’s throne and by the one who sits on that throne” (Matthew 23:18-22, CEV).

The religious leaders also taught that making a solemn statement or promise is not binding when it's done by using the altar; but it's binding when it's done using the gift on the altar. Again, Jesus proves their teaching to be

erroneous. The altar is more important than the gift on the altar; for it is the altar that makes the gift sacred.

The altar is where things offered to God were placed, and the temple is not only a place devoted for worship but a place God dwells. Making a solemn statement or promise using the altar or the Temple must be taken seriously. And as for those who made solemn statements or promises using heaven, they too were obligated to keep their words, for heaven is where God's throne is.

I'm not sure any one of us makes solemn statements or promises using either the Temple, the gold in the Temple, the altar, nor the gifts on the altar or heaven. What I am however sure of is that many of us make solemn statements or promises to God, and if we go by Jesus' teaching, we should know that we are obligated to keep them. Christians are however advised to tread carefully when making vows (Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-6).

JESUS SAYS 170

*“You Pharisees and teachers are show-offs, and you’re in for trouble! You give God a tenth of the spices from your garden, such as mint, dill, and cumin. Yet you neglect the more important matters of the Law, such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These are the important things you should have done, though you should not have left others undone either. You blind leaders! You strain out a small fly but swallow a camel”
(Matthew 23:23-24, CEV).*

The Pharisees and teachers of the law might claim superior sanctity, but Jesus again tells them they were headed for trouble with God, this time because of their inaction. You see, they obeyed the laws of tithing to the letter (Leviticus 27:30) and

demanding the same of others; but they paid no attention to the MORE IMPORTANT MATTERS of the Law such as justice, mercy and faithfulness nor taught others to do same. Jesus wasn't saying they ought to have neglected tithing and paid attention to these only, He was saying they ought not to have neglected any aspects of the Law. And by use of a proverb, He reiterates that the religious leaders concerned themselves with little details while ignoring matters of great importance.

In the words of Jesus, He makes an important distinction between what we consider as more important and what God considers as more important. While we often concern ourselves with outward worship, such as giving, and there is a place for this, God is more interested in what's going on inside of us. Are we fair in our treatment of others? Do we show compassion to others? And, are we loyal and committed to Him? Jesus' counsel is this, that we align our priorities with God's, lest our worship be considered pretentious before God; also, we'll be headed for trouble with God like the religious leaders.

One more thing I feel tasked to add is, in the words of Jesus there's also counsel concerning our general outlook on God's law made accessible to us all and we are expected to obey them all. Truth is, God's law is part of the many resources He has provided to aid our transformation; and when we obey them, we come into partnership with God, one where the benefits are all ours.

JESUS SAYS 171

“You Pharisees and teachers are show-offs, and you’re in for trouble! You wash the outside of your cups and dishes, while inside there is nothing but greed and selfishness. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of a cup, and then the outside will also be clean”

(Matthew 23:25-26, CEV).

The religious leaders really did think all they had to do to be pure is ceremonially cleanse outward things. But here in these verses, Jesus corrects them, but not without first telling them of their spiritual state. They had cleansed outward things but their hearts were full of all kinds of evil. By this He hinted that being pure would require more than just cleansing outward things; it will begin with paying more attention to the contents of their hearts.

Have you always thought in the same manner as the religious leaders? I don’t want to believe that there are still Christians who believe purity has nothing to do with the state of the heart, but I’d be wrong to assume there aren’t

Christians like this out there. So, if this is you, then here's how you can apply Jesus' counsel to your life. It's simple: you know God's laws, right? Then obey them. Don't neglect any. God's laws have the power to cleanse us, and we let God do His work in our hearts when we obey Him implicitly.

One last word concerning this teaching of the religious leaders is this: the outward cleansing laws they adhered to were also the measure by which they judged others. They believed that the measure of attention others paid to these laws is the extent to which they were inwardly pure. We already know that this is erroneous. Today, we too are guilty of this; we assume that we can conclude about a person's heart based on their degree of conformity to traditions added to Christianity. This too is wrong. There are too many people out there professing to be Christians, speaking 'Christian-ese' and doing all what they believe is general behaviour for the Christian; meanwhile, their hearts are far from pure, and far from God. Let's be careful out there. Ignorance is not an excuse.

JESUS SAYS 172

*“You Pharisees and teachers are in for trouble! You’re nothing but show-offs. You’re like tombs that have been whitewashed. On the outside they are beautiful, but inside they are full of bones and filth. That’s what you are like. Outside you look good, but inside you are evil and only pretend to be good”
(Matthew 23:27-28, CEV).*

Jesus had likened the religious leaders to whitewashed tombs and expounds on it. Whitewashed tombs remained tombs (filled with bones and filth) even when efforts have been made to make them appear beautiful. In the same way, the religious leaders remained sinners (filled with evil intentions and works) even though they made various efforts to make themselves appear pious. They were pretenders.

Many times we are guilty of the same sins as the religious leaders. Consumed with how we appear before

others and making efforts to give off the best impressions. We even go as far as convincing ourselves that the version we show others is who we truly are. We can fool others and even ourselves but we can't fool God. He knows exactly what we are and the motives for all we do.

How would you have responded if you were on the receiving end of Jesus' words to the religious leaders? Would you have got angry? Would you have made excuses? If it's any of these two or both then your response is poor. The right response is to repent. Jesus pointing out a wrongdoing of ours is for our own good. It's an opportunity for us to change and grow; and we must see it as such. So, upon being confronted with our wrongdoings, we ought to acknowledge our sins and confess them, and then turn away completely from them. A good goal for the religious leaders (and we too) would have been to be genuine in their dealing with others, with themselves, and especially with God.

JESUS SAYS 172

*“You Pharisees and teachers are nothing but show-offs, and you’re in for trouble! You build monuments for the prophets and decorate the tombs of good people. And you claim you would not have taken part with your ancestors in killing the prophets. But you prove you really are the relatives of the ones who killed the prophets. So keep on doing everything they did. You are nothing but snakes and the children of snakes! How can you escape going to hell?”
(Matthew 23:29-33, CEV).*

The ancestors of the religious leaders didn’t always treat the prophets God sent them well. A good number of prophets were killed by them. Knowing full well the sins of their ancestors, the

religious leaders of Jesus' day decided to do things "differently" and so built monuments for the prophets and decorated the tombs of good people. This was all done to back up their claim that they wouldn't have taken part with their ancestors in killing the prophets. But Jesus reveals to them that they've already proven that they are related to their ancestors who killed God's prophets. By this, He was referring to how He has been treated so far by them and predicting how He will be killed by them.

He also implies how His disciples/followers will be persecuted by them. The religious leaders didn't have to hide behind a facade anymore; they might as well keep doing everything their ancestors did in the view of everyone. And when He called them snakes and the children of snakes, He was referring to their treacherous or deceitful nature, something they had in common with their ancestors, and which will end them in hell, where their ancestors had ended.

If I asked us about Christians who fell off, I'm sure we can at least name one or two. Some of us even have the entire back story. But if I asked us in what ways are we trying to do things differently than them, I'm not sure that we've even considered it; because, we think what happened to them could never happen to us. Truth is, it could happen to you. The earlier we know and accept this, the better prepared we will be at preventing it.

One thing we must bear in mind is that doing things different than those Christians we speak of will not

happen by wishful thinking, and definitely not by outward shows like the religious leaders put forth. Instead, let's pay more attention to our hearts; examining and guarding it. Why? Because it is the centre of our thoughts and emotions, and being careful to walk in the Spirit so as not to obey selfish desires.

"I will send to you prophets and wise people and experts in the Law of Moses. You will kill them or nail them to a cross or beat them in your synagogues or chase them from town to town. That's why you will be held guilty for the murder of every good person, beginning with the good man Abel. This also includes Barachiah's son Zechariah, the man you murdered between the temple and the altar. I can promise that you people living today will be punished for all these things!" (Matthew 23:34-36, CEV).

The ancestors of the religious leaders had killed the prophets God sent them, and soon they, the religious leaders would succeed in killing Jesus whom God also sent to them even though His death wouldn't be final. And in the verses above, Jesus informs the religious leaders that even more prophets, wise men and experts in the Law of Moses would be sent to them – by this He refers to His disciples/followers who would serve in the capacity of interpreters and teachers. They too will be treated badly by them. But Jesus doesn't give them this history and

predictions for nothing. He does this to inform them that those who are guilty would be held accountable by God for their actions. He rounds off by telling them that their generation could expect a greater measure of God's judgment.

Jesus' words hold a warning for us, to not repeat the errors of the religious leaders who, just like their ancestors, would not only reject God's messengers but God's message to them, and became destined for judgment. The challenge for us all is this: first is to listen when people claim to speak messages on God's behalf. Second is to think carefully about what they have said to see if it is true (You can do this by prayerfully running what has been said through the Scriptures. It is true if it conforms with God's word, will and ways). Then finally, to obey all that is in the word, and keep away from anything that the word forbids.

JESUS SAYS 174

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Your people have killed the prophets and have stoned the messengers who were sent to you. I have often wanted to gather your people, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you wouldn’t let me. And now your temple will be deserted. You won’t see me again until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 23:37-39, CEV).

Bible scholars claim that although Jesus says “Jerusalem, Jerusalem!” His lament wasn’t over the city but Israel as a nation. Anyway in Jesus’ lament, He not only mentions the self-sabotaging action of the nation but the role it played in hindering God’s good intentions for them from materializing. He laments also what the future held for them. His words also

indicate His death, burial, resurrection and return in glory.

But the nation of Israel wasn't the only one engaged in self-sabotaging actions. You and I, Christians, do too when we continue in sin even after we have been confronted and convicted by God's word. How can God do for us all the good that He intends to do when our action and inaction won't allow Him to? Sometimes it's not even sin that's the self-sabotaging action; other times it's a know-it-all attitude, a heart that refuses to accept and yield to God's revealed will because it discriminates against the messenger, or the message which is not generally accepted theory, doctrine or practice.

The good part is that there's still hope for us, that is if we heed the words we've read and commit to effecting changes where necessary. Instead of lamenting over us, we ought to do things in such a way that God rejoices over us.



THE END AT HAND

JESUS SAYS 175

*“After Jesus left the temple, his disciples came over and said, “Look at all these buildings!” Jesus replied, “Do you see these buildings? They will certainly be torn down! Not one stone will be left in place”
(Matthew 24:1-2, CEV).*

AT THE VERY tail end of chapter 23 Jesus had revealed that the Temple will be deserted due to the sinful and repeated sinful actions of the people. And if the Temple is deserted it meant God's presence was no longer there and people no longer worshiped there. Jesus' disciples however didn't dwell too long on His statement and were soon turning His attention towards the buildings of the Temple, most likely so He could admire them. But Jesus' comment echoed His previous sentiments. There was no point admiring the buildings; they will be destroyed. And His prediction of judgment did come to pass.

The attitude of the disciples towards the buildings of the Temple and Jesus' response to them remind me of something. How we Christians often admire things/people God has deserted and passed judgment on. We are all guilty of this, yes, including myself; perhaps especially myself. We get overly excited by what we see, for instance the architectural beauty of the place of worship or the poise and gifts of the man/woman of God; and if God doesn't intervene, we will go on being deceived. And this is the very reason we must be careful to not take anything or anyone at face value but via the help of the Holy Spirit observe them more closely to determine the truth.

I'm sure whatever positive feelings the disciples had towards the buildings of the Temple evaporated after Jesus spoke. How they must have become sombre and aware of the consequences of sin! That's how it is with the truth, it might bring an abrupt end to whatever giddy feelings we have. And it's more beneficial because it has the power to save and preserve. Should we prefer the comforts of lies? Then we allow ourselves to be preyed upon and will be in for a surprise, not a pleasant one though when the truth unfolds.

“Later, as Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples came to him in private and asked, “When will this happen? What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the world?” (verse 3).

Jesus had predicted the desertion of the Temple and the destruction of the buildings; now the disciples' casual mode had given way to a sombre one; they were suddenly curious to know more. They asked Him when His predictions concerning the Temple will happen, for the sign of His coming and the signs for the end of the world.

Does Jesus respond? Of course He isn't the type to ignore a genuine desire to know. But if the disciples were expecting time, day of the month and year in Jesus' response, like we all so often do when we ask God these sort of questions, then they'd have been greatly disappointed. Some things are not for us to know. Let's move on now into Jesus' response.

“Jesus answered: Don't let anyone fool you. Many will come and claim to be me. They will say they are the Messiah, and they will fool many people. You will soon hear about wars and threats of wars, but don't be afraid. These things will have to happen first, but that isn't the end. Nations and kingdoms will go to war against each other. People will starve to death, and in some places there will be earthquakes. But this is just the beginning of troubles. You will be arrested, punished, and even killed. Because of me, you will be hated by people of all nations. Many will give up and will betray and hate each other. Many false prophets will come and fool a lot of people. Evil will spread and cause many people to stop loving others. But if you keep on being

faithful right to the end, you will be saved. When the good news about the kingdom has been preached all over the world and told to all nations, the end will come” (Matthew 24:4-14, CEV).

Jesus doesn’t answer in the order in which He is asked. He starts with talks about the ‘end’. His response which is captured in the verses above can be divided in three parts. The first is happenings before the end, next will be the beginning of troubles, and finally a signal for the end. All of which are characterized by different negative occurrences except the last. Thankfully Jesus doesn’t fail to instruct the disciples (and us) on how to respond excellently when these things happen.

In responding excellently, the first command is, “*Don’t let anyone fool you.*” There will be a parade of false messiahs, but Christians are expected not to be misled nor give these impostors undue advantage over them. This will not happen by wishful thinking but conscious actions on our part. We already know the truth about Jesus Christ and that He is our Messiah. We must cling tightly to the truth about Him which He has revealed and is recorded in the Scriptures. Any other ‘messiah’, regardless of their abilities, must be rejected.

The second is, “*Don’t be afraid.*” There will be wars and threats of wars, but Christians are not to be worried or anxious about their wellbeing and safety. I know this is easier said than done, but not impossible. It becomes

possible to maintain peace even in the face of such extreme situations when one depends and trusts God for one's wellbeing and safety.

The third is, *Keep on being faithful right to the end*. There will be famine, natural disasters, persecution, and emergence of false prophets and the spread of evil; yet, Christians are expected to keep on being faithful to the end of these events or even their own lives. The challenge here is to continue to have a strong belief in God and the truths in the Scripture, not forgetting to obey all of God's commands recorded in it. The promise of deliverance and the ultimate reward of salvation which is eternal life is reserved for those who remain uncompromisingly righteous even in these times.

JESUS SAYS 176

“Someday you will see that “Horrible Thing” in the holy place, just as the prophet Daniel said. Everyone who reads this must try to understand! If you are living in Judea at that time, run to the mountains. If you are on the roof of your house, don’t go inside to get anything. If you are out in the field, don’t go back for your coat. It will be a terrible time for women who are expecting babies or nursing young children. And pray that you won’t have to escape in winter or on a Sabbath. This will be the worst time of suffering since the beginning of the world, and nothing this terrible will ever happen again. If God doesn’t make the time shorter, no one will be left alive. But because of God’s chosen ones, he will make the time shorter”

(Matthew 24:15-22, CEV).

Jesus is still answering the questions asked by His disciples. This time He addresses their question about the desertion and destruction of the Temple. The bigger picture is the destruction of Jerusalem. They had asked Him when it will happen and He had responded by giving them a clear sign that will indicate it (See also Luke 21:20-24). What's amazing is that right in the midst of describing this frightful occurrence, Jesus encourages the disciples (or better yet those who will experience this event) to pray for a favourable season and days without restrictions for escape! And He doesn't stop speaking about the event without informing them of God's mindfulness of His chosen ones in those times and His willingness to act on their behalf.

While this occurrence might not apply to us directly, we can take away from this the knowledge that a time of suffering is not the time to keep the lines of communication with God closed. It should stay open, and we can go ahead to tell God what our desires are. Let's bear in mind that though He allows us to suffer, He is still mindful of us and willing to help even in those times according to His wisdom.

JESUS SAYS 177

“Someone may say, ‘Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘There he is!’ but don’t believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will come and work great miracles and signs. They will even try to fool God’s chosen ones. But I have warned you ahead of time. If you are told the Messiah is out in the desert, don’t go there! And if you are told he is in some secret place, don’t believe it! The coming of the Son of Man will be like lightning that can be seen from east to west. Where there is a corpse, there will always be vultures.

Right after those days of suffering, ‘The sun will become dark, and the moon will no longer shine. The stars will fall, and the powers in the sky will be shaken.’ Then a sign will appear in the sky. And there will be the Son of Man. All nations on earth

will weep when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. At the sound of a loud trumpet, he will send his angels to bring his chosen ones together from all over the earth”
(Matthew 24:23-31, CEV).

Here, Jesus is speaking on His second coming which most Bible Scholars have determined is Phase Two of His second coming. It is accepted that prior to this return which our Lord speaks of here, three notable events would have taken place: the first being the rapture, the second the Bema seat or marriage supper of the Lamb, and third, the Great tribulation on earth.

Anyway, Jesus in the verses above tells the disciples about a very cunning plan that the enemy will design to turn His second coming to his advantage. What would happen during those times? The enemy would raise people that will claim to have exclusive report about the Lord's return. Jesus tells the disciples such reports must not be accepted as truth. People had to be cautious during those times because of the presence of false messiahs and false prophets who will

not only work great miracles and signs but also be very convincing with their lies. Besides, for this return of our Lord which He talks about, no one will need anyone to give them report about it or point out His whereabouts, because it would be visible to all. That's why it would be like lightning that can be seen from east to west.

That being said, Jesus moves on to mention things that will happen in the natural world and to earthly powers just before He appears. His appearance in power and glory will however not be received with rejoicing by some; we know those who will fall into that category are the unsaved who are in fear of His judgment. Then of course, there will be the sound of the trumpet which will be the cue for the angels of the Lord to bring His chosen ones together from all over the earth.

JESUS SAYS 178

*“Learn a lesson from a fig tree. When its branches sprout and start putting out leaves, you know summer is near. So when you see all these things happening, you will know the time has almost come. I can promise you that some of the people of this generation will still be alive when all this happens. The sky and earth won’t last forever, but my words will.
(Matthew 24:32-35, CEV).*

Jesus draws the attention of the disciples to the fig tree, not because the fig tree held any hidden meaning here; it was used for the sole reason of a point that He was trying to pass across. If by observing the changes in a fig tree the nearness of summer could be determined, then they would find observing the events

which He had spoken of useful, and by them they would know the time has almost come – the time for His return. Then He informs the disciples that some of the people of that generation will still be alive when all these events begin to unfold. He then concludes that the sky and earth won't last forever, but His words will. What does this mean?

The meaning behind “*the people of this generation*” have been and will continue to be the subject of many debates. You can read up on them. One group of Bible scholars believe that Jesus isn't just referring to the disciples but to all of us. Yes, that the people of ‘this generation’ are them, but including you and me; and that the generation Jesus refers to continues on until all of the things Jesus has spoken of take place. But let's not focus solely on decoding the meaning behind those words to the point we fail to acknowledge the ones whose meanings are obvious. In the concluding part of the two-part statement by Jesus, He informs the disciples of a quality about His words: that they are lasting/permanent. They could take this as a guarantee that all He had said would come to pass.

“No one knows the day or hour. The angels in heaven don't know, and the Son himself doesn't know. Only the Father knows. When the Son of Man appears, things will be just as they were when Noah lived. People were eating, drinking, and getting married right up to the day the flood came and Noah went into the big boat. They

didn't know anything was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. This is how it will be when the Son of Man appears. Two men will be in the same field, but only one will be taken. The other will be left. Two women will be together grinding grain, but only one will be taken. The other will be left. So be on your guard! You don't know when your Lord will come. Homeowners never know when a thief is coming, and they are always on guard to keep one from breaking in. Always be ready! You don't know when the Son of Man will come" (Matthew 24:36-44, CEV).

Jesus is still speaking about His second coming, and Bible scholars have determined that this portion of Scripture describes the rapture which falls under Phase One of His second coming. The basis of this conclusion about it being the rapture is that the exact day or hour is unknown, not even by angels who reside in heaven, nor by the Son, who is the person of Jesus but in His humanity. Only God the Father in His sovereign Omniscience knows that day and hour.

That being said, Jesus describes how things will be at His coming. He starts out by making reference to when Noah lived, how back then people were carrying on with the course of life (eating, drinking, getting married etc), even up until the day and hour of the flood. The day might have started out like every other day but they soon realized it was a different one when the flood hit and

swept them all away except for Noah and his family. However by the time realization dawned on the antediluvian people, it was too late. By making reference to the time of Noah, Jesus reveals to us that even until the day and the time the rapture will happen, people will be carrying on with the course of life. It will be an unpleasant surprise for those who weren't expecting it nor prepared for it.

Next, Jesus paints a picture of the rapture in our minds. In my opinion, a more scary one, this time He says two people will be together, and one will be raptured while the other will be left behind. To avoid being left behind, Jesus advises that we be on our guard. This isn't hard to decode. He is simply instructing the believer to keep pleasing God by living right and obeying Him.

I should add that Bible scholars have closely observed this picture Jesus paints concerning the rapture; they compare it with the writings of Luke in Luke 17:34-36, and conclude that the time of the rapture, whether it be daytime or night will largely depend on your time zone per time. After all He's said, Jesus gives the illustration of a watchful homeowner to stress how unexpected His coming (the rapture) will be and the need for us to stay prepared for it.

JESUS SAYS 179

*“Who are faithful and wise servants? Who are the ones the master will put in charge of giving the other servants their food supplies at the proper time? Servants are fortunate if their master comes and finds them doing their job. You may be sure a servant who is always faithful will be put in charge of everything the master owns. But suppose one of the servants thinks the master won’t return until late. Suppose this evil servant starts beating the other servants and eats and drinks with people who are drunk. If that happens, the master will surely come on a day and at a time when the servant least expects him. This servant will then be punished and thrown out with the ones who only pretended to serve their master. There they will cry and grit their teeth in pain”
(Matthew 24:45-51, CEV).*

Let's bear in mind that Jesus was still speaking to His disciples here. The admonition is for them to be faithful and show good judgment. For Jesus had (or will soon) put them in charge of other believers. Their task would be to feed the church/believers daily. What this means is that they were tasked with encouraging the spiritual growth of other believers, either by preaching or teaching. If during periodic checks, the Lord finds them doing their duty, they will be favoured and rewarded. But if they conclude in their hearts that His return will be delayed and then begin to use their position to oppress the other believers, and also act out of character by hanging around sinners and committing their sins, then they would be in for a surprise. His coming will appear sudden to them, earlier than their prediction. And the guilty ones among them will be punished, made to suffer the same fate as those whose service to God is pretentious.

Jesus' admonition for faithfulness and good judgment is not only for the apostles and leaders but for the church in general, especially for those of us who are involved in Kingdom service, occupying one position or another. Though we have some authority, we must concern ourselves with serving other believers. Jesus keeps His eye on us, and rewards faithful service. We mustn't put out of our minds Jesus' coming and begin to use our position/authority to oppress others or neglect carrying out our responsibilities, choosing instead to hang around sinners

and indulge in their sins. If we do, then the Lord's coming will not only happen suddenly, it won't be favourable for us at all.



JESUS IS
COMING
SOON

JESUS SAYS 180

“The kingdom of heaven is like what happened one night when ten young women took their oil lamps and went to a wedding to meet the groom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps, but no extra oil. The ones who were wise took along extra oil for their lamps. The groom was late arriving, and the young women became drowsy and fell asleep. Then in the middle of the night someone shouted, “Here’s the groom! Come to meet him!” When the women got up and started getting their lamps ready, the foolish ones said to the others, “Let us have some of your oil! Our lamps are going out.” Those who were wise answered, “There’s not enough oil for all of us! Go and buy some for yourselves.”

While the foolish ones were on their way to get some oil, the groom arrived. The five who were ready went into the wedding, and the doors were closed. Later the others returned and shouted, “Sir, sir! Open the door for us!” But the groom replied, “I don’t even know you!” So, my disciples, always be ready! You don’t know the day or the time when all this will happen” (Matthew 25:1-13, CEV).

IT IS THE high level of preparedness of five of the ten young women in Jesus’ story that makes Him refer to them as wise (meaning showing good judgment). Their level of preparedness is what every Christian ought to strive for when considering Jesus’ coming. Unlike their counterparts who failed to prepare, these were conscious/aware of the possibility of the groom not arriving at the(ir) stipulated time; so they prepared adequately by taking along extra oil for their lamps. They weren’t wrong, the groom did arrive at an unexpected time, but they weren’t caught unprepared. When the groom’s arrival was announced, they had all they needed to enable them meet with Him in time. They didn’t miss out on the wedding!

The foolish young women earned their title based on their inaction. Their role in Jesus' story serves as an example of what not to do as a believer. Compared to the wise young women, these ones didn't pay much mind to what might happen in the future and what might be needed; so they hastily packed and were inadequately prepared for what was to come. They were wrong to think and act that way. The groom showed up later than they anticipated and when his arrival was announced they were unprepared to meet him right away. They also had this wrong belief that all things could be shared amongst themselves, and when it dawned on them that certain things needed to be done individually, they found themselves doing the right thing at the wrong time. In the end, they missed out on the wedding.

While some have claimed that the lamp and the oil are symbolic and hold deeper meanings, I'd advise that we concentrate more on the general message Jesus' story holds. And that is the call for every believer to be mindful of His unexpected return and be well prepared for it. Bearing in mind that our preparedness is an individual responsibility, and failure to do it at the right time will be a costly mistake.

Someone might ask, how do we stay prepared in this context? Can it be more obvious? It's by applying the consciousness of Jesus' return in all we do.

JESUS SAYS 181

“The kingdom is also like what happened when a man went away and put his three servants in charge of all he owned. The man knew what each servant could do. So he handed 5,000 coins to the first servant, 2,000 to the second, and 1,000 to the third.

Then he left the country. As soon as the man had gone, the servant with the 5,000 coins used them to earn 5,000 more. The servant who had 2,000 coins did the same with his money and earned 2,000 more.

But the servant with 1,000 coins dug a hole and hid his master’s money in the ground. Some time later the master of those servants returned. He called them in and asked what they had done with his money. The servant who had been given 5,000 coins brought them in with the 5,000 that he had earned. He said, “Sir,

you gave me 5,000 coins, and I have earned 5,000 more.” “Wonderful!” his master replied. “You are a good and faithful servant. I left you in charge of only a little, but now I will put you in charge of much more. Come and share in my happiness!” Next, the servant who had been given 2,000 coins came in and said, “Sir, you gave me 2,000 coins, and I have earned 2,000 more.” “Wonderful!” his master replied. “You are a good and faithful servant. I left you in charge of only a little, but now I will put you in charge of much more. Come and share in my happiness!” The servant who had been given 1,000 coins then came in and said, “Sir, I know that you are hard to work for. You harvest what you don’t plant and gather crops where you haven’t scattered seed. I was frightened and went out and hid your money in the ground. Here is every single coin!” The master of the

servant told him, “You are lazy and good-for-nothing! You know I harvest what I don’t plant and gather crops where I haven’t scattered seed. You could have at least put my money in the bank, so I could have earned interest on it.” Then the master said, “Now your money will be taken away and given to the servant with 10,000 coins! Everyone who has something will be given more, and they will have more than enough. But everything will be taken from those who don’t have anything. You are a worthless servant, and you will be thrown out into the dark where people will cry and grit their teeth in pain” (Matthew 25:14-30, CEV).

There are certain things about the master of these servants that remind me of God, and I’d like to share it with us, even though I know the message Jesus passes across in this story is largely based on the attitudes of the servants. We’ll also get to that. But first, the master and God. Before we go any

further, let me make it clear that the master in this story isn't God. However, just like him, God does share what's His with us; for example, all the resources we have, and He does so according to our abilities. Meaning, He doesn't have any undue expectations of us, but has expectations of us. He expects that we put our resources and abilities to good use and be productive with them. This is why a time comes when He calls us to give account of how we've used our resources and abilities. If we have been diligent and productive, He rewards us with more resources and responsibilities; and if we haven't, He metes out due punishment, not to destroy us, but to stir us to repent and do better.

Now, on to the first two servants: they are who we ought to emulate. These two understood the unspoken rule, that if they had been given something, the one who gave it to them had expectations of them, and in view of their master's return, they got busy. They diligently put their resources to good use and thankfully were not only productive but had good returns. These ones were prepared for the day of accountability, which happened when their master returned; and as expected, he was pleased with them and promised them a reward.

The last servant is who we must strive not to be as believers, because even though there were good examples around him, he ignored them all and went ahead to do his own thing, burying the resources shared with him. He

gave no thoughts to his master's expectations, and clearly was not motivated to diligence, and so produced nothing. Because he didn't put his resources to any use, they were no returns. He was clearly unprepared for the day of accountability. But what's interesting is that when finally he came face to face with his master, he tries to justify his inaction with excuses. But he quickly finds out that his excuses weren't tenable. He was inexcusable and became eligible for punishment.

His punishment? His resources were taken from him; that was one loss. Secondly, he was called lazy, good-for-nothing and, worthless, and all of that not because he had no real value or couldn't be useful, but because he had chosen not to exhibit any good qualities, proving that he deserved contempt. And contempt is what he got. Finally, he was banished from his master's presence and the grand scheme of things.

Why did Jesus tell this story? In my opinion, it was to reveal certain things about God and encourage our diligence in His (i.e. Jesus') absence. Because whether it's a periodic check-in or on the day of accountability when He returns, we will have to give account for the resources entrusted to us. Then we will either be in the group of the first two servants or the third; we will either be rewarded because we had pleased Him or be punished because we've displeased Him. We will be better off being well prepared before then.

Before we move on from this story, can we revisit the reward promised the servants who pleased their master? This is what he told them: *“I left you in charge of only a little, but now I will put you in charge of much more. Come and share in my happiness.”* At first glance one would quickly come to the conclusion that the reward of hard work is more work. That is true, but that’s not all. These ones also get to experience and keep experiencing the joys of service – the feeling of great pleasure that accompanies being instrumental in something big. Do you know about this feeling?

JESUS SAYS 182

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory with all his angels, he will sit on his royal throne. The people of all nations will be brought before him, and he will separate them, as shepherds separate their sheep from their goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘My father has blessed you! Come and receive the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created. When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me, and when I was naked, you gave me clothes to wear. When I was sick, you took care of me, and when I was in jail, you visited me.’ Then the ones who pleased the Lord will ask,

“When did we give you something to eat or drink? When did we welcome you as a stranger or give you clothes to wear or visit you while you were sick or in jail?” The king will answer, “Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me.” Then the king will say to those on his left, “Get away from me! You are under God's curse. Go into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels! I was hungry, but you did not give me anything to eat, and I was thirsty, but you did not give me anything to drink. I was a stranger, but you did not welcome me, and I was naked, but you did not give me any clothes to wear. I was sick and in jail, but you did not take care of me.” “Then the people will ask, “Lord, when did we fail to help you when you were hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in jail?” The king will say to them, “Whenever you

failed to help any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you failed to do it for me.” Then Jesus said, “Those people will be punished forever. But the ones who pleased God will have eternal life” (Matthew 25:31-46, CEV).

In these verses, Jesus speaks on the judgment of individuals of all nations. And He says, before judgment there will be a separation. This separation is imperative and it will be done using the criteria of what was done and what was left undone. Going by Jesus’ words, there will exist a group for the sheep; they will be on His right. And there will be the group for the goats who will be on His left. These groups can be understood to mean the saved and the lost, and as you keep reading you’ll see how I came to that conclusion.

Those on the right had pleased God greatly by their actions, and were to receive His blessings – of entering into His Kingdom. What were their actions? They were kind enough to share their food and drinks. They were good (hospitable) to strangers, helped to clothe the naked, patiently nursed the sick to health and showed compassion to those in jail by visiting them. Jesus had claimed they did it to Him, but in actuality, they had done

it to others, not discriminating against any because of their status (most likely believers) since Jesus later uses the word, “my people”. Now tell me, aren’t these character qualities and good works synonymous with a saved person?

Those on the left had failed to please God. Instead of being blessed like the others, they were now under God’s curse, and were going to be punished for all of eternity, sharing a fate reserved for the devil and his fallen angels. The great mistake this group made which makes me refer to them as lost is this. They forgot that even though we aren’t saved by our works, we prove we are saved by our works; and though they profess to be Christians, they failed to use their time wisely by developing godly character qualities and engaging in good works. Wouldn’t you agree with me that they are indeed lost? Whether you agree or not, Jesus makes it clear that they are lost by the judgment He pronounced on them.

After reading all of this, if this judgment were to happen today, tell me, which group would you fall into? The sheep or the goat? I’m hoping it’s the former and not the latter. You see, Jesus did not only tell us about what is to come just so we are informed, but so we come into realization of what is expected of us, especially how we use our time on earth. And what is expected of us? To work hard to show the results of our salvation, in our character and with our good works.

23

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

JESUS SAYS 183

*“When Jesus had finished teaching, he told his disciples, “You know two days from now will be Passover. This is when the Son of Man will be handed over to his enemies and nailed to a cross.” At that time the chief priests and the nation’s leaders were meeting at the home of Caiaphas the high priest. They planned how they could sneak around and have Jesus arrested and put to death. But they said, “We must not do it during Passover, because the people will riot”
(Matthew 26:1-5, CEV).*

S O FAR, WE’VE counted three times Jesus foretold His death; this time would be the fourth, and as His usual fashion, He adds something new to the information He’s giving His disciples. He tells them

clearly the time His betrayal, suffering and death would happen. That it will be during the Passover (festival), and will be symbolic. Instead of an animal, it is Jesus that would be killed and His blood would be shed for our preservation. For more details about the Passover, read Exodus 12.

But while Jesus talks to His disciples about His death, somewhere else, to be specific at the home of the high priest Caiaphas, Jesus' enemies were meeting, planning how to secretly arrest and kill Him. And even though they planned not to do it during Passover, we'll see as we go on that things happened according to how Jesus predicted it.

These verses hold certain truths for us, I'd share two. And the first is this: that we ought to have a better appreciation for God's timing. God was doing a new thing from something old, and the right time was an important factor in it. God is always doing something new in our lives, and like I never fail to mention, timing would play a huge role in it. And even though you can't see through the suffering you're facing now, know that if you stick with Him long enough, you'd see the big picture, and it will gladden your heart.

The second truth is this: that we beware of the seduction of the enemy. The religious and nation's leaders had sunk to the lowest low, and weren't aware. Instead of doing the Lord's work they were willing instruments in doing the devil's work. Thankfully their actions fit into God's plan; nonetheless, we must learn from these leaders

what not to do. Before they sunk to this low of planning murder, the fall started when they started to entertain ill feelings towards Jesus.

The devil is still out recruiting people who will work for him, and his eyes are on Christians as well; and we join willingly his recruits the minute we begin to entertain ill feelings towards others. Here's my advice: talk to God about your emotions, yes, the negative ones especially, and He'll help you through it. You don't have to be the villain in someone's story or self-destruct.

JESUS SAYS 184

“Jesus was in the town of Bethany, eating at the home of Simon, who had leprosy, A woman came in with a bottle of expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus’ head. But when his disciples saw this, they became angry and complained, “Why such a waste? We could have sold this perfume for a lot of money and given it to the poor.” Jesus knew what they were thinking, and he said: Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing for me. You will always have the poor with you but you won’t always have me. She has poured perfume on my body to prepare it for burial. You may be sure that wherever the good news is told all over the world, people will remember what she has done. And they will tell others”
(Matthew 26:6- 13, CEV).

While Jesus was a guest at the home of one of the men He had healed, there was an incident that provides answers to one of the most controversial topics today, especially amongst Christians: giving to God. Some people, like the woman in these verses, give God expensive gifts, while others are like the disciples who believe that expensive gifts shouldn't be given to God, but instead let their proceeds be shared among the poor. Which group do you belong? The group you belong reflect your belief.

What does Jesus say? He doesn't condemn the woman's gesture, neither does He cancel giving to the poor. He however questions the reaction of the disciples to the woman's gesture, while revealing many things.

Jesus reveals that the woman's spontaneous action was in line with what was to befall Him; so we can say this woman was under the influence of God's Spirit. And the same is true for most people who give expensive gifts to God. Most times, their actions are led by the Spirit of God. Why should we concern ourselves with how God is leading them?

The mistake the disciples made was getting angry and complaining about the woman's gesture (she poured on Jesus' head a bottle of expensive perfume). Giving to God is never a waste! Jesus makes it clear that He was pleased with her action. He recognized it and would reward her greatly for it. We mustn't concern ourselves too much

with what others are doing for God; else, we run the risk of falling into error, like the disciples did.

And about giving to the poor Jesus says, we will always have the poor with us; and nowhere does He say we should neglect them. But giving to the poor shouldn't rule out giving to God. As Christians, we give to God and give to the poor; and on the days when we are led to do something extra special for our God, we must do it without hesitation, for we will always have opportunities to minister to the poor.

JESUS SAYS 185

*“Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve disciples. He went to the chief priests and asked, “How much will you give me if I help you arrest Jesus?” They paid Judas 30 silver coins, and from then on he started looking for a good chance to betray Jesus”
(Matthew 26:14-16, CEV).*

In the same manner, many “Christians” out there have entered into a betrayal agreement with the enemy. They are willing to trade Jesus. Judas did it for money; some will do it for same reasons, others will do it for fame, possessions, position/power, marriage, children etc; the things people trade Jesus for in this world are endless.

And while you might not be one of those who have betrayed Jesus, know that there’s a possibility that you can; so take the necessary precaution! When Judas approached the chief priests, the first words he spoke to

them was about money. He asked them, “*How much will you give me...*” thereby revealing what he loved and desired the most. And since we are ever so often led into sin through our affections/desires, it is important that we make loving God our topmost priority, and pleasing Him our desire. This way ideas/suggestions that will place self above God can be rejected.

Judas did not only betray and trade Jesus, who is God, he betrayed and traded a friend. Do we still have Christians who betray their friends? Unfortunately we do, but I hope you aren't one of them. While Judas' actions show us what not to do in our relationship with God, there's also wisdom in it for our earthly relationships. Judas' friendship with Jesus was beneficial to him in every sense of the word; but he began to desire more, and went after it, sacrificing his friend in the process. In the end, he gets to find his decision less than satisfying. In all of our relationships, we must practice loyalty. It's how God deals with us and it's how we must deal with Him and with others. I should also add that we practice loyalty because no one is born loyal. The Holy Spirit in us gives us this ability and helps us in our practice until we become loyal people.

JESUS SAYS 186

*“On the first day of the Festival of Thin Bread, Jesus' disciples came to him and asked, “Where do you want us to prepare the Passover meal?” Jesus told them to go to a certain man in the city and tell him, “Our teacher says, ‘My time has come! I want to eat the Passover meal with my disciples in your home.’ ” They did as Jesus told them and prepared the meal”
(Matthew 26:17-19, CEV).*

The question of where to eat, rather than the usual what to eat comes up; and as usual, Jesus has a plan. He makes mention of a certain man in the city who when informed about their need, would open up his heart and home to them. Some Bible scholars are of the opinion that this man was one of Jesus' followers and a prior arrangement had been made by Jesus

with him. Others simply believe that Jesus revealed the man's identity and location, and discerned his willingness to help, using His supernatural abilities. Me? I'm of the opinion that what truly matters is that there was someone who Jesus could depend on. If Jesus were to make an arrangement with you, can He trust that you'll keep your word? If Jesus should search your heart, will He find a willingness to share your resources with others? These are questions we should ask ourselves when we read these verses, instead of wondering about whether there was an arrangement or not.

One more thing to note is that, that man was chosen for an assignment and he did it. It wasn't as grand as being among Jesus' twelve disciples, yet he delivered. In the end, his help was recognized and his obedience rewarded. See, his action is recorded in the gospel! Whatever our assignment is, even if it's not as grand as that of others, let's commit to doing it. All our good works, even those which seem insignificant, are always recognized and rewarded by God.

JESUS SAYS 187

“When Jesus was eating with his twelve disciples that evening, he said, “One of you will surely hand me over to my enemies.” The disciples were very sad, and each one said to Jesus, “Lord, you can't mean me!” He answered, “One of you men who has eaten with me from this dish will betray me. The Son of Man will die, as the Scriptures say. But it's going to be terrible for the one who betrays me! That man would be better off if he had never been born.” Judas said, “Teacher, you surely don't mean me!” “That's what you say!” Jesus replied. But later, Judas did betray him” (Matthew 26:20-25, CEV).

Judas had already been to see the chief priests and had entered into a betrayal agreement with them. In fact, he had even been paid thirty silver coins upfront; but when Jesus announced that one of His followers would hand Him over to His enemies, Judas joined the other disciples in saying, “*Lord, you can't mean me!*” And when Jesus reiterates the earlier claim, mentions His death and even the fate of the betrayer, Judas still had the audacity to say to Jesus, “*Teacher, you surely don't mean me!*” I want to say I'm surprised, but I really can't; after all, at one time or another in our lives, we've all attempted to hide our sins and present ourselves to God and others as blameless.

Anyway, since we know that Judas' betrayal would be allowed for the Scriptures to be fulfilled, then Jesus wasn't announcing the betrayal nor stating the fate of the betrayer for Judas to stop; rather to inform Judas and the other disciples that nothing was hid from Him; it was also a reminder that our actions have consequences.

All the words of Jesus apply to us. Let's not forget that God knows everything: what we've done in the past and what we are about to do. So when we are dealing with Him, there's really no point pretending to be who we aren't. Also, if we continue in the wrong path, we must be ready to accept the consequences of our actions.

JESUS SAYS 188

“During the meal Jesus took some bread in his hands. He blessed the bread and broke it. Then he gave it to his disciples and said, “Take this and eat it. This is my body.” Jesus picked up a cup of wine and gave thanks to God. He then gave it to his disciples and said, “Take this and drink it. This is my blood, and with it God makes his agreement with you. It will be poured out, so that many people will have their sins forgiven. From now on I am not going to drink any wine, until I drink new wine with you in my Father's kingdom.” Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives”

(Matthew 26:26-30, CEV);

Like the bread Jesus blessed and broke, His skin would be cut open due to the beatings He would receive; and like the wine Jesus blessed and shared with His disciples, His blood would be shed! And rightly so, because bloodshed was required for the new covenant and the forgiveness of sins. In summary, the bread and wine were symbols of His death. At the end of His speech, Jesus mentions an event that will happen at a future time.

The disciples partook of the Lord's supper, which had now replaced the Passover; and even though Jesus made a number of revelatory statements, I doubt the disciples understood what Jesus truly meant. And that's how it is with God and us. Many times what He does doesn't make sense; and no matter how clearly He speaks, we don't always understand Him. But even in those times when God doesn't make sense or we fail to understand Him, like the disciples, let's trust Him and just do as He says. In the end, He will make sense to us as we begin to understand what He's been saying all along.

Till date, many Christians partake of the Lord's Supper, though we now call it the Holy Communion. Apostle Paul sheds more light on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-32.

JESUS SAYS 189

“Jesus said to his disciples, “During this very night, all of you will reject me, as the Scriptures say, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised to life, I will go ahead of you to Galilee” (Matthew 26:31-32, CEV),

It was no longer, one of you will... but now, all of you will.... What exactly was Jesus saying? Initially, He had spoken on His betrayal, but now He is speaking on the reaction of the disciples to the things that were about to happen to Him, and He backs it with Scripture. See Zechariah 13:7. And just as their reaction was certain, so was His resurrection. It was so certain that Jesus tells the disciples where to meet with Him when it happens.

Let's dwell a little on Jesus' prediction of His disciples response to His coming suffering. He told them they would reject Him, and by this He reveals the temptation

all Christians face when things aren't going so well in their lives or around them. While some Christians resist the temptation to reject Jesus, i.e. to turn their backs on Him and renounce Christianity, sadly there are those who don't. In fact, there will always be those who don't.

One major reason why certain people end up rejecting Jesus during hard time is disillusionment: the sudden feeling of disappointment in Him; and that's because they had this image and belief in Him that He's failed to uphold. We must make conscious effort to avoid disillusionment. The Scriptures provide us with the image and character of God and tells us of His power. Nowhere does it state that He's promised us a problem free life, or will use His power how and when we tell Him to always.

JESUS SAYS 190

*“Peter spoke up, “Even if all the others reject you, I never will!” Jesus replied, “I promise you before a rooster crows tonight, you will say three times that you don’t know me.” But Peter said, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never say I don’t know you.” All the others said the same thing”
(Matthew 26:33-35, CEV).*

U pon hearing Jesus’ prediction about their reaction, Peter speaks up in protest, placing himself in a different spiritual level than the rest. Forgetting that Jesus means what He says and that he, Peter, was only human afterall, and could fall into temptation. His protest which is rooted in pride and ignorance is shut down by Jesus who reveals even further that Peter specifically would deny Him thrice. But Peter believing that good intentions will translate into inner

strength objects, declaring his willingness to die with Jesus rather than deny Him. The other disciples echoed him; but they were all in for a surprise in a bit.

The lesson here is clear. Peter teaches us how not to respond to divine revelation. Divine revelations sometimes are given to us by God for warnings, to make us turn from sin and pride, and to protect us from being destroyed! The right attitude towards such is not to challenge God but to pray. God doesn't delight in us falling into sin; so if we humbly ask Him to help us so we won't end up doing the wrong things, He will. Peter learnt this the hard way; you don't have to.

JESUS SAYS 191

*“Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. When they got there, he told them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray”
(Matthew 26:36, CEV).*

A lot of things will end up happening at this place called Gethsemane, but first things first. Let's talk about the first thing Jesus reveals as the reason why He brought them to this location. Obviously it's so He could pray!

The time of His suffering and death was drawing near and Jesus wanted to pray; not that He just wants to pray, He actually does pray. Tell me, in your relationship with God, does apprehension pull you to prayer? I'm guessing the answer most of us, including myself, will provide is no. But this ought not to be so, for we must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Apprehension should pull us into prayer.

I know we all have reasons why we don't pray in those times, solid reasons too; but the truth of the matter is that

the only one having fun at our expense when we don't pray during those times is the devil. It's true that prayer at such times might not change what is to come, like in the case of Jesus; but at least one comes out of prayer better equipped to face and handle what's to come. So pray; you have nothing to lose if you do but stand to gain something when you do.

JESUS SAYS 192

*“Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John. He was very sad and troubled, and he said to them, “I am so sad that I feel as if I am dying. Stay here and keep awake with me”
(Matthew 26:37-38, CEV).*

Jesus had left the nine still at Gethsemane and had proceeded further with the three: Peter, James and John. He shared His feelings with them and asks them to stay awake with Him. And by so doing, He gives us permission to be honest about our feelings to ourselves, to unburden with those God leads us to confide in and also to ask for their support.

This might seem like common knowledge, but I'm sure someone reading this is just learning this for the first time. And so, this is for them. You don't have to pretend to be happy when you feel sad, or less concerned when you're troubled. When God points out the right people to

you, go ahead and confide in them. Ask them for their physical and spiritual support. God won't be mad at you. See even Jesus did it. So it's okay.

I'm glad Jesus shared not only His highs with the disciples but also His lows. It's not only for their good but for ours as well. This way we can never forget that even the Christian life is full of highs and lows. Anyone who tells us otherwise is setting us up for disappointment.

JESUS SAYS 193

*“Jesus walked on a little way. Then he knelt with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, don’t make me suffer by drinking from this cup, But do what you want, and not what I want” ...Again Jesus went to pray and said, “My Father, if there is no other way, and I must suffer, I will still do what you want” ...He left them and prayed the same prayer once more”
(Matthew 26:39, 42, 44, CEV).*

I have put these verses together, not out of an attempt to rearrange the verses of the Bible but for our easy understanding of the points I intend to pass across.

When alone, Jesus prays. His prayers contain His desires, but also an awareness that it might not align with God’s will, and finally a willingness to submit to God’s

will. Learning all of this begs us to ask ourselves a very important question: What is my mindset when I pray?

A faulty mindset during prayer is seeing it as a means to get all of your desires met. It's having no consideration for God's will, nor showing any willingness to submit to God's will. People with faulty mindset during prayer have a hard time maintaining peace with God.

Here is what to keep in mind when you pray, so that you can continue to be a praying Christian. God hears all our prayers but doesn't give us all we ask for always. God's will is a huge determinant in whether we receive the answers we want or not. And in the case where God's will overrides your request, the right attitude is to be okay with it. Remember, being a Christian means we've agreed to submit to God's will.

JESUS SAYS 194

“He came back and found his disciples sleeping. So he said to Peter, “Can’t any of you stay awake with me for just one hour? Stay awake and pray that you won’t be tested. You want to do what is right, but you are weak” ...Jesus came back and found them sleeping again. They simply could not keep their eyes open... Finally, Jesus returned to his disciples and said, “Are you still sleeping and resting? The time has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to sinners. Get up! Let’s go. The one who will betray me is already here” (Matthew 26:40-41,43, 45-46 CEV).

Jesus had earlier expressed how He was feeling to Peter, James and John, and had asked for their support. But He had also spent some time praying alone. After a while, He took a break to check on the three and found them sleeping. Even though He

chides them for sleeping instead of staying awake with Him, His rebuke seem to be directed at Peter specifically (and we know why). He says to him, *“Stay awake and pray that you won’t be tested. You want to do what is right, but you are weak.”*

Peter had made a boast earlier and by so doing seem to have made himself eligible for testing. The command to pray that Jesus gave Peter was more of a way out. In fact, it was the only way he could ace that test. Because, although Peter was full of good intentions, he had little inner strength. Whether we make a boast or not, even though it’s advisable that we don’t, for as long as we profess that we are Christians, times of testing will come. God will allow them; and the devil will show up with his tests, but because we won’t always know when those tests will show up, we must be people of prayer just like Jesus advised Peter; for it is in the place of prayer that our weaknesses get exchanged for strength.

The second time Jesus checks on the three, they were still sleeping. The Scripture records that they simply couldn’t keep their eyes open. But Jesus doesn’t even bother with waking them or chiding them. Perhaps because He reckoned they were better off learning by experience that the call to prayer must not be ignored. Oh, and experience is a cruel teacher!

When the Holy Spirit reveals something to you and nudges you to pray about it, what do you do? If you do not respond excellently, God might leave you to learn by

experience like in the case of Peter. Someone might say, sometimes one is truly tired. It's true. However, that tiredness is your flesh rebelling against God! Even in your tiredness, your prayers can be said. You can rule over the flesh because God's Spirit is in you, and it makes you willing and able to do the will of God.

The third and final time Jesus returns to check on the three, they were still sleeping. He wakes them only because they couldn't afford to miss what was about to happen (His betrayal and arrest); they had to bear witness to it.

JESUS SAYS 195

*“Jesus was still speaking, when Judas the betrayer came up. He was one of the twelve disciples, and a large mob armed with swords and clubs was with him. They had been sent by the chief priests and the nation’s leaders. Judas had told them ahead of time, “Arrest the man I greet with a kiss.” Judas walked right up to Jesus and said, “Hello, teacher.” Then Judas kissed him. Jesus replied, “My friend, do what you came for”
(Matthew 26:47-50a, CEV).*

The prearranged signal might have been necessary because it was dark, or more likely because the mob was mixed and Romans were present. But that’s not what I’d like us to dwell on. What

I'd like us to dwell on is the greetings exchanged by Judas and Jesus.

When Judas approached Jesus and just before he kissed Him, he called Him teacher. His words were insincere and shallow, for though he acknowledged Jesus with his words, his heart was far from Him. It was devoid of any respect or love for Him. And this is how you know as a Christian that you're close to betraying Jesus: when your worship has been reduced to lip service, when your heart's not in it, and there's no more reverence nor love for God.

Jesus doesn't give Judas the silent treatment; He replies and calls him, "My friend!" And we know there's no guile in Jesus so His greeting wasn't insincere. But why would Jesus use an affectionate term to address Judas? Was He doing it to live as He had preached and taught? Remember, He had encouraged His followers to be merciful and had commanded them to be forgiving. Or did He do it because He was letting Judas know that though he was acting out of character, it didn't change how He sees him, and when he was back to his senses he could repent? Why does it have to be one or the other when it could be both? It's likely that it was for both reasons Jesus acted and spoke in that manner. What this means for you and me is that we're being challenged to walk it like we talk it.

Preaching and teaching on mercy and forgiveness is never far from the lips of us Christians; yet not many of us follow in the footsteps of the Author of our faith. Let's

do better. Furthermore, Jesus' disposition towards Judas should encourage Christians who have compromised and are living a life of compromise because they are too ashamed to return to the Lord. Do so because how you see yourself isn't how God sees you. He calls you friend, so live up to that title; but first return to Him.

JESUS SAYS 196

“The men grabbed Jesus and arrested him. One of Jesus’ followers pulled out a sword. He struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. But Jesus told him, “Put your sword away. Anyone who lives by fighting will die by fighting. Don’t you know that I could ask my Father, and he would at once send me more than twelve armies of angels? But then, how could the words of the Scriptures come true, which say this must happen?” Jesus said to the mob, “Why do you come with swords and clubs to arrest me like a criminal? Day after day I sat and taught in the temple, and you didn’t arrest me. But all this happened, so that what the prophets wrote would come true.” All Jesus’ disciples left him and ran away”
(Matthew 26:50b-56, CEV).

From John's account (See John 18:10), we learn it was Peter who pulled out a sword from its sheath in an attempt to defend Jesus and ends up cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest. And in Luke's account (Luke 22:51), we learn Jesus touches the servant's ear and heals it, an act of mercy on His part for the servant and also for Peter who would have been arrested alongside Jesus, if the ear hadn't been healed.

And in the verses above, we learn Jesus addresses Peter's behaviour. He says to him, *"Put your sword away."* Why? Because, the appropriate response to that situation didn't require Peter's efforts nor violence. Believe it or not, sooner than later in life you'd find out you can't get out of some situations by relying on your effort or violence. Next, Jesus says to him, *"Anyone who lives by fighting will die by fighting."* Why? If Peter had succeeded in defending Jesus by using his sword, he might become habitually inclined to doing so as situations present themselves. Jesus didn't want that to happen to Peter, nor did He want the other disciples following Peter's example to do so. He quickly tells them the fate of those who choose violence all of the time.

I hope you understand this to mean Christians are expected to be non-violent people. And finally, Jesus says to Peter, *"Don't you know that I could ask my Father, and he would at once send me more than twelve armies of angels? But then, how could the words of the Scriptures come true, which say this must happen?"* By this Jesus makes an effort in

explaining to Peter that He is only showing restraint and not using His privileges because He had placed the will of God above His freedom. Do you think Peter understood? Can you identify areas in your life where God is leading you to show restraint and prioritize His will over your desires?

After Jesus was done addressing Peter, He addresses the mob. However not in the way His disciples would expect! Instead of using His privileges/power, He explains away their action as what had been predicted! The disciples are left disillusioned about Him, some were confused, others ashamed; and all of them being afraid left Him and ran away (just as He had predicted in verse 31).

JESUS SAYS 197

“After Jesus had been arrested, he was led off to the house of Caiaphas the high priest. The nation’s leaders and the teachers of the Law of Moses were meeting there. But Peter followed along at a distance and came to the courtyard of the high priest’s palace. He went in and sat down with the guards to see what was going to happen. The chief priests and the whole council wanted to put Jesus to death. So they tried to find some people who would tell lies about him in court. But they could not find any, even though many did come and tell lies”
(Matthew 26:57-60, CEV).

While Jesus was being led away for questioning and trial, we learn that Peter changes direction and doesn't run away; instead, he follows Jesus but from a distance, out of curiosity. Have you ever asked yourself, why am I following Jesus? Because, there are many reasons why people do. You should at least be able to answer why, so if the reasons are wrong, you can make the necessary adjustments. But Peter's reappearance isn't the only interesting thing that happens; there's also the attempt of the chief priests and the whole council to find a worthy charge against Jesus (they didn't care if it was a lie, they just needed a charge), one strong enough to make their collective goal, which was to have Him put to death, fulfilled.

First, their inability to find a truthful witness to bring up a charge against Jesus shows the kind of reputation Jesus had, which is the kind of reputation we should have. I know these days a lot of people, Christians inclusive, don't care about how they come off to others. But I tell you, we should, because in many ways a good reputation will prove useful. Building a good reputation however doesn't happen without our effort, neither does it happen overnight. As in the case of Jesus, it will require our deliberate effort in obeying God's word consistently.

It's important we address the behaviour of the Jewish council who cared nothing about how God commands that we treat each other and only about their selfish

interests; and it led them to hire false witnesses against Jesus. It seemed they kept sinking to a new low each time! And this is what will happen anytime we prioritize our selfish interests over God's commands; we will keep sinking to new lows until we can't go any lower and what's left is to face the wrath of God's judgment. This warning is for all Christians, but specifically those who occupy leadership positions in the secular and in the church. Some are of the opinion they can't be held accountable for their wrong doings. We know they will!

"At last two men came forward and said, "This man claimed he could tear down God's temple and build it again in three days." The high priest stood up and asked Jesus, "Why don't you say something in your own defense? Don't you hear the charges they are making against you?" But Jesus did not answer" (Matthew 26:60b-63a, CEV)

Jesus' words had been misconstrued and two things were left to do, for Him to speak in His defence or to keep silent. He chose to keep silent. Why? A lot of people, including myself, are of the opinion that He didn't speak in His own defence for the same reasons He didn't beckon on God to send angels to prevent His arrest. He was simply aligning with the Scriptures which had to be fulfilled (See Isaiah 53:7).

What manner of man is this? Such self-control, such submission to the will of the Father! If Jesus can do it, so can we. The Spirit in Him is the same Spirit in us. And so, our emotions and desires no longer have to rule us. We can rule it.

Jesus' example (with my little exhortation) is horror to someone who always feels the need to defend themselves, even when it means disregarding God's word/will. Yes, I'm speaking to you. Well, let me tell you something you've probably never considered, that God does the work of vindication. Or did you think the real meaning behind Jesus' words wouldn't be revealed eventually? It will, or rather it was. And wasn't He vindicated? He was. And so, let's always bear in mind that we aren't the only ones who care about us, God cares about us too, and when charges are made against us like this and He prompts us not to defend ourselves, it's because He will do the work of vindicating us, and no one does it better than Him.

And if you're wondering how to discern when to speak and when not to speak, know that the Holy Spirit will reveal that to you.

JESUS SAYS 198

“So the high priest said, “With the living God looking on, you must tell the truth. Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?” “That is what you say!” Jesus answered. “But I tell all of you, ‘Soon you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right side of God All-Powerful and coming on the clouds of heaven’”

(Matthew 26:63b-64, CEV).

Jesus’ refusal to speak in His defence earlier did nothing for the council who were in search of a charge against Him, a charge that could earn Him the death penalty. And so, the high priest puts Him under oath and asks Him a question about His identity. The oath was to compel Jesus to answer. However, I think it was unnecessary. For Jesus wouldn’t have refused to affirm His identity. Jesus does respond, affirming His

identity. He even tells them that at some future time, or rather eventually, they will catch a vision backing up His claim.

How did they react? *“The high priest then tore his robe and said, “This man claims to be God! We don’t need any more witnesses! You have heard what he said. What do you think?” They answered, “He is guilty and deserves to die!” Then they spit in his face and hit him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, “You think you are the Messiah! So tell us who hit you!”* (verses 65-68, CEV).

They charged Jesus with blasphemy, and all agreed He was guilty and deserved the death penalty. Then they proceeded to assault Him and mock His claim of being Messiah. That’s how they reacted. And it is for the fear of the reaction of others that many who are Christians hide their identities. But if we are taking a cue from Jesus’ example, then we must not be afraid of the reaction of others but instead boldly claim our identities. Peter faulted in this regard.

“While Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, a servant girl came up to him and said, “You were with Jesus from Galilee.” But in front of everyone Peter said, “That isn’t so! I don’t know what you are talking about!” When Peter had gone out to the gate, another servant girl saw him and said to some people there, “This man was with Jesus from Nazareth.” Again Peter denied it, and this

time he swore, “I don’t even know that man!” A little while later some people standing there walked over to Peter and said, “We know you are one of them. We can tell it because you talk like someone from Galilee.” Peter began to curse and swear, “I don’t know that man!” Right then a rooster crowed, and Peter remembered that Jesus had said, “Before a rooster crows, you will say three times you don’t know me.” Then Peter went out and cried bitterly” (Matthew 26:69-75, CEV).

Matthew’s account had revealed earlier that Peter had followed Jesus from a distance, out of curiosity; and now Matthew gives us an update of what was going on with him. He was sitting out in the courtyard and unknown to him, it was time for his test. The first test was presented to him while he was sitting out in the courtyard by a servant girl who walked up to him, identifying him as someone who had been with Jesus. But while everyone was watching, Peter claimed she was lying and feigned ignorance.

Paying no mind to the magnitude of what had just happened but thinking it best to change location, Peter goes outside the gate; but there the second test was presented to him by another servant girl who sees him and identifies him to the people there as one who had been with Jesus. And again, while people watched, Peter denies Jesus and tries hard to be convincing.

But contrary to what Peter thinks, the testing isn't over; there was one more to go. And so, despite all Peter does, not to draw attention to himself, some people still approach him insisting that they had identified Peter based on his Galilean accent; and this time Peter puts in the extra work to sound convincing, vehemently denying ever knowing Jesus. And if he hadn't remembered his promise or Jesus' prediction during the time of the testing, the roosters crow helped jog his memory. Face to face with his failures, Peter couldn't help but leave that location while crying bitterly.

Again I'd say this, it's the fear of how people will react that makes Christians hide their identity and deny Jesus! Take away that fear and replace it with the boldness the Holy Spirit fills a believer with and you'd get a courageous witness. Are you a courageous witness?

Anyway, what I'd like us to focus on is not Peter's failure, I won't scrutinize it; instead, I'd rather we dwell on the setting for Peter's testing. Why? Because we all are human and can repeat Peter's mistake. However if we learn a thing or two about the setting, we can be better prepared not to make the same mistakes as he did.

So where did it all happen? It happened in the courtyard of the high priest's palace where the Lord's enemies were; and Peter, who was a disciple of Jesus and clearly outnumbered, was also. Peter found himself in the wrong company. And in the wrong company, Peter saw

that the temptation to sin seemed unending! And he who was already lacking inner strength, as a result of his prayerlessness, coupled with the fact that he was without encouragement and support from his original group, which comprised other believers, found himself saying and doing all the things he ought not to.

What I'm hoping we've picked from Peter's failure is to avoid a lackadaisical attitude towards temptations. Also, we should:

- Pay attention to God's promptings.
- Become people of prayer.
- Never rely on our own strength.
- Never linger in the wrong company.
- Belong and keep in touch with our tribe, which must comprise other believers.

With temptations, if we fail to stay prepared, then we're prepared to fail.



THEY
CRUCIFIED
JESUS

JESUS SAYS 199

*“Early the next morning all the chief priests and the nation’s leaders met and decided that Jesus should be put to death. They tied him up and led him away to Pilate the governor”
(Matthew 27:1-2, CEV).*

P REVIOUSLY, JESUS HAD been arrested at night and led off to the house of Caiaphas the high priest where He was questioned by the council and eventually accused of blasphemy, a charge grave enough for the death penalty. Now this chapter opens with what happens the morning after. We are informed there was another meeting, perhaps for the sake of formality and to include other members who weren’t present at night. Regardless of what the reason were, the verdict of the meeting in the morning only echoed the one at night. They all decided that Jesus should be put to death.

Only problem was they couldn't put Him to death in isolation, the Roman law stood between them and their goal. Under the Roman law, they weren't authorized to put prisoners to death; only the Romans authority could. For this reason they needed Pilate who was the Roman governor to give the order, and that is why they took Jesus to him.

Matthew doesn't fail to inform us that Jesus was tied up while He was being led away to Pilate. Why did they feel the need to tie Him up? Was it for fear that He would escape? Whatever their reasons were, you and I already know that Jesus had willingly given Himself to them and was not about to use His privileges or power to get out of that situation.

Come to think of it, Jesus had enough time from the night He was arrested till morning to change His mind about God's plan. But He didn't. It couldn't have been easy, but He was determined to see things through. Following God's plan for our lives is hardly ever easy, and the trials we will face will make many change their minds about the whole thing, God's expectation of us is the same as Jesus'; and like Jesus, we're to see it through till the very end. And like I always tell myself, if Jesus could do it, we can too, because the Spirit in Him is the same Spirit at work in us.

“Judas had betrayed Jesus, but when he learned that Jesus had been sentenced to death, he was sorry for what he had done. He returned the 30 silver coins to the chief priests and leaders and said, ‘I have sinned by betraying a man who has never done anything wrong.’ ‘So what? That’s your problem.’ they replied. Judas threw the money into the temple and then went out and hanged himself” (Matthew 27:3-5, CEV).

What was the hidden motive for Judas betraying Jesus? We’ll never know; however, at some point, as Matthew reveals, Judas is remorseful over the results of his actions. And his remorse cause him to try to get things back to how they were. For instance, he returns the money he had earlier received for the betrayal, confesses his sin and declares Jesus’ innocence. But his partners in crime could care less. If Judas thought his remorse, words and actions now would have any positive effect on the verdict passed on Jesus, then he was naive. Those religious leaders had tricked and used him to achieve their sinister goal, and couldn’t be bothered about his afterthought.

Then Judas, upon realizing nothing’s ever going to be the same again, allowed his guilt lead him to commit suicide. The words of James, the half-brother of Jesus, a servant of God comes to mind. He said, *“We are tempted by our own desires that drag us off and trap us. Our desires make us sin, and when sin is finished with us, it leaves us dead”*

(James 1:14-15). Judas' sin ended up causing him not only spiritual death but also physical death. Let's not be fooled, temptation and sin aren't things to be casual about. However, when we are tempted, and if we do sin, our story doesn't have to end the way Judas' did.

Here are a few things you should do differently than Judas: First, confess your sin to God and seek His forgiveness. And if your repentance is genuine, He won't turn you away. He'll forgive you. Not just that, He'll give you the strength you need for the other steps. Second, seek restitution. There are times when our sins affect others. We mustn't overlook their hurt, but seek also their forgiveness. And finally, forgive yourself. Because, if you don't forgive yourself, then God's forgiveness and that of others would lose the impact, and like Judas, you really might end up destroying yourself.

“The chief priests picked up the money and said, “This money was paid to have a man killed. We can’t put it in the temple treasury.” Then they had a meeting and decided to buy a field that belonged to someone who made clay pots. They wanted to use it as a graveyard for foreigners. This is why people still call that place “Field of Blood.” So the words of the prophet Jeremiah came true, “They took the thirty silver coins, the price of a person among the people of Israel. They paid it for a potter’s field, as the Lord had commanded me” (Matthew 27:6-10, CEV).

The chief priests decided the money Judas returned was unfit for the temple treasury because of what it had been used to do. However they failed to see how they were unfit to be called worshipers of God and recognized as religious leaders because of their sin of being the masterminds behind Jesus' arrest, persecutions and soon also His death. As always, they were concerned with the little details while they ignored weightier matters. The unclean money or their unclean heart, which one do you think God would have liked that they paid attention to first? Dear believers, we must not allow our hearts become hardened to the truth, especially when it's staring us in the face. Let's acknowledge it and take the other steps required for genuine repentance.

In the end, the money is used to buy a field which would be used as a graveyard for foreigners. The people called it "Field of Blood" even though I'm not sure they knew fully the history behind the place. Anyway, Matthew rounds off the verses about Judas with a prophecy he says are the words of prophet Jeremiah. But read also Zechariah 11:12-13.

Please note that even though it is written that Matthew quoted Jeremiah's words, some Bible scholars say many original versions read Zechariah, which can be proven. Those who insist on Jeremiah say even if there's no quotation available, it is still possible he had said it. The people knew of it and Matthew quoted from his memory.

JESUS SAYS 200

*“Jesus was brought before Pilate the governor, who asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “Those are your words!” Jesus answered. And when the chief priests and leaders brought their charges against him, he did not say a thing. Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear what crimes they say you have done?” But Jesus did not say anything, and the governor was greatly amazed”
(Matthew 27:11-14, CEV).*

Finally Jesus is before Pilate and he questions Him. But only to the question about His identity does Jesus answer, in the affirmative. When the leaders brought up their (false) charges, He doesn’t respond, and despite being urged by Pilate to

defend Himself, He still doesn't say anything, much to the governor's surprise.

Someone might ask, should we adopt Jesus' silence during times of accusation? In my opinion, Jesus' silence cannot be taken by itself to teach that one must be silent in every such situation. I say this because we know why Jesus was silent. It was wise for Him to do so if He was to achieve His goal. What I do advise is that we submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit's leading. The Holy Spirit works to help us align with God's will. So He'll prompt us, whether we are to just listen and wait for God's vindication or we are to speak up while He works right there and then on the scene to vindicate us.

JESUS SAYS 201

“During Passover the governor always freed a prisoner chosen by the people. At that time a well-known terrorist named Jesus Barabbas was in jail. So when the crowd came together, Pilate asked them, “Which prisoner do you want me to set free? Do you want Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate knew the leaders had brought Jesus to him because they were jealous. While Pilate was judging the case, his wife sent him a message. It said, “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man. I have had nightmares because of him.” But the chief priests and the leaders convinced the crowds to ask for Barabbas to be set free and for Jesus to be killed. Pilate asked the crowd again, “Which of these two men do

*you want me to set free?” “Barabbas!” they shouted. Pilate asked them, “What am I to do with Jesus, who is called the Messiah?” They all yelled, “Nail him to a cross!” Pilate answered, “But what crime has he done?” “Nail him to a cross!” they yelled even louder. Pilate saw that there was nothing he could do and that the people were starting to riot. So he took some water and washed his hands in front of them and said, “I won’t have anything to do with killing this man. You are the ones doing it!” Everyone answered, “We and our own families will take the blame for his death!” Pilate set Barabbas free. Then he ordered his soldiers to beat Jesus with a whip and nail him to a cross”
(Matthew 27:15-26, CEV).*

It’s a long read and a lot seemed to be happening at that time; however, I’d resist the temptation to discuss everything in these verses and instead stick to the one message I believe we mustn’t miss.

One, these verses introduce us to a prisoner and well-known terrorist called Jesus Barabbas who one day finds himself standing side by side with Jesus who is the Messiah. We aren't sure if Jesus Barabbas ever heard of or met Jesus the Messiah prior to that moment. But on that day when they were presented before the crowd, he met Him and realized that if the crowd chose him over Him, he would walk away free. And just like that, in a matter of a few back and forth, the man who Pilate seemed to believe was innocent was to be killed while he set free!

Do you think Barabbas changes his ways afterwards? Although I'm yet to come across any records that say he does, I however believe such an encounter should have a lasting positive effect on him. Anyway, Jesus who is innocent, suffering the fate of Barabbas who is guilty, was a symbol of the work His death would do for all of mankind. Jesus will end up taking our place and suffering the judgment of God on our sins, while we get to receive freedom and a chance at a new life. Every Christian knows this, but not enough non-believers do. This is a reminder of our duty to evangelize.

Two, while reading between the lines, I observed something. When Jesus Barabbas and Jesus the Messiah were put side by side and the crowd was given an opportunity to favour one, the crowd favoured Jesus Barabbas, even though he had done nothing but be a public menace, compared to Jesus the Messiah who had

gone around doing good and healing everyone! The reason Matthew gives for this is that they were under the influence of the chief priests and the leaders.

Now, I want us to relate it to what's happening in our world today. Isn't Jesus still less likely to be favoured by the people of the world despite what He's done for us and all the good He still does? Genuine and authentic Christianity is still in the minority. And now, we can't put the blame on the religious and nation's leaders like back then, we know the resistance Jesus, the church and many Christians face is the work of the devil. And what is the call to action? We must be careful not to waste our time seeking the favour/approval/acceptance of people. We rely only on God's approval and acceptance; and as we continue to do His will, we can be sure of not only His recognition but also His reward.

There is also a counsel for Christians with a bandwagon mentality. The crowd is not always right. You see, the situation we read about backs up my claim. And Christians who continue to be led by what's fashionable or popular run the risk of falling into sin. Let's continue to let only God's Spirit direct/lead us.

“The governor’s soldiers led Jesus into the fortress and brought together the rest of the troops. They stripped off Jesus’ clothes and put a scarlet robe on him. They made a crown out of thorn branches and placed it on his head, and they put a stick in his right hand. The soldiers knelt

down and pretended to worship him. They made fun of him and shouted, "Hey, you king of the Jews!" Then they spit on him. They took the stick from him and beat him on the head with it" (Matthew 27:27-30, CEV).

Jesus had earlier told His disciples that He would be sentenced to death, handed over to foreigners who would make fun of Him, that He would also be beaten and nailed to a cross (See 20:17-19). The verses above reveal Jesus' prediction to have come true. The nailing to the cross happens soon too. And while none of what our Lord and Saviour went through should be trivialized as it is not only a great sacrifice but an expression of His love, I'd like us to pay a closer attention to the mockery He suffered.

Instead of His clothes, a scarlet robe was put on Jesus; a crown was made out of thorn branches and placed on His head, and a stick in His right hand. The soldiers did all of this, including kneeling down, and pretending to worship Him, even choosing to go as far as spitting on Him and beating Him on the head; all because of His claim to royalty. It seemed they were working overtime to prove to Jesus that His claim was false and that He didn't have the power and authority that came with the position of king. But you know what, even though Jesus at that time, physically didn't look like a king, and He seemed to be powerless and at the mercy of the soldiers, His claim wasn't false; and He does have the power and authority no earthly king would ever have. The soldiers could mock all

they wanted, Jesus was exactly who He said He was. It will only take time, and there will be proof to back His claim.

But Jesus isn't the only one who will face mockery. Every Christian will too, at one point or another in our Christian walk. Or, maybe, you're already facing one. Thankfully from Jesus, we know how to deal with such situations. How does Jesus deal with it? He doesn't stop the soldiers from making fun of Him by saying or doing anything. He lets them do and say what they liked. And you know why? I'm sure you're thinking it's for the Scriptures to be fulfilled. Well, yes, but that's not all. It's also because what they did and said couldn't change the truth. It was their fault they couldn't discern the truth. Jesus coped with mockery for the Scriptures to be fulfilled, and we too can cope with mockery, choosing to see it as a means of dying to self; that and also as a way to defeat the enemy who uses mockery as a device to discourage us and separate us from God and His will. We only have to keep believing the truth and not the opinion of others whom the devil has influenced. In time, we will be vindicated before our mockers.

I should add that we are better equipped to deal with mockery when we know the truth, the truth that's in God's word, and the truth that God has said concerning you and the situation you're in.

“When the soldiers had finished making fun of Jesus, they took off the robe. They put his own clothes back on him and led him off to be nailed to a cross. On the way they met a man named Simon who was from Cyrene, and they forced him to carry Jesus’ cross” (Matthew 27:31-32, CEV).

At last the mockery from the soldiers ended, and Jesus’ clothes returned to Him; but as He is led off to be nailed to a cross there’s a need for someone to carry His cross. And the man whom the soldiers chose was named Simon: he was from Cyrene. Cyrene is said to be an ancient Greek city in North Africa, near the coast of Cyrenaica. I think I know what you’re thinking, and I want to believe the same, but there’s been no evidence to prove that Simon was a black man.

Why was there a need for Simon? Despite all Jesus had been through, He was expected to still carry His cross to the place of His crucifixion; but all He had been through was the very reason why the weight of the cross was more than He could bear (Remember, Jesus doesn’t use His privileges or power); thereby providing a need for Simon. Many people don’t seem to pay much mind to Simon’s action because he had been compelled by the soldiers. But it’s good that we do because there’s so much to learn from it.

We already know that as Believers and followers of Jesus, it's required of us to "take up our cross and follow Him" (See Matthew 16:24-26), but there will be times where just like Jesus, we would struggle under the weight of our cross, and need someone to bear our burdens with us. When that time comes we will need a Simon. A Simon is there for us as the situation demands, it could be by upholding us in prayer, being present while we're going through, or sharing their resources with us. Do you have a Simon? If you don't know that you need one, we Christians need each other. So pray to God to give you a Simon.

There are also other times where we are the Simon's others need. And though we have a ton of things on our to-do list, the Holy Spirit will beckon on us to be there for another believer who is struggling and having a hard time. When that time comes, we must take up our roles as Simon very seriously and fulfil it. Simon helped Jesus without knowing how important the work Jesus was about to do really was and how his help played a significant role in it. We too might never know what God is doing with the individuals He sends us to help; and since we can't determine how instrumental our help will be, let's never withhold or trivialize it.

I'm not sure Simon had met Jesus prior to this time or that he believed in Him but I doubt the encounter left him the same. Bible Scholars say his children became Christians. You see, we are not left unrewarded for our

acts of kindness, even our children end up benefiting from them.

“They came to a place named Golgotha, which means ‘Place of a Skull.’ There they gave Jesus some wine mixed with a drug to ease the pain. But when Jesus tasted what it was, he refused to drink it” (Matthew 27:33-34, CEV).

In case you’re wondering why the soldiers would try to help Jesus by giving Him a drink to ease His pain. Bible scholars say it was customary. Drinks like this were given to condemned prisoners, and they likely took it, except Jesus who refused it. And He did so perhaps because He had said He wouldn’t drink any wine again until sometime later in the future with His disciples (See 26:29). But more likely, He refused the drink because He didn’t want the pain to be eased. He wanted to be in His right mind suffering the full penalty of our sins.

Isn’t it amazing that even to this point Jesus remained resolute about fulfilling God’s plan to the letter! I pray in our Christian walk that we be as resolute as Him, refusing anything that could interfere with God’s plan for our lives, no matter how good it seems, in Jesus’ name. Amen!

“The soldiers nailed Jesus to a cross and gambled to see who would get his clothes. Then they sat down to guard

him. Above his head they put a sign that told why he was nailed there. It read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." The soldiers also nailed two criminals on crosses, one to the right of Jesus and the other to his left. People who passed by said terrible things about Jesus. They shook their heads and shouted, "So you're the one who claimed you could tear down the temple and build it again in three days! If you are God's Son, save yourself and come down from the cross!" The chief priests, the leaders, and the teachers of the Law of Moses also made fun of Jesus. They said, "He saved others, but he can't save himself. If he is the king of Israel, he should come down from the cross! Then we will believe him. He trusted God, so let God save him, if he wants to. He even said he was God's Son." The two criminals also said cruel things to Jesus" (Matthew 27:35-44, CEV).

One would think after Jesus was nailed to the cross, all He'd have to deal with would be the pain from the injuries inflicted on Him. But the verses above inform us of the sign that reminded Him of the rejection of the people, the taunting of the people who passed by, the chief priests, the leaders, and the teachers of the Law of Moses, not forgetting the cruel words the two criminals crucified to His right and His left said to Him.

You know what's a sorry sight here? No, it's not Jesus but the religious leaders who decided to kick a man when

he is down. It just wasn't enough for them that Jesus was nailed to a cross. Dear believer, you and I must not emulate them, taunting people during their time of trying? No, it's completely unacceptable, even if they are considered our enemies.

Anyway, in the words the people who passed by and the chief priests, leaders, and teachers of the Law of Moses said to Jesus, therein lies a challenge for Jesus to prove His Sonship by using His miraculous power to save Himself. This reminds me of His testing in Matthew 4. Do you see it? But Jesus, just like back then, doesn't accept the challenge. And we know why; it's not because He isn't the Son of God, but because He is fully committed to seeing God's plan through, accepting their challenge would negate that.

How often do you let the words, taunts, advice (or sometimes actions) of others provoke you to act? Drawing my conclusions from Jesus' case, if this is your usual practice then I dare say, you might not be where God wants you to be. You might not be doing what God wants you to do, and sadly, you might never become who God wants you to become. As Christians, we must be wary of external influences that always want to rule our lives; like Jesus, follow only God's leading.

And I must add, as I conclude, that even when we follow God's leading and trust Him, it can still lead us to hard places, just like what Jesus was facing. Even though

people (and us) would like God to save us from those situations, He hardly does it when we want Him to, and how we want Him to. Even though eventually He does come and save us, He just does it when He feels is best and how He prefers. And if people aren't okay with that, that's on them. For you and I, as believers, we must be okay with it as Jesus was.

JESUS SAYS 202

“At noon the sky turned dark and stayed that way until three o’clock. Then about that time Jesus shouted, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? Which means, “My God, my God, why have you deserted me?” Some of the people standing there heard Jesus and said, “He’s calling for Elijah.” One of them at once ran and grabbed a sponge. He soaked it in wine, then put it on a stick and held it up to Jesus. Others said, “Wait! Let’s see if Elijah will come and save him.”

Once again Jesus shouted, and then he died. At once the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, and rocks split apart. Graves opened, and many of God’s people were raised to life. They left their graves, and after Jesus had risen to life, they went into the holy city, where they were seen by

many people. The officer and the soldiers guarding Jesus felt the earthquake and saw everything else that happened. They were frightened and said, "This man really was God's Son!" Many women had come with Jesus from Galilee to be of help to him, and they were there, looking on at a distance. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of James and John were some of these women"

(Matthew 27:45-56, CEV).

Twice before He died Jesus had shouted "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?* Which means, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" Those who heard Him misunderstood Him, but you who read His words, do you understand Him? Jesus' words are not to be taken to mean that in our time of suffering God deserts us; because, we know or rather we all ought to know that God will continue to love and be with us even when we face hard times. Jesus' cry was peculiar to Him. His assignment was to bear the full penalty for our sins and so

in the time of His suffering and until His death, He was our sin-bearer.

After Jesus dies, a lot of remarkable things happened, even when He resurrects too. And because for many, seeing is believing, Matthew tells of the conversion of an officer and the soldiers who guarded Jesus. This happens after they had felt the earthquake and seen everything else that happened. I should add that ‘seeing is believing’ must not be a phrase adopted by the believer. For us, we believe even when we haven’t seen. What this means is that we don’t need proof to believe God; we believe God even when there’s no proof yet.

The women that came to be of help to Jesus definitely stood out for me! Amongst them were Mary Magdalene whom Jesus had delivered of seven demons (See Mark 16:9), Mary the wife of Clopas (See John 19:25) and mother of James and Joseph, and Salome the wife of Zebedee and mother of James and John. They stand out for me because they wanted to be of help to Jesus when it could have been dangerous for them to be identified with Him, and they weren’t just full of good intentions, they backed it up with action. They were courageously present at the scene of His death, hoping to find ways they could be of service to Him.

How far does your loyalty to Jesus go? Does it end with good intentions or do you walk your talk? These women serve as examples for all Christians.

“That evening a rich disciple named Joseph from the town of Arimathea went and asked for Jesus’ body. Pilate gave orders for it to be given to Joseph, who took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth. Then Joseph put the body in his own tomb that had been cut into solid rock and had never been used. He rolled a big stone against the entrance to the tomb and went away. All this time Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting across from the tomb. On the next day, which was a Sabbath, the chief priests and the Pharisees went together to Pilate. They said, “Sir, we remember what this liar said while he was still alive. He claimed in three days he would come back from death. So please order the tomb to be carefully guarded for three days. If you don’t his disciples may come and steal his body. They will tell the people he has been raised to life, and this last lie will be worse than the first one. Pilate said to them, “All right, take some of your soldiers and guard the tomb as well as you know how.” So they sealed it tight and placed soldiers there to guard it” (Matthew 27:57-66, CEV).

In these verses Matthew introduces us to a wealthy disciple of Jesus named Joseph who according to Bible scholars was a member of the Sanhedrin but whom we have never heard of and can safely assume was a secret disciple. When we earlier talked about secret Christians

we attributed their need for secrecy on their fear of people's reaction to them. I believe this was the case with Joseph who was both a member of the Sanhedrin and a disciple of Jesus. He would have constantly been plagued with the fear of being found out by the Jews.

But Joseph's fear of being found out and persecuted seem to end with the death of Jesus, and in place of fear was now courage, because when he could have got away forever with no one knowing that he was a disciple of Jesus, he steps up and asks Pilate for Jesus' body. His plan was to honour his Lord by burying His body. I'll say this: for as long as we let fear, it will hinder us. But the moment we say no to fear, God fills us with courage, and suddenly we are able to do things for God we thought we'd never be able to do! In what way is fear hindering you today? When do you intend to say no to it?

Some women, Mary Magdalene and an unidentified Mary were the known followers of Jesus who witnessed His burial; where were the rest?

Joseph had approached Pilate for a favour and it was granted; but he wasn't the only one that approached Pilate. The next day, a Sabbath, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to meet Pilate for a favour too. In their speech to Pilate, they called Jesus a liar, maligned the character of His disciples and attempted to hinder the fulfilment of prophecy. Again, these were religious men who were too comfortable in their roles as villains in

Jesus' story even after His death. Their character and actions are not to be emulated/repeated by anyone who claims to be a Christian.

But thankfully Pilate grants their request and allows them seal the tomb tightly, and even place soldiers there to guard it. I say “thankfully” because how else would they be able to see how weak their security paled when compared to the power of God? Doesn't this encourage you to have more faith in God's power?



TRIUMPHANT RESURRECTION

“The Sabbath was over, and it was almost daybreak on Sunday when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. Suddenly a strong earthquake struck, and the Lord’s angel came down from heaven.

He rolled away the stone and sat on it. The angel looked as bright as lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards shook from fear and fell down, as though they were dead. The angel said to the women, “Don’t be afraid! I know you are looking for Jesus, who was nailed to a cross. He isn’t here! God has raised him to life, just as Jesus said he would. Come, see the place where his body was lying. Now hurry! Tell his disciples he has been raised to life and is on his way to Galilee. Go there, and you will see him. This is what I came to tell you”

(Matthew 28:1-7, CEV).

IT WAS FINALLY resurrection morning; in fact, Jesus was already resurrected, but no one knew about it yet. However it would not remain a secret any longer. God would make sure of it. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary visited Jesus’ tomb but what they encountered there was nothing like they expected! An earthquake, an angel, the heavy stone rolled away by the angel and the shock the guards at the tomb had! It was a lot to take in. As if that wasn’t enough, the angel then gives them the most shocking news! Jesus has

been resurrected! And there's proof too! His body is no longer in the tomb! Then finally, the angel gives them an assignment not forgetting to include where Jesus could be seen. Of the many things the angel said, one thing stands out for me: *"God has raised him to life, just as Jesus said he would."*

Remember before His arrest, suffering and death, Jesus had foretold His resurrection and expressed faith in it. Now, in the words of the angel, we learn God had fulfilled it! For those Christians that scoff at prophecy, doesn't this make you want to start taking God's word a little more seriously? Jesus' resurrection is enough proof that if God reveals it/says it, He'll surely work to make it happen. We just have to have faith.

That being said, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary didn't just encounter all of this by chance; it was all arranged by God. He knew they would go there because of their dedication to Jesus. And since He needed a witness about Jesus' resurrection!, He decided it would be them. I don't know about you, but if I lived back then, I would desire to be in the position of these women. Even now, I know that if I am dedicated to Jesus, like them, I would get to experience things I can't even begin to imagine, I know that if I stay dedicated to Jesus and make myself available to Him, He would use me for His glory. Makes me wonder how dedicated I am right now to Him. And you too, how dedicated are you to Him?

JESUS SAYS 203

*“The women were frightened and yet very happy, as they hurried from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and greeted them. They went near him, held on to his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid! Tell my followers to go to Galilee. They will see me there”
(verses 8-10).*

On their way to carry out the instructions from the angel, which was originally from God, the women meet Jesus! What privilege! They see our resurrected Lord. He speaks to them. They move close to Him and touch Him. They even worshipped Him. I can’t even imagine the emotions they felt. However, the encounter doesn’t end without Jesus instructing the women to tell His followers to meet with

Him in Galilee. Why? Wasn't it enough that the angel had given them this instruction? Did Jesus Himself have to say it too?

The last time we read of the disciples, ten had fled at Jesus' arrest. Peter had denied the Lord three times and Judas had committed suicide. Jesus Himself instructing the women to ask them to meet Him was probably His way of reassuring them that He held no grudges against them for deserting and Peter for denying Him, and was indeed looking forward to being reunited with them.

Jesus' attitude towards the disciples shortcomings is the same attitude He has towards ours! So, on the days you feel like you've let down Jesus, make sure to remember that He is willing to forgive you and His desire is to be reunited with you. So, don't stay away from Him when you feel His Spirit is leading you back to Him.

“While the women were on their way, some soldiers who had been guarding the tomb went into the city. They told the chief priests everything that had happened. So the chief priests met with the leaders and decided to bribe the soldiers with a lot of money. They said to the soldiers, “Tell everyone that Jesus’ disciples came during the night and stole his body while you were asleep. If the governor hears about this, we will talk to him. You won’t have anything to worry about.” The soldiers took the money and did what they were told. The people of

Judea still tell each other this story” (Matthew 28:11-15, CEV).

In case you're wondering why the soldiers reported the events at the tomb to the chief priests, it's because they were the ones who had sought out security detail from Pilate for the guarding of Jesus' tomb. It was to be expected that they would give them a report. The chief priests however refused to admit they had been wrong about a lot of things but instead chose to continue in their path of wickedness and depravity. Upon hearing the news, their wicked minds formed a plan. They joined forces with other leaders and decided to use bribery to deal with the situation. And just like that, the soldiers who could have been converted, borne witness to the truth, and even ended with an eternal reward, were lured away by money. They joined the religious leaders as opposition against the truth. They spread lies about Jesus' disciples. And when they worried about how their lie might implicate them before Pilate, they were assured Pilate could be persuaded to side with them too. If you're wondering if their lies had any effect, Matthew tells us the people of Judea still tell each other the story the soldiers spread.

From the actions of the soldiers, a very important topic arises. Bribery. Going by what we've read we know that bribery happens not only in the secular but can also

happen in the church, among ‘Christians’, but Christians ought not to give bribes or receive bribes. Because a bribe was given and received, many people continue to reject the good news of Jesus and His finished work. Surely those who gave the bribe and those who received it will end up facing the judgment of God for their actions. But aside from the example in the verses above, Scriptures contain various verses that warn us against bribes. It is best we honour God’s word and live up to His expectations of us.

JESUS SAYS 204

“Jesus’ eleven disciples went to a mountain in Galilee, where Jesus had told them to meet him. They saw him and worshiped him, but some of them doubted. Jesus came to them and said:

I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth! Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you. I will be with you always, even until the end of the world”

(Matthew 28:16- 20, CEV).

The devil was busy, so was Jesus busy too. Finally reunited with the eleven disciples, even though some of them had doubted His resurrection, He informs them of His new status, gives them the great commission and assures them He would always be with them.

Someone might ask, Why didn't Jesus do anything about the absurd lies of the chief priests and the soldiers?

Who says He didn't? He just didn't do it the way we'd have liked! What do you think happens as the disciples of Jesus (including us) obey the great commission? We're partnering with Jesus in countering lies with the truth. And what do you think happens when more and more people learn of the truth and embrace it? More witnesses for the truth are raised. God's always working! Sometimes, we just need to look closely to see it.

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR



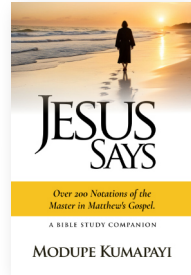
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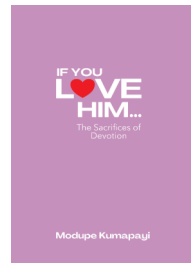
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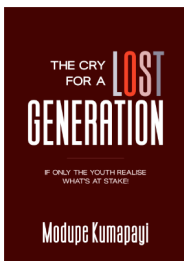
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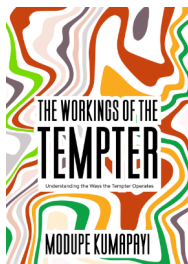
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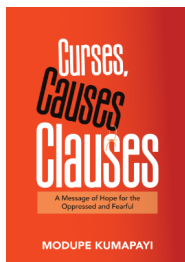
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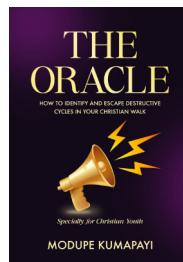
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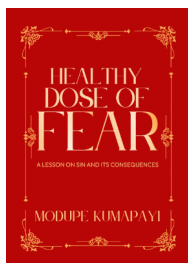
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Jesus Says is void of seminary or theological sloganeering; its simple and easy delivery style opens Matthew's Gospel to everyone, at whatever level of spiritual understanding, to greater acceptance of Jesus' life and ministry.

The Author

MODUPE KUMAPAYI believes strongly that God has impressed upon her heart to share through her writings the knowledge she has gained in her walk with God and the insight she has been given in her study of God's Word. Her deepest desire is to arm people with the truth; and her greatest fulfilment comes from watching people thrive spiritually.

