

"LOOKING TO JESUS, THE
AUTHOR AND FINISHER OF OUR
FAITH..."

This isn't a suggestion, or limited to one
aspect of Jesus' life. If we truly want to
be accepted by God, we must look to
Jesus in everything He did, for
everything we do.

This volume is designed to meditate
on the life of Jesus from His
genealogy to His great invitation.

LOOKING TO JESUS

CHOWNING



Looking to
JESUS

JOHN CHOWNING

Looking To
JESUS

John Chowning

Looking to Jesus is copyright ©2020 by John Chowning. All rights reserved. This work (whether in whole or in part) may not be reproduced in any way (print, digital, audio, photocopy, or any other medium) without the expressed written permission of the author.

Read more from the author at:
www.ReadTheWordToday.com

DEDICATION

This book is joyously dedicated to my mentor in preaching, brother W. Terry Varner and his lovely wife Lillie.

Thank you, Terry for a lifetime of wisdom packed into three years of laboring together. Like so many other preachers, you have been a great blessing to me.

Thank you, Miss Lillie for your warm and generous hospitality. You have been a great encouragement to me.

Foreword

John Chowning serves as the preacher for the Algood church of Christ in Algood, TN. Since leaving full time preaching in 2017 and doing full time mission work it has been our good pleasure to attend the Algood congregation when we are not fundraising and reporting to churches.

Carolyn and I have been greatly blessed by John's Bible classes and sermons. His lessons are filled with God's Word and application is made to those listening.

I have also been impressed with his writing ability. In a time when so many preachers use the cut and paste method for their church bulletins, John takes the time each week to study, research, and write very timely articles. I look forward each week to reading them. He always has something worthwhile to say.

This book is a collection of John's church bulletin articles written in 2017. The theme that year was "Looking to Jesus".

I encourage you to take the time to read and study John's articles on this great theme. I believe you will benefit greatly from this book and commend it to you.

Ronald D. Gilbert

International Bible Teaching Ministries, Director

Preface

In January of 2017, I began laboring together with the Algood church of Christ. The elders had chosen for that year the congregational theme of “Looking to Jesus”. Because of this, the following articles were written and initially published in the church bulletin.

Beginning with the genealogy of Jesus and working as best as possible in chronological order, the following material considers matters which Matthew, Mark, and Luke record. It does not address the great sermon on the mount, or anything recorded in John’s gospel. (If the Lord wills, material on those portions of Scripture may be published later.) Jesus’ great invitation in Matthew 11:28-30 is the terminus for this volume.

When writing, my focus was to address the question of “What spiritually beneficial truths can be gleaned from the historical facts recorded?” A quick perusal of 1 Corinthians 11:1-13 will demonstrate that this approach has inspired, apostolic authority behind it. I heartily recommend it whenever you are engaged in a study of God’s word.

My prayer is that your time invested in reading this volume on the author and finisher of faith will be richly rewarded.

Table of Contents

Looking to Jesus...	
And His Genealogy.....	1
And His Unique Birth.....	3
At His Birth.....	6
And the Home in which He was Raised.....	9
As a Teenager.....	12
At His Baptism.....	15
In the Wilderness.....	18
On a Pinnacle of the Temple.....	21
On an Exceeding High Mountain.....	24
In Nazareth's Synagogue.....	27
And His First Recorded Bible Class.....	30
And His Move to Capernaum.....	33
And His Call of Four Fishermen.....	36
And His Second Call of Simon Peter.....	39
And His Priorities.....	42
And His Authority.....	45
The Great Physician.....	48
And His Call of Levi.....	51
And His Critics.....	54
And His Conflicts with His Critics—1.....	56
And His Conflicts with His Critics—2.....	59
And His Conflicts with His Critics—3.....	62
And His Conflicts with His Critics—4.....	65
And His Conflicts with His Critics—5.....	68
When Life is Unfair.....	71
In Prayer All Night.....	74
And His Call of the Apostles.....	77
And His Basics of Fellowship.....	81

And His Sermon on Discipleship	84
And The Centurion's Great Faith	86
And His Greatness	90
And His Response to John	93
And His Description of a Great Preacher.....	95
And His True Statements about the Kingdom of Heaven.....	99
And His Explanation of Why Some Refuse Baptism	104
And Fake News	107
And His Somber Words about Impenitence.....	111
And His Great Invitation.....	113

Looking to Jesus and His Genealogy

I am not a genealogy buff. I believe I already know enough fruits and nuts on my family tree without having to look for more among my ancestors. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, devotes several pages to genealogical lists. Most Bible readers perform a “pass over” when they come to passages such as Genesis 10–11 and 1st Chronicles 1–9. But, have you ever stopped to consider the tremendous value these lists—especially the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3—have?

“The book of the generation of Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1) demonstrates that **God keeps His word**. About 2,000 years prior to the birth of Jesus, God promised Abraham: “And in thy seed shall the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). About 1,000 years prior to the birth of the babe in Bethlehem, Jehovah promised David: “And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Samuel 7:12-13). The passing of time did not erode the promises made by the eternal God. One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day (2 Peter 3:8); therefore, the promises He made to David and Abraham were not forgotten or revoked. Because “the testimony of the Lord is sure” (Psalm 19:7), the Lord is not slack with His word (2 Peter 3:9).

“And Judas (Judah) begat Phares and Zara of Tamar (Tamar)...and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias (Uriah)” (Matthew 1:3, 6) documents that **God used sinners to bring the Savior and salvation to sinners**. Like almost every family’s genealogy, Jesus’ ancestors had some less-than-honorable births—the widower Judah fathered twin sons with his widowed daughter-in-law (Genesis 38) and David seduced an-

other man's wife (2 Samuel 11). These events emphasize a very simple, yet profound, truth—the only choice God had for bringing the Savior and salvation to humanity was to use fallen humans. In addition, He not only used sinners to bring His Son and the gospel of salvation into this world, He has also chosen to use fallen humanity to spread the gospel of His Son to a lost and dying world. The treasure of the gospel has been entrusted to “earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7), “for we are laborers together with God” (1 Corinthians 3:9).

“...and Achim begot Eliud; and Eliud begat Eleazar...” (Matthew 1:14–15) indicates that **God knows those who are His** (2 Timothy 2:19). The only place in the world where a person can read of this man Eliud is here in the genealogy of Jesus. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* contains the following entry on him: “An ancestor of Jesus, four generations before Joseph (Matthew 1:15)” (2:938). Secular and even Bible historians would state that this man whose name means “God is my praise” is an obscure person in history. Yet, God knew him and knew him by name. God knows when he was born, when he died, and where he is buried. No person in human history is nameless or obscure to the omniscient I AM.

“And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ” (Matthew 1:16) subtly testifies to **the miraculous conception of Jesus**. Thirty-nine times the word “begat” appears in the genealogy of Jesus. Each usage identifies the human, biological father of the son born in this genealogical chain. However, when describing the appearance of Jesus in this book of generations, there is no human father identified. The reason is simple: Joseph, the husband of Mary, did not begat Jesus; the Holy Spirit did (Luke 1:35). In addition, when penning the phrase “of whom was born Jesus,” Matthew uses a feminine singular pronoun (hes), not the masculine plural pronoun (hon). This indicates that there was one human—a female—involved in the

birth of Jesus, not two (a male and a female). This is in perfect harmony with the promised “seed of woman” found in Genesis 3:15 and the prophesied son of a virgin found in Isaiah 7:14.

The genealogy of Jesus verifies the fact that **the gospel is not comprised of “cunningly devised fables”** (2 Peter 1:16). What a difference between a fairy tale’s “Once upon a time...” and the gospel’s “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness... (Luke 3:1–2)! What a difference between the genealogy of Santa Claus and the genealogy of Jesus!

As Christians, we should not give heed to endless genealogies (1 Timothy 1:4), but that does not mean there is nothing to learn from the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Looking to Jesus and His Unique Birth

Because the divine mandate is that “at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses shall the matter be established” (Deuteronomy 19:15), it should not surprise us that two gospel writers record the unique birth of Jesus—Matthew and Luke. Both contain the fundamental historical facts; each contains supplemental facts that are unique to his gospel. To do justice to each account, consideration will be given to Matthew’s account, and then to Luke’s record. From Matthew’s gospel, let’s consider how the following things make Jesus’ birth unique and different from every other birth in human history.

His birth is unique because Jesus’ conception was a miracle. “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his

mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:18–20). Since the Garden of Eden, babies have been conceived in the same way as described in Genesis 4:1—“And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain.” Even conceptions which came out of due season—like Isaac’s (Genesis 21:1–2; Romans 4:19) and John the Baptist’s (Luke 1:7, 24)—still occurred according to the natural order of being begotten by a human father and a birth by a child’s mother. But, not Jesus! His mother conceived while a virgin, before her marriage to Joseph was consummated. In fact, she remained a virgin until after the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:25). The sons and daughters she gave birth to after Jesus (cf. Matthew 13:55–56) were not conceived miraculously.

Jesus’ birth is unique because of its purpose. Matthew declares: “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins” (1:21). All children are special. “Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Psalm 127:3). However, no other child in human history has ever been born for the purpose of saving humanity from its sins.

Even prior to His birth, it is abundantly clear that Jesus’ mission on earth was spiritual in nature, not physical. His very name—Jesus (“Jehovah is salvation”)—was designed to proclaim the spiritual focus and purpose of His life. At the beginning of His ministry, John the Baptist identifies Him as “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Though the false doctrine of premillennialism contradicts this truth, it remains a fact

that NEVER in Jesus' life was He on this earth to establish a worldly kingdom. He came to save His people from their sins by destroying the works of the devil (1 John 3:8)—i.e. the guilt and consequences of sin.

Jesus' birth is unique because it fulfilled prophecy. “Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS” (Matthew 1:22–25). Isaiah's prophecy was not fulfilled soon after it was spoken. It was not fulfilled within Isaiah's life nor the lifetime of King Ahaz, to whom it was spoken. Approximately seven hundred years passed before this unique birth occurred. Yet, the seed of woman, promised in Genesis 3:15, was born and, as Matthew will demonstrate by the end of his gospel, He did bruise the serpent's head (a fatal blow) while being bruised by the serpent on the heel (a non-fatal blow). So complete was His victory that Matthew's final, recorded words of Jesus begin with the declaration: “All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth...” (Matthew 28:18).

No religious book in human history has anything remotely comparable to the Bible's predictive prophecies. No person in human history has had anything remotely comparable to the over 300 predictive prophecies made about and fulfilled by the One named “Jehovah is salvation.” Of this salvation, Peter wrote: “the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now re-

ported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into” (1 Peter 1:10–12).

Jesus’ birth is unique because of His birth announcements.

Loving parents have sent cards, made postings on social media, and even taken out newspaper ads to announce the arrival of their bundle of joy. But, no one else has ever been able to use a star (Matthew 2:1–2), the angel of the Lord (Luke 2:9–12), or a multitude of heavenly host (Luke 2:13) to announce a child’s birth! What a fitting anthem of praise was sung at His birth—“Glory to God in the highest”—when those “things the angels desire to look into” were finally introduced into human history. “Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable (indescribable, inestimable, incomparable, inexpressible) gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15)!

Looking to Jesus at His Birth

Since the previous consideration focused upon Matthew’s record of Jesus’ unique birth, now we will focus upon Luke’s account (chapter 2) and the glorious portrait of Jehovah it contains. Bursting from the canvas of Luke’s gospel is a dazzling depiction of...

—**The sovereignty and providence of God.** “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David)” (verses 1–4). Without this decree with its exact requirements at this exact time, Mary (who lived in Nazareth, about 70 miles north) would have never given birth to her firstborn child in Bethlehem (the exact place prophesied in Micah 5:2). Just as the crucifixion of Jesus occurred at the exact hour His Father

had determined (see John 2:4, 7:30, 8:20, 12:23, 17:1), so too His birth was the result of God's precise and perfect providence and absolute sovereignty. Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man in the world at that time, was nothing more than a providential pawn in the hands of the Sovereign, Jehovah.

—**The faithfulness of God.** “he was of the house and lineage of David” (verse 4). From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures resoundingly and repeatedly testify of God's unswerving faithfulness to His word. God had told David: “And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Samuel 7:12–13). The angel Gabriel informed Mary that Jesus was going to be conceived in her womb and that “the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:32–33). God gave his word to David, a thousand years passed, and God remained faithful to His word.

—**The ways of God.** “And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid” (verses 6–9). God's Anointed One was not born in a palace or a mansion, but a stable and laid in a feeding trough. The first human witnesses were not the wise, or mighty, or noble. Why? Because “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things

which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence” (1 Corinthians 1:27–29). The first humans invited to see the Lamb of God were shepherds keeping watch over their own flocks. Truly, man’s ways are not God’s ways “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than ways” (Isaiah 55:9).

—**The amazing love of God for all humanity.** “And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.” (verses 10–11). Both Jewish shepherds and Gentile wise men (Matthew 2:1–11) received heavenly announcements of Jesus’ birth. He is the Savior of all humanity. He came to reconcile both Jews and Gentiles back to God (Ephesians 2:16). The mystery revealed to the apostles and prophets is that in Christ Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs of God, of the same spiritual body (the church), and equal partakers of all spiritual blessings in Christ (cf. Ephesians 3:1–6; 1:3). Because “God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:4–7). Yes, God SO loved the world!!

—**The glory of God.** “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (verses 13–14). AMEN!

Looking to Jesus and the Home in which He was Raised

By worldly standards, not one of the gospel writers wrote an acceptable account of Jesus' life—neither Mark nor John have even a word about the first thirty years of His life; Matthew and Luke use only two chapters apiece to record anything about Jesus' birth and formative years prior to His baptism; and, all four writers use at least one-fourth of their gospel to chronicle the final week of Jesus' life. However, this should not come as a surprise because man's ways are not God's ways. Although the New Testament penmen do not record everything that might satisfy every human's curiosity about the life of Jesus prior to the beginning of His ministry, what it does record is worthy of serious and sober consideration. Consider these three truths:

Truth # 1: The home in which Jesus was raised was NOT a single parent home. Jehovah had the “perfect opportunity” to put His stamp of approval on this “alternative” to His divine model for the home. Unlike any other child in human history, Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary without a human father. She was a “single mother” in the most unique sense. However, the conception of Jesus did not occur until after “his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph” (Matthew 1:18). Jehovah could have done this at any time He chose. Note that He chose to do it after the espousal, not before. Also note that when Joseph “was minded to put her away” (Matthew 1:19), thus making Jesus a child in a single parent home, Jehovah's angel “appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:20). Though single parent homes are politically correct and wildly popular with feminists, they are not as God would have them. Because His parents were not wealthy (cf. Luke 2:24; Leviticus 12:8), there were many things Jesus did without in the home in which He grew

up, but one thing that Jehovah made sure that He had as a child was a father and a mother who were married to each other.

Truth # 2: The home in which Jesus was raised was permeated by submission to God and His revealed will. A Bible reader would need to have lots of help to not see this when reading: “And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days of her purification **according to the law of Moses** were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; **(as it is written in the law of the Lord,** Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) and to offer a sacrifice according to **that which is said in the law of the Lord,** A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons... And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him **after the custom of the law...** And when they had performed all things **according to the law of the Lord,** they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth” (Luke 2:21–24, 27, 39).

The instructions of the law of the Lord and the customs of the law given through Moses were authoritative in the lives of Joseph and Mary. In addition, note how Luke subtly informs us of their commitment to obeying every jot and tittle of God’s Word when he writes: “His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover” (Luke 2:41). From the first feast after Jesus’ birth onward the sons of Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem for the Passover. Why? Because God said: “Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto me in the year... Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord GOD... Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles: and they shall not appear before the LORD empty” (Exodus 23:14, 17; Deuteronomy 16:16). Notice that none of these Old Testament passages places an age

limit on the males who are expected to attend these feasts. Because Joseph and Mary had at least four sons and two daughters after Jesus (cf. Matthew 13:55–56), the fact that they went to Jerusalem from Nazareth (about 70 miles away) every year as commanded is another indication of their determined commitment to obedience. What godly parents Jesus had!

Truth # 3: The home in which Jesus was raised was dedicated to the spiritual, physical, and mental development of its children. In this home, the record states “the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). Because of His parents’ obedience to God’s Word we are not surprised that Jesus grew spiritually. The goal of their spiritual instruction was that He would love the Lord God with all His heart, all His soul, and all His strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). Therefore, He was taught diligently when He sat in the house, when He walked by the way, when He laid down, and when He rose up (cf. Deuteronomy 6:7). Like an olive plant (Psalm 128:3)—which requires years of tender and protective nurturing—Jesus developed and thrived in the Nazareth home of Joseph and Mary.

Almost seventy years ago, Baylus B. McKinney wrote the beautiful song “God, Give Us Christian Homes.” Its lyrics include the following: “Homes where the Bible is loved and taught, Homes where the Master’s will is sought, Homes crowned with beauty Thy love hath wrought...Homes where the father is true and strong, Homes that are free from the blight of wrong, Homes that are joyous with love and song...Homes where the mother, in queenly quest, strives to show others Thy way is best, Homes where the Lord is an honored guest...Homes where the children are led to know Christ in His beauty who loves them so, Homes where the altar fires burn and glow; God, give us Christian homes; God, give us Christian homes.”

The home in which Jesus was raised was such a home. Is yours?

Looking to Jesus as a Teenager

There are very few, if any, people who have found adolescence—the transition period between childhood and adulthood—to be the best years of their lives. Hollywood usually portrays this period as an acceptable time for promiscuity, defiance, rudeness, self-absorption, narcissism, bitterness, lawlessness, and indulgence. Although the New Testament does not have an extensive record about Jesus in His adolescent years, Luke chronicles enough for us to get a clear understanding of what Jesus was like as a teenager. He writes: “Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it. But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day’s journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him. And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business? And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them. And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her

heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:41–52).

As a teenager, Jesus took personal responsibility for His relationship to God. The fact that Jesus was twelve years old (v. 42) is significant. Even today among the Jews this is the age in which a Jewish male has his “Bar mitzvah.” By translation this term literally means “son of the commandment.” The tradition of a “Bar mitzvah” arose to indicate that a Jewish male was no longer considered a child of his mother or father but is now a son of the Law, and thus responsible to God for his obedience to the commandments given through Moses. The reason Jesus “tarried behind in Jerusalem” (v. 43) was because of His keen interest in spiritual things and the urgent sense of personal responsibility to God (“I must be about my father’s business”—v. 49). His question to His parents—“How is it ye sought me?”—was not sarcastic or snide; it was designed to hopefully shine the light on the obvious—If He was the son of the Law (physically at age 12) and the Son of God (spiritually by conception), then where else could or would you expect Him to be than in the temple, i.e. about His father’s business?

As a teenager, Jesus was responsible and trustworthy. The fact that Joseph and His mother supposed that Jesus would be travelling with them somewhere in the crowd and went an entire day before they started looking for Him (v. 44) suggests that they had great confidence in Him that He would be where He ought to be. This indicates that Jesus had lived the first twelve years of His life as a responsible and trustworthy individual. This also helps to explain why Joseph and Mary had such anxiety of heart. When someone who is responsible, dependable, and trustworthy disappears, there is usually something dreadfully wrong! What fears must have overwhelmed His mother’s heart during those two days that were spent traveling and searching.

As a teenager, Jesus was respectful to others and capable of conversing with adults. “after three days they found Him in the

temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions” (v. 46). From the text it is unclear exactly how long Jesus conversed with these learned men; what is quite clear is that Jesus was capable of both listening and talking to adults. Whether He was talking to the men in the temple or responding to His mother, there is no hint of being disrespectful in any way. Though the Son of God, He honored His (step)father and mother, even when He was talking to them.

As a teenager, Jesus lived in submission to His parents. Luke is very clear that Jesus’ parents did not understand everything about Him (v. 50). Neither this fact nor the fact that Jesus did not have perfect parents was an acceptable excuse for disobeying either of them while He lived under their roof. Of special note is the fact that Luke uses a present middle participle in verse 51. Therefore, “was subject unto them” does not fully capture what is written; He “habitually, continually chose to subject Himself to them” is a closer to what Luke intended. There were no wars of will between parents and offspring; there was no defiance or “you can’t make me” attitude in Jesus during His adolescence. Jesus exemplified exactly what God said and expects when it is written: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1). It remains right even when one is in his/her teens.

As a teenager, Jesus actively pursued His mental, physical, spiritual, and social development (v. 52). Unlike an athlete today who can excel at a sport but cannot write or read his name, Jesus was a well-rounded person. He developed Himself mentally, not just in knowledge but especially in the realm of wisdom (i.e. seeing the world as God sees it). He developed Himself physically by taking care of His body through a proper and balanced diet, physical exercise, proper rest, and avoidance of those substances that are destructive to it. He developed Himself spiritually. He developed and cultivated the good and godly habits of prayer and worship. He memorized Scripture. He hungered and thirsted for righteousness.

And, He developed Himself socially. He practiced the Golden Rule by using manners, being responsible, and living unselfishly.

While it is true that Luke's record of Jesus as a teenager is more portrait size than mural size, there still is much to be seen and gleaned from it.

Looking to Jesus at His Baptism

When Jesus was about thirty years of age (Luke 3:23), John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness of Judea (Matthew 3:1). He was the Messenger of the Lord prophesied by Malachi (in Malachi 3:1) and the Voice prophesied by Isaiah (in Isaiah 40:3–5). His message demanded fruitful repentance (Luke 3:8, 13–14) and baptism for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4). He was brutally blunt in his rebuke of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Luke 3:7–9). He warned all of the wrath of God (Matthew 3:8) and spoke of One whose authority and ability was vastly superior to his (Luke 3:16–17). Those who were baptized by him in the Jordan River did so while confessing their sins (Matthew 3:16).

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him” (Matthew 3:13–15). “Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21–22).

There was no stern, thundering rebuke, or condemnation of sin when John saw Jesus. There was no delineation of the fruits of repentance that needed to be found in Jesus' life. There was prayer, not confession of sin, on Jesus' lips when He was baptized. In fact,

when Jesus approached, John desired to go from being the baptizer to being the one baptized! What an extraordinary event this was in John's brief ministry and, ultimately, in human history. Consider how the following four things make it so extraordinary:

The baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of His ministry of reconciliation. Just as water baptism completes one's spiritual new birth (John 3:3, 5) and allows one to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4) because "old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17), so Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of a new portion of His life on this earth. With His birth in Bethlehem, Jesus identified Himself with innocent humanity. With His baptism in the Jordan, Jesus identified Himself with sinful humanity. Isaiah's prophecy that "he was numbered with the transgressors" (53:12) was not only true at His death, it was also true at His baptism. Though He had no sin, He still submitted Himself to John's baptism for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4). It is interesting to also note that Jesus' earthly ministry of reconciliation that began with a baptism in water ended with another baptism—one of unimaginable suffering and anguish (Luke 12:50).

The baptism of Jesus demonstrated His humble and obedient spirit. Oftentimes around Thanksgiving Day in America, television camera crews will capture footage of some politician or celebrity who had gone to a local homeless shelter or soup kitchen and spent a few hours there posing during this prearranged photo op. Once the bright lights of the camera crew disappear, the politician or celebrity leaves as well. Jesus did not show up on the banks of the Jordan River for a photo op. Though He was mightier than John, though John was not worthy to bear Jesus' shoes (Matthew 3:11) or even unlatch His sandals (Luke 3:16) because of Jesus' pre-existence (John 1:30), John baptized Jesus. Why? Because of Jesus' humble and obedient spirit. It is this lowliness of mind

which does nothing through selfish ambition or conceit that is to be in all who are in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:3–5).

The baptism of Jesus displays His relentless commitment to righteousness. Jesus’ response to John’s objections over His baptism was: “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Though Jesus was sinless, His focus was on what God had commanded. Since “all thy commandments are righteousness” (Psalm 119:172), Jesus was determined to obey it. “He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous...whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God” (1 John 3:7, 10). Jesus was passionate about righteousness. He was always hungering and thirsting for it. In the two earliest recorded statements of Jesus, we see quite clearly that He sought first the kingdom of God (Luke 2:49) and His righteousness (Matthew 3:15). The facts that He travelled at least 30 miles (probably on foot) to be baptized by John and that He was baptized even though He had not sinned, manifests clearly His relentless and passionate commitment to righteousness.

The baptism of Jesus confirms His identity. Not only did the voice from heaven affirm the identity of Jesus, the one baptizing Him testified that this is the Son of God (John 1:34) sent to be the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). John the Baptist explained how he knew such to be true: “And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” (John 1:31–33). Since God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), we can know that we know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Looking to Jesus in the Wilderness

The devil prowls about like a lion seeking to devour his prey (1 Peter 5:8). If unsuccessful in this way, The Adversary also seeks to inflict spiritual damage more subtly by taking advantage of us through his carefully thought out and planned exploitation of our weaknesses and strengths (2 Corinthians 2:11). Sin occurs whenever Satan is successful in drawing us away from the safety of God's word via human desire and then enticing us to take the baited hook of temptation (James 1:14). Just like the case with mother Eve, Satan seeks to beguile (i.e. thoroughly deceive) us through his subtlety so that our fellowship with God is destroyed (2 Corinthians 11:3). In each of the temptations recorded in Matthew four, Jesus heard Satan's smooth words and subtle suggestions, yet He resisted them. Let's see if any of these suggestions found in in Matthew 4:1–4 sound familiar. If they do, we should take utmost care to note how Jesus resisted Satan's subtle suggestions.

“Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward hungry. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

Suggestion # 1: Prove yourself. (Demonstrate the accuracy of God's declaration at your baptism by doing something miraculous.) Given the construction in the original text, Satan's words were not designed to cast doubt on Jesus' Sonship (God had just verbally stated such—Matthew 3:17); instead the tempter was suggesting to Jesus what He should do. His temptation is more accurately understood with the translation of “since.” “Since you are the Son of God,” prove it! This suggestion is explicitly repeated at

least two more times during Jesus' ministry (in Matthew 12:38 and Matthew 27:41–42).

How powerful is the challenge of a dare! In response to this suggestion, Jesus proved that Sonship is not demonstrated simply by miracles; it also demands absolute obedience. Jesus Himself said: “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:21–23).

Suggestion # 2: Use your position/power for personal benefit. (Surely being the Son of God has some perks!) Can you imagine having unlimited miraculous powers and NEVER once using them for your own personal benefit (even when nobody is around!)? Secular historians have documented repeatedly in humanity's timeline the truism that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Even our beloved country has a significant number of its citizens who feel that the widespread corruption found in our government needs to be drained from our political swamp. Power has corrupted.

How enticing is the illicit “perks” of power and position! In response to this diabolic suggestion, it should be noted that Jesus remained focused on using His power and position to glorify God. He was not opposed to using His miraculous power to satisfy human hunger (He fed 5,000+ and 4,000+ that way); however, His good works were always done to glorify God (Matthew 5:16), never to benefit Himself.

Suggestion # 3: God will make an exception for YOU. (Since you are the Son of God, surely God will show you some favoritism/cut you some slack.) Have you noticed how often the seeds of “self-esteem” have produced the noxious crop of an enti-

tlement mentality in our society? Everyone nowadays, it seems, is entitled to be the exception to any rule, regulation, or law because of how unique and wonderfully special they are. If such were legitimate, then Jesus—the only begotten Son of God—would have to be at the top of the list of exceptions. He wasn't.

How pleasing is the possibility of being an exception! In response to this suggestion, it should be noted that Jesus never lost sight of the fact that God is no respecter of persons (Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11); He has no list of exceptions. If the Father would not excuse/ignore sin in His only begotten Son, why do we believe that He will when we sin? “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18).

Suggestion # 4: Sometimes you just must take matters into your own hands. (Surely God does not want you to suffer. How can He be a God of love who is trustworthy in His providence and you be in such a state of abject need?) Here Satan's suggestion attacks Jesus' faith in and contentment with the sufficiency of God's providence. A failure to learn to be content in whatever state God has providentially placed us is extraordinarily perilous. Whether abased or abounding, full or hungry, abounding or suffering need (cf. Philippians 4:11–12), Satan seeks to stimulate discontentment with God's provisions.

How alluring is the trap of being discontented! In response to this suggestion Jesus esteemed being faithful unto death by starvation over living in disobedience to God. “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

Suggestion # 5: Live for the here and now. (Human existence should be focused upon material, physical comfort and satisfaction.) Human history records how popular and persuasive this suggestion has been. In the first century, the slogan was: “Take thine ease; eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:19). During the French

Revolution in the late 18 century, it was expressed in “Carpe diem” (“seize the day”). In our current age of texting, it is found in YO-LO (“you only live once”).

How tantalizing is the passing pleasure of worldliness. In response to this suggestion, Jesus esteemed the needs of the soul of greater value than His physical needs. Living by bread alone does not satisfy the soul. True life comes “by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

We should not allow Satan to take advantage of us for we are not ignorant of his devices (2 Corinthians 2:11).

Looking to Jesus on a Pinnacle of the Temple

After Satan’s vicious attack of the fasting Jesus in the wilderness Matthew records a change of scenery and yet another diabolic assault. “Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands, they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. (Matthew 4:5–7).

Just like the temptation in the wilderness a host of subtle suggestions permeates this Satanic strike. How essential it is for those who desire to withstand the wiles (methods) of the devil to carefully ponder his devices so that he cannot gain an advantage over us. How sobering it is to note that since Satan could not entice Jesus to sin because of His steadfast adherence to God’s Word, he sought to use this strength of our Lord to bring forth sin. Satan not only attacks us at our weakest places, he also seeks to use our strengths against us!

Subtle suggestion # 1: Be spectacular. (Prove your Messiahship by exercising your miraculous power in a dazzling way.) In

the wilderness, Satan sought to convince Jesus to use His miraculous powers for His own personal benefit. Now the tempter proposes a different purpose for His powers: Be impressive! Here, once and for all, Jesus could demonstrate His Sonship. He would become instantly famous. He could have His fifteen minutes of fame!

When one reads the second chapter of John he learns that Jesus did do something early in His ministry at the temple that got the attention of the Jews and sent a host of shock waves throughout the nation: He personally cleansed the temple (John 2:13–17). The people who witnessed this event were impressed by His holy zeal for God’s house (John 2:18), not by a spectacular, dazzling, entertaining miracle as Satan had proposed. How widespread can this subtle suggestion of Satan be found today! Several years ago, in an attempt to encapsulate a growing trend in America’s religious community, sociologists created a new word: worshiptainment. Centuries ago, Satan suggested this; Jesus refused it.

How seductive is the suggestion of being spectacular! In response to this wile of Satan, Jesus remained focused on the fact that His mission was to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), not impress them. His mission was to draw all people to Himself by His death (John 12:32), not by a dazzling publicity stunt from a pinnacle of the temple.

Subtle suggestion # 2: Believe in God and expect a miracle. (Reckless daring best demonstrates confidence in God and His word.) This suggestion erases the divine line between obedience that trusts God and presumption that tests God. It is sobering to note that Satan even proposed a proof text (Psalm 91:11–12) for his suggestion, thus giving it an aura of Biblical authority.

How devious is the sin of presumption! In response to this enticement to sin, Jesus (by His use of the word “again”) demonstrated that any interpretation of one Bible passage that results in the contradiction of another passage of Scripture is a misinterpretation

of God's Word. Satan's use of Psalm 91:11 contradicted the plain warning of Deuteronomy 6:16; therefore, Satan was wresting (2 Peter 3:16) God's Word. Biblical faith does not tempt God by ignoring His word, acting foolishly or presumptuously, and then expecting God to bail us out. Genuine confidence in God and His Word is best demonstrated by obedience, not presumption.

Subtle suggestion # 3: You can prove anything by the Bible. (The Bible is so confusing and difficult to understand that the best we can do with it is for you to have your interpretation of it and I have my interpretation of it and we just agree to disagree whenever our interpretations are different.) It is sobering to note that, if necessary, Satan can provide a book, chapter, and verse quotation to justify almost anything.

As well, it is instructive to consider how Satan was able to come to the "interpretation" of Psalm 91:11–12 that he did. First, note that He deliberately omits an important part of Psalm 91:11. Consider the differences between:

"He shall give His angels charge concerning thee" (Matthew 4:6) and "He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways" (Psalm 91:11).

It was not simply an innocent oversight that Satan removed "to keep thee in all thy ways" from his quotation. Probably the best commentary on what "in all thy ways" means would be found in the verse that immediately follows the passage quoted by Jesus in Matthew 4:7; it is: "Ye shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his testimonies, and his statutes, which he hath commanded thee" (Deuteronomy 6:17). Satan has never had a problem with adding to or subtracting from God's Word.

Next, note that Satan wrested the passage quoted from its immediate context. "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust...Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even

the most High, thy habitation” (Psalm 91:1, 2, and 9). In other words, the promise of verse 11 was not given to those who recklessly do as they please; it was a promise made to those who are living obediently to God’s will. It was a promise made to those who had made Jehovah their abiding place (v. 1), their refuge and fortress (v. 2), their habitation (v. 9). They were obediently living inside the protective confines of God’s will.

How attractive is the temptation to wrest the Scriptures so that they say what we want them to say! Jesus never lost sight of the fact that any text taken from its context becomes a pretext. God’s will is to be understood (Ephesians 5:17). Because God’s Word is truth (John 17:17) and truth can be known (John 8:32), God’s Word can be understood/known. It will be understood correctly when it is handled accurately (2 Timothy 2:15). Subtracting from God’s Word, ignoring the immediate context of a Bible passage, and interpreting a Bible passage so that it plainly contradicts another portion of God’s Word are three of the hermeneutical tools that Satan employs when wresting God’s perfect Word.

Looking to Jesus on an Exceeding High Mountain

One of the added dangers of modern warfare has been the creation and use of landmines (IEDs, et. al.). Unsuspecting soldiers have lost limbs and life by accidentally triggering an enemy’s booby trap. Similar devices can be found in Satan’s spiritual arsenal. For Jesus to complete victoriously His fortieth day of spiritual combat after His baptism, He had one more minefield to successfully negotiate. Matthew reports of this in 4:8–11: “Again the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for

it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him. “

Suggestion # 1: Instant gratification is better than waiting patiently on God. (Why wait to become King of kings in the future when you can become it today?) Immediately following Jesus’ baptism, a voice from heaven declared, “This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased’ (Matthew 3:17). This statement refers to at least two Messianic prophecies—Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:6–7. In the eighth verse of Psalm two, the writer records the Lord’s instruction to His Royal Son: “Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.” Considering this, Satan is suggesting that Jesus should not wait patiently upon God to fulfill this promise. Instead, He can have everything that has been promised to Him right now. Here was His “too good to be true,” “once in a lifetime” opportunity.

Jesus’ response was to “rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7), to “wait on the Lord, and keep His way” (Psalm 37:34), to “wait on the Lord (and) be of good courage” (Psalm 27:14). Instant gratification would result in spiritual ruination. There are no shortcuts to spiritual blessings and victory. Spiritual triumph is never gained by compromising with the enemy. In its final analysis, instant gratification is vastly inferior to ultimate and eternal glorification.

How enticing is the landmine of spiritual shortcuts and instant gratification! Satan offered the Son of God a crown without a cross. Today he offers Christians a relationship with God without having to search and study the Scriptures daily or to be fervent in the practice of praying without ceasing. Jesus was discerning and determined enough to not be deceived by these demonic devices; are we?

Suggestion # 2: Surely God does not want you to suffer.

(What kind of God eternally purposes that His Beloved Son be so despised and rejected of men that He dies by crucifixion?) In every generation, Satan has had his “God wants you to be rich, powerful, and happy” preachers. None of their disciples is told to “deny himself, and take up his cross daily” (Luke 9:23). For them, discipleship is about feeling good, being comfortable, and laying up treasures on earth.

Jesus’ response was to focus on the unique and utter worthiness of Jehovah. HE and HE alone is worthy of exclusive worship and service, regardless of the price one must pay to do so. In addition, Jesus knew that God’s greatest concern for His children is their character (1 Peter 1:15), not their ease, comfort, or convenience.

How alluring is the landmine of convenient, cross-less discipleship! The apostle Paul’s perspective on the sufferings he experienced are well expressed in 2 Corinthians 4:17–18: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Not only is Jehovah worthy to receive glory, honor, and praise in our worship, He is worthy of our zealous, diligent, and faithful service, even unto death.

Suggestion # 3: Sometimes you must go along to get along.

(As god of this world [2 Corinthians 4:4], Satan had power over all the kingdoms of the world. He had what Jesus came to gain. If Jesus would give a little and Satan would do likewise, everyone could walk away with what he wanted.) Satan is the master at making gigantic offers in exchange for “little” spiritual favors. He offered Eve the gigantic promise of Godlike knowledge in exchange for something “little” like her innocence and intimate fellowship with God (Genesis 3). He offered Moses the gigantic treasures in Egypt in exchange for something “little” like his faith and heaven-

ly reward (Hebrews 11:26). Satan did not even have to offer Esau something gigantic, all he offered him was a morsel of meat in exchange for something “little” like his birthright (Hebrews 12:16). Because he was a profane man, Esau accepted Satan’s offer.

Jesus knew that “little” spiritual compromises have gigantic consequences. The worth of one’s fellowship with God is not “little”; the worth of one’s heavenly reward is not “little”; the worth of one’s soul is not “little”; each is invaluable. His haunting question of “What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26) has had many sad and tragic incorrect answers in human history.

How often is the landmine of spiritual compromise placed in our path! Spiritual victory is never gained by a slow retreat from the enemy. The whole armor of God is equipped so that the Christian soldier can stand against the wiles of the devil (Ephesians 6:10) and to withstand in the evil day, and having done all things to stand (Ephesians 6:13). The battle “strategy” of going along to get along has NEVER in human history won a single spiritual victory for anyone but Satan.

Looking to Jesus in Nazareth’s Synagogue

Shortly after the initial Passover of His ministry (John 2:13ff), Jesus and His disciples went into the land of Judaea (John 3:22ff) and then through Samaria (John 4:4ff) before returning to the region of Galilee (John 4:43ff). While in Galilee, Jesus “came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias (Isaiah). And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the cap-

tives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son? And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country. And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; but unto none of them was Elijah sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian. And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way."

In meditating upon Jesus this Sabbath day in Nazareth, let's focus on the following things found in Luke's account:

His habit of obedient worship: "as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day." Like the worship at the temple (John 2:14–16), the worship at this synagogue may have been much less than what Jehovah truly deserves. And, there were probably at least a few hypocrites who would assemble in the synagogue on any given Sabbath. Yet, neither of these oft-used excuses (poor quality of worship and the presence of hypocrites) deterred our Lord from cultivating and maintaining this spiritual habit. Jesus never failed to join Himself to God's worshipping people

on the day God had designated. Such a habit gives clear insight into Jesus' values and the priority obedient worship had in His life.

His profound reverence for God's Word: "and stood up to read...of the prophet Isaiah." Throughout history, one way that humanity has chosen to show deference and respect for someone and his authority is to stand when in his presence. In Nehemiah's day, for example, "all the people stood up" (Nehemiah 8:5) when the priest Ezra opened God's Word so that he could read distinctly from it, give its sense, and cause his hearers to understand the reading (Nehemiah 8:8). Jesus' actions in Nazareth were more than simply a reflection of the custom of His day; they were an outward manifestation of His heart. Like the Psalmist who wrote "my heart standeth in awe of Thy word" (Psalm 119:161), Jesus had a profound reverence and respect for God's authoritative Word.

His intimate familiarity with God's Word: "when He had opened the book, He found the place." Jesus knew which prophet (i.e. Isaiah) and what place (i.e. chapter 61, verses 1 and 2) He needed so He could find this Messianic prophecy. The facts that 1) Isaiah's prophecy would have been written on a scroll that had to be unrolled and 2) it did not have chapter and verse divisions at that time like we have now help to emphasize how well-acquainted Jesus was with the Holy Scriptures. There are no shortcuts to an intimate knowledge of God's inspired Word. Persistent, daily reading and intense studying of the Bible is the only bridge that gets anyone into the land of Biblical literacy.

His abhorrence and rejection of performance-oriented worship: "Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country." As predicted by Isaiah, the focus of the Messiah's ministry was to be preaching the gospel which brought great spiritual blessings, not the performance of miracles that appealed to carnal desires. Jesus had already criticized the Galileans, including the nobleman, for their insatiable appetite for signs and won-

ders, which were a hindrance to faith: “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe” (John 4:48). The citizens of Nazareth in Galilee were likewise guilty. They sought Jesus, the Great Physician, not so that He would heal them of their spiritual maladies, but so that He who was not sick would heal Himself! In other words, they were not wanting the son of David, the Messiah, to heal their broken hearts, or give them spiritual liberty, or heal their spiritual blindness, or release them from their spiritual oppression. Absolutely not. They were wanting the son of Joseph, their hometown prophet, to exercise His miraculous power for their carnal enjoyment and approval. Satan’s temptation of using His miraculous power to dazzle people was not now being suggested from a pinnacle of the temple (Matthew 4:5–7); it was being suggested by his hometown villagers in the synagogue! Jesus adamantly rebuffs this thinking by showing that the prophets Elijah and Elisha both exercised miraculous powers outside their own country (i.e. upon Gentiles) because the same appetite was among the Jews in their days. Like our own day, having such a spiritual focus in worship in Jesus’ day was not acceptable; therefore, they led Him out of the city to cast Him down from the hill whereon their city was built.

Looking to Jesus’ First Recorded Bible Class

Profitable Bible study in a public setting does not happen by accident. Both the teacher and the student(s) have essential responsibilities to carry out. For a student to be able to receive with meekness the engrafted word of God, he must be swift to hear (i.e. ready to listen), slow to speak (or argue with God’s word), and slow to wrath (or not easily offended by the truth). In addition, he must separate himself from all ungodliness if he desires the Holy Scriptures to save his soul (see James 1:19–21).

Luke 4:17–27 records a summary of Jesus’ first public Bible class. In this passage one can readily discern the following responsibilities of a Bible class teacher:

Focus on the text of the Scriptures by reading it (vv. 17–20). Jesus’ instruction was rooted in and came from the written word of God. Though no title for this prophecy of Isaiah is given, it could easily be: “Why Did My Savior Come to Earth?” When allowed to speak for itself, the word of God is always vivid and solemn in its description of sin; it is never ambiguous. Isaiah 61:1–2, the passage read by Jesus, is no exception. Here God’s word describes sin as impoverishing and bankrupting (“poor”), destructive and devastating (“brokenhearted”), oppressive and enslaving (“captives”), blinding and abusive (“blind...bruised”). In Scripture, sin is never a laughing or lighthearted matter.

Thankfully, Jehovah’s solution to sin is also presented in Isaiah’s detailed prophecy. “Hallelujah, what a Savior!” is a fitting summary of the Messianic portion of this prediction. The gospel preached by God’s anointed One offers: 1) a Benefactor who enriches the bankrupt, 2) a Physician that heals the brokenhearted and blind, and 3) a Redeemer who releases those being crushed in captivity.

Emphasize the relevancy of the Scriptures by applying them (v. 21). Though Isaiah’s prophecy was written about seven hundred years prior to this Sabbath day in Nazareth, it still was relevant to the students in Jesus’ class. (In this case, it was probably more relevant than they could have possibly imagined!) In Jesus’ case, He was teaching from the covenant under which He lived and died. But, even when a New Testament Christian is studying from the Old Testament, the Scriptures are still relevant. The examples of the Old Testament were written for our admonition (1 Corinthians 10:11); thus, they are still helpful to us (1 Corinthians 10:1–13). The hundreds of specific, plain, predictive Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillments recorded in sacred and secular

history resoundingly testify the ever-relevant truth that the “testimony of the Lord is sure” (Psalm 19:7). God’s word is perpetually relevant to mankind, regardless of which century it is.

Affirm the simplicity of the Scriptures by speaking plainly (v. 22). Luke’s choice of *chrestos* here is thought-provoking. When used in Matthew 11:30 to describe the yoke Jesus offers, the word is translated “easy.” Hence, the conclusion that the “gracious words” which proceeded out of Jesus’ mouth were easily understood. He spoke plainly and simply. None of the polysyllabic jargon of theologians, or the mumbo jumbo of humanistic psychobabble, or the esoteric erudition of educationally-degreed egotists can be considered “gracious” speech. There is no need for it when studying the simple profundity and profound simplicity of God’s word. According to 2 Timothy 3:14, Timothy knew the Holy Scriptures from a child (literally, a baby). What an enduring monument to the simplicity of God’s Word! So simple it is that the only way to misunderstand many of its passages is with some help! And, a good Bible teacher does not want to provide that kind of help.

Demonstrate the authority of the Scriptures by confronting sin (vv. 23–27). The students in Jesus’ Bible class had a sinful attitude toward Him (v. 23) and a hard heart toward God (vv. 24–27). By this point in His ministry, He had already performed enough miracles to convince Nicodemus that He was a teacher from God (John 3:2). His words to the Samaritan woman and the citizens of Sychar had been enough to generate faith in many and produce the conviction that He indeed is the Christ, the Savior of the world (John 4:41–42). Therefore, their desire for Him to entertain them with His miraculous power was sinful; plus, their unbelief spawned by a hardness of heart (and not a lack of adequate evidence) was sinful and inexcusable; thus, Jesus confronted it. So effective was His use of the Scriptures’ authority, Luke records: “And all they in the synagogue when they heard these things, were filled with

wrath, and rose up and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong” (Luke 4:28–29).

Prove your faith in the essentiality of the Scriptures by persevering (vv. 30–31). “But he passing through the midst of them went his way, and came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days.” Jesus stopped teaching in Nazareth, but He did not quit teaching God’s word. He persevered. Because the Scriptures are everything that they claim to be—inspired, inerrant, authoritative, powerful, essential—a Bible class teacher must persevere week after week, just like Jesus did.

Looking to Jesus’ Move to Capernaum

Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:4–7), He was moved as a young child to Nazareth and grew up there (Matthew 2:21–23). Because of the common usage of the name He was given (Joshua is the Hebrew equivalent for Jesus) and because of the truth about His parentage (He was, in fact, the Son of God, and not the biological son of Joseph—Luke 3:23, 38), He is referred to more often in the New Testament as Jesus of Nazareth, not as Jesus the son of Joseph. However, sometime within the first year of His public ministry, Matthew records that Jesus left Nazareth and “dwelt in Capernaum” (Matthew 4:13).

Moving from one’s hometown and settling down in another location (even if it is only about twenty miles away as it was for Jesus), is usually not done without some adequate personal and/or external reasons for it. Such things in life as education, marriage, employment and income, persecution, famine, and death have necessitated many a move from the familiar surroundings of one location for a new place of residence. Considering what few possessions Jesus had when He died (John 19:23–24) and the great simplicity with which He lived (Luke 9:58), it seems highly doubtful

that He needed a large herd of camels to help Him make the move from Nazareth to Capernaum.

The question of “Why did He move?” is a challenging one. Its answers may surprise; its answers may convict. Let’s consider at least three reasons why Jesus relocated.

Jesus moved to Capernaum because of His courage. Matthew explicitly connects the imprisonment of John with Jesus’ move to Capernaum: “Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum” (Matthew 4:12–13). The unflinching courage of our Lord is easily seen when two more items are added for consideration. First, it was Herod the tetrarch who had laid hold of John, bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias’ sake (Matthew 14:1–3). Second, this Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee (Luke 3:1). Like the courageous firefighters who ran into the flaming Twin Towers on 9/11 as hundreds of people were trying to flee from the inferno, Jesus moved from the small, obscure village of Nazareth in Galilee to a city which was home to at least one member of the royal court (John 4:46), a centurion—the leader of a detachment of 100 Roman soldiers (Matthew 8:5), and a tax office (Mark 2:1, 13–15). He was not moving away from danger; He was moving into greater danger. He did not retreat from the region over which Herod—the ultimate murderer of John the Baptist—reigned; He advanced in it. And, like John, the message that Jesus preached for everyone was: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). The proclamation of repentance was still courageously being echoed throughout Galilee. Herod had imprisoned the preliminary messenger of the divine remedy for sin, but he had not gotten rid of the message!

Jesus moved to Capernaum because of His compassion. Although Capernaum was of importance politically and militarily speaking, it was in abject poverty spiritually speaking. Because of its geographical location, Capernaum was known as the “Galilee of

the Gentiles” (Matthew 4:15). Isaiah’s description of this location is “darkness.” From his prophecy, Isaiah gives the impression that the darkness was so great and so dense that—like in the days of Egypt when God brought the ninth plague and “they saw not one another neither rose any from his place” (Exodus 10:23)—the only activity that could be done in this darkness was to sit. Isaiah also describes this region as being the “shadow of death.” What a dismal, spiritually bankrupt, morally desolate place to relocate!

Yet, it was because of its immense spiritual need and because of His profuse compassion that Jesus moved to Capernaum of Galilee. He went so that it could be said: “the people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up” (Matthew 4:16). For this great prediction to be fulfilled, “Jesus began to preach, and say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Throughout the remainder of His ministry Jesus performed many mighty works. So privileged was Capernaum, so great was the light it received that later in His ministry Jesus declared the following: “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee” (Matthew 11:23–24).

It is quite sobering to note the following quotation from The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary, page 146: “His prophecy [of Matthew 11:23–24; Luke 10:15—jhc] was so completely fulfilled that the town has disappeared, and its very site is a matter of debate.” To sin against the light of truth is no trifling matter, especially when the light was brought to you because of the tender love of a compassionate heart.

Jesus moved to Capernaum because it was necessary. A couple of items fit under this reason. First, it was necessary be-

cause it was predicted in Isaiah 9:1–2. What Jesus said about His suffering and resurrection from the dead in Luke 24:46 could also be said about His move to Capernaum: “Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ” to move to “the land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matthew 4:15). Jesus lived, moved, and had His being ever and always in obedience to the authoritative, written word of God.

Second, it was necessary because of the imprisonment of John. The Voice and forerunner of the Christ had made full proof of his ministry. Now it was time for Jesus to search out and call those who would be with Him so that someday He could send them forth to preach saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 10:7), then “the kingdom of God is come nigh unto you” (Luke 10:9), and finally, “repentance and remission of sins in His name among all nations” (Luke 24:47). He began this portion of His ministry by the Sea of Galilee when He said to Peter, Andrew, James, and John: “Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men” and their response was to immediately leave everything and follow Him (Matthew 4:18–22).

Looking to Jesus’ Call of Four Fishermen

According to the first chapter of John’s gospel, shortly after Jesus’ baptism, His forerunner identified Him as the Lamb of God. Two of John’s disciples heard him and followed Jesus (John 1:36–37). One of these two disciples was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother (John 1:40). It is written: “He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, we have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus” (John 1:41–42). No one knows for sure how much contact Jesus had with Peter and Andrew after this initial introduction. What is known for sure is that by the end of Jesus’ first year of public ministry, John the

Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod, and Jesus had moved to Capernaum (Matthew 4:12–13). The work of preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, begun by John, and emphasized by Jesus, had to continue.

At this point the Scriptures record: “And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him” (Matthew 4:18–22). Jesus’ call of discipleship contained three unchanging components for those fishermen then and for all men since. Let’s consider each of them.

First, **Jesus’ call of discipleship contains a clear challenge: “Follow Me.”** Jesus never missed the mark of God’s will; He never sinned (1 Peter 2:22). He never strayed from God’s word. He never added to the Holy Scriptures or subtracted from them. He was obedient in all things to the written word, even to the point of death, yea even the death of the cross. From the moment of His first breath as a newborn in Bethlehem until the moment He bowed His head and gave up His spirit at Calvary, He reverently, joyfully, and submissively obeyed His Father. He had no down time from obedience. He allowed no distractions from His purpose. He made no conditions for His obedience.

There cannot be any greater challenge in human history than Jesus’ challenge of “Follow Me.” The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master” (Luke 6:40). The mind of Christ is to be in every one of His followers (Philippians 2:5), because the redeemed follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth (Revelation 14:4). What a breathtaking challenge!

Second, **Jesus' call of discipleship demands a distinct change: "I will make you fishers of men."** Jesus intended to transform these four Galileans from men with earthly ambitions and worldly treasures into men with spiritual ambitions and heavenly treasures. His vision for them was to change them from being self-employed, working the family business, to being God's co-laborers about His Father's business. By the renewing of his mind, Simon the son of Jonah was going to be transformed into Cephas, a stone (John 1:42). They were not called to be keepers of the aquarium, but fishers of men. Not some men, not just Jewish men, but all men, because "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind" (Matthew 13:47).

There cannot be any more distinct change than when a person is delivered from the power of darkness and is translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son. When such occurs those who have been risen with Christ in newness of life are to "Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:2–5). This transformation by the renewing of one's mind demonstrates that the word of God is good, acceptable, and perfect (Romans 12:2). What a distinctive change!

Third, **Jesus' call of discipleship requires a critical choice.** The four fishermen had to choose between the material and familiar (nets, family, hired servants, and boats) or the spiritual and unknown (the kingdom of heaven, preaching the gospel, and being fishers of men). With them, there was no hesitation—"And they straightway left their nets and followed him...And they immediate-

ly left the ship and their father, and followed him” (Matthew 4:20, 22). They forsook all and followed Christ (Matthew 19:27).

There cannot be any more critical decision than the one which determines which master is served in life. “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). Deciding to not decide today is a bad decision. Deciding without counting the cost is also a bad decision. Deciding without carefully considering the words of Jesus in Mark 10:29–30 (“ Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel’s, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29–30) is also a bad decision. What a critical choice!

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus called four fishermen to be His disciples. His challenge was clear; their change would be distinctive; they had to make a critical choice. We have reflected upon that scene on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Would you conclude that their decision was a good and wise one or a bad and foolish one? If your conclusion is that it was good and wise, have you answered Jesus’ call of discipleship like they did? If not, why?

Looking to Jesus’ Second Call of Simon Peter

Matthew and Mark give a quick summary of Jesus’ call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Matthew 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20). Luke, however, records far more details about that revolutionary day in which Simon Peter stopped being a fisherman and became a fisher of men. After teaching a crowd of people from one of the two boats by the lake of Gennesaret, Luke records the following: “he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your

nets for a draught. And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net. And when they had this done, they enclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken: and so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him" (Luke 5:4–11).

Starting with this man and eleven more of a similar disposition, Jesus turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). All He needed then was a few good men. Today, He still needs men like Peter. Jesus needs:

Men who know how to work hard and together. When Jesus spoke to Peter in verse 4, he had already put in a 12+ hour shift. He was weary for he had "toiled all the night." Being a fisherman required a sturdy, callous-creating work ethic. To be successful, fishermen had to work together and help each other (v. 7). Teamwork was not optional in their line of work; it was essential.

In Matthew 20:1, Jesus declares that "For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard." In the telling of this parable, the work day lasted twelve hours—from sun up to sun down (vv. 6–12). In describing the work that He and His disciples had to accomplish, Jesus portrays the salvation of souls as an abundant harvest (John 4:35) which desperately needs more laborers (Matthew 9:37–38). The rightly dividing of God's Word requires diligent and vigorous effort, like "a workman that needeth

not to be ashamed” when his labors are reviewed and evaluated by a superior (2 Timothy 2:15). Clearly, all can see how essential a healthy, lifelong work ethic is to everyone who follows Jesus.

Men who obey Jesus when He speaks (vv. 4–5). It is easy to imagine a host of different responses that Peter could have given to Jesus’ command: “I’m too tired; let’s do it later.” “It didn’t work before when we did it last night.” “Since when did carpenters know more about fishing than the professionals?” “Why bother?” “Everybody knows that you fish in the deep waters at night and in the shallow water during the day.” Yet, none of these were Peter’s response. His answer was, “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net.” His use of the word “Master” here indicated that Peter, though the owner of the boat (v. 3), considered Jesus to be its captain. Therefore, what Jesus, the captain, said was what Peter, the sailor, did.

It is a sad but true fact that Jesus has many more admirers than obeyers! Discipleship, however, is not determined by whether we agree with Jesus or like what He says; rather, it is decided by whether we obey Him. And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

Men who come on their knees (v. 8). Fundamental to Peter’s relationship with Jesus was his deep sense of personal unworthiness and sinfulness and of Jesus’ innate superiority and holiness. In addressing Jesus as “Lord” here in verse 8, Peter recognized that Jesus was more than the captain of the boat (v.5), He was also the ruler of the lake and all the fish within it. Jesus had the power to command a great multitude of fish into the nets. So many fish that TWO boats were so weighed down that they almost sank! (v. 7)

Poverty of spirit is the starting point for genuine righteousness (Matthew 5:3) and authentic discipleship. Becoming a disciple of Jesus does not put God into our debt. Nor are we doing Jehovah a favor. Even if a disciple of Jesus did everything which He had

commanded, the truth remains: “We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which is our duty to do” (Luke 17:10). “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13) is an ever-necessary sentiment of those who come to Christ.

Men who forsake all (v. 11). Truth be told there really is no other way to follow Jesus than by forsaking all for Him. Jesus Himself makes this crystal clear: “If any man comes to me, and hates not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. ...And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 14:26; 9:62). Jesus must be loved preeminently with all of one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength. He accepts nothing less.

Looking to Jesus’ Priorities

Regardless of where on this earth you live, or what vocation you have, or when in history you lived, life comes in 24-hour segments called days. Adam and Eve had the same number of hours in a day that you and I have. An Australian and a Canadian, a plumber and a professor all have 24-hour days just as you and I do. And, while tabernacled in flesh, Jesus of Nazareth had 24 hours in each of the days He had as He went about His Father’s business. Since He died prior to reaching the age of 40, it is plain to see that He accomplished all that He did in His life because of the priorities He had, and not because He had a vast number of days to live.

Until the final week of His ministry, it is quite uncommon to find large segments of Jesus’ life in any of the gospel accounts. There is, however, at least one exception. Mark (and Luke in 4:31–44) records a 24-hour slice of Jesus’ life. Etched into this sliver of human history, Jesus taught in the synagogue in the morning of the Sabbath (Mark 1:21–28), spent the afternoon in the home of Simon and Andrew (Mark 1:29–31), healed many who were brought to

Him after sundown (Mark 1:32–34), arose to pray before daylight the next morning (Mark 1:35), and departed from Capernaum on a preaching tour in Galilee (Mark 1:38). A careful examination of this simple narrative results in several noteworthy observations about Jesus’ priorities.

Jesus prioritized worship. Mark 1:21 is clear as to what Jesus’ pre-eminent priority was on the Sabbath day: “and straightway on the Sabbath day He entered the synagogue.” Notice carefully that Mark does not declare that Jesus simply went to the synagogue that Sabbath day. Rather, it is written that He went “straightway.” It was a matter of priority. Jesus did not arise from His bed of slumber and then meander here and there, dillying and dallying through Capernaum until He eventually arrived at the synagogue. Instead, like a heat-seeking missile aimed at a specific target, Jesus had a direct, immediate, single focus for that Sabbath. Jesus’ “To Do” list for that day had only one item on it: Worship God. Like David (Psalm 122:1), He was glad when He could assemble with fellow worshippers and offer a sacrifice of praise to the Great I Am.

Increasingly, our culture’s attitude toward the first day of the week is reflected by its pagan name—Sunday—and not its Biblical name—the Lord’s Day. While it is true that the New Testament nowhere teaches that the first day of the week must be observed by refraining from all physical activities, it is also true that our Lord on His day deserves better than when we treat worship like it is something we “work into” an already overscheduled day.

Jesus prioritized personal communion with God. “And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed” (Mark 1:35). It is not recorded how many hours after sunset Jesus spent healing the many diseased and demon-possessed who had gathered together at and outside the door of the house where He was (Mark 1:32–34). It is not recorded which hour of the night it was when Jesus was fi-

nally able to crawl into bed and drift off to sleep. What is recorded is that while it was still dark the next morning, He arose so that He could go to a prayer closet (“a solitary place”) and commune with God. In other words, He prioritized His spirit’s need for prayer and personal communion with God over everything else. It was the first thing He addressed that morning.

Implicit in His sermon on the mount’s instruction of praying for one’s daily bread (Matthew 6:11) is the conclusion that Jesus expects His disciples to be people who pray daily. Since Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), the only reasonable conclusion to draw is that Jesus expects His disciples to be people who pray in secret daily because that is exactly what He did. A Christian should never to view daily prayer and communion with God as a matter of convenience; it is a matter of priorities. Jesus did it because it was THAT important to Him. Is it THAT important to you and me?

Jesus prioritized obedience. A third manifestation of Jesus’ priorities can be seen in what Jesus said “no” to. Luke records: “And when it was day, He departed and went into a desert place: and the people sought Him, and came unto Him, and stayed Him, that He should not depart from them. And He said unto them, I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent” (4:42–43). What a stunning refusal by a preacher! By all appearances, these residents of Capernaum were wanting to hear more of Jesus’ preaching and teaching. What a great opportunity! But, at this specific point in His ministry, God’s commission for Him was to preach throughout the region of Galilee. This was not an optional matter; it was imperative. It had to/must be done that way.

Because of the priority Jesus placed on obeying His Father, He refused the implicit request for Him to stay with the residents of Capernaum. Their will for Him was out of harmony with God’s will for Him. Because He hungered and thirsted to do the will of

Him who sent Him and to finish His work (John 4:34), Jesus said “no” to their request. He prioritized God’s will and conforming to it over everything else. Do you?

Looking to Jesus’ Authority

In a world of advertising hype, cinematic special effects, and advanced handheld technology, it is hard to find much that impresses, astonishes, amazes, and/or stuns a crowd of people. Because of this, most media and digital addicts today are bored, restless, and have a very limited capacity for wonder. Early in his gospel, Mark records several scenes from Jesus’ life which left people astonished (*ekplesso*—struck in the minds by a sudden shock), amazed (*thambos*—rendered immovable by a wonder performed), and dumbfounded (*ekstasis*—moved from their normal condition into a state of surprise). In each of these scenes it was Jesus’ authority which produced such a response.

In Mark 1:22, it was the authority of absolute truth when Jesus taught which astonished; the Scriptures state: “And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.” The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day were infamous for their practice of quoting uninspired commentators who were commenting on other uninspired commentators who were commenting on other uninspired commentators. Instead, Jesus focused on the text of the Scriptures by reading it (Luke 4:17–20); then, He emphasized the relevancy of the Scriptures by applying them (Luke 4:21); next, He affirmed the simplicity of God’s Word by speaking plainly, with memorable and vivid illustrations like parables (Luke 4:22); finally, He demonstrated the authority of the Scriptures by confronting sin (Luke 4:23–27).

Jesus preached and taught the Word of God, which is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). He preached using bold, emphatic declarations, not timid, apolo-

getic suggestions. His sermons resounded with mighty thunderbolts of truth. His hearers were shocked by the avalanche and authority of the truth that He lived, loved, and heralded. The empty-handed officers of the chief priests and Pharisees who were sent to arrest Him said it best: “Never man spake like this man” (John 7:46).

In Mark 1:27, it was the authority of absolute holiness when He confronted evil which amazed; the Scriptures record: “And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the unclean spirit had torn him, and cried with a loud voice, he came out of him. And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What thing is this? what new doctrine is this? for with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him” (Mark 1:23–27).

Mark’s use of the word “rebuke” (*epitimaō*) provides a valuable insight into the extraordinary authority Jesus has. The word has the idea of finding fault with another without causing the offender to repent. In other words, although the unclean spirit did not have any remorse for its pollution of this man, it still complied with Jesus’ command. It reminds me of the little boy whose misbehavior resulted in his being sat in a corner by his mother. In defiance, the little boy’s response was “I may be sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside.” The last thing that this unclean spirit wanted to do was to leave its human habitation. Yet, with two simple commands— “hold thy peace” (literally—“be muzzled”) and “come out of him”—the victim was finally free from his tormentor. The ease with which Jesus accomplished this feat is stunning. With just five (Greek) words the unwilling evil spirit was exorcised! The fact that the unclean spirit neither wanted to be

muzzled nor exorcised, yet complied promptly, is a simple yet profound testament to the beauty and authority of Jesus' holiness.

In addition, Mark records two more testaments to the authority of Jesus' holiness. First, he tells of Simon's wife's mother (Mark 1:30) who, according to Dr. Luke, "was taken with a great fever" (Luke 4:38). Like the demon, the fever was rebuked (Luke 4:39) and its immediate response was to depart (Mark 1:31). Its departure was so complete that "immediately she arose and ministered unto them" (Luke 4:39). Jesus not only removed the fever from her, the usual aftereffects of weakness and weariness went away instantly as well.

Soon after this, a leper came to Jesus (Mark 1:40). Although no gospel writer tells how long this dreaded, incurable disease had haunted its victim, Luke informs us that it was on the verge of completing its deadly mission, for the man was "full of leprosy" (Luke 5:12). The cold, clammy, irresistible hand of death was about to knock on the door of this man's life and not leave empty handed. The leper beseeched Jesus, "saying unto Him, "If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean" (Mark 1:40). With two (Greek) words (Mark 1:41), the Great Physician banished this dreadful, deadly scourge of the outer man!

In Mark 2:12, it was the authority of God when He forgave sins which amazed; the Scriptures record: "And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion." A man sick with palsy had been brought to Jesus by four of his friends. So determined were they to bring their friend to Jesus that they uncovered the roof and lowered him down into the room where Jesus was preaching. With five tender (Greek) words, Jesus removed His sins (Mark 2:5). To demonstrate that He in fact did possess such authority He later told this same man, "I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house (Mark 2:11), and that is exactly what the man did.

Developing a deeper understanding of and proper reverence for Jesus' authority is a spiritual necessity. An excellent aid to a healthy attitude towards the One with all authority in heaven and in earth is to be impressed, astonished, amazed, and stunned by His teaching, by His healing, and by His forgiveness. May we ever grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Looking to Jesus the Great Physician

Like a brilliant diamond, the life of Jesus can be studied from a multitude of different viewpoints. With each new perspective, the student is blessed with another stunning glimpse of Jesus' perfection and goodness. When the murmuring scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus why He ate and drank with publicans and sinners, He explained by comparing Himself to a physician who was ministering to sick patients (Luke 4:30–31). Because the Lord Himself suggested this perspective, looking to Jesus the Great Physician is worthy of careful consideration.

Jesus is the Great Physician because of His incredible healing power. Matthew records: “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatic, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them...When evening was come, they brought unto him many that were possessed with devils: and he cast out the spirits with his word, and healed all that were sick: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses” (4:23–24, 8:16–17).

People with acute and chronic diseases came to Jesus. People with emotional, physical, and spiritual maladies that the doctors of the day could not cure came to Jesus. People being crushed, tormented, and tortured by savage and painful afflictions came to Jesus. People with a wide variety of ailments like fever, leprosy, and blindness came to Jesus. And, all were healed. No case was too difficult; no ailment was too complex; no disease was beyond His expertise and power. What a GREAT physician!

Jesus is the Great Physician because of His compassionate desire to heal. It is written: “And there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean. And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed” (Mark 1:40–42). Some doctors with great skill and expertise have terrible “bedside manners.” Not so with the Great Physician. In dealing with this man full of leprosy, Jesus revealed a compassionate heart and a willing spirit by His tender touch and reassuring, authoritative words.

Jesus is the Great Physician because of His keen perception and discernment. When four men, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed, came to Him and could not find a way to place their friend in front of Jesus because of the crowd gathered around Him, they went up on the roof and dug an opening and let him down (Luke 5:18–19), “and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee” (Matthew 9:2). Jesus did not see four men making a nuisance of themselves. Instead, He saw four fiercely determined men who loved deeply and had great faith. Jesus did not simply see the obvious—a man who could not walk. He saw one whose physical paralysis was the result of a spiritual malady. He saw one whose paralyzed body was home to a spirit that was oppressed with hopelessness. Because of

His keen perception and discernment, He said to the man “Be of good cheer/Take courage” and then forgave His sins.

That same eye of perception and discernment “saw” (i.e. “took notice”) of a publican named Levi (Luke 5:27). The verb used by Luke (*theoreo*) indicates that Jesus made a careful, deliberate perusal of details in this man; He made an earnest contemplation. What Jesus saw was far different than the tax collector, traitor, greedy outcast of Jewish society that the Pharisees saw. Jesus saw a man (Matthew 9:9)—a person made in the image of God. He saw a man who needed to become His disciple (Luke 5:27). He saw a spiritually sick man in need of a physician (Luke 5:31). He saw a sinner needing to repent (Luke 5:32). He saw a man who would weigh the treasures of earth in the balances of eternity and find them wanting, and then turn his back on Rome’s internal revenue for Christ’s eternal revenue.

Jesus is the Great Physician because of His inclusiveness.

Jesus never turned anyone away. “And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners? And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:29–32). As a Physician, He went where the sick were.

Unfortunately, not everyone realized that he was sick and in need of the Great Physician. Therefore, some—like the scribes and Pharisees—never took the medicine of repentance that He prescribed for all His patients (Mark 1:15); they perished (Luke 13:3, 5). How tragic considering the Great Physician’s incredible power, compassionate desire to heal, keen perception and discernment, and willingness to help anyone!

Looking to Jesus' Call of Levi

Shortly after Jesus demonstrated His authority to forgive sins by making a paralyzed man rise and walk (Luke 5:18–24), He demonstrated His immense desire to forgive sins by calling Levi to be His disciple. Luke's record is as follows: "And after these things he went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he said unto him, Follow me. And he left all, rose up, and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners? And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:27–32).

From this account, let's consider **the call that was made**: "Follow Me." Two simple words. No grandiose, ostentatious, verbose pronouncement of invitational intentions. No arm-twisting, manipulating, or cajoling. Just two simple, impossible-to-be-misunderstood words. Like the calling of the gospel itself (1 Corinthians 1:26–31), Levi's call was designed so that He would glory in his Lord, not in himself.

"Follow Me" was personal. We know not whether there were many, few, or any others at the toll booth that day. We do know from the declension of Jesus' words that they were addressed to a single person. We also know from the mood of the verb used that Jesus was issuing a command, not a suggestion.

"Follow Me" was scandalous to many. Fishermen were hard-working, industrious, respectable men in their community. So were physicians, carpenters, tent makers, and dozens of other professions. Publicans were not. They were viewed as spiritual harlots who had sold their souls for Mammon. They were traitors of their

people who showed greater loyalty to Caesar than to Jehovah. No self-respecting, God-fearing rabbi would ever allow such a vile and polluted outcast to be in his presence, let alone remain there. Yet, Jesus, the One who would use a woman with five husbands to introduce Him to a Samaritan city (John 4:18, 28–30) did. Yes, Jesus, the One who would take a man who had been a blasphemer, persecutor, and injurious—the chief of sinners—to be a demonstration of God’s exceeding abundant grace (1 Timothy 1:12–16), called Levi.

“Follow Me” was monumental. There was no way that a lukewarm response would work. Levi could not follow Jesus and keep his profession. He could not love the world and the things of the world and love the Father also (1 John 2:15). He could not remain a friend of the world and be a disciple of Jesus (James 4:4). And, he did not try to: “he left all.” He left a steady, lucrative income to be a disciple of the One who had nowhere to lay His head (Luke 9:58). He put his hand to the plow and did not look back (Luke 9:62). He followed the Lamb wherever He went (Revelation 14:4) from that day until the day of his death.

Next, consider **the man who was called**: “a publican, named Levi.” A publican, by profession, was a man who knew how to keep accounts and give reports. However, Levi was not the one Jesus assigned the task of being His treasurer. “Judas had the bag” (John 13:29). Levi’s accounting and reporting skills were used for a higher calling: being a gospel writer. Though Mark and Luke identify him as Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27), in the gospel bearing the name of Matthew, he records this call (Matthew 9:9). His gospel account is very orderly arranged and recorded. It is not as strict chronologically as Mark’s and Luke’s are. Yet, what a regal account is made of David’s Son and Lord, the Christ!

Though an outcast from much of Jewish society, this “publican named Levi” was a man who was thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. From its beginning with the genealogy of

Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1) to its conclusion with Jesus' final pronouncement that "all authority is given unto Me in heaven and in earth..." (28:18–20), Matthew's gospel is saturated with more than 90 Old Testament citations and quotations. This gospel was written to Jews by a Jew about a Jew.

This "publican named Levi" was a passionate man. He understood the spiritual sickness that his former colleagues had. He understood the loving heart and authority over sin that the Great Physician had. Therefore, immediately following his termination at the tax office, "Levi made a great feast in his own house." Like Andrew (John 1:40–41), he began immediately to try to connect others with Jesus. He knew that the Great Physician made house calls, and he knew his former co-workers were much more likely to come to a feast at his house than visit the local synagogue to hear Jesus teach. Even though he had not attended a single evangelism class, he was passionate about being evangelistic. He had good news. He understood the spiritual sickness of worldly people, and he knew that it was impossible to introduce Jesus to "the wrong person." Let the Pharisees criticize (which they did—Luke 5:30), Levi knew sinners who needed to repent. Because of his passionate love for them, he acted in a most shrewd, generous, hospitable, and evangelistic way.

What a contrast between the decision made by "a publican named Levi" and the decision made by the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:21–22)! Each was challenged to turn his back on earthly treasures and begin laying up treasures in heaven. Levi weighed the treasures of earth in the balances of eternity and found them wanting; the rich young ruler did not!

Which one made the right decision?

Whose decision are you imitating in your life?

Looking to Jesus and His Critics

Centuries prior to Jesus' life on earth, the Greek philosopher Aristotle observed that "Criticism is something we can avoid easily by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing." Anyone who desires to make an impact on their contemporaries and, possibly, on the course of human history can expect to have critics. Considering the profound impact that Jesus had on His contemporaries and on human history, it should not surprise us to learn that He was often the target of harsh and unrelenting criticism. Both Mark (2:13–3:6) and Luke (5:27–6:11) record an assault of indirect and direct criticism that was hurled at Jesus near the beginning of His ministry.

The first criticism was indirect in that it was not said to Jesus Himself but to His disciples: "He eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners" (Mark 2:16). The second and third criticisms were said directly to Him, but they were focused upon His disciples: "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Thy disciples fast not...Why do they on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful?" (Mark 2:18, 24). The final criticism was direct but unspoken: "They watched Him...that they might accuse Him" (Mark 3:2). Before the sun had set on that Sabbath day the Pharisees had taken "counsel with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him" (Mark 3:6). As we focus on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of the faith, several truths about His critics and their criticism shine forth.

Truth # 1: For some, being hyper-critical of others is the only talent they have cultivated. The critics of Jesus ignored some very large camels in their search for their desired gnats of criticism. Mark 3:1–2 portrays this so aptly: "And he entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him." Is that not stunning?

The question in the mind of Jesus' critics was not: "Does He have the power to heal this man?" It was not: "Where does His power come from?" Nor was it: "What is the message/truth that is being communicated by His possession of such miraculous powers?" No, sadly, their focus was upon whether He would do this on the Sabbath day. Even sadder, they were hoping that this withered hand would be healed, **not** so they could rejoice with the man who possessed it, but so they could accuse the man who had restored it! No wonder Mark records Jesus' response as being one of "anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts" (Mark 3:6). Benjamin Franklin once observed that "any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain, and most fools do."

Truth # 2: For some, criticism is an indirect form of self-boasting. Each of the first three criticisms blasted at Jesus had the deadly toxin of self-boasting embedded in them—we don't eat and drink with publicans and sinners; we fast on a rigid, weekly schedule; we don't violate the Sabbath. Self-boasting easily leads to self-deception. Is it not stunning that these critics of Jesus determined that He was in violation of the Sabbath for healing a man with a withered hand, yet they were not in violation of the Sabbath or God's law when they consulted together on "how they might destroy Him" (Mark 3:6)? Jesus' question of "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? To save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4) did not deter His self-righteous critics! How much easier it is to be critical than correct.

Truth # 3: "The final proof of greatness lies in being able to endure criticism without resentment" (Elbert Hubbard). Jesus had many slings and arrows of criticism hurled at Him throughout His life. Yet, He never allowed Himself to be taken captive by resentment nor did He retaliate in kind. He always obeyed the wise man's sage counsel: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit" (Proverbs 26:4–5). In harmony with

Proverbs 26:4, Jesus never returned an evil word or innuendo with an evil word or innuendo. In harmony with Proverbs 26:5, Jesus answered the falsehood contained in each criticism: His response to their criticism that He ate and drank with publicans and sinners (Mark 2:16) was that “They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mark 2:17). His response to the criticism that His disciples did not fast (Mark 2:18) was that the children of the bride chamber did not fast while the bridegroom is with them (Mark 2:19). His answer to the criticism of His disciples’ grain consumption on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23) was that “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). He did heal a man with a withered hand because it is lawful to do good and save life on Sabbath days (Mark 3:4). One of the many facets of Jesus’ greatness is seen in his wise and gracious response to His overbearing and obnoxious critics and their criticism. He did not return evil for evil or insult for insult, and neither should we. “For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil” (1 Peter 3:10–12).

Looking to Jesus’ Conflicts with His Critics—1

Jesus’ call of Levi and the subsequent feast that Levi gave to ensure that tax collectors and others could be introduced to Jesus by his generous hospitality sparked a firestorm of direct and indirect criticism. Although Jesus did not answer with bitter criticism or insult in response to His critics, He did answer them in a simple, yet masterful way. The careful reader can see obvious differences between the genuine religion He taught and practiced and the

counterfeit variety they taught and practiced. Let's consider the first of these instances and the vivid contrasts between the genuine and the counterfeit that it contains.

“And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matthew 9:10–13).

The first and obvious difference between Jesus and His critics is: **He sees all people as diseased by sin; they do not.** Humanity has always sought to create classes and distinctions among itself. Like in Jesus' day among His critics, so it is true today that there is the practice of a caste system in some parts of the world. In America, even though it was founded upon the noble (and Biblical) ideal that all men are created equal, there is a host of people who prefer to identify themselves as “hyphenated” Americans of some kind and not simply as Americans. Routinely we hear of people designated by their race, or age, or income level, or religious practices, or marital status, or educational attainment, or political party affiliation. And, in recent days, we have even been disgustingly inundated by vulgar sexual preference categories.

But, as God told Samuel, “the Lord seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Therefore, when Jesus looked on His contemporaries in history, He saw people, all people, as desperately needy and sin sick. All were infected with the horrific cancer of sin. All were spiritual lepers facing the same frightful future of certain death. “There is none righteous, no, not one...for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10, 23).

Therefore, there were no “untouchables”; no one was of a different spiritual class or caste. Through His eyes, Jesus only saw two types of sinners—those who knew they were sick and in need of a physician and those who did not know they were sick. He could help those who knew they needed help; He could not help the rest until they realized their need.

The second distinct difference between Jesus and His critics is: **He prescribes the same remedy—repentance—for all.** The religion of His critics did not require humility and penitence; all it needed was extortioners, the unjust, adulterers, and tax collectors. Then its practitioners could pray, “God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men” (Luke 18:11). Much of the false doctrine that has blackened the pages of human history and blighted the Lord’s church has sprung from the ungodly desire to practice sin without repenting of it. Not so with the Great Physician. Every one of His patients is prescribed a powerful dose of repentance and its lifelong fruits, because all men everywhere are commanded to repent (Acts 17:30). The holy God does not need to alter anything about Himself of His perfect will; unholy man is the one who needs to change.

A third and most significant difference between Jesus and His critics is: **Inward, heartfelt conformity to God’s will matters most to Him; to them it does not.** Fasting twice a week, giving tithes of all that one possesses, praying in the synagogues and on the corners of the street, disfiguring one’s appearance while fasting were of supreme importance to Jesus’ critics. It never has been with God. As the prophet Hosea had stated seven hundred years prior (Hosea 6:6), Jehovah prioritizes loyal, faithful lovingkindness over external sacrifices. Formalism which is void of love for God and void of genuine concern for people was worthless. Even today, it is “to this man will I look, saith the Lord, to him that is of a poor and contrite spirit and trembleth at My word” (cf. Isaiah 66:2).

On the surface it can often be difficult to discern a difference between authentic religion and its imitators. In some ways, Jesus and His critics had similarities. However, once a serious investigation and comparison is made, there are several, critical differences between the genuineness of Jesus and His counterfeiting critics. Which religion are you practicing?

Looking to Jesus' Conflicts with His Critics—2

Jesus' call of Levi and the subsequent feast that Levi gave to ensure that tax collectors and others could be introduced to Jesus by his generous hospitality sparked a firestorm of direct and indirect criticism. Although Jesus did not answer with bitter criticism or insult in response to His critics, He did answer them in a simple, yet masterful way. The careful reader can see obvious differences between the genuine religion He taught and practiced and the counterfeit variety they taught and practiced. Let's consider the second of these instances and the vivid contrasts between the genuine and the counterfeit that it contains.

“And they said unto Him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? And He said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days” (Luke 5:33–35).

The first significant difference between genuine religion and its counterfeits is: **In Jesus' religion, there are no brownie points.** The Pharisees (and possibly some of the disciples of the imprisoned John the Baptizer) looked upon fasting (and other things) as a way of earning spiritual extra credit. Since the Old Testament (in Leviticus 16:29) did command all Jews to “afflict your souls” once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the Pharisees reasoned that any additional fasting done in the year increased one's

standing before God. If fasting once a year was good and all that God required, how much better to fast once a month or once a week! Such additional fasting, they concluded, was going beyond the required amount; therefore, anyone who fasted twice a week—as the Pharisees did (Luke 18:12)—was putting God into his debt.

Jesus disagreed completely with such a concept and approach to being righteous before God. He never taught His disciples such error. The truth of the matter is “when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10). Jesus expects His disciples to fast, but not to be seen of men but rather so that they can be seen of God and rewarded openly (Matthew 6:16–18). The gospel’s plan of salvation for all humanity is of God’s grace through man’s faith (Ephesians 2:8); such things as doing good to others, praying, fasting, and worship are expected by God, but there is no such thing as “extra credit” in these matters.

A second significant difference found in this text is: **In Jesus’ religion, spiritual health is not measured by outward appearances.** The Pharisees were always conscious of and concerned about what others thought of them. They fasted on Mondays and Thursdays so that they could be seen of men. Their continuous disregard of the disposition of their inner person resulted in a religion that resembled a continuous masquerade party. Asking a tax collector to join their ranks (akin to what Jesus had done when He called Levi to follow Him) was unthinkable. It was bad optics. Keeping up appearances and always making sure you have good publicity were dogmas of the Pharisees’ religion. They were, as Jesus so aptly analyzed, “whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27). Spiritual impurity on the inside was less important than the appearance of righteousness on the outside.

Jesus' religion demands genuineness from inside out. When your soul is afflicted, you are to pray; when your heart is merry, you should sing (James 5:13). Genuine heaviness of heart and anguish of spirit, not the day of the week, is what ought to prompt fasting and greater prayerfulness. The religion that Jesus taught and practiced prioritized being real over being respectable, being brutally honest over being haughtily self-righteous, being transparent over putting on a performance. He criticized often and condemned always those who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" (Luke 18:9). The publican's sincere prayer of "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13) was praised by our Lord. The hypocrite's prayers to be seen of men and the heathen's prayers with "their much speaking" (Matthew 6:5, 7) were condemned.

A third significant difference that is highlighted here is: **In Jesus' religion, artificial emotions and superficial spirituality are abominations.** Because it is a joyous occasion, people tend to feast at weddings. To fast at a wedding because it is a Monday or a Thursday is spiritual insanity, not spiritual superiority. The Pharisees encouraged and even mandated such foolishness and superficiality; Jesus abhorred it. When the bridegroom is present, and the marriage feast is being held, the guests should be joyous and rejoice (Luke 5:34). When death comes, and a tsunami of sorrow and grief overwhelms the loved ones of the bridegroom, fasting and weeping are genuine and natural. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) at Lazarus' tomb, not because it was Monday or Thursday, but because of "how He loved him" (John 11:36). His emotion was not artificial or contrived.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day believed that spirituality was increased and improved by legislation. Thus, they believed that when certain actions (like fasting) were taken—regardless of the motive—superior spirituality automatically resulted. It matters not whether it be regimented fasting, forced celibacy, special lighting

in worship services, holding hands, clapping hands, or raising hands in prayer and praise, none of these actions inherently makes someone more spiritual than those who do not.

Genuine spirituality is cultivated; superficial spirituality is legislated. Therefore, ordinances such as “Touch not,” “Taste not,” and “Handle not” are necessary in false religions and will always result in a superficial appearance of wisdom and spirituality (Colossians 2:20–23). But, such is not Christ’s way. When one has died with Christ (Colossians 2:20) and is also risen with Him, he cultivates genuine spirituality by seeking “those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). Affections have been set on things above, not on things on the earth (Colossians 3:2). Therefore, artificial emotions and superficial spirituality ought to be abhorred, not applauded.

Looking to Jesus’ Conflicts with His Critics—3

Jesus’ call of Levi and the subsequent feast that Levi gave to ensure that tax collectors and others could be introduced to Jesus by his generous hospitality sparked a firestorm of direct and indirect criticism. Although Jesus did not answer with bitter criticism or insult in response to His critics, He did answer them in a simple, yet masterful way. The careful reader can see obvious differences between the genuine religion He taught and practiced and the counterfeit variety they taught and practiced. Let’s consider the parables Jesus taught to illustrate the distinct contrasts between the true religion of Christianity with all of its false counterparts:

“And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles;

and both are preserved. No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better” (Luke 5:36–39).

The first truth Jesus sets forth in this passage is the fact **that Christianity is not a patch job of the old (i.e. Judaism)**. Just as a seamstress would never use an unshrunk patch to repair an old garment, Jesus did not come to patch up the Old Law. The Law of Moses has always been holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12). It was perfect in demonstrating to everyone their inexcusable guilt before God (Romans 3:19). However, by the deeds of the Law no flesh will be justified in God’s sight (Romans 3:20). For God to be able to be just and the justifier of everyone who lives by faith in Him, the Law of Moses had to be fulfilled—every jot and tittle (Matthew 5:17)—and a new and better covenant—activated by the death of the testator (Matthew 26:28)—was given to all humanity.

God’s New Testament is all-sufficient and self-contained. God’s divine intention has never been for Christianity to be a sect of the Jews or to be patched together with any other religion, even Judaism (see Acts 15). It has no deficiencies; therefore, nothing needs to be added to it like human doctrines and commandments. It has nothing that is superfluous; therefore, nothing ought to be subtracted from it. The recent attempts of Rick Warren (the author of “The Purpose Driven...” series) to create Chrislam—claiming that Jehovah of the Scriptures is the same as Allah of the Quran—demonstrates abject ignorance (and heinous blasphemy) on this matter.

In addition, Christianity does not offer a band-aid or patch job for man’s spiritual deficiencies. The problem of sin is so deadly and serious that “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Becoming a Christian requires heart surgery, not cosmetic surgery. Without the drastic action of repentance, all will perish (Luke 13:3, 5).

The second truth that Jesus illustrates is that **the “new wine” of the gospel with its frequent use of authoritative principles cannot be put successfully into the “old wineskins” of the Pharisees’ excessive, rigid, unauthorized rule-making.** Just like oil and water do not mix, the religion of Jesus will not fit successfully into the legalistic, self-righteous religion of the Pharisees. The precious new wine of the gospel not only uses specific commands, examples, and necessary inferences to authorize, it also uses broad, general principles. There is, for example, no detailed list of endless Dos and Don’ts after Jesus’ imperative of “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). Jesus’ expectation of loving God with all of one’s mind (Matthew 22:37) requires each one of His followers to examine himself carefully and conscientiously and then live accordingly. (The wisdom of this should not be missed, especially in a country where the burden of excessive regulation has replaced common sense. I heard some time ago that the USDA’s regulations for a head of lettuce contains over 25,000 words!!)

Because of this divine decision to use broad, authoritative principles, there has always been some who find this too tough to handle. So, in one ditch beside the narrow way that leads to life are the legalists who bind specific regulations when God has authorized using a generic command. And, in the ditch on the other side of the narrow way are the licentious who loose what God has bound by contending that the Bible does not say “Thou shalt not...” Both ditches must be avoided.

The third truth that Jesus declares is that **His religion does not elevate personal preference over divine revelation.** The Pharisees preferred the “old wine” of “the tradition of the elders” (Matthew 15:2) over the “new wine” of the gospel. They preferred the respectability it brought; they preferred the exclusivity it gave them; they liked how it fit their lifestyle. Their “old wine” never required them to associate with publicans and sinners, but it did

allow ample room for harsh criticism of someone like Jesus who did. To them, “The old was better.”

New Testament Christianity is not about personal preference; it is about divine revelation and its inherent authority. It does not teach “Attend the church of your choice”; it teaches “Attend the church of Christ’s choice. It does not teach “Let your conscience be your guide”; it teaches “Let God’s Word be your only guide.” It does not ask: “Do you see anything wrong with this?”; it asks: “What does God say about the matter?” Christianity is not about doing what you think, feel, or believe to be right; it is about obeying the will of the Blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords (1 Timothy 6:15) so that whatsoever you do in word or deed, it is done in the name of (by the authority of) the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:17).

Looking to Jesus’ Conflicts with His Critics—4

Throughout His entire ministry, Jesus was the target of vicious, self-righteous, hypercritical, hypocritical attacks. It mattered not whether He was in Galilee (i.e. northern Palestine) or Judaea (southern Palestine) or somewhere in between, His critics were at hand and ready to hurl their carping barbs at Him. When a response was necessary, Jesus’ reply was always discerning and dignified. Mark (2:23–28) and Luke (6:1–5) also record this incident; however, it is Matthew’s account that is the longest. It is written: “At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were hungry, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day. But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was hungry, and they that were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the

sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple. But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day” (12:1–8).

As with the previously considered conflicts with His critics, our Lord focuses on significant and fundamental differences between the religion He taught and practiced, and the religion taught and practiced by His critics. Each difference merits careful consideration.

Difference # 1: His religion does not condemn the innocent or excuse the guilty. Jesus’ hungry disciples were not doing something condemned by God. Deuteronomy 23:25 makes this clear: “When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbor, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor’s standing corn.” The Law permitted this action any day of the week. According to the doctrines and commandments of men that the Pharisees subscribed to, it was only permitted six days a week; it could not be done on the Sabbath day. They failed to respect the silence of the Scriptures. Therefore, the charge made against Jesus’ disciples that they were doing something “not lawful” is only true when comparing their actions to the laws that originated in the minds of men; they were lawful when viewed by the authoritative Law of God. Therefore, Jesus’ critics were implying that Jesus encouraged (or at least, permitted) His disciples to break God’s Law. They were condemning the innocent. By His reference to David, Jesus also pointed out that they rationalized David’s unlawful actions (in 1 Samuel 21:3–6); thus, they excused the guilty.

This is one of the inherent and unavoidable facts implicit in the treating of man-made doctrines as authoritative in matters of religion: At some point(s) the innocent will be condemned and the

guilty will be excused. Evil will be called good and good will be called evil, darkness will be put for light and light for darkness, bitter will be called sweet and sweet will be called bitter. Woe to those who do such (Isaiah 5:20).

Difference # 2: True religion recognizes Jesus' uniqueness.

In verse six, Jesus states that He was more exalted, more majestic than the temple. In verse eight, He covertly declares His divine nature by stating that He Himself is Lord of the Sabbath. The massive bedrock foundation of genuine Christianity is the absolute superiority of Jesus to any and every other religious leader. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. This makes Him unique. It makes Him superior to all, even to Moses—God's instrument for the Old Testament's covenant and law. Moses was a faithful servant in God's house; Jesus is the faithful Son over it (Hebrews 3:5–6).

Jesus' unique identity implies His superiority and His authority. Therefore, His understanding of the Sabbath as practiced by His disciples is correct. He is not defending His disciples because He is trying to justify sinful actions; He is not employing "situation ethics." He is defending them because He knows they are innocent. He is not claiming that He and His disciples can do anything they want and still be innocent. He is claiming to know both the letter and spirit of the Sabbath Law and therefore, He knows that they are innocent. Because of His uniqueness, His understanding of any moral, spiritual, or historical matter is always correct; it cannot be wrong.

Difference # 3: True religion recognizes the purpose of divine law. In his account, Mark includes this argument of Jesus: "And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Just as Moses stressed repeatedly in Deuteronomy, God has given His commandments to His children for their good (e.g. 4:40, 5:29, 32–33; 6:24). He does not give laws arbitrarily or lightly. In fact, because of His great love and concern for humanity, He used six days to create the world instead

of one nanosecond. He created all things in six days and then rested on the seventh day for one reason—to model the pattern of work and rest that He would prescribe for the children of Israel (Exodus 20:9–11). Jehovah does not give divine laws because He is a legalist who delights in making random and onerous edicts. He gives divine laws because of His immense love for His children and His intense desire that they are spiritually successful. Unlike the doctrines and commandments of men, the Scriptures have no frivolous, degrading, or insignificant commandments. Therefore, “this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3).

Looking to Jesus’ Conflicts with His Critics—5

A second Sabbath conflict between Jesus and His critics arose shortly after the controversy over His disciples’ picking grain on the Sabbath. A synthesis of Matthew 12:9–14, Mark 3:1–6, and Luke 6:6–11 reads as follows: And departing from there, it came about on another Sabbath, that He entered the synagogue and was teaching. And, behold, there was a man whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath. And they questioned Him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—in order that they might find reason to accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Rise and come forward!” And he rose and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save a life, or to destroy it? What man among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out?” But they kept silent. “Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” And after looking around at them all with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man,

“Stretch out your hand!” And he stretched it out and it was restored to normal, like the other. But they themselves were filled with rage; the Pharisees went out and immediately began taking counsel with the Herodians against Him, what they might do to Jesus to destroy Him.

Like all the previous conflicts, this one provides several distinct differences between the religion Jesus taught and practiced and the religion taught and practiced by His critics. Let’s examine them carefully.

Difference # 1: True Religion practices compassion. Is it not stunning that the scribes and Pharisees viewed this man whose right hand was withered as bait for their trap of accusation, and not as a human in need of compassion?! Both Mark and Luke use the same verb (*paratereo*)—“to watch closely, observe narrowly”—and tense (imperfect)—a continued action in past time. Luke, however, uses the middle voice which, according to Vine’s, emphasizes the idea that they had evil motives for their actions. The gospel writers do not provide all the information that the critics of Jesus may have known about this man and his condition (how it happened—was it by accident, birth defect, misfortune?), how long had he had this paralysis (i.e. a few days, months, years, or entire life), the family members who may have been impacted (i.e. parents, wife, children). Luke states that it was the man’s right hand. Yet, Jesus’ critics showed no concern for these “trivial” things. Their sole focus was on whether Jesus would “take the bait”!

It is most significant to note how both Luke and Mark describe the situation. “The scribes and Pharisees watched Him whether He would heal on the Sabbath day” (Luke 6:7; cf. Mark 3:2). Luke and Mark are quite emphatic that the issue at hand was NOT: **Could** Jesus heal this man? rather, it was: **Would** Jesus heal him? Is that not a stunning, yet inadvertent, admission by Jesus’ enemies!! There was absolutely no doubt in their minds that Jesus had the power to perform miracles. They were NOT closely watching the

situation to see if Jesus had the power to perform this miracle! Without intending to, these venomous critics of Jesus tacitly confirmed the fact of His miraculous power. In a court of law, there is no stronger evidence possible than to have an open enemy confirm the testimony of his opponent. This happened on that Sabbath.

Unlike His hostile critics, Jesus did not see this man as “bait.” He saw him as a human being made in the image of God whose life had been blighted by a withered hand. With utter fearlessness He calls this man to stand in front of all these intent and intense critics. Then, with tenderhearted compassion (and four simple words), He heals him. Instantly. Completely. Undoubtedly.

Compassion is not optional in genuine religion. In fact, it is of such importance to our Lord that it is used as the distinguishing characteristic in discerning between His sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46. “But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:17–18).

Difference # 2: True religion values people over possessions. Jesus identified a clear distinction between His religion and that of His critics by asking if it was permissible on the Sabbath to rescue a sheep that had fallen into a pit. This was something that His critics deemed permissible on that day; however, to rescue a man whose hand had fallen into the pit of disuse was not permissible. Implicit in these critics’ reasoning is the priority of possessions over people. They valued things/sheep more than they did people. Therefore, one should not be surprised by their lack of compassion as noted above. The love of the world is always enmity with God and godliness.

Difference # 3: True religion abominates and laments hardness of heart and hypocrisy. The callousness of the Pharisees stirred within our Lord the strongest of all human passions. He

was angry, and He sinned not. He was also grieved, smitten with affliction in His heart by the horror of their spiritual condition. They who professed principled and absolute opposition to the Herodians politically-speaking, sought their counsel and fellowship on how to destroy Him—on the Sabbath. From their perverse perspective, He was guilty of violating the Sabbath for healing a man with a withered hand, but they were innocent of violating the Sabbath while brainstorming a way to utterly destroy and ruin Him! Such hardness of heart and abject hypocrisy kindled our Lord’s wrath and broke His heart. He loved sinners and hated their sin. He expects the same of us.

Looking to Jesus When Life is Unfair

Life is not fair. It never has been. Like all the rest of its brethren, these two facts are stubborn things. History as ancient as Cain and Abel and as recent as today’s news is saturated with overwhelming proof that life is not always fair. In nearly every sentence of Jesus’ biography there is injustice. For our purposes, we will focus upon the following occasion when life was unfair for the Son of God.

The barrage of hypocritical and hypercritical fault-finding that Jesus received after the call of Matthew (Mark 2:18–3:5) concludes with the Pharisees and Herodians brainstorming together as to how they might destroy Him (Mark 3:6; Matthew 12:14). “But when Jesus knew it, He withdrew Himself from thence: and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all; and charged them that they should not make Him known: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, Behold My servant, whom I have chosen; My beloved, in whom My soul is well pleased: I will put My spirit upon Him, and He shall show judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He shall not

break, and smoking flax He shall not quench, till He sends forth judgment unto victory. And in His name shall the Gentiles trust” (Matthew 12:15–21). It is stunning that Jesus healed a man whose hand was withered, and all the thanks He got for it was the plotting of a death squad. What injustice! So, when life was unfair to Jesus, He chose to:

Be wise (vv. 15–16). In this instance, being wise meant to withdraw or back off from the place where His enemies were plotting and scheming. There are times and places in which the wisest way to do our part in trying to live peaceably with all men (Romans 12:18) is simply to walk away. It is not a sign of weakness or of cowardice to back off. A second wise thing Jesus did was to enforce a gag rule upon all those who received the joyous blessings of healing. They were not to make Him known. He was going to continue being about His Father’s business. That was not going to stop. But, because His hour had not yet come, what He could do was to keep as low of a profile as possible. It is impossible for “cooler heads to prevail” when wagging tongues continue to fan the flames.

Be obedient (vv. 17–18). Criticism, hostility, intimidation, persecution, and even death are inadequate excuses for disobedience. Even though Jesus had wisely moved away from His enemies and their murderous plotting, He did not move one iota away from loving, serving, and obeying God. Even though the recipients of His healing power were not to say a word about their newly restored health, Jesus was unreserved in His fulfillment of God’s prophetic word. The injustices of life did not detour Jesus from the path of obedience. Because of this, He was God’s chosen, beloved, well-pleasing servant who we are commanded to pay attention and take heed to (v. 18).

Be dignified (v. 19). Unlike an ill-advised, blasphemous comparison made a few years ago by a presidential candidate, Jesus was not a loud-mouthed, publicity-seeking, grievance-driven, self-

promoting community organizer. While His enemies plotted and schemed, He was not organizing a rally, or making plans for a Million Man March on Jerusalem, or forming a special interest grievance group called “Galilean Lives Matter.” He did not start wearing a pink hat or a rainbow flag or an “awareness” ribbon. His focus was not in fomenting civil unrest or even leading a peaceful public protest. His focus was upon those who had been battered and bludgeoned in the rough and tumble of life—those described by Isaiah as “bruised reeds” and “smoking flax.” Be dignified when life is unfair to you; it may be even more unfair to others.

Be meek (vv. 15, 20). At the heart and soul of the word “meek” is the concept of power under control. In inspiration’s typically understated, very matter-of-fact way, the text simply states “as many as had plagues” were all healed (Mark 3:10). Regardless of what physical, mental, and/or spiritual disease(s) had lacerated their life and plagued their health and scourged their home, each left the Great Physician well—the deaf, the blind, the mute, the lame, the leper, the brokenhearted, the demon-possessed, the paralytic, et. al. No case was incurable, because Jesus possessed stunning, all-encompassing, miraculous power. It is important to note that Jesus never uses this immense power to endanger or harm those who were scheming and plotting against Him. He could have; He didn’t, because He was meek.

Be focused on helping others (v. 20). On a good day, a thin narrow reed was feeble and tossed about by every wind and storm of life. To be broken or bruised would severely worsen a reed’s already fragile condition and threaten its very survival. It could easily be destroyed by someone trying to help it unless it was handled with the most expert and tenderest of touch. A smoking flax is what the wick of an oil lamp becomes when it no longer has any fuel to feed its flame. It is running on fumes. What a graphic metaphor of humans who are near the extinction of their resources, hope, and/or health. Only the most sympathetic and delicate of

hands could restore its flame without extinguishing it in the process. These were the ones Jesus focused upon, not Himself, during this occasion of injustice and unfairness in His life.

Be faithful (v. 21). Much is learned about a person's character when inflicted with injustice. With Jesus, His steadfastness and consistency during this tempest of injustice ought to increase our belief in His own trustworthiness. Although several of His contemporaries found Him to be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to their sin-loving hearts, this precious and elect chief cornerstone is trustworthy. Everyone who believes on Him shall not be ashamed; faith in Him is not and will not be in vain (cf. 1 Peter 2:5–8). “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58), for He is faithful.

Looking to Jesus in Prayer All Night

When it comes to prayer, Jesus is quite clear that quality is more important than quantity. The model prayer found in the Sermon on the Mount is less than seventy words (Matthew 6:9–13). Prayers uttered for the purpose of being seen of men and prayers lengthened using vain repetitions are expressly forbidden (Matthew 6:5–7). Like a sermon, a prayer does not have to be eternal to be immortal! Considering this, Luke's startling statement can easily be missed: “And it came to pass in those days, that He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). Like a first-century doctor maintaining an all-night watch at the bedside of a needy patient, Jesus closeted Himself away on a mountain to seek and maintain intimate communion with God. Let's reverently consider several reasons why this occasion arose in our Lord's life “in those days.”

“In those days” Jesus was facing the increased and focused hostility of those who hated Him. In the minds of His enemies, Jesus’ Sabbath “violations” had become intolerable. In recent days, He had healed an impotent man and commanded him to take up his bed and walk while in Jerusalem (John 5:1–16). Next, He had defended His disciples’ plucking of grain and declared Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–5). And then, He had healed a man with a withered hand while exposing His enemies’ hypocrisy (Matthew 12:9–13). His enemies wanted to destroy Him (Mark 3:6).

Like every other godly person, Jesus was facing persecution (2 Timothy 3:12) and it was going to continue intensifying. While that persecution intensified, God’s expectations of righteous behavior—loving your enemies, blessing those who curse you, doing good to those who hate you, and praying for those who spitefully use you and persecute you—was not going to lessen. God still expected hungry enemies to be fed and thirsty ones given something to drink. In the continuous battle of good versus evil, God still expected Jesus to not avenge Himself or be overcome by evil, but rather to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:19–21). Jesus did not continue on the path of obedience amid growing hostility by accident or by having “good luck”; He did it by praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). So, “in those days...He went out into a mountain to pray.”

“In those days” Jesus was also facing the perils of popularity. The reader can almost sense a strain upon Mark’s inspired quill as he strives to adequately capture the immense size of Jesus’ popularity: “and from Jerusalem, and from Idumæa, and from beyond Jordan; and they about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they had heard what great things He did, came unto him. And He spoke to His disciples, that a small ship should wait on Him because of the multitude, lest they should throng Him” (Mark 3:8–9).

Like every other preacher, Jesus was facing the perils that come with the fickle winds of popularity. Regardless of whether it

is popular (“in season”) or unpopular (“out of season”), God’s expectation for His Son and all His other preachers is to “Preach the word...reprove, rebuke, and exhort” (2 Timothy 4:2). Coveting popularity, even when it is watered down to simply having the desire for all men to speak well of you, is accursed of God (Luke 6:26). Many preachers and Christians have been seduced from the path of faithfulness by the temptress called popularity. Jesus did not avoid the perils of popularity by accident or by having “good luck”; He did it by praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). So, “in those days...He went out into a mountain to pray.”

“In those days” Jesus was facing the necessity of making difficult and weighty decisions. God’s ultimate plan for the gospel was to entrust this treasure to earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7), to give His kingdom and vineyard to a people who will produce fruit (Matthew 21:33–43), and to delegate the husbandry of the seed—its planting and watering—to His fellow workers (1 Corinthians 3:6–9). The full revelation and manifestation of God’s eternally purposed mystery—kept secret since the world began, prophesied of by holy men of old, and culminating in the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us—was going to be made known to all nations by holy apostles and prophets (Romans 16:25–26; Ephesians 3:5). Angels need not apply; only humans are qualified for this momentous task.

With the coming of the sunrise, Jesus was going to leave His prayer closet in the mountain and call a dozen of His disciples to become apostles (Luke 6:12–13). These men—fallible, diverse, imperfect—were going to be with Him, and then be entrusted with the word of God to preach and with miraculous power to heal. In less than three years they were going to be sent into all the world to preach the gospel to every creature (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16). By the time the last of these twelve mortals had breathed his final breath, they will have forever changed human

history. What difficult and weighty decisions were involved in the selection of the apostles!

Like every other human, Jesus was facing the final moments before several sober and important decisions. How imperative wisdom is on such an occasion. Although He was the only begotten Son of God, He was not exempted from having to ask in prayer for wisdom (James 1:5). He had to be made like unto His brethren in all things (Hebrews 2:17), not *almost* all things. He did not wisely choose the apostles by accident or by having “good luck”; He did it by praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). So, “in those days...He went out into a mountain to pray.”

In the life of Christ, we can readily see on different occasions how human the Son of Man was: He slept (Mark 4:38); He hungered (Mark 11:12); He thirsted (John 19:28); He wept (John 11:35); He was angry (Mark 3:5); He was tempted (Hebrews 4:15). One more proof can be added to demonstrate that He was one hundred percent human: He prayed (all night)!

Looking to Jesus’ Call of the Apostles

During the first year of Jesus’ ministry He called and made many disciples. It was not until the early part of His second year that the following took place: “...He called His disciples to Him and summoned those whom He Himself wanted and they came to Him. And He chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons. And He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter), and Andrew his brother; and James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means, “Sons of Thunder”), and Philip and Bartholomew; and Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon who was called the Zealot; Judas/Thaddaeus the son of James, and Ju-

das Iscariot, who became a traitor” (combination of Mark 3:13–19 and Luke 6:13–19 by the author). With the increase of popularity on the one hand and the intense hostility on the other, Jesus needed protégés that He could carefully and thoroughly disciple, preparing them for the greatest challenge ever commissioned in all human history. From this significant event in His ministry, let us consider the following:

Jesus chose them. According to Vine’s, the voice used by Luke (in 6:13) to describe this selection means “to choose for oneself.” There was no “Apostle Recommendation Committee.” There were no requests for nominations from the multitude. Jesus sought and therefore received no input from even one single human about these men He selected. This is important to remember because when the apostleship of Paul is challenged by the Judaizers, one of the things Paul emphasizes in the defense of his apostleship is this very fact: Jesus chose him (Galatians 1:11–17).

Jesus chose twelve. In God’s eternal purpose, the redeemed body for which Christ was going to die was going to be a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). The kingdom of God was going to be taken away from the nation of Israel and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof (Matthew 21:43). Like its Old Testament counterpart with its twelve founding fathers, the new Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) was going to have twelve foundational apostles. From this foundation, the holy temple built with living stones has been fitly framed together to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God (Ephesians 2:20–21; 1 Peter 2:5). Jesus, the Master Builder, knew the exact number of stones/apostles He needed to build His church.

Jesus chose disciples. The most significant characteristic that all twelve of these men shared was not advanced educational degrees, seminary training, material wealth, high social standing, or distinguished intellect. Because God has chosen the foolish and weak and base and despised things of the world so that no flesh

should glory in His presence (1 Corinthians 1:26–28), Jesus was focused like a laser upon one essential characteristic: passionate discipleship. From the gospel accounts, we know that Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew eagerly and immediately left all behind when Jesus called them to be His disciples (Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:28). When Jesus selected these men to become His apostles, these dozen disciples did not hesitate, “they came unto Him” (Luke 6:13).

Jesus chose humans. The literal translation of Luke’s comment about the final apostle Jesus chose may help to emphasize this obvious fact. In Luke 6:16, Luke names Judas and then adds “who also became a traitor.” The word “became” clearly implies that Judas was a genuine follower of Christ when he was chosen as an apostle. However, because of his failure to watch over and keep his heart with all diligence (Proverbs 4:23), Judas allowed his spiritual defenses to be breached and completely overrun by the evil one (John 13:27). He became a traitor. So horrific was this son of perdition’s apostasy and betrayal that Jesus said that it would have been good for Judas if he had not been born (Matthew 26:24).

These chosen apostles were no different in their human-ness than anyone living today. They were short-sighted, forgetful, given to little faith and big fears, prone to pettiness and pride, opinionated, prejudiced, foolish, impetuous, stubborn. (Being called the “Sons of Thunder” was probably intended to be more factual than complimentary!) Almost any flaw that can be found in oneself was also found in these called and chosen men. But, humans—earthen vessels—had been chosen so that the excellency of the power of God may be clearly seen (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Jesus chose males. Any careful student of Jesus knows that there were many social customs of His day that He completely disregarded. He never thanked God that He was born a man and not a Gentile or a woman (as was the custom of many of his male contemporaries). He treated women with respect (John 2:4); He talked

in public places with women (John 4:7ff); He refused to further humiliate an adulterous woman used as bait for a trap that was intended for Him (John 8:2–11); He defended a woman whose loving generosity was harshly criticized by His disciples (John 12:7); He healed women who were afflicted with evil spirits and infirmities (Luke 8:2; Mark 1:30–31); He compassionately raised to life the only son of a widow (Luke 7:12–16) and the only daughter of a Jewish ruler (Luke 8:42); He allowed women to minister to Him of their livelihoods (Luke 8:3); He permitted a woman with five husbands to introduce Him to the city of Sychar (John 4:28–30); He sought care and provision for His mother as He was dying (John 19:26–27); He allowed women to be the first witnesses and messengers of His resurrection (Luke 24:1–11). NO ONE in human history has done more to increase the amount of esteem women should receive and to demonstrate the incredible value of women, especially godly women who tirelessly guard and keep the divine institution called the home.

Yet, it is deserving of serious and somber consideration that Jesus did not call any females to be apostles. Jesus' call of twelve males was NOT because He had spinelessly decided to “go along to get along” with the customs of the day. Jesus' call of twelve males was NOT because He had a disdain of women—unlike, for example the polygamous founder of Islam who taught and practiced the treatment of women as possessions, sex objects, and scapegoats. Jesus' call of twelve males was because of the fact that since the sixth day of creation—the day when God formed Adam first and then Eve—Jehovah has always expected males to be spiritual leaders (1 Timothy 2:12–14). Even before the introduction of sin into human history, God expected men to shoulder the weighty challenge of responsible, wise, courageous, virtuous, godly spiritual leadership. In the 4,000 or so years from the sixth day of creation to the day Jesus chose the twelve, God had not changed His

mind. And, in the 2,000 or so years from the ministry of Christ to this very moment in time, Jehovah's mind remains unchanged.

Looking to Jesus to See the Basics of Fellowship

The Bible's teaching on fellowship has many facets and vital areas of study. It also has a firm foundation of basic, fundamental truths. In the third chapter of his gospel, Mark records the following: "And unclean spirits, when they saw Him, fell down before Him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God. And He straitly charged them that they should not make Him known. And He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto Him whom He would: and they came unto Him. And He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils: and Simon He surnamed Peter; and James the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James; and He surnamed them Boanerges, which is, The sons of thunder: and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphæus, and Thaddæus, and Simon the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot, which also betrayed Him: and they went into an house" (verses 11–19). This passage illuminates three basic truths about fellowship as the Sinless Son of God lived in perfect harmony with His Father's will.

First, **Jesus refused the fellowship of some.** On several occasions (including this one), unclean spirits voluntarily offered their willing participation in declaring the truth about Jesus' deity. Every offer was instantly and sternly rejected. Even these unclean spirits who fell down before Him in their offer of fellowship were refused. There are distinct and definite boundaries and landmarks to fellowship. Because of this, every invitation to transgress and not

abide within these God-ordained boundaries must be promptly and firmly refused.

There are at least two very easily discerned reasons why Jesus refused this offer of fellowship. First, the moral character of these beings obviously required a refusal of their offer. These spirits were morally and spiritually filthy. What fellowship can/does righteousness have with unrighteousness? And, what communion does light have with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14)? Second, in the most practical of terms, acceptance of their offer would have proven disastrous to Christ in the future. Three verses further in this chapter it is written that the scribes from Jerusalem tried to slander Jesus by saying that He has Beelzebub and it is by the prince of the demons that He casts out demons (Mark 3:22). If Jesus had been allowing the unclean spirits to proclaim His identity, there would have been credible evidence to support their profane charge. This would have shipwrecked His ministry.

Second, **Jesus entered into fellowship with some.** It ought to be noted that those with whom He entered into fellowship were those who He first called and then they responded. The holy, sovereign God desires intimate, genuine fellowship with all humanity, and all humanity has the ability for fellowship with God. However, fellowship with God is not something humans can demand or view as a spiritual entitlement. God offers His wondrous fellowship on His terms. There is no negotiation. There is no give-and-take. There is His offer, and each of us can either accept it or reject it. Regardless of whether it is Jesus' call of apostleship then or His call of discipleship today, the wise come to Him when He extends His offer of fellowship.

Third, **Jesus understood the two-fold purpose of fellowship.** Jesus called these dozen men so that they should be with Him, and thus be transformed by their intimate, daily communion with each other. Fundamentally, spiritual fellowship is the deliberate, active involvement with other disciples of Jesus to encourage their spir-

itual growth. Jesus' fellowship with the apostles is breathtaking. Simon, an impetuous, outspoken fisherman, was transformed into Peter ("Rock"), a fearless fisher of men. Jesus' fellowship with James and John transformed and harnessed the passion of their spirits so that they became The Sons of Thunder. His unrivaled power to transform through fellowship is still at work today in all those who will refuse to be conformed to this world and choose instead to renew their minds (Romans 12:2).

Jesus' transformative power can also be seen when considering the obscure and diverse collection of men He called. He called men with quite different occupations. He called men from various locations in Palestine. He even called men with extreme political affiliations—a publican and a Zealot (Judaism's version of the "Alt Right" and the "Alt Left"). Yet, what a metamorphosis occurred as this cadre of men heard, saw, looked upon, and handled the Word of Life (1 John 1:1). So complete was this transformation that even the enemies of Christ could easily tell that "they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). "Christ formed in you" (Galatians 4:19) is not only the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27), it is also the transformative purpose of fellowship as one walks with the Master in daily communion.

Because of their transformation, the apostles fulfilled the nitty-gritty purpose of fellowship—the increase of evangelism and benevolence. Jesus did not call these men to be with Him just so they could enjoy an amazing meal made from five loaves and two fish or one with seven loaves and a few small fish. They were not called to be His apostles so that they could incessantly argue over who was the greatest among them. His previous night was not sleepless and prayer-filled because He wanted to make sure He chose the correct fun-and-games organizers or meal planners. As conceived in the mind of God and practiced by the Son of God and revealed by the Spirit of God, the end result of fellowship is not an increase of giggles and laughs in one's social life nor better fitness

for the body in one's physical life; rather, it is the increase of evangelism and benevolence in a world that is lost and hurting in its spiritual life.

Looking to Jesus' Sermon on Discipleship

Shortly after calling twelve disciples to be His apostles (in Luke 6), Jesus preached a sermon on discipleship—its essentiality (vv. 20–26), its demands (vv. 27–28), its responsibilities (vv. 29–31), its rationale (vv. 32–36), its blessings (vv. 37–38), its purpose (vv. 39–42), its proof (vv. 43–45), and its value (vv. 46–49). Because of His location—“And He came down with them [the apostles—vv. 13–16], and stood in the plain” (v. 17)—this sermon is often referred to as “The Sermon on the Plain, instead of “Jesus’ Sermon on Discipleship.” Regardless of what designation it is given, it does provide an accurate record of one of Jesus’ sermons. Because Jesus, the Faithful Witness (Revelation 1:5), always spoke the oracles of God, this sermon allows us to behold and carefully examine several of the radiant facets found in the precious gem called truth. In this stirring sermon on discipleship, we can find the following truths about Truth:

Truth is sobering. From all indications given by the gospel writers, this sermon was the first teaching Jesus gave after the selection of the apostles. He had ordained twelve men to be with Him so that they could fulfill the incredible roles of being apostles. What does He say to them (and possibly their families) and the multitude as they begin their apostolic training? It is wise to note that He does not congratulate them; He does not offer pious sounding pie-in-the-sky-isms; He does not gush forth with a host of spiritual “atta boys.” He is a preacher, not a pep rally leader. As apostles, these men were appointed to death, to be made a spectacle unto the world and angels and men, to be fools for Christ’s sake, to be weak, despised, hungry, thirsty, naked, buffeted, reviled, perse-

cuted, defamed, made as the filth of the world and the offscouring of all things (1 Corinthians 4:9–13). (According to Lightfoot, this word “offscouring” [*peripsema*] and its synonym “rubbish” [*perikatharma*] “were used especially of condemned criminals of the lowest classes, who were sacrificed as expiatory sacrifices... because of their degraded life.”) Therefore, Jesus pulls no punches about the essentiality of discipleship: “Blessed be ye poor... Blessed are ye that hunger now... Blessed are ye that weep now... Blessed are ye when men hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake” (Luke 6:20–22). Truth is sobering. Being an apostle did not lessen the demands of discipleship; it did, however, increase the size of the target Satan put on their backs.

Truth is truth. It is not difficult to see that much of the content in Jesus’ sermon on the plain—His sermon on discipleship—is quite similar to things found in His sermon on the mount—His sermon on righteousness. There is a distinct overlap in the content of these sermons. Unlike a vote-seeking politician who drastically changes his/her message as locations and audiences change, Jesus’ proclamation of truth did not vary dramatically from one location to the next. One reason for this is because Truth is truth. What is true on the mountain remains true on the plain.

Truth is distinctive. In the beginning of this masterful sermon—the essentiality of discipleship (vv. 20–26)—the words “blessed” and “woe” each occur four times. These two concepts are polar opposites. There is a black-and-white, day-and-night, heaven-and-hell difference between *makarios* (“blessed”) and *ouai* (“woe”). There are no gray areas in this sermon. Truth is distinctive. There are certain things in life that the God in heaven above blesses; there are certain things that He curses.

Truth is authoritative. In verses 27 to 38, Jesus thunders forth fifteen imperatives—“Love, do, bless, pray, offer, give, ask not,

love, do, lend, be merciful, judge not, condemn not, forgive, give.” The pursuit of truth is neither trivial nor academic. Its pursuit is for the purpose of purchase (Proverbs 23:23). Truth is authoritative. It is to be obeyed (1 Peter 1:22).

Truth necessitates a response. Neutrality is impossible. Ignoring the authority of truth does not nullify the necessity of responding to it. Giving lip service to the authority of Christ by calling Him “Lord” is not an acceptable substitute for obedience (Luke 6:46). All people respond to truth by either hearing and doing what Jesus says (Luke 6:47–48) or hearing and not doing (Luke 6:49). Deciding not to decide is a decision. Washing your hands as did the cowardly Pilate does not make you free from your responsibility to respond.

There appears to be a slowly growing and ever widening practice in our brotherhood of ending a sermon without explaining to all who are gathered what the Bible teaches one must do to respond to the gospel. This practice implies more than its practitioner may realize. It implies that either the sermon was insufficient in its content (i.e. it lacked sufficient truth to warrant a response), or the preacher’s understanding of the inherent authority of truth is grossly defective (i.e. he does not believe that truth necessitates a response), or both. If the purpose of a sermon is not to declare the sobering, unchanging, distinctive, authoritative truth of God so that its hearers are confronted with the necessity of responding to it, then the sermon belongs in the trash can and its author needs to stay out of the pulpit.

Looking to Jesus and The Centurion’s Great Faith

One of the more famous quotes in sports broadcasting came from the lips of Jack Buck. With the Los Angeles Dodgers trailing the Oakland Athletics 4 to 3 in the bottom of the ninth inning in the first game of the 1988 World Series, an injured, pinch-hitting Kirk

Gibson clubbed a two-out, two-run homer. As Gibson was hobbling around the bases, Buck's memorable words were: "I don't believe what I just saw! I don't believe what I just saw!"

From the gospel writers one learns that there were at least two times in Jesus' life in which He had this same "I don't believe what I just saw!" moment. One is in Mark's gospel; it is written, "He marveled because of their unbelief (6:6). The other is in Matthew's account; it is written, "When Jesus heard it, he marveled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (8:10). Both the extreme unbelief of the Nazarenes and the incredible faith of a Gentile soldier caused our Lord to marvel.

The focus of this article will be upon the characteristics of this man's great faith as found recorded in Matthew 8:5-9: "And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto Him a centurion, beseeching Him, and saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented. And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him. The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it."

Great faith has unshakable confidence in the ability of Christ (v. 8). The fact that this event occurred in Capernaum is an important detail, for it sheds light on why this centurion sought out Jesus. Earlier in Christ's ministry, there had been a nobleman whose son was sick in Capernaum (John 4:46). This man travelled as quickly as possible from Capernaum to Cana of Galilee to entreat Jesus and to travel with Him so that He could attend to his desperately sick son. From a distance of about 25 miles, Jesus said, "Go thy way; thy son liveth" and that very hour—the seventh hour—the fever left the boy (John 4:50-53). It is reasonable to be-

lieve that this Roman soldier had heard the testimony of those who were reliable witnesses to this previous miracle. In addition, it is reasonable to believe that he may have heard the testimony of reliable witnesses who had seen the unclean spirit cast out of a man in the Capernaum synagogue (Mark 1:21–28); he may have been informed about the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:30–31); he may have heard the testimony of reliable witnesses of the healing that Jesus performed in Capernaum after the Sabbath sunset several months earlier (Mark 1:32–34); he may have heard of the bedridden man who was healed when Jesus said, “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” (Mark 2:1–12).

Unlike Mark Twain’s incorrect definition of faith (“believing in something that you know ain’t so”), this man’s faith was grounded in the unshakable bedrock of conviction that had come as the result of accurate testimony from reliable, truthful witnesses. His great faith had unshakable confidence in the ability of Christ. Therefore, when his servant who was dear to him was sick and on the verge of death (Luke 7:2), he acted decisively and confidently.

Great faith has extreme trust in the sensitivity of Christ (v. 6). A careful harmony of Matthew 8:5–10 and Luke 7:1–10 reveals the distinct possibility that the elders of the Jews who were sent to entreat Jesus on this man’s behalf were overzealous. It appears that the centurion simply wanted Jesus to be informed about this deathly sick servant (Matthew 8:6). It was probably the elders of the Jews who believed that Jesus would need to come to the centurion’s residence and heal his servant (Luke 7:3). The centurion believed no such thing (Luke 7:7). He believed that upon learning of his servant’s torturous distress and anguish the sensitive and compassionate heart of Jesus would respond. He did not believe that Jesus would need to be ordered to come or coerced to come because of a military escort. He trusted in the loving, compassionate, sensitive heart of Christ because he had great faith.

Great faith has an accurate understanding of the superiority of Christ (v. 8). According to Luke’s account, the centurion’s response to the thought of Jesus coming to his house was to send a company of friends and have them entreat Him not trouble Himself; “I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof” (7:6) was how he saw himself in comparison to Christ. Here was a Roman soldier with enough personal wealth and/or political clout to construct a synagogue for the Jews (Luke 7:5). Here was an officer in the Roman army with the authority to command a cohort of one hundred soldiers by simply saying “Go,” “Come,” or “Do this” (Luke 7:8). Here was a man who could compel any Jew at any time to carry his load for one mile (Matthew 5:41). This man—the Roman army officer—said to the one who had no political, social, economic, or military clout: “I am not worthy...” By all worldly standards he was entirely wrong in this sentiment. But, he was not! The less faith one has, the more he esteems himself; the more faith one has, the more he esteems Jesus. The greater the faith the greater one’s understanding of the superiority of Christ.

Great faith has insightful submission to the authority of Christ (v. 9). Because of his accurate understanding of the superiority of Christ, this man under authority understood the authority of Jesus. All that Jesus had to do was say “a word” (Luke 7:7) and his servant would be completely whole. Because of the authority of his commanding officer, every soldier in Rome’s army was expected to obey any command after hearing it once. Immediate, precise, complete obedience is how the will of God is carried out by His heavenly hosts. The desire of every soldier in God’s army is to be that God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). Great faith understands the absolute authority of Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, and obeys His will promptly, precisely, and completely.

When Jesus looked at this man’s faith He found great faith. What does He find when He examines yours?

Looking to Jesus and His Greatness

Because of the continuous overuse of hype in our culture today, the adjective “great” does not create as much attention as it used to. “Great” has almost become humdrum, especially when compared to such glittery and glamorous descriptors as “epic” or “awesome.” But, everything that glitters is not gold. The inspired gospel writers never get caught in the trap of hype; their focus is upon a straightforward and accurate recording of historical facts.

Therefore, the following stands written without drama or fanfare: “And it came to pass the day after, that He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and much people. Now when He came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And He came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And He said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And He delivered him to his mother. And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited His people” (Luke 7:11–16). With careful examination, the incomparable greatness of Jesus can be seen in the following ways:

His great compassion. One’s imagination is taxed when challenged to visualize the utter anguish and bitter aftertaste that death had left in this nameless woman’s heart and soul. This was not her first trip to the silent city of the dead. She was a widow. Like Naomi of old, she had lost her husband prior to losing all her offspring (Ruth 1:1–5). Unlike Naomi, she appears to have had no Ruth for future companionship and consolation. There were no Social Security benefits. There was no life insurance policy. From

henceforth, her lot in life would be whatever sustenance she could gather after grain fields had been gleaned, olive trees had been picked, and grapes had been harvested (Deuteronomy 24:19–21). No one knows how many unscrupulous scribes took note of her and began making plans to devour her house (Mark 12:40). Her future was almost as dark and depressing as was her horrific present.

When the multitude going into the city met the crowd coming out of the city, the Lord saw her. The Man of sorrows saw her bitter tears. The One acquainted with grief heard her audible and inaudible heartbroken, grief-laden wails. He did not walk on by, trying to avoid her pain. He did not stand aside and stoically let the funeral procession exit the city before He entered it. Using the most powerful, gut-wrenching word available in the Greek language, Luke's inspired quill writes: "He had compassion on her." From the depths of His immense soul and tender heart came an intense flood of pity, sympathy, and mercy. Jesus is great because of His great compassion.

His great authority. His first command was directed to her: "Stop weeping." This was not said to rebuke her, for there is a proper time to cry (Ecclesiastes 3:4). This was not said to mock her, for it is scriptural to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). This was said so that she would be able to see clearly what He was going to do. With her very own no-longer-tear-dimmed eyes, she saw the only begotten Son of God stop the funeral procession of her only begotten son. With her very own ears she heard four words: "*neaniske, soil ego, egertheti.*" Then, with her very own eyes she saw her son sit up, and with her very own ears she heard him begin to speak. She watched and heard it all.

Like Elisha the prophet had done centuries before in the nearby city of Shunem, a woman's dead son had been resurrected (2 Kings 4:8ff). However, with this resurrection, there was no servant who tried and failed (v. 31), there was no prayer offered by the man of

God (v. 33), there was no body-to-body correspondence in performing the resurrection (v. 34). Instead, with four unforgettable words, Jesus commanded this young man's spirit out of the clutches of Hades and reunited it with the corpse being carried out of the city. With the same ease of a mother waking a light-sleeping child, Jesus resurrected a dead man. Jesus is great because of His great authority.

His great tenderness. "And He delivered him to his mother." This son whose death had severed his earthly ties with his widowed mother and broken her heart into a million pieces was now given back to her. For the time being, Jesus did not call him to personally publish abroad the great thing the Lord had done for him (cf. Mark 5:19–20), nor was he charged to remain silent about what had happened to him (cf. Mark 1:43). The report of what happened that day would go forth throughout all Judaea and the surrounding regions (Luke 7:17) because of the crowd of people who witnessed what had happened. For the time being, this young man was given back to his mother because Jesus was sent to heal the broken hearted (Luke 4:18). And He did. Jesus was great because of His great tenderness.

What Jesus did for this nameless widow He has done for all of humanity. This historical event in Nain is in many ways a microcosm of what He has indelibly etched into human history for the entire world with His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Because of His great compassion, Jesus left heaven. Because of our need and the irreversible wages of sin, Jesus came to this world to halt the incessant funeral march of spiritual death. Because of His great authority to lay down and take His life (John 10:17–18), He laid down His life and the gates of Hades could not prevail against Him. Now those who are dead in their trespasses and sins can be raised to walk in newness of life. Because of His great tenderness, the Lord has reconciled humanity back to God and views the redeemed as His precious and glorious bride. A great Savior

was raised among us when God visited His people. Hallelujah, What a (great) Savior!

Looking to Jesus and His Response to John

Day after day John remained in Herod's prison. The wildfire he had lit with his thunderous preaching was still burning ferociously through the dry spiritual landscape of Judaism. Via disciples he received news about Jesus and His ministry. The reports he heard were strange to his ears and puzzling. Although Jesus had many followers—far more than the 600 men that David had when he began covertly attacking and destroying Israel's enemies (1 Samuel 27:2, 8–12)—he had received no reports of such clandestine military operations by Jesus. In fact, there was not even a single report of unfruitful trees being cut down, or grain being winnowed, or chaff being burnt as he himself had proclaimed about the coming one (cf. Matthew 3:10–12). The blood-thirsty, head-hunting Herodias was still seething toward him and plotting. How vulnerable John was to Satan's relentless barrage of questions: "Why did Jesus allow this?" "Does Jesus even really care?" "Has Jesus forgotten about me?" "What's taking so long?" "Why me?" "What if I have gotten it all wrong?"

So, as the friction of his unpleasant circumstances continued to rub day after day against his erroneous expectations of the Messiah, the blister of doubt grew bigger and bigger in John's heart. Something had to be done, so "John calling unto him two of his disciples sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou He that should come? or look we for another? When the men were come unto Him, they said, John Baptist hath sent us unto Thee, saying, Art Thou He that should come? or look we for another? And in that same hour He cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind He gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have

seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me” (Luke 7:19–23). From John’s actions and Jesus’ response, the following lessons should be taken to heart when battling Satan in the dungeon of doubt.

Be Honest. After analyzing his nagging doubts and fears, John boiled his perplexity down to two essential questions. Then, in keeping with his forceful personality, John dispatched two disciples to bluntly state these two honest interrogations: Art thou he that should come? or look we for another? He did not pretend that he had no doubts. Pretension solves nothing. Like the desperate father whose son was demon-possessed and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24), John was candid about the doubts that he was battling.

Be Encouraged. When John’s doubts were presented to Jesus, it is encouraging to note how Jesus did *not* respond. There is no public denunciation of John. There is no thundering rebuke. Jesus does not shame John or belittle him for having doubts and honestly expressing them to Him. In fact, after John’s messengers depart, Jesus makes a public defense of God’s messenger who prepared the way for Him (Luke 7:24–28). Rather than upbraiding John for having doubts, Jesus declares that “among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28). How encouraging to know that even the spiritual giant John the Immerser had times in which he was in intense, hand-to-hand combat with the device of darkness called doubt.

Be wise. Earlier on the timeline of history, John himself had been asked about his identity; he had responded in his usual, straightforward way (John 1:19–23). Jesus does not answer John’s question in like manner. His response indicates that He is no respecter of persons—John was not given any insider, confidential, exclusive information. Instead, Jesus’ response gives us the wisest

course of action to take when under assault by doubt: Feed your faith.

Jesus' answer is intended to point John away from doubt and toward faith. Biblical faith is rooted in historical facts that are confirmed by the testimony of reliable witnesses. So, John's disciples were to go and tell John about the many infirmities, plagues, and evil spirits that Jesus cured and the many blind who received their sight. In addition, Biblical faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17). The report that was to be taken back to John was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies given by Isaiah (42:6–7, 61:1). Jesus was challenging John to replace the doubts that arose from His circumstances with faith that springs from God's infallible word. If John could wisely feed his faith by focusing on the sure testimony of the Lord (Psalm 19:7) and the obvious message found within Jesus' miraculous signs (John 20:30–31), he would know that Jesus is the Messiah; therefore, do not look for another.

Be victorious. Doubts usually arise when our circumstances are harder than we want them to be and/or when we have unidentified misconceptions about spiritual matters. Doubts do not have to end with apostasy and bitterness. We do not have to be offended. A spiritual duel with doubt can result in greater trust and a purer, more Biblically accurate faith. Ultimately, humanity is required to walk by faith; we are not owed explanations. The beatitude of verse 23 clearly indicates that Jesus wants every battle with fear and doubt to end in spiritual victory. What a glorious goal to have whenever we find ourselves battling Satan in the dungeon of doubt!

Looking to Jesus' Description of a Great Preacher

After the messengers asked and had answered the two questions John had given them, Luke records Jesus' defense of John. It

is written: “What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings’ courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee. For I say unto you, among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:24–28).

With six questions and four statements, the Master paints onto the imperishable canvas of Scripture a portrait of John which vividly displays the essential characteristics of what it was that made him such a godly man and great prophet/preacher. Contrary to the popular opinion of His day and ours, Jesus approvingly notes the following truths about John:

John had convictions. He was not fickle, tossed around with every puff of wind like a skinny reed. John stood straight, tall, and powerful—like a mighty cedar tree—because of his deep, strong, and massive roots of conviction. Even though he began preaching when a young man, his convictions were rugged, plain, and permeated every cell of his being.

The weighty nature of his forceful preaching reveals the depth and content of his convictions. With all his being, John understood and believed: the seriousness of spiritual deception (Luke 3:7–8), the urgent need for heartfelt and fruitful repentance (Luke 3:8), the certainty of and terribleness of divine judgment upon sin (Luke 3:9, 17), the unnegotiable need for divine authority for personal behavior (Luke 3:19; Matthew 14:2), and the pre-eminence of Jesus, the Messiah (Mark 1:7; John 1:15). Not only did John believe, live, and preach with these immovable convictions, he willingly was imprisoned, and ultimately died, for them.

John had courage. He rebuked the multitude for their sins (Luke 3:7) and reproved the ruler Herod for his (Luke 3:19). He forcefully confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3:7) and insisted that publicans and soldiers live righteously as well (Luke 3:12–14). All men everywhere needed to repent; therefore, he plainly and courageously warned of God’s judgment. He did not mumble or become mute in the presence of sinners who wore soft garments or lived luxuriously in palatial residences. Just as the wicked flee when no one pursues them, the righteous are bold as a lion (Proverbs 28:1); John was fearless.

John was consecrated. He lived in work clothes, not gorgeous apparel. His role in God’s eternal purpose was to fill in every valley and to bring every mountain and hill low, to make the crooked straight and to smooth the rough ways (Luke 3:5). His work required vigorous spiritual effort and intense, uncompromising commitment to it. His life was not one of ease, material wealth, or even longevity. He never celebrated a thirty-fifth birthday. His laser-like focus was on preparing the way of the Lord (Luke 3:4), not on eating, drinking, and being merry. The extent of his consecration was such that some of his contemporaries considered him to be possessed (Luke 7:33). Yet, even one as sinful as Herod feared him because he knew John was a just and holy man (Mark 6:20). Because of his consecration, no one doubted that John was a man of God. With this, John was content.

John was privileged. Unlike all the Messianic prophets before him, John himself was predicted. Because of John’s fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, Jesus describes him as being “much more than a prophet.” John was privileged with a unique and incredible responsibility; he was going to be the final messenger of God, the Messiah’s own “Malachi” (the name “Malachi” literally means “My messenger”). Isaiah was allowed the privilege of predicting the coming Lamb of God seven hundred years prior to His birth (Isaiah 53:4–7), but John had the privilege of immersing Him in the

Jordan and identifying Him as the Son of God in the flesh (John 1:29–34). No one born of women prior to John had any greater spiritual privileges than he had. But, since the revelation of the gospel with its bounty of all spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3) and the establishment of the kingdom—the church (Matthew 16:18–19)—in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2), those who preach the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8) today have an even greater privilege than did John! In light of this extreme privilege, it is plain to see why the apostle Paul would exclaim: “woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

John was faithful. The doubts John had concerning Jesus did not result in him veering from the path of faithfulness. John did enjoy the blessedness of not being offended because of Jesus (Luke 7:23). There are at least two subtle indications in the Greek text that John had repeated encounters with Herod after his arrest. *Wuest’s Expanded Translation* of Mark 6:20 helps highlight these subtle indicators: “Herod was fearing John, knowing him to be a man, righteous and holy; and he kept him constantly out of harm’s way, and having heard him often, he was in a continual state of perplexity, and he was in the habit of hearing him with pleasure.” Regardless of how many times they conversed and how tempting it may have been to scratch Herod’s itching ears, John remained faithful to the truth of God’s law concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The truth, as John so accurately declared it (Mark 6:18) was “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” The present tense that John used denotes the idea of “it presently is not and will continue to not be lawful.” In other words, there is no expiration date on the truth about this matter. So, regardless of whether it was one day, one week, or one month after his arrest, John faithfully continued to proclaim to Herod the sinfulness of his unlawful marriage to Herodias. This faithfulness to God’s word resulted in his death. Like Antipas (Revelation 2:13), John was faithful unto death.

There are many descriptors used today that our Lord never used about John. (Words like “dynamic,” “popular,” and “in demand.”) Instead, His focus was upon John’s convictions, courage, consecration, and faithfulness. If we are intent on having the mind of Christ, our focus should be upon the same things.

Looking to Jesus’ True Statements about the Kingdom of Heaven

Immediately after Jesus’ defense and commendation of John the Immerser (Matthew 11:7–10), Matthew records the following: “Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Immerser until now the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing itself and forceful ones are violently opposing it. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear (11:11–15—Please note that verse 12 is my translation; most translations differ from it.) Within these verses are several significant truths about the kingdom of heaven that deserve more thorough investigation and consideration.

Truth # 1: The blessedness of being in the kingdom of heaven exceeds all previous spiritual privileges. Every patriarch, prophet, priest, and prince who lived and died prior to the establishment of the eternal kingdom (Daniel 2:44) on the Day of Pentecost (as recorded in Acts 2) had inferior spiritual privileges to anyone who is a disciple of Jesus. As Jesus Himself told His disciples privately: “Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see: for I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them” (Luke 10:23–24).

Being in Christ Jesus and thus blessed with all spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3) is a greater privilege than being the Messiah's forerunner. Living in realization of the salvation which the prophets of old inquired of and searched diligently for is superior to any blessing enjoyed by the Old Testament faithful. Reading the revelation given to the holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit of the mystery which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men was something that angels desired to look into and understand. In every possible way, the New Testament is the better covenant. How fitting it is then that we read it attentively, purposefully, and thankfully instead of turning our backs upon Christ after receiving the knowledge of the truth. A certain, fearful looking for judgment and indignation is a just recompense of reward for those who are so profane and blind to the extreme blessedness of being in the kingdom of heaven.

Truth # 2: The kingdom of heaven requires intense spiritual conflict to advance itself. There are several matters related to the translation of verse 12 that create disagreement among translators. From my study of these matters and the context itself, I believe that the intended meaning of this verse is: Ever since John's forceful, dogmatic preaching of repentance which ushered in the initial preparations of the kingdom of heaven until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing itself and aggressively engaging the enemy and his kingdom of darkness—the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, demons are silenced and cast out, and the gospel is preached; i.e. all the works of the devil are under siege. In response, the forces of darkness have been counterattacking with violent (physical and spiritual) reprisals—the arrest of John, the criticisms of the Pharisees, misguided and false Messianic beliefs.

This was not unexpected by Jesus; it did not take Him by surprise in any way. Fierce spiritual warfare is a necessity to the advancement of the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus left the Jordan

River immediately after his baptism by John, he drew the sword of the Spirit and threw away its sheath. From the wilderness of temptation to the cross on Calvary's hill, Jesus relentlessly pursued and fought the Adversary. The weapons of His warfare were not carnal, but mighty through God. With every miracle, with every sermon, with every soul that was taught the truth, Jesus was invading the kingdom of darkness and threatening its power. He never retreated in defeat. He never grew weary in well doing. He never stopped aggressively pursuing the enemy of God and man. Even being laid to rest in a borrowed tomb was for the purpose of conquering yet another stronghold of Satan. His militant pursuit of evil did not end until He had crushed the serpent's head. How profoundly sad it is to see so many view the kingdom of heaven on earth today (the church) as a relaxing spa or an entertaining social club instead of a militant, blood-stained, in-a-perpetual-war-zone army.

The pushback of evil did not deter our Lord. He knew that all who desire to live godly will suffer persecution. The longest beatitude in Jesus' sermon on the mount was concerning those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5:10–12). No one who quits the fight against evil because of a spiritual paper cut or slight bruise or some other minor discomfort is fit for the kingdom of God. Being reviled, persecuted, and slandered by the enemy does not call for one's resignation from active duty; it should cause one to rejoice and be exceedingly glad. Jesus' forerunner was arrested and ultimately beheaded because he was a threat to the kingdom of darkness.

The profuse mistreatment that was heaped upon the apostles (1 Cor. 4:9–13) was because of the unflinching threat they posed to the principalities, powers, and rulers of darkness. When such pushback and mistreatment does not appear to be nearly as widespread among God's people today as it was in the first century, the haunting question that needs to be asked and honestly answered is: Are the forces of darkness now more tolerant of righteousness and

spiritual warfare that threatens them, or are those in the kingdom of heaven far less militant toward and far more tolerant of evil? One reason why the church is not growing today as much as it could is the wicked and erroneous belief that intense spiritual conflict is optional in advancing the kingdom of heaven.

Truth # 3: The Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, His forerunner, and His kingdom (found in the Law and the prophets) began to be fulfilled with John the Immerser (v. 13). For hundreds of years Jehovah’s spokesmen had prophesied of the coming Messiah. Moses, David, Isaiah, Daniel, and Zechariah had explicitly predicted the divine game plan for His coming and the victorious establishment of His kingdom. The last words of God’s final prophet before four hundred years of divine silence was: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5–6).

When a certain priest named Zacharias of the course of Abia went up to Jerusalem in the days of Herod and there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord, he received the following message: “Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:13–17).

John the Immerser, the Messiah’s forerunner, was the bridge between the old covenant that Moses inaugurated at Mount Sinai

and the new covenant—prophesied by Jeremiah—that Jesus inaugurated at Mount Calvary. So “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judæa, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituræa and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness” (Luke 3:1–2). His message was fearless and simple: “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and His kingdom had begun. God’s faithfulness to His prophetic word was so complete that the inspired apostle Peter could declare: “those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled” (Acts 3:18). Yet again, not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.

Truth # 4: Inspired New Testament interpretation of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and His kingdom must be received and heeded (vv. 14–15). The conventional wisdom among the Jews of Jesus’ day was that Elijah himself had to appear bodily for Malachi 4:5’s fulfillment. Therefore, when John was asked if he was Elijah in John 1:21, his response was “I am not.” He answered correctly. Yet, John was the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5; Jesus said so (v. 14). Therefore, His divine interpretation of this (and every) Old Testament prophecy should be readily accepted by those with attentive ears (v. 15).

This simple passage illustrates a most vital truth about Messianic prophecies: Some contain symbolic language; some contain literal language; some contain both. The coming of Elijah (Malachi 4:5) was given in symbolic language. The birth of a son to a virgin (Isaiah 7:14) was given in literal language. The seed of woman being bruised on the heel (Genesis 3:15) was given in both literal and figurative language. This fact that God has spoken in times past by

the prophets at various times and in various/different ways is precisely what Hebrews 1:1 affirms.

Because of this, the reading and proper understanding of the prophets, especially when prophesying of the Messiah and His kingdom, may leave someone feeling like the Ethiopian eunuch—that he will not understand what he reads unless he receives guidance from another (Acts 8:30–31). It is here that a most critical and deliberate decision must be made—whether to believe the interpretation of an inspired or an uninspired man. Jesus’ unmistakable counsel on this matter is: receive by deliberate, ready, and welcome reception what He, God’s final spokesman (Hebrews 1:2), says about it. The command to receive with meekness the engrafted word (James 1:21) echoes our Lord’s sentiments.

Legion is the number of false teachers who use their uninspired interpretation of the prophecies of God’s word to subtly introduce their heresies. These spiritual predators are successful only when the inspired New Testament writer’s interpretation is ignored or rejected. If a person purposefully determines to gladly receive only what God’s word says on the matter, he truly is using his ears to hear. May his tribe increase.

Looking to Jesus’ Explanation of Why Some Refuse Baptism

In His defense of John the Immerser (Luke 7:24–28), Jesus declared that this prisoner of Herod was “much more than a prophet”; John was the Messiah’s prophesied messenger. Jesus concluded His commendation by declaring that “among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John.” The immediate response to Jesus’ words was twofold: “And all the people that heard Him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the

counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him” (Luke 7:29–30).

This response did not surprise or puzzle Jesus in any way because “the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! But wisdom is justified of all her children” (Luke 7:31–35). Though unflattering, the Savior personally identifies the following actual reasons why people refuse to be baptized.

Reason # 1: They choose to treat God’s accurate assessment of their spiritual state as valueless (vv. 29–30). Unlike the publicans who did the right thing by acknowledging God’s righteousness in accusing them of sin and demanding that they repent, the Pharisees and lawyers of Jesus’ day treated God’s will as being of no value. John’s preaching of repentance had no effect upon their hearts because they rejected his pronouncement that they were a generation of vipers who needed to flee from the wrath to come (Matthew 3:7). John’s inspired proclamation was deprived of its two-edged-sword power because they tenaciously held to their opinion that having Abraham as their father was spiritually sufficient for them. Their “I think so” was preferred over John’s “Thus saith the Lord.”

Reason # 2: Spiritually speaking, they were childish, not child-like (vv. 31–32). Being child-like (humble) is what Jesus illustrated and commended in Matthew 18:1–4. Being childish (willfully uncooperative and fickle) is what Jesus illustrates and condemns in Luke 7:31–32. This illustration comes from the children of His day who used to play “wedding” or “funeral” depend-

ing upon their mood. As one group of children seeks to prompt their peers into joining them in playing “wedding,” their offer is rebuffed because the non-participants do not feel happy enough to do so. Because of this, the suggestion of playing “funeral” is made. This offer is rebuffed also because they do not feel sad enough to do so. People who are childish always want things their way every time, even when it comes to spiritual matters.

Reason # 3: They blame their rejection of God’s message upon the messenger, not themselves (vv. 33–35). According to the Pharisees and lawyers, John the Immerser was a demon-possessed, stick-in-the mud freak and Jesus was a hedonistic party animal. What an example of “fake news.” This why the proverb that “an excuse is the skin of reason stuffed with a lie” will always be true. This preacher is not friendly enough; that one is too friendly. That preacher is stuck up; this one cannot keep his nose in his own business. How accurate is Benjamin Franklin’s observation that “He that is good for making excuses is seldom good for anything else.” People who want to reject the truth about themselves and their need to repent can and will always find something in the preacher to criticize. BE NOT DECEIVED: God is not fooled by one’s excuses.

But, “wisdom is justified of all her children.” Although John the Immerser and Jesus were quite a contrast of personalities and lifestyles, each preached the exact same message: “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:14–15). In his preaching, John usually attempted to provoke the godly sorrow that produces repentance by emphasizing the severity of God. In His preaching, Jesus often sought to lead His hearers to repentance by focusing upon the riches of God’s goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering. Neither preaching about God’s goodness nor preaching about God’s severity produced penitent obedience in the lives of the Pharisees and lawyers. Because of this exercise of God’s wisdom, the skin of their excuses was peeled away to ex-

pose their lie and to reveal the unvarnished truth—their rejection of baptism is because of an evil heart, not an unacceptable preacher. The seriousness of the sin of impenitence cannot be overestimated.

In like manner, the seriousness of the sin of rejecting the preaching of John and Jesus cannot be overemphasized. In God’s final attempt to receive acceptable fruits from His vineyard, He sent an incomparable duo—John (the one who was “more than a prophet” and “among those born of women there is no greater prophet than”) and Jesus (“the Son of man”; i.e. the incarnate, prophecy-fulfilling Messiah). Even John—the chief steward of all of God’s servants—and Jesus—the Master’s son—could not harvest any fruits of repentance from the wicked husbandmen of Israel. Because of this exercise of His manifold wisdom, only lying lips accuse God of not making the greatest, most earnest, last ditch effort to avert the kingdom of God being taken away from the nation of Israel and given to the church—a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. God and His wisdom cannot be impugned. “The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner; this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes...whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder” (Matthew 21:42–44). Those who obey not the gospel face fiery vengeance and punishment with everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:8–9), because “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

Looking to Jesus and Fake News

Fake news can be described as misleading information that is published for the purpose of damaging another by using sensational, exaggerated, or patently false information about its target. Although this phrase has been popularized in recent days, its practice can be found throughout human history, especially as it has mani-

fested itself in propaganda and slander. Jesus was a frequent target of slanderous exaggerations that were designed to damage and discredit Him. One such example of fake news in His life is described in Luke 7:33–34. It is written: “For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!” In these words of our Lord, three of the most common characteristics of fake news can be found.

Fake news has ever-changing standards to judge the behavior of others. To the Pharisees and lawyers of his day, John was unacceptable because he was a loner and Jesus was unacceptable because He was not. John was not extroverted; Jesus was too extroverted. John’s message was rejected because he was not friendly; Jesus’ preaching was rejected because He was friendly. Jesus was deserving of death because He “broke” the Sabbath by doing good—He healed a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees could do evil—take counsel with the Herodians against Jesus as to how they might destroy Him—without breaking the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6). What hypocrisy!

Some Americans have lived long enough to have heard (in 1991) a huge outcry over the possible appointment of a justice to the United States Supreme Court because of “the seriousness of the allegations” of sexual harassment made against him and then six years later hear the same people yawn in response to the actual, physical evidence that proved that a United States President had lied and was guilty of marital infidelity. Such hypocrisy is nauseating.

Or, how about when a terrorist attack occurs and a victim of the attack reports that the last thing said by the terrorist was “Allah akbar.” Have you ever noticed that a “rush to judgment” is sternly and repeatedly discouraged? Yet, when a political candidate for the United States Senate is accused of misdeeds that occurred decades

ago, these same people demand an immediate rush to judgment. Clearly, there are two different standards.

Using diverse weights and measures on one's scales in the market place is an abomination to God (Proverbs 20:10). Since they are abhorred by God in the business world, surely the same is true if they are used on the scales of justice and morality.

Fake news demonizes people who condemn sin and promote godly living. According to the angel Gabriel, it was God's will for John the Immerser to never drink wine or strong drink and to be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). Being raised by righteous parents who walked blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord (Luke 1:6), it is not difficult to see why it was predicted that John would become great in the sight of the Lord (Luke 1:15). Jesus recognized John's spiritual stature when He stated, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater" (Matthew 11:11).

Holiness, sin, repentance, righteousness, and divine judgment were not abstract theological concepts to John. They were nitty-gritty essentials of his life which needed to be found in a spiritually lethargic nation before the axe of Jehovah delivered its final, decisive blow to its root. John's uncompromising and intense consecration to God coupled with his non-negotiable determination to speak only the oracles of God made him quite different than his peers. Had he been living today, one can only imagine all the phobias that John's demonizers would accuse him of having.

Fake news exaggerates and perverts facts into slander. John's austere diet was wild locust and honey (Matthew 3:4). Jesus' diet was whatever kosher food was set before Him. John was a Nazarite; therefore, he did not touch anything from a grape (Numbers 6:2-4). Jesus was from Nazareth, but He was not a Nazarite; therefore, he ate grapes and drank the juice of grapes. Jesus' critics exaggerated His culinary practices to the point of slanderously saying about Him that He was a glutton and a winebibber. According

to Deuteronomy 21:18–21, if Jewish parents had a stubborn and rebellious son who would not obey them and who chose to conduct himself as a glutton and a drunkard, this evil man was to be executed by stoning. These perverse accusations plainly reveal the vicious, evil motives of Jesus’ slanderers.

So, was Jesus a wine drinker? The correct answer is: YES! and NO! Because the Greek word *oinos* is a generic term, it is used in the New Testament to refer to fermented grape juice and also to unfermented grape juice. Because He drank unfermented grape juice, it can be accurately said that Jesus drank wine (*oinopotes*). In fact, He even miraculously provided over 100 gallons of this juice for a wedding feast (John 2:1–10). Anyone who has drunk a glass of grape juice would be classified as *oinopotes*, just like Jesus was. If, however, one is referring to fermented grape juice in their question, then the correct answer is NO! The Greek word for this kind of wine drinker is *oinophlugia*. Unlike many today, even the fake newsmakers of Jesus’ day did not think they could exaggerate and pervert the truth to the point of slandering Jesus in this way!

It is obvious that the intention of charging Jesus with being “a friend of publicans and sinners” was to imply that He approved of their sinful actions. He did not. Instead, He expected them to repent of their sins and bring forth fruits meet for repentance (see John 8:11). Since these people were spiritually sick and He was the Great Physician, it was only appropriate that He tend to His patients. Once the disease of sin was remedied by a strong dose of repentance, Jesus did not treat His healed patients like lepers in need of continued isolation. What wise and compassionate physician would do that? Unlike the evil and folly which animated these fake newsmakers who slandered Him, the correctness of Jesus’ actions is vindicated by the wisdom which prompted them. In other words, “wisdom is justified of her children.”

Looking to Jesus’ Somber Words about Impenitence

When John the Immerser preached “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2), the Pharisees rejected his message because he was too eccentric, hard core, and aloof (Matthew 11:18). When Jesus the Christ preached “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17), the Pharisees rejected His message because He was too common, gracious, and friendly (Matthew 11:19). The problem was ultimately with the message, not the messenger. The message of repentance is not flattering. It does not tickle the ears, and it is unacceptable to those who think of themselves as being in robust spiritual health.

Therefore, in Matthew 11:20–24, the Great Physician solemnly warns of the gruesome spiritual state called impenitence. It is written: “Then began He to upbraid the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done, because they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.” With this pronouncement the Son of God declares:

The required remedy for impenitence. The continuous prescription for the deadly disease of sin is repentance, a change of mind produced by godly sorrow that results in a turning away from sin and a turning to God. It is a spiritual U-turn. It is the determina-

tion to leave the pigpen of sin and return to one's heavenly Father which results in a joyous homecoming.

As Jesus thought about the impenitent cities that were located near the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee and the great light that had illuminated their spiritual darkness (Matthew 4:16), His troubled heart burst forth with solemn warning. They should have repented long before now. Tyre and Sidon—two Gentile cities who received, at best, a flicker or two of light from Jesus' ministry—would have repented in the most profoundest of ways if they had witnessed the mighty works done in Chorazin or Bethsaida, the hometown of Philip, Andrew, and Peter (John 1:44). Repentance is not an optional or trivial matter. It is essential. A person either repents and lives or refuses and perishes.

The ghastly guilt of impenitence. Sin is rarely viewed by human eyes as it is in God's sight. There is no mention anywhere in the New Testament that any of these three Jewish cities—Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum—ever viciously opposed Jesus. There is no record of their citizens ever attempting to cast Him headlong off the brow of a hill like at Nazareth (Luke 4:29). There is no record of their citizens ever picking up stones to cast at Him like in Jerusalem (John 8:59). There is no indication that the citizens of Capernaum were shamelessly expressing their sexuality in vile and unnatural ways like the Sodomites did in Abraham's day. Yet, for Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom it shall be more tolerable in the day of judgment!

For "everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48) is an immutable standard that God uses in determining one's reward or guilt. Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum had witnessed numerous infallible proofs of Jesus' deity. More so than any of the other Jewish cities. In addition to becoming the home base of Jesus' ministry (Matthew 4:13), Capernaum was the location of the healing of the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:5–13), Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14–17), the paralyzed

man (Matthew 9:1–8), and the nobleman’s son (John 4:46–54). It was also the site of the exorcism of an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21–26) and a citywide night of healing and exorcism (Mark 1:32–34). When John the Immerser heard of the miracles of Jesus and their fulfillment of Scripture, his doubts were dispelled; however, the citizens of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum who personally witnessed Jesus’ miracles and marveled with amazement at His authority (Mark 1:27, 2:12) clung to their sins in impenitence! What ghastly guilt impenitence produces, especially for those to whom much is given.

The certain calamity of impenitence. Like Sodom, the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida have absolutely vanished from the earth. Today’s archaeologists are uncertain as to their exact location. Capernaum which had desired immortality and exaltation has also passed into oblivion. It should be clear to all that Jesus meant exactly what He said and did exactly as He said. Impenitence brings certain calamity, a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation. It is a fearful thing to fall in the hands of the living God, especially when one is guilty of the horrific sin of impenitence. All men everywhere are commanded to repent (Acts 17:30). Have you?

Looking to Jesus’ Great Invitation

Jesus’ passion for lost souls was intense and unconquerable. His stepfather was instructed by the angel to call Mary’s firstborn son “Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Throughout every day of His life, Jesus was ever zealous and single-minded about humanity’s salvation. How disheartening for John to send two of his disciples to ask Him: “Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3). How discouraging to live in a generation that excused its profane unbelief by believing that God’s prophet—John—was demon-possessed

and God's only begotten Son—Jesus—was a drunk and a glutton who was in illicit fellowship with sinful people (Matthew 11:16–19). And, how disappointing when the cities where Jesus performed many mighty works—Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum—refused to repent and believe the gospel (Matthew 11:20–24).

It was during this disheartening, discouraging, and disappointing time that Jesus issued His great invitation: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30). The genuine greatness of this invitation can be better seen and appreciated when we consider:

Its Sender. The One issuing this invitation is none other than He to whom all things were delivered by His Father. He is the only being that fully knows the Father, and He is the only one who can completely reveal the Father to humanity (Matthew 11:27). He is the One who gives the invitation. Though He is so high and exalted in status, privilege, and power, no one needs to fear for He is not harsh, overbearing, oppressive, or arrogant. He is meek and lowly in heart. His invitation is not insincere; this is not a demeaning taunt of those who are inferior to Him in rank. His invitation is not a cruel hoax in which He offers you something that actually is too good to be true; He is not a spiritual con man. His invitation is one that is reasonable, tender, compassionate, and genuine.

Its Recipients. Although it only has three letters, “all” is a mighty and big word. It knows no limit to its quantity. The “all” of Jesus' invitation has no restrictions based upon someone's nationality, religious training, sex, economic achievements, or social status; its only limits are “labor” and “heavy laden.” One would be hard pressed to find a better way to describe sin's oppressive tyranny and burdensome guilt. Who of Adam's descendants does not know of the unrelenting toil and effort that sin, the cruel taskmas-

ter, demands of its slaves? Who of Eve's children has not staggered with intense weariness under the ever-increasing weight of sin's guilt? The recipients of Jesus' gracious and great invitation, therefore, are all who have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Since there is none righteous, no, not one (Romans 3:10), the invitation list includes every accountable creature of every nation in every generation until the end of time.

Its Conditions. To respond to this invitation, the one invited must do three things: come to Jesus, take His yoke, and learn of Him. These are not optional conditions; they are imperatives. But, each of them is quite do-able.

“Come” implies that there is a distance between the sinner and the Savior. It implies that the separation is eliminated by the sinner's voluntary decision to move from the bondage and burden of sin to a place of spiritual rest. Every person who accepts this wondrous invitation must do like the prodigal son who “came to himself” in repentance and arose and came to his father (Luke 15:17–20).

“Take My yoke upon you” indicates a willingness to submit to a new master. Rather than roaming the paths of sin by doing as one pleases, Jesus invites all to live life with purpose, direction, and discipline. A yoke suggests companionship and fellowship with another. Its purpose is to take its wearers' strength and transform that natural ability into purposeful, productive labor as overseen by a wise master. What a wondrous invitation!

“Learn of Me” is a unique educational opportunity. In light of Matthew 11:27, this literally is the opportunity of a lifetime: “All things are delivered unto Me of My Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.” What a teacher, curriculum, and education await the one who accepts this condition of this invitation! It also is the opportunity to properly prepare for life's ultimate exam and pass it: “And this is life eter-

nal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). What a wondrous invitation!

Its promises. “I will give you rest...ye shall find rest unto your souls.” Rest—the cessation of onerous toil and the crushing burden of guilt—is given with the remission of one’s sins. Rest—the relief and rejuvenation of one’s spirit—is the blessing that one finds embedded in the daily toil of discipleship. Rest is guaranteed because the yoke used by the Master is good and wholesome; it fits you like one custom-made by a carpenter. Because God has put eternity in your heart, doing God’s will is what your heart is built for and using your talents and strength in consecrated service to God is what your spirit yearns for. Jesus’ great invitation promises the best, most abundant life possible.

So, have you accepted or declined the world’s greatest invitation?