



1-on-1
with the
One & Only

Encounters with Jesus

Norman Nokleby

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Front Cover:	Sunbeam inside Lower Antelope Canyon - Antelope Canyon Navajo Tribal Park, Arizona
Dedication Page:	Sunset, Lake Erie - Point Pelee National Park, Ontario
Page 9:	Sunset, Great Fountain Geyser - Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
Page 115:	Late-day light - Oxbow Bend (of the Snake River), Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming
Back Cover:	Sun star, Sun’s Eye Arch (upper right) - Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, Arizona

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A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is a bright, glowing orb in the upper right quadrant, casting a shimmering path of light across the water's surface. The sky is a deep orange, and the water reflects the colors of the sunset. In the foreground, a dark, textured surface, possibly a beach or a pier, is visible, with the sun's reflection shimmering on it. The Latin phrase "Soli Deo Gloria" is written in a white, elegant cursive font across the center of the image.

Soli

Deo

Gloria

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The One and Only

Jesus is the One and Only Son of God:

“For this is how God loved the world:

He gave his one and only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
will not perish but have eternal life.”

– John 3:16

Jesus is the One and Only way to God:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one can come to the Father
except through me.”

– John 14:6

In this book, I've selected from the Bible a few of the encounters Jesus had with individuals. Their social statuses spanned the spectrum from poor Samaritan to well-to-do Jew. The needs of these folks also ran the gamut from physical to emotional to spiritual. In his book *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*, Max Lucado pointed out that through the many dealings Jesus had

with such a wide variety of people, he demonstrated that our value as human beings, from God's perspective, is inborn. Our worth in God's eyes has nothing - zero, nada, zilch - to do with our intelligence, how much we earn, where we live, who we know, our physical attributes, our net worth, how many things we own, the good things we've accomplished, or the bad things we haven't done.

Simply put, God values each of us because he individually created us and wants to have a relationship with each person. So, the most important encounter with Jesus is not any of those mentioned in this book, or any of the others documented in the Bible. Instead, it is the personal encounter you have with God. If you don't yet know Jesus Christ as your one and only Savior, you can do so with three simple steps.

A. Admit that you are not perfect, that you have made mistakes in your life. (The Bible calls mistakes sin.)

B. Believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son and the forgiveness offered through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the required atonement (payment) for your mistakes (sins).

C. Confess to God your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord from this point forward. (This acknowledgment means you are going to change the direction of your life to follow God's path.)

These three steps may be accomplished with a simple prayer like this:

Dear God, thank you for loving me. I admit that I am a sinner. Please forgive me. I acknowledge You as God and Your Son, Jesus Christ, as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

If you have taken these three steps, congratulations! The next step along the path of faith is to become affiliated with a Bible-believing church to serve as your new family of faith. They will help you grow along this spiritual journey you have started.

Son Rays of Light

Have you ever wished you had the opportunity to meet Jesus Christ one-on-one, face-to-face? There were actually quite a few people who were able to do this. And a number of these instances are recorded in the Bible. We know the names of some of these folks. Others are anonymous, at least to us. Quite a few of these conversations had a positive impact on the lives of the individuals involved. Other meetings did not turn out so well. Regardless of the outcome, however, I believe taking a look at these encounters with Jesus can shed Son rays of light on our journeys along the paths of life and faith.



The Unknown Soldier

Faith

Matthew 8:5-13

Scripture Summary

Capernaum was a shoreside community on the north end of the Sea of Galilee. On one of Jesus' visits there, a Roman centurion came to Jesus and asked him to help with a servant, who was paralyzed and in great pain. When Jesus seemed willing to go to the soldier's home, the captain humbly declined. "I am not worthy to have you come into my home. I know something about authority. And I recognize that you have it over disease and illness. If you just say the word, I know this man's health will be restored." After recovering from his astonishment at this Gentile's faith, Jesus told the man to return home and he would find his servant healed.

Points to Ponder

When most people hear the word "faith," it is usually associated with God or Christianity. However, I would suggest faith is a fundamental part of life. I can believe

with every fiber of my being that a lamp in my house is capable of being illuminated. But I have not demonstrated my faith that electricity will indeed flow through the wires until I flip the switch from “off” to “on.” I may believe that a rock in a stream I need to cross is stable. But until I stretch out my leg and place my foot on the stone, I have not demonstrated my faith that the rock will support me and not move. These two simple examples provide the foundation for a basic definition of faith:

Faith is belief put into action.

A centurion, by definition, was in charge of 100 troops. The centurion in this encounter could have been the commander of the military garrison in Capernaum. This man’s meeting with Jesus is an excellent example of “belief put into action.” Consider the following based on Volume 5 of *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*:

- In calling him “Lord” (verse 6), the centurion approached Christ “cap in hand,” so to speak. This act is in contrast to Naaman in the Old Testament (also a military officer), who had a letter from his boss (the king of Aram) demanding a cure for Naaman’s skin disease. (See 2 Kings 5:6, emphasis added.)

- There are a number of instances where people came to Christ on behalf of their children. This story is the only recorded instance where a person came to Jesus seeking help for a servant, that is, a slave.
- Note that after the soldier states the problem, Jesus does not say, I will go and “see him” but I will go and “heal him” (verse 7, emphasis added). By saying this, Jesus confirms the centurion’s faith in him and demonstrates Jesus’ willingness to defy conventional Jewish practice and enter a Gentile’s home.
- The soldier does not respond “My servant is not worthy” but “I am not worthy” (verse 8, emphasis added). The soldier confesses his personal unworthiness before God.
- The centurion not only had faith Jesus could heal his servant; he also had faith Jesus could do so remotely. Quite remarkably, the man thus acknowledged that physical proximity (in other words, being close enough to touch) was not a factor in Christ’s power, but his words themselves had power. (Reference God speaking at Creation.)
- In expressing his admiration for the centurion’s stunning faith, Jesus pointed out that people who are

and will be a part of his kingdom should focus their attention on how they live rather than what they are called (Jew or Gentile).

The centurion made his faith-filled request as an advocate for another person, in fact, a slave. This soldier demonstrated his faith by:

- Acknowledging Jesus as Lord
- Requesting Jesus' help (rather than assuming, expecting, or demanding)
- Confessing his own personal unworthiness
- Affirming the power of Jesus' will and words

Questions for Reflection

1. Verse 10 indicates that Jesus was “amazed” at the centurion’s faith. (Other translations use “taken aback” and “astonished.”) Does it strike you as a bit unusual that the Son of God could be surprised?

2. Faith is listed as a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:9). There is no indication in the Bible that the gift of faith (or any spiritual gift) is given to every believer. But faith is necessary for each person to become a believer (Romans 3:28). How would you explain this?

3. I once saw a poster with these words: “Faith is going to the edge of all the light you have and taking one more step.” Does this seem scripturally sound to you?
4. In our culture today, what are some of the inhibitors to faith?
5. What part, if any, should (or do) feelings play in faith?
6. What are some of the results or by-products of faith that generally are not visible to other folks?
7. What are some of the results or by-products of faith that should be visible to other people?

All In

Commitment

Matthew 8:19-20

Scripture Summary

A Jewish teacher of the law came to Jesus and told him that he wanted to accompany Jesus wherever he went. Christ responded by letting the man know he'd better be ready to forgo all the comforts of home as well as be fully committed to doing what he said he would do.

Points to Ponder

Monday, October 13, 2008, 4:00 PM. Clemson, South Carolina. That morning, Tommy Bowden, the university's head football coach, had been fired. His 38-year-old wide receivers coach had been appointed as interim head coach. Dabo Swinney was having his first meeting with the staff and the team. He told them, "The next six weeks are going to be really tough, but I'm all in." And then he added that only those who are also "all in" should bother showing up for practice two hours later. Everyone showed up. (Per Ryan McGee, ESPN)

In speaking to folks who followed him, Jesus wanted anyone who was considering becoming his disciple to do so with their eyes wide open. “Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows” (John 16:33a). In Luke 14, Jesus used the analogy of planning to build a tower. Before you start the project, Jesus asked rhetorically, wouldn’t it be prudent to, first, know how much it will cost and, second, make sure you have enough money to complete it? Perhaps Jesus put it most plainly in Luke 9:62: “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back [in other words, is not ‘all in’] is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”

The man who came to speak to Jesus was no freshman theology student. In writing about this passage of scripture, Mike Nappa pointed out that scribes were “well-educated, being especially knowledgeable about the Old Testament. Within those scholars was an even more select group who had become experts at interpreting and teaching Scripture. The man who came to Jesus was one of these guys.”

We don’t know whether or not this man made the commitment to follow Jesus. But the real question is - Are we “all in” with Jesus?

Questions for Reflection

1. Why is commitment so important in life and in the life of faith?
2. How do commitment, worship, and service relate to each other?

Swimming with the Sharks

Doubt

Matthew 14:22-31

Scripture Summary

After the Feeding of the 5,000, Jesus' disciples headed across the Sea of Galilee in a boat while Jesus went up into the hills to pray. As the disciples were sailing along, they encountered strong headwinds, which, in turn, whipped up some considerable waves. In the middle of the night, Jesus came out to the boat walking on the surface of the storm-tossed water, which understandably unnerved his followers. After Jesus assured the folks in the boat that it was him, Peter asked to come out and walk on the water toward Jesus. The Master said okay. After a few steps, Peter became fearful of the wind and the waves and began to sink. Peter called out for Jesus to save him, which he did.

Points to Ponder

It should be noted that Jesus insisted his disciples get into the boat and head out onto the water (verse 22). In his commentary on this passage, former U.S. Army

chaplain Richard Niell Donovan provided the following insight: “The Greek word used here for ‘insisted’ is *enankasen* which means ‘compelled.’ Thus, the disciples weren’t being foolish, but obedient.” Sometimes we encounter hard times or difficult people (or both), not because we have made unwise choices, but because we are – to the best of our knowledge – going down the path God has led us on.

Mr. Donovan also pointed out that “the believers to whom Matthew addressed his gospel were experiencing extensive persecution from their culture. The difficulties and perils the disciples faced in their boat mirrored the storms many early Christians faced in their communities.” And this should resonate with twenty-first century believers because of the marginalization we Christians increasingly face in our society.

In his 1857 book *The Old Testament and New Testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, Joseph Benson noted: “Peter’s doubt was not that it was Jesus on the water. He was sure of that before he climbed out of the boat. And as long as Peter kept his focus on Jesus and relied on him, Christ supported Peter. But when Peter focused on his circumstances – the fierce wind, the tops of the churning waves turning white, and his own

personal inadequacy to deal with them – doubt overwhelmed Peter.”

Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter. And then Jesus let Peter know how disappointed he was in him. “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Richard Niell Donovan wrote, “This is the only recorded instance where Jesus’ comment on a lack of faith was directed to an individual.” There is no doubt Peter learned from this experience. He continued to be enthusiastic and bold. But Peter learned to make his enthusiasm and boldness subordinate to God’s will and leading. This was especially evident after the resurrection. And since we live post-resurrection, we would do well to also learn from Peter’s experience.

Questions for Reflection

1. Is all doubt wrong?
2. To what extent does fear lead to doubt?
3. Sometimes God speaks with “thunder.” Sometimes God is silent, which can lead to uncertainty or doubt. (The Saturday between Jesus’ death and resurrection might be an example of God’s silence.) How can we do a better job of handling the “Saturdays” in our lives?

4. Goliath in the Old Testament, a giant even by today's standards, blocked out the sun and created fear wherever he walked. But when David faced Goliath, there was no evidence of fear or lack of faith. But sometimes we encounter "Goliaths" that block or interfere with our communication with God. How can we do a better job of handling the "Goliaths" in our lives?

Woof! Woof!

Perseverance

Matthew 15:21-28

Scripture Summary

Perhaps to get away from the religious leaders who had no use for him and wished him harm, Jesus traveled to the area of Tyre and Sidon. (North-northeast of the Sea of Galilee, these two Mediterranean coastal towns are about 25 miles apart.) A Canaanite mother found out where Jesus was and sought him out on behalf of her daughter who was ill and suffering greatly. Jesus greeted her plea with silence. His disciples urged him to dismiss her. Jesus' response, likely more to his disciples than the mother, was that his ministry and purpose was to and for the Jews. (Per Allen Ross in his sermon, "The Faith of a Canaanite Woman.") Not to be put off, the woman came and knelt before him, once again addressing Jesus as Lord and repeated her request. This time Jesus replied it wasn't appropriate to take bread off the children's plates and give it to the dogs. The woman concurred, but then countered that dogs at least got the crumbs which fell from their master's table. Impressed

by her persistent evidence of faith, Jesus granted her request and healed her daughter remotely.

Points to Ponder

In his unusually titled sermon “Keep the Change,” Mickey Anders provided this insight: “This unnamed supplicant ignores a number of societal norms: (a) a Canaanite, (b) a woman, (c) unescorted, (d), initiates a conversation with a man she does not know.” These factors provide evidence of her perseverance from the very beginning of the encounter.

She immediately addressed Jesus as “Lord” (verse 22). The woman is convinced of his Messiahship, even though her upbringing and culture had told her that Jesus, as a Jew, was her enemy. Culture and society are often wrong about the life of faith. It is imperative that people of faith listen to God rather than other individuals, regardless of how well-intentioned their words are or how elevated their positions might be. (See Peter’s response to religious leaders in Acts 4:19-20.)

The woman showed no evidence of discouragement when Christ responded with silence to her first plea for mercy. Instead, she went and knelt before him, acknowledging

his divinity, without know what Jesus would do. (See verse 25.)

Some people consider “patience” and “perseverance” as synonymous or at least very close in meaning. I see these terms differently. From a Biblical perspective, I think of *patience* as “purposeful waiting without worrying.” When *perseverance* is used or implied in Scripture, I think of it as “patience combined with persistence.” The reason for this distinction? I think perseverance involves some difficulty or obstacle that must be dealt with. This mother’s encounter with Jesus is a good example.

After Jesus’ comment about giving the children’s bread to the dogs, Mickey Anders pointed out this woman “does not dispute her status as second-in-line behind Israel.” But then she takes Jesus’ graphic word picture and turns it on its ear. “Don’t the dogs at least get the crumbs that fall from the master’s table?” she parries.

What is a crumb? It is an unwanted, miniscule scrap, too small to be worth bothering with. Would it assuage hunger? Certainly not. But, would it be better than nothing? Most certainly. (See Jesus’ parable about the former rich guy who begged for a single touch of cool water on his tongue in Luke 16:24.)

Note the great paradox here. Jesus spent a lot of time and energy trying to convince his own people he was the Messiah. He was far from successful with many of his own ethnic group, the very people he'd been sent to help. Then here came this Gentile female, whom he'd never previously met or spoken to, who acknowledged his Lordship from the first words out of her mouth. (Per Allen Ross in his sermon, "The Faith of a Canaanite Woman.")

Jesus was impressed. That is evident in addressing her as "woman" (verse 28). While that term sounds strangely common to our ears today, Jesus used it as a term of respect. In fact, the Greek word used here (*gune*) is the same one he used in addressing his mother at the crucifixion. (See John 19:26.) Jesus grants the Canaanite mother's request to heal her daughter because of the woman's faith, her perseverance, and perhaps also, as Mickey Anders observed, because of her "vision" that "God's table may be stretched to accommodate a far more inclusive group of diners." Diners who will partake, not of crumbs, scraps or warmed-up leftovers, but of a feast of God's love, mercy and healing.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are different ways we can persevere?
2. Can spiritual perseverance become an unchecked obsession? If so, how can you prevent it from happening?
3. How can you keep the focus of your spiritual perseverance from becoming something you think God owes you?

IOU

Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

Scripture Summary

Peter went to Jesus and asked, “How many times should I forgive a brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus responded, “Not seven times but seventy times seven.” Jesus then related a parable about a king who wanted to balance his books. The king found that a servant owed him a few million shekels. Since the guy was not able to pay, the king ordered the man and his family to be sold to repay the debt. When the servant begged for mercy, the king relented and canceled the IOU. Then, this same servant went to a fellow servant who owed him a few bucks, demanding immediate payment in full. When the fellow servant begged for mercy, the first servant refused and had the guy thrown into prison. Other servants got word to the king about what had happened. Quite angry, the king put the first servant in jail until his debt was paid in full. If this wasn’t already clear enough to Peter, Jesus told him this was how God would treat him unless he sincerely forgave his brother.

Points to Ponder

Before we cast too many aspersions on Peter, we should recognize that misconceptions on this subject are quite prevalent even in the enlightened twenty-first century. On the 8 February 2003 edition of *Meet the Press*, General Norman Schwarzkopf recalled this response upon being asked about forgiving Osama bin Laden: “Forgiveness is up to God. I just hope we hurry up the meeting.” Stormin’ Norman was undoubtedly a great military tactician. But his knowledge of how God views forgiveness was even more lacking than Peter’s.

One aspect of Jesus’ parable in this passage that has long puzzled me is how the first servant was supposed to repay such an enormous sum from a prison cell. While working on this project, I heard this insight from Erwin Lutzer, Pastor Emeritus of The Moody Church: The king did not expect this man to work off his financial obligation. The king had already canceled that IOU (verse 27). But the king was adamant the first servant pay the debt of forgiveness and mercy owed to his fellow servant. (From a sermon aired on BBN on 6 July 2021.)

Note that Jesus was not advocating that each of us set up a spreadsheet to keep track of the number of times we forgive an individual. It is clear from his reply to Peter

and the subsequent parable, Jesus is using hyperbole. In effect, Jesus rhetorically asks, “If Omnipotent God doesn’t keep track of how many times He has forgiven you, why should you count how often you forgive another person?”

Nor was Jesus saying the offender is not responsible for the wrong he or she committed. In a 1998 publication of Prison Fellowship Ministries, Becky Beane pointed out, “Forgiveness does not remove the consequences or abolish the need for discipline.”

Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet noted “forgiveness [does not] mean forgetting, ignoring, minimizing, tolerating, excusing, liking, or reconciling.” Instead, Dr. Witvliet added, “forgiveness involves letting go, relinquishing the demand for personal vengeance and retribution.” (From a 1999 newsletter from the John Templeton Foundation.)

Forgiveness also means ceding judgment or punishment of the offender to God and/or the appropriate authorities.

George Herbert, seventeenth century English pastor and poet, penned these words, “He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for everyone has need to be forgiven.” (See Matthew 6:14-15.) Is there any more

compelling portrait of forgiveness than Jesus forgiving the people responsible for crucifying him? Through both words and deeds, Jesus communicated that if someone wrongs me, my forgiveness of that person should be intentional, unilateral, and unconditional. I'm just glad he didn't say it should be easy.

Questions for Reflection

1. In his book *Cast of Characters*, Max Lucado spoke about forgiveness as the gospel of the second chance. "It's not every day that you find somebody who will give you a second chance . . . every day."

- Have you ever been given a second chance? If so, what difference did it make in your life?
- Have you given someone else a second chance? If so, what difference did it make in his or her life? In your life?

2. Is there a difference between forgiveness and restoration? If so, what?

3. How has forgiveness impacted your life?

Rich Man, Poor Man

Priorities

Mark 10:17-22

Scripture Summary

A young man came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus listed several of the Ten Commandments. The young man replied, in effect, “Been there, done that.” Looking at the man, Jesus’ heart went out to him. Jesus told the guy there was one other thing remaining. He needed to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the needy. The young man’s smile turned to a frown as he left, his thumbs running over the gold rings on his fingers.

Points to Ponder

First, let’s give credit where credit is due. This young man came to Jesus and showed proper respect by kneeling before Christ and addressing him as “good teacher” (verse 17). After that, unfortunately, things didn’t go so well for the guy.

The man wanted to know what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. In his sermon on this encounter, John McKinnon noted this man's question "assumed that the outcome was in his own hands: he would be in control and he could bring it about if he did the right things." In other words, this person wanted a to-do list with accompanying checkboxes.

The second part of his question associated eternal life with being inherited. This young guy was likely not a self-made millionaire. He'd probably inherited his wealth from his father, just as he had inherited his Jewish heritage. In this man's world, pretty much everything he had that he deemed worth having was likely obtained either via inheritance or by his own actions.

Jesus asked this man about keeping "horizontal" commandments – the ones which deal with rules about how he should or should not interact with other people. This guy could check all those boxes. Okay, that was to his credit as well.

But he wanted something *to do*. Jesus acquiesced to his request. Even though it was an action, the man could not check that box. This young man had given his head (knowing the rules) and his hands (not doing the wrong

things) to God. But he held back his heart (his desires and his priorities).

Mr. To-do List had paid little attention to the “vertical” commandments – those which deal with his relationship with God. There is a reason the First Commandment is first. How we interact with others - our thoughts, words and actions, our priorities and choices - should be, no, make that are, guided by our relationship to God.

This guy was neither the first nor the last person to be confused about what matters more. In a “Family Circus” comic strip, seven-year-old Billy, dressed up as a doctor, went to his father and asked, “Daddy, is there anything you’d like taken out?” His father leaned over, looked down at his son, and said, “Yes. The garbage.”

Martha, Lazarus’ sister, was busy in the kitchen preparing dinner for Jesus and his disciples. She was frustrated by the lack of help from her sister Mary who was listening to Jesus. She went to Jesus complaining about what seemed unfair to her. Jesus replied to Martha, in effect, “Your sister has discovered what matters more and it won’t be taken from her.” (See Luke 10:38-42.) Fortunately, unlike the rich guy, Martha learned from her encounter with Jesus, as evidenced by her action when Jesus came to Bethany after Lazarus

had died. Martha was the first of the two sisters to go out and meet Jesus. Being in the Master's presence and talking with him mattered more – more than anything else.

Our times are far from simple. Our phones ring, chirp, or buzz, demanding our time and attention. Our inboxes, both physical and electronic, overflow with things that want to claim our energy and resources. In a sermon dealing with priorities and titled “Discovering Your Purpose,” Pastor Steve Cloud observed, “Rather than prioritizing our schedules, we need to schedule our priorities.”

Years ago, while on vacation in Arizona, my wife and I attended a Sunday morning worship service in Tucson. The pastor related the following story about an event that occurred earlier that week. “My wife and I were eating supper at a restaurant. After placing our orders, we were casually talking, occasionally glancing out the window by our table. All of a sudden, on the road by the restaurant, we noticed a hearse go by – pulling a U-Haul trailer. Our conversation momentarily halted. My wife broke the silence by observing, ‘Well, I guess you can take it with you.’ ” I don't think the young man in this encounter would have seen the humor in that story. But

my wife and I, along with the rest of the congregation, certainly did.

In his book *When God Whispers Your Name*, Max Lucado reminded us of God's rules of finance: "We are managers, not owners; stewards, not landlords; maintenance people, not proprietors. Our money is not ours; it is his."

“Don't spend so much time and effort here
accumulating stuff.

Stuff can get broken, lost, go bad,
decrease in value, be borrowed by your neighbor
never to be returned, or stolen.

Instead, focus on amassing what is beyond price
and then use an Eternal Asset Transfer
to get your valuables to heaven,
where none of these bad things can happen.”

– Author's paraphrase of Matthew 6:19-20

“Our Lord did not ask us to give up the things of earth,
but to exchange them for better things.”

– Fulton J. Sheen

And if your wealth increases,
don't make it the center of your life.
– Psalm 62:10b

Questions for Reflection

1. Are values, priorities, and choices related? If so, how?
2. How do you decide among competing options for:
 - your time and energy?
 - your abilities and talents?
 - your financial resources?
3. What are some resources you can use to help set or change your priorities?

If

Humility

Luke 5:12-14

Scripture Summary

In one of the towns, a man came along who was severely afflicted with a skin disease. Upon seeing Jesus, the man prostrated himself before Christ and pleaded, “Lord, if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.” Jesus reached out, made physical contact with the man and said, “I am willing. Be healed.” And immediately the man’s skin disease was gone! Then Jesus instructed him to go show himself to the priest and offer the required sacrifices for his healing.

Points to Ponder

Verse 12 contains two points of interest. We’ll look at them in reverse order of their mention. First, many translations refer to this man’s affliction as “leprosy.” However, a margin note in the *New International Version* points out the Greek word here is a catchall term used for a number of different skin diseases, not just

leprosy. In his commentary on this passage, Jeremy Myers pointed out “true leprosy, Hansen’s Disease, occurred rarely in first century Middle East. In addition, medical folks of the time lacked the ability to differentiate the various skin ailments that existed in those days. Thus, pretty much any skin disease was categorized as ‘leprosy’ and treated, as well as viewed by society, as the same thing.”

When firefighters encounter a structure that has flames, heat, and smoke across its entirety, they use the term “fully involved.” Whatever this man’s problem was, Dr. Luke indicated his body was “fully involved.”

Jeremy Myers also noted a second point in verse 12 that “this man was in town, where he should not have been.” Folks who were afflicted with skin diseases were regarded as highly contagious and were therefore excluded from being in or near populated areas. But here this man was. Jesus said, “Seek and you will find” (Matthew 7:7b). Although we don’t know for sure, it seems a reasonable inference this guy was seeking Jesus.

When he saw Jesus, the man fell on the ground before Christ. Addressing him as Lord, the man begged, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean” (emphasis added).

Contrast this approach with that of Jacob in the Old Testament. After this renowned Jewish patriarch had his well-known ladder dream, he awoke and said, “If . . .” followed by five conditions, after which Jacob said, “then the Lord will be my God” (Genesis 28:20-21, emphasis added).

The spirit and tone of this New Testament man’s “if” is more closely aligned with the one Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” (Luke 22:42, emphasis added).

It should be noted that humility in our words or our actions should not be viewed as a spiritual *Abracadabra* to grant whatever we are requesting or to get us out of a particular situation. Consider Jesus noting the humble act of a poor widow giving a small (but in God’s eyes large) offering. When the woman left, she was still a widow and she remained financially impoverished (Mark 12:41-42). Then recall how God responded to Jesus’ request for him to find an alternative to being crucified.

So, what does our being humble before God do? It demonstrates our intent to be aligned with God’s will and his Son’s example. And that is what was demonstrated

by this man. As Jeremy Myers in his commentary pointed out, this man had not a scintilla of doubt that Jesus could heal him. But this supplicant made his request subordinate to Jesus' being willing to heal him.

The first beatitude is:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

– Matthew 5:3 (NIV)

The phrase “poor in spirit” means *humble before God and man*. Also note that “are” and “is” are present tense verbs.

How did Jesus respond to this guy's request? How long had it been since this man had experienced any human contact? Years? Decades? How many times had he longed to be touched by someone, or for him to touch another person? Hundreds? Thousands? Perhaps his emotional wounds from this isolation were almost as serious as his physical ailment.

So, Jesus ignored societal protocol and Jewish law of the time. He reached out and touched the man. In fact, the Greek word used here is much stronger than only a brief contact. It could be translated that Jesus took hold of this individual, perhaps putting his arm around this man's shoulders or maybe even embracing him. (From

Jeremy Myers' sermon "Touching the Untouchables.") First, Jesus demonstrated this man was not beyond the reach of God's love. And then Jesus healed him physically.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you define humility? In Romans 12:3b, Paul wrote: "Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves . . ." Does this change your definition?
2. How is humility different from weakness?
3. Is there a correlation between humility and self-worth?
4. In our society, what are some obstacles for a person to be humble?
5. What are some things we should keep in mind which would help us be humble?
6. The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to go "boldly to the very throne of God" (Hebrews 4:16, The Living Bible). How can we do this and, at the same time, be humble?

You've Got a Friend

Works

Luke 5:17-26

Scripture Summary

One day Jesus was teaching in someone's home. His audience included not only regular folks but also Pharisees and teachers of the law. There were so many people present, it was literally SRO (Standing Room Only). Some men approached the dwelling where Jesus was, bringing a paralytic on a mat. Seeing there was no way to get to Jesus through the crowd, they went up and over. After removing part of the roof, these guys lowered the invalid on his makeshift bed to where Jesus was. Jesus looked at the man and first forgave his sins, which caused the Pharisees considerable mental turmoil. Knowing what these religious leaders were thinking, Jesus then told the guy on the floor to do three things - get up, roll up, move up and out. Which he did. And then praises to God went up through the roof!

Points to Ponder

This event likely occurred early in Jesus' ministry. From Mark's telling of what occurred here, we know Jesus was in Capernaum, a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Mark's Gospel also tells us that Simon Peter and his brother Andrew lived in this town. But we don't know if Jesus was at Peter and Andrew's house on this occasion.

What we do know is that without the benefit of Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, word about what Jesus was doing and saying spread fairly rapidly. Religious leaders had come from near and far to hear and judge for themselves whether or not this "new kid on the block" fit into their rigid mold of religious maturity. (From a commentary on these verses by Jeremy Myers.) There were also lots of regular folks there.

Among those who had heard of what Jesus was doing were some guys who had a friend who was paralyzed. The number of men providing assistance isn't stated, but it was probably more than two.

Upon arriving at the edifice where Jesus was, these men were faced with a considerable obstacle. The crowd was shoulder to shoulder, which made it impossible to enable

their friend to have a quick and easy one-on-one encounter with Jesus. Not knowing if they would ever have another opportunity, these guys quickly formulated Plan B.

Jewish homes of the day generally had flat roofs which were accessed via outside stairs. On summer nights, family members might go up onto the roofs to sleep, taking advantage of the cool evening breezes coming off the water. The roofs of homes in this area would generally have been quite substantial, consisting of wood beams covered with straw thatching and overlaid with mud, clay, and stone tiles. To dig through this would have required significant time and effort, causing significant damage to the structure. It seems more likely Jesus was in a terrace area, open in the summer but closed with tiles during the rainy season. The temporary tiles would have been much easier to remove. (From the Bible Hub commentary on Luke 5.)

These men had faith Jesus could and would heal their friend. They demonstrated that faith with their efforts to get their disabled friend before Jesus. Some years later, early church leader James would write about just such melding of faith and works in his epistle:

Suppose you encounter someone
who had an obvious physical need.
If you say to that person,
“I’ve got to go. Have a good one,”
but do nothing to help this individual,
do you really think
you’ve done anything worthwhile?
Faith needs to be demonstrated
with more than just words - it needs actions.
– Author’s paraphrase of James 2:15-17

After the paralytic’s sins were forgiven and his infirmity healed, I can envision these men quickly repairing the roof, getting back on the ground, and echoing the healed man’s praises as they accompanied him. Their friend was going home, not only under his own power, but also under God’s.

“I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.
‘Master, what are you talking about?
When did we ever see you hungry and feed you,
thirsty and give you a drink?’

And when did we ever see you sick
or in prison and come to you?
Then the King will say,
'I'm telling the solemn truth:
Whenever you did one of these things
to someone overlooked or ignored,
that was me – you did it to me.'"
– Matthew 25:35-36, 37b-40 (MSG)

Be sure that nothing you do for him
[the Lord] is ever lost or ever wasted.
– 1 Corinthians 15:58b
(J.B. Phillips New Testament)

Questions for Reflection

1. Is it easier for you to help someone you know or a stranger?
2. What are the different ways you can use your gifts, abilities, and resources to demonstrate your faith through works?
3. How can you become more aware of and sensitive to the needs of others?

Tears of Joy

Compassion

Luke 7:11-15

Scripture Summary

Jesus went to a town called Nain, accompanied not only by his disciples but also by a large group of people. As he neared the town gate, Jesus met a funeral procession headed out of town. In the coffin lay a young man who was the only son of a widow. When the Lord saw this woman, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” Then he went up and touched the coffin as a signal for the pallbearers to stop, which they did. Jesus commanded the young man to get up, which he did. The man immediately began to talk and Jesus gave him back to his mom.

Points to Ponder

In his commentary on this chapter, Richard Niell Donovan pointed out that Nain was located 5.5 miles southeast of Nazareth, where Jesus was raised, and not far from Capernaum, where he spent a good deal of time as an adult.

The woman and her son were evidently well-known and liked, as evidenced by the size of the funeral procession. The first century was a patriarchal society. Thus, as a widow, and now without her son, she was likely headed for hard times, having to depend on friends or neighbors for her room and board in the days ahead. So, her tears may have been both for the loss of her only child but also for the bleak future she faced.

Alexander MacLaren, in “Expositions of Holy Scripture,” wrote about a very interesting element in this miracle. In Luke’s recounting of this event, there is no mention of anyone requesting or expecting Jesus to do anything. Not his disciples, not the dead man’s mother, not the friends carrying the coffin, not a single individual in either of the large groups of people that encountered each other just outside town. Jesus acted solely on his own, motivated by compassion.

After Jesus restored life to this young man, he sat up and began to speak. I wonder what he said. Did he realize what had just happened? Did he ask questions? If the shocked pallbearers had not already done so, they must have quickly put the coffin down on the ground. Jesus probably helped the young man get out of his former final resting place and then restored the son to his mother. It

seems certain she began to cry again. But this time, they were tears of joy.

Questions for Reflection

1. How would you define compassion? Is it different from pity? If so, how?
2. Have you helped someone you didn't know without being asked to? If so, what motivated you to do this?
3. What are the different ways you can show compassion to others?
4. How can you develop a more compassionate heart?

There Goes the Neighborhood

Mercy

Luke 10:25-37

Scripture Summary

An expert in Jewish law tested Jesus by asking, “What should I do to inherit eternal life?” Since this man was a serious student of the Torah, Jesus asked him, “What does the law of Moses say?” The man responded: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus replied, “Right! Do this and you will live!” The man, however, wanted to make sure he was on solid theological ground and so asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. At its conclusion, Jesus put his second and final question to this expert. “Of the characters in this story, who would you say was a neighbor to the victim?” The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus concluded the Q-and-A session by stating, “Yes, now go and do the same.”

Points to Ponder

Luke is the only gospel writer to include this familiar parable, which may be one of the most well-known passages in the New Testament. Though the story is relatively simple, it contains meaning and insight which remain relevant two millennia after it was first told.

In verse 25, the expert in the law asked Jesus, “What should I do . . .” (emphasis added). This man was asking this question on behalf of himself. The Greek text indicates the expert, in effect, wanted to know “By doing what single act shall I inherit eternal life?” This guy was evidently thinking there might be a stand-alone charitable thing he could do that would punch his ticket to heaven. To be fair, this was reasonably consistent with Jewish religious teaching which was, in essence, salvation by works. For the Jewish person, a right relationship with God came through what you did and, perhaps just as importantly, what you did not do.

In verse 28, Jesus accepted and affirmed this summary of the Law. However, in his response, Jesus wanted to make clear these were not just words to be mindlessly repeated. The verb Jesus used for *do* in the Greek is in the present imperative tense. In that form, Jesus’ words could appropriately read, “Keep on doing this.” In other

words, “Keep these commandments for your entire life and you won’t need to worry.”

The law expert requested Jesus to more clearly define the term *neighbor* in verse 29. This verse marks an important transition in this passage. In verses 25-28, Jesus deals with the man’s question about eternal life. In verses 30-37, Jesus responds to the second question, “Who is my neighbor?” It should be noted the parable is not intended to answer the question about eternal life.

From the original text, it is fairly certain Jesus was conveying that the “man” in this story, the victim, was Jewish. To get from Jerusalem to Jericho meant descending about 3,300 feet over 17 miles. This road was known to be an area fraught with peril. In fact, as late as the early 1930s, this was still a dangerous place for travelers.

The next character that appears in Jesus’ story is a priest (verse 31). As such, this guy was a hereditary descendant of Aaron. (He could prove that fact by being able to trace his lineage back that far, without using Ancestry.com, I might add.) Upon spotting the victim on the side of the road just ahead, the priest crossed over to the other side of the road. He did not want to take any chance of being considered unclean by touching the guy

lying there. Like many of his real-life colleagues, this fictional priest put ritual above humanity. Not too dissimilarly, a Levite or temple assistant (verse 32) also came and went, detouring just as quickly around the prostrate, bleeding man.

Then, along came a Samaritan. Upon hearing the arrival of this character in the story, the legal expert may have thought to himself, *Okay, here's the bad guy.* Back in verse 27, the Greek word used for “neighbor” is *plesion*, which means “countryman.” This correlation goes all the way back to Leviticus 19:18 which equates “your fellow Israelite” with “your neighbor.” (Jews regarded Samaritans as contemptible half-breeds and would go well out of their way to avoid even having to look at one of these despicable folks.)

I wonder if the legal beagle was able to suppress his shock when Jesus ended the introduction of this new character by adding the Samaritan “felt compassion” for the injured man. The Greek word used for “compassion” in verse 33 is *splagchnizomai* which indicates “the deepest level of concern.” In Clarence Jordan’s *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts*, this verse says, “what [the Samaritan] saw moved him to tears.”

By the time Jesus finished relating the numerous, selfless ways the “bad guy” had helped the victim, the religious leader’s head was probably spinning like a top and he may have been looking for a rock to sit down on. When Jesus concluded the parable, he put his second and final question to the law guy, “Who would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked?” The scholar could not bring himself to say the word “Samaritan” and so responded as generically as possible, “The one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus finished this lesson in verse 37 by saying, “Yes, now go and do the same.” There are a couple of points worth noting about Jesus’ response here. First, like verse 28, the verb “do” here is in the present imperative tense. Thus, Jesus’ response could be translated as “go and keep on doing the same.” Second, note the subject of the command in verse 37 is implied. In Greek, the implied subject is not plural (as an implied “you” can be in English). Nor is it a collective or general “y’all” or “you guys.” The implied subject is singular, emphatic, and specific. It is directed towards the person who asked, “Who is my neighbor?” (emphasis added). Jesus, in effect, is verbally pointing a finger at the law expert and saying, “You be the neighbor!” (emphasis added).

At the beginning of this man's conversation with Jesus, the law expert wanted to see how narrowly "neighbor" could be defined. But Jesus pointed out that in God's kingdom, a neighbor is not just a person who:

- resides in close proximity to you
- is easy to like and be around
- goes to the same church you do
- has the same beliefs you do
- works with you
- is in the same racial, socio-economic group as you
- you think merits your assistance.

In a sermon titled "Who Is Our Neighbor?" Pastor Stephen Clyborne concisely summarized these ideas for anyone who follows Christ: "Where we are at any given moment is our neighborhood and those people around us are our neighbors." Dr. Clyborne also pointed out, "It is not enough just to know the right thing to do; you must also do the right thing."

And finally, through this encounter and the penetrating parable, Jesus demonstrated my need to show mercy to other people, *including those folks I might not think are deserving of it.*

Questions for Reflection

1. In a “Dennis the Menace” comic strip from The Greenville News, 10 November 2015, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson see Dennis coming towards their house. Mr. Wilson says to his wife, “Here comes ‘thy neighbor.’ You love him while I take a nap.” Who are the “Dennises” in your life?

2. One of the challenges for us today is the pervasiveness of electronic media and how it tends to reduce the opportunities to have in-person contact with our “neighbors.” What can you do to overcome this tendency and be more intentional in face-to-face interactions with other people?

3. Having Jesus’ heart and mind is foundationally important to believers. But through his life, Christ showed us we also need to be his hands and his feet. What can you do to more directly link Christian compassion and action in your life?

Bigger Than Rules

Doing the Right Thing

Luke 13:10-17

Scripture Summary

One Sabbath, as Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, he saw a woman who was bent over, unable to straighten up. (She'd been like that for eighteen years.) Jesus called her to come to where he was. After she did, Jesus said, "You are healed!" Then he reached out and touched her. And immediately she stood up straight. And the woman praised God in a mighty way!

But the synagogue leader was outraged because Jesus had done this on the Sabbath. Directing his comments to the congregation, he said, "There are other days in the week for working. If you're going to be healed, do it on one of those other days, rather than the Sabbath."

Jesus responded, "You folks are hypocrites! You work on the Sabbath! Don't you untie your ox or donkey on the Sabbath and lead it to water? This dear woman has been bent over for eighteen years. Why can't she be released from her suffering even if it is on the Sabbath?"

The logic of Jesus' reply embarrassed the holier-than-thou people there. But everyone else rejoiced.

Points to Ponder

More than the other three gospels, Luke's account of the life of Jesus features his interactions with people who were overlooked, looked down on, or in one way or another, had been kicked to the curb not only by society but also by religious leaders of the day. This incident is a case in point. In the first century, women were generally regarded as second-class citizens. Jesus challenged this mindset, demonstrating with both his words and his actions that females should be treated with respect and dignity.

This unidentified person probably sat in the back of the synagogue. It had been a long time since she'd been able to gaze up at the sky or look anyone in the eye. And yet, here she was on the Sabbath ready to hear God's word proclaimed.

When the Teacher called for her to come over to where he was, she may have been embarrassed that attention was being drawn to her. The congregation was silent as she moved towards the voice that called her. When she

came to where Jesus was, he said, “Dear one, you are healed!” Then Jesus touched her.

I can only imagine what that touch felt like. When I’ve been outside in below-freezing conditions for a while and then come back into a warm place, my numbed fingers tingle as feeling and sensitivity are restored to them. Maybe what that woman felt was similar to that. At any rate, her joints and tendons, stiff and frozen for so long, suddenly became limber, flexible, and responsive! She stood straight, looked into the eyes of God’s Son, and then praised their Father!

In his commentary, Richard Niell Donovan pointed out the word for “healed” in verse 12 is *apolelusa*, which comes from the same root word as “untie” in verse 15 and “set free” in verse 16. It seems reasonable that Jesus intentionally used this term to make a connection between allowing people to be cared for on the Sabbath as well as animals.

Pharisees had taken the commandments God gave through Moses to the Jewish nation and expanded them to more than six hundred rules, which the Pharisees felt carried the same weight as the original Ten. Wading through the minute detail of these regulations today would require early and frequent doses of Extra Strength

Tylenol. But they were no laughing matter to the synagogue leader and his ilk. This religious leader would have found it perfectly acceptable for any of his congregants to help a domestic animal on the Sabbath. But shame, shame on anyone who would provide relief to a suffering Jewish woman on the same day. I think this synagogue “saint” was fortunate to get away with only being called a hypocrite by Jesus. In verse 16, Jesus asks his antagonist, “What better day to heal (bring freedom) than on the Sabbath?” (From Jeannine K. Brown’s commentary on this passage.)

In the delightful and enchanting 1995 movie *Babe*, a farmer, his wife, and the animals on an Australian sheep farm take in an orphaned piglet. The well-told tale reveals the impact Babe has on everyone, human or animal, with whom he comes in contact. In one early scene, a mischievous duck named Ferdinand is trying to convince Babe to go into the farmhouse to snatch something.

Babe: *It’s against the rules. Only dogs and cats are allowed inside the house.*

Ferdinand: *It’s a good rule. But this is bigger than rules.*

Jesus did not have kind words to say about his contemporaries who created lots of rules for people to

follow. Christ said, in effect, God is “bigger than rules.” From God’s perspective, doing the right thing is more about how we maintain our relationship with Him and with other people than following strict rules.

Then Jesus said to them,
“The Sabbath was made to meet
the needs of people,
and not people to meet
the requirements of the Sabbath.”
– Mark 2:27

Questions for Reflection

1. “The ruler of the synagogue erred by being too legalistic about the Sabbath.” In what ways might we err on the other end of the spectrum “by being too casual about the ways and the times we honor God?” (From Richard Niell Donovan.)
2. This occurrence in the life of Jesus could be viewed as a story about the role and function of religious traditions. (From Jeannine K. Brown.) Sometimes, traditions in a church become so ingrained that they, in effect, become “rules” or “laws.” How can your church ensure that traditions are occasionally evaluated so they continue to be meaningful and appropriate?

3. Parents, teachers, employers, supervisors, law enforcement officials, judges, and religious leaders are among people who can and do struggle with limits and standards, as well as fair and equitable enforcement of laws and regulations. When you've been in a position of authority and had to take action:

- What consequences did you impose for failure to obey the rules or meet the standards?
- How did you determine the appropriate measure of discipline?
- What exceptions, if any, did you allow and why?

Thanks-living

Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19

Scripture Summary

One day, as Jesus was working his way towards Jerusalem, he entered a village which straddled the border between Galilee and Samaria. Ten men who were afflicted with a skin disease stood at a distance and shouted, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” Jesus looked at them and told them to go show themselves to the priests. The men started off on their way and, as they were traveling, they were cleansed of their skin disease.

One of the men, when he realized what had happened, returned to Jesus shouting, “Praise God!” The newly-healed man fell to the ground at Jesus’ feet, thanking him. Jesus rhetorically asked, “Didn’t I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has nobody come back except this Samaritan?” Then Jesus said to the man, “Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you.”

Points to Ponder

It seems a little unusual that these guys addressed Jesus by name and called him “Master.” To an ordinary passerby, they would likely have just asked for money. But if these men had heard of Jesus and the things he had done, it certainly seems reasonable their request was that they be healed.

An interesting sidelight: verse 14 begins “He looked at them . . .” In Jesus’ day, it was fairly common for disadvantaged folks to be ignored. (From a commentary by Richard Niell Donovan.) I wonder if Luke pointed this out to make his comfortable readers a little less so. The lack of acknowledgment of needy and underprivileged people is probably also true to some degree in the twenty-first century.

Although he could have done so, Jesus did not heal these men immediately. Instead, he instructed them to go seek priestly certification. Jesus wanted these guys to demonstrate their faith and their obedience. But there is another important reason Jesus acted as he did. Their physical restoration was only part of the healing these men needed. They also needed to be restored to their nuclear families, to society, and to their families of faith.

Richard Niell Donovan conveyed that in Jesus' day, this restoration could only be done by receiving an "all clear" from a priest.

The second part of verse 14 indicates all ten men were healed of their skin disease. But only one of them realized a couple of other things. First, God deserved to be praised. Second, Jesus deserved to be thanked. (From Richard Niell Donovan.) As I studied this passage anew, I was struck by something else: this man's gratitude ("shouting") appears to have been just as heartfelt and expressive as his request for Jesus' help ("crying out"). Similarly, my thanks to God could often use an upside adjustment to be more proportional to my requests for his help.

When Luke penned the words that comprise verse 16, I can imagine the doctor ever so briefly smiling to himself as he wrote, "This man was a Samaritan," because Luke himself, though not a Samaritan, was a Gentile. And while he didn't say so directly, Luke implied the other nine men were Jews. In other words, those who should have been the most grateful were not, and the man who we wouldn't have expected to return actually did. (From Keith R. Krell's "An Attitude of Gratitude.")

All ten men were healed from their skin disease. But something else happened to the one who returned. Jesus told him, “Your faith has healed you” (verse 19b). But this man’s skin affliction had already been removed. In his book, *Interpretation: Luke*, Fred B. Craddock noted that the Greek for “has healed you” here is *sesoken se* from the verb *sozo*, which can be translated “has saved you.” (See Luke 7:50.) Physical well-being was restored to ten guys. But only the one who came back to give thanks and praise God was blessed with being restored and made whole spiritually.

A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves.

– Henry Ward Beecher

A grateful heart sees each day as a gift.

The grateful heart is like a magnet sweeping over the day, collecting reasons for gratitude.

– Max Lucado in

You’ll Get Through This

Consistent gratitude, that is, thanks-living, is an all too rare attribute in our society today. But for Christians, it should be an essential part of our character.

Questions for Reflection

1. In verse 14, why is the word “priests” plural?
2. Why should gratitude be an integral part of our lives?
3. How do you express gratitude to God?
4. What are some different ways you express gratitude to other people?
5. Have you ever done something for someone without gratitude being expressed? If so, how did that make you feel?
6. Have you ever done something for someone and been overwhelmed with the gratitude that was expressed? If so, how did that make you feel?
7. What steps can you take to improve the manner and frequency of your expressions of gratitude to God? To other people?
8. What are some practical ways you can incorporate thanks-living, that is, consistent daily gratitude into your life?

Out on a Limb

Repentance

Luke 19:1-10

Scripture Summary

As Jesus proceeded on his way to Jerusalem, he came to the town of Jericho. One of the residents there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in that area and quite wealthy. Zacchaeus wanted to get a look at Jesus. However, being quite short, he was unable to see over the crowd lining the street. So, he ran ahead of the procession and climbed a sycamore-fig tree that was along the road Jesus was traveling on.

When Jesus passed by that tree, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down from there. I must be a guest in your home today.” Zacchaeus quickly shinnied down the sycamore and was elated as he escorted Jesus to his home.

But the parade watchers were quite upset. “Jesus has gone to be the guest of an unscrupulous cheat!”

However, once inside his house, Zacchaeus stood before Christ and proclaimed, “Lord, I will give half my wealth to the poor! And if I’ve cheated anybody on taxes I’ve collected, I’ll pay them back four times as much!”

Jesus replied, “Salvation has come to this home today. This man has shown himself to truly be a descendant of Abraham. For I’ve come to seek and save the lost.”

Points to Ponder

Jericho was about 15 miles east-northeast of Jerusalem. Prominent in the Old Testament, Jericho was the first city to be conquered by the Israelites after they entered the Promised Land. By the time of Jesus, ancient Jericho had largely been abandoned. Herod the Great had built a new Jericho a short distance to the southeast of Old Testament Jericho. This was an oasis in the true sense of the word, having been built around a spring in the midst of a very arid land. With its abundant water resources, it was an agricultural hub for date palms, which are still grown in that area today. Jericho was also somewhat of a resort. In Jesus’ time, royalty and well-to-do priests had homes there.

Since Old Testament days, material abundance was largely regarded by Jews as an affirmation of God’s

pleasure with a person. However, an exception was made for those whose wealth was derived from collecting taxes for the Roman government. During Jesus' day, the bottom of the social hierarchy barrel, in descending order, would have been something like this:

- shepherds
- thieves/prostitutes
- tax collectors
- chief tax collectors

In verse 3, the Greek word for “tried” or “wanted” means “willing to devote serious effort to accomplish one’s objective.” Zacchaeus had an abundance of financial resources (verse 2). But his money didn’t get him a front row seat on the curb that day.

The tree mentioned in verse 4 is not the American Sycamore, which has mottled, exfoliating bark and can grow to around a hundred feet in height. The sycamore-fig of the Middle East has a mature height of 30-40 feet. In its development, the branches grow horizontally before growing vertically, making it an easy tree to climb.

In verse 5, Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “Quick, come down!” The English words “quick” or “immediately” don’t quite convey the sense of urgency that is in the Greek. A closer

parallel might be the medical term “Stat!” which is used when a person’s life may depend on the response.

Also in verse 5, Jesus tells Zacchaeus “I must be a guest in your home today.” Dr. Robert Jeffress, Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas TX, pointed out the Greek word used for “must” is *dei*, which means to act “out of moral necessity.” By the way, this is the same word used for “had” in John 4:4: “He [Jesus] had to go through Samaria.” Another interesting point about verse 5 – this is the only recorded instance in the Bible where Jesus invited himself.

Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus occurred as Jesus was passing through town. As we are on our journey, we should be sensitive to other people who need Christ’s restorative touch. And note that Jesus took the initiative. Likewise, we should actively seek ways to minister and witness to others.

If a person is described as “opportunistic” in our culture, it is usually not a compliment because it is associated with the idea of taking unfair advantage of a person or situation. But there is another way to view this trait. When I go out to do nature photography, I carry more than 20 pounds of gear. The reason I do this is to be able to take advantage of various opportunities I encounter,

whether it is a majestic mountain panorama or a close-up of a small wildflower. And that is the way Zacchaeus is being opportunistic here – he used the opportunity that was made available to him. And in case you think that is an unbiblical idea, check out Ephesians 5:16, which says, “Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.”

When the chief tax collector responded to Jesus’ invitation, verse 6 indicates he did so with “joy.” The Greek here is from the same root word used in Luke 1:14 where the angel Gabriel told another Z-man, Zechariah, about the “rejoicing” which would occur at the birth of John the Baptizer.

There are several veins of ore to be mined in verse 7. First, this is one of a number of instances where Jesus demonstrated he was not a politician. Jesus was doing what was right, not what was popular.

The second lesson from this verse is it shows the danger of judging others. I don’t mean having an opinion or taking a stand about someone or something that is right or wrong. But we are on unstable spiritual ground when we express judgment about a person’s soul. That is reserved for God’s court. Zacchaeus’ fellow citizens were essentially saying he had no hope of getting close to God.

What we should do instead is to try to see other people we encounter through God's eyes, in which no person is potentially beyond the reach of God's love and mercy.

There is a third aspect to verse 7 that I think is worth considering. In verses 1-3, a huge crowd turned out to see and welcome Jesus as he came to town. A very short time later, their praise turned to protest. Think about what's going to happen in a few days - The Triumphal Entry followed by The Crucifixion. I wonder if Luke constructed this passage in Chapter 19 as a foreshadowing of the events that were soon to take place in Jesus' life. We don't really know. But as a writer, I find this to be a really interesting possibility.

Zacchaeus came down from a tree to receive Jesus. All who want to receive Christ must humble themselves and come down from their elevated positions of self-importance or self-worth. This seeker became self-aware and then he became God-aware. I think it is important to note that Zacchaeus is not seeking to be justified by what he said he would do with his financial resources. Instead, he is giving evidence of his faith.

The longer I live, the more I am convinced life is about choices. (See Matthew 7:13-14.) Like Zacchaeus, we are faced with choices every day:

Our Choices reflect



our Priorities which,
in turn, are built upon



our Values.

In verse 8, Zacchaeus indicated he had changed his *values* and that decision would impact his *priorities* and *choices* going forward.

In verse 9, Jesus said, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham.” The Greek word for “salvation” here means “healing” or “making whole.” Zacchaeus was a Jew by birth. In the second part of his statement, Jesus was saying Zacchaeus was not only a part of Abraham’s genealogy, but this penitent man now also walked along the path of Abraham’s faith. Dr. Stephen Clyborne

pointed out that, for Jews, the heart (rather than the mind) was the home of the will and thus “real change must come from the heart, from the inside out.” (From a sermon at Earle Street Baptist Church, Greenville SC, on 21 March 2021.) Zacchaeus’ actions gave evidence of his new heart.

Chapter 20 of Luke’s Gospel details an interesting exchange Jesus had with religious leaders who intended to trap Jesus with several questions. In his response to one of these questions, Jesus clearly states governments have a right to collect taxes. (See verses 22-25.) There is no evidence Zacchaeus changed what he did (his job) after his encounter with Jesus. But Zacchaeus’s confession of faith changed how he did his job. Which is as it should be.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the difference between salvation and sanctification?
2. In what ways has your salvation impacted what you do every day?
3. How does the way you deal with money give evidence of your salvation?

On Behalf Of

Intercessory Prayer

Luke 22:31-32

Scripture Summary

Jesus told Simon that Satan wanted to “sift” each of the disciples “like wheat.” Then Jesus told Simon that Jesus has prayed for him and, after he has repented and their relationship restored, for Simon to strengthen the other disciples.

Points to Ponder

Intercessory prayer is praying for the needs of others. Our motive in doing this should be unselfish concern.

Jesus began this encounter with one of his closest disciples by repeating his name. This is often done to ensure the undivided attention of the listener and to indicate the seriousness of the words that follow. Jesus used Simon’s given name rather than the name Jesus gave him, perhaps because he knew this disciple would not be a dependable, solid “rock” in the near future.

In verse 31, Jesus spoke about all the disciples. But in verse 32, Jesus said he had specifically prayed for Simon. In his sermon “Sifted Like Wheat,” Brent Kercheville pointed out that, in the Greek, all four instances of “you” and “your” in this verse are singular.

Note that Jesus did not pray Simon would not sin. Instead, Jesus prayed Simon would repent after falling short. In his sermon notes for this passage, Chuck Smith insightfully conveyed that perhaps allowing Simon to go through the coming hard times would give him empathy and understanding for those who go through similar experiences. (And this may be an application for us today.)

From this brief encounter, here are a few thoughts about intercessory prayer in our lives, provided by Mike Bennett in “Intercessory Prayer: How to Pray for Others”:

- We should pray for others from our heart.
- We should pray for others regularly.
- We should pray for others in detail.
- We should pray for others with faith, acknowledging that God knows what is best.

And finally, when we are praying for another person, it can be an encouragement to let that individual know you are praying for him or her.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why does God want us to pray for other people?
2. How often do you engage in intercessory prayer?
3. What are some different ways you can let another person know you are praying for him or her?

Sight and Insight

From Skepticism to Certainty

John 1:45-50

Scripture Summary

Philip, a newly-recruited disciple of Jesus (see John 1:43), went to Nathanael and told his friend about finding Jesus, who Moses and the prophets wrote about. “Jesus is the son of Joseph from Nazareth,” Philip added for reference. Nathanael had significant reservations. “Nazareth? You’ve got to be kidding!” Philip simply responded, “Come with me and check him out for yourself.”

So, they went to where Jesus was. As they neared Christ, he looked Nathanael in the eye and said, “Here is a real son of Israel – a man of complete integrity.” Nathanael was amazed! “How could you know me?” he asked. Jesus replied, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip found you.” Nathanael exclaimed, “You truly are the Son of God!” Jesus responded, “You believe just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Points to Ponder

Not much is known about Nathanael. His hometown was Cana, about four miles from Nazareth. (From a footnote in the *New Living Translation Life Application Study Bible*, page 1796.) The only other mention of Nathanael (by that name) in the Bible is in John 21:2. He was one of seven disciples Jesus appeared to by the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection. He is also listed among the disciples as Bartholomew in Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:14, and Acts 1:13. (From a footnote in the *New Living Translation Life Application Study Bible*, page 1797.)

Regarding Nathanael's perspective on Nazareth, this town may have been a place with a less than stellar reputation. (From a footnote in the *New Living Translation Life Application Study Bible*, page 1797.) Or, as James Burton Coffman pointed out in his commentary, Nazareth may have been such a small, obscure, ordinary village that it lacked the credentials of a place one would expect the Messiah to come from. Either way, it does seem reasonable to say Nathanael was prejudiced against Nazareth, and by implication, anyone from there. But just as Nathanael found out he was wrong about at least one person from Nazareth, we in the twenty-first century need to be careful about

rendering hasty, misinformed value judgments about people, places, or situations.

Notice Philip did not try to reason or argue with his friend or engage in speculation about Jesus. Philip simply suggested Nathanael meet Jesus for himself and then form an opinion based on a fair and candid inquiry. Richard Niell Donovan observed this is probably another lesson for us: Philosophical arguments rarely have as much impact as our personal witness and our invitation to “Come and see.”

In Nathanael, Jesus saw a sincere, honest, upright, godly person. Christ deemed this man to be an Israelite in more than just his heritage. Nathanael had the spirit and integrity of a true Jew, one who feared God. (From James Burton Coffman’s commentary on this passage.) Jesus likely also discerned Nathanael was not a hypocrite, unlike many of the religious leaders Jesus was soon to encounter.

In his commentary on verse 49, Barton W. Johnson noted that in Nathanael’s statement, “You are the Son of God,” we have the first recorded confession by a human being of the divinity of adult Jesus.

When Jesus told Nathanael, “You will see greater things,” Nathanael wouldn’t have to wait very long. Less than 24 hours later, Jesus would perform his first recorded miracle in Nathanael’s hometown, Cana. In a larger context, Nathanael would become a part of one of those “greater things” – Nathanael, an ordinary person, would become a disciple of Jesus through whom God would change the world.

There are very few Peters, Corrie Ten Booms, and Billy Grahams. There is no doubt God’s kingdom has been greatly enhanced through the lives of these exceptional folks and other spiritual giants like them. But, as Richard Niell Donovan astutely observed, there are a lot more Nathanaels – ordinary people through whom God works to do extraordinary things.

Questions for Reflection

1. In what areas do you have prejudices that could use some reexamination?
2. How can skepticism and questions, which come from a heart and mind that sincerely want to know the truth, help strengthen your relationship with God and help you grow in your journey of faith?

Nic @ Night

When Your Best Isn't Good Enough

John 3:1-11,16

Scripture Summary

Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, came to Jesus one dark night, wanting to know more details about what Jesus was teaching. Not wanting to waste either time or words, Jesus got right to the point: “You must be born again.” Nicodemus was incredulous, thinking Jesus was speaking of physical birth. But Jesus told the Jewish leader he was talking about spiritual birth. Jesus then drew a parallel between the wind and the work of the Spirit. Nicodemus still didn't quite get it. Then Jesus uttered probably the most well-known verse in the Bible.

Points to Ponder

The book of John differs from the other gospels in several ways. One of these distinctions is that John contains no parables. Instead, John provides discourses, of which this is the first. In fact, it is one of the longest dialogues Jesus had with a single, named individual that is recorded in the Bible.

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, but also an elite Torah scholar, occupying one of 71 seats on the Judean supreme court. Nic is thought to have been quite wealthy. He seemed to be a person of distinction and outstanding character, having prestige, position, and power. It can certainly be said this man was religious to a fault. But what Nic lacked was a certainty, a peace, that his relationship with God was all it could be or should be. However, being a person with a sincere hunger for the truth, he came to Jesus because Jesus was doing and saying things Nicodemus had not seen or heard before.

Nic addressed Jesus as “Rabbi,” which is how another Jew would have addressed Nicodemus. So, it is clear this man had a great deal of respect for Jesus. Beyond what Jesus was teaching, Nicodemus also regarded Jesus as having God’s seal of approval because of what Jesus was doing. Nic didn’t have any miracles on his resume, nor did any of his colleagues.

Jesus had few, if any, complimentary words about religious leaders in general and Pharisees in particular. In Matthew 23, Jesus used the terms, “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “whitewashed tombs,” and “snakes” for these folks. Not exactly words I’d like to hear from a spiritual mentor during a performance appraisal. So

why was Jesus willing to spend time with this particular Pharisee? I believe Jesus recognized in Nic a man who was sincere in his quest for the Kingdom of God. People's hearts and minds – meaning their motives – count for a lot with Jesus. That was true in the first century, and it is still true in the twenty-first century.

In verse 3, Jesus began his response with the words, “I tell you the truth.” You might think this would be equivalent to someone today saying “To be honest with you . . .” However, the phrase Jesus used here is one of the strongest exclamatory expressions in the Bible. In his commentary, Rev. Joseph Benson provided an expanded paraphrase which conveys a better sense of the emphasis Jesus placed on these introductory words: “I declare it with the utmost solemnity, as a truth of the highest importance . . .”

On occasion, I have been asked, “What is the most important aspect of taking good nature photographs?” My response has always been the same: “It is the ability to see as the camera sees.” This understanding is necessary because our eyes and mind work together to see the world differently than a camera does. (For example, we can see in three dimensions, whereas a camera can only “see” in two dimensions.) Jesus was telling Nicodemus that seeing the Kingdom of God

requires a different way of looking at God, people, and the world. This altered perspective is not done with our physical eyes but rather with our heart, mind, and spirit. In other words, it is seeing with “new” eyes.

A while ago I had cataract surgery on both eyes. Prior to that, I’d worn glasses with quite a strong prescription since the sixth grade. Without the correction provided by my eyeglasses, my vision of reality was significantly compromised. With the “new” eyes provided by the surgery, I now see reality much clearer. In addition, the colors I see are brighter and more vivid. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he needed “new” eyes. Not the ones given to him when he was born, but “eyes” given by God’s spirit. Without this spiritual “surgery,” Nic’s sight (in other words, his relationship to God) would always be compromised. It would never be good enough, always less than it could be or should be. Similarly for us, the key to opening the door to the Kingdom of God is to see ourselves and other people the way that God does.

In verses 5-7, Jesus explains the difference between physical birth and spiritual birth. Physical birth provides many things. For Nicodemus, one of these things was his Jewish heritage. Jesus pointed out this was not enough to get him into heaven. Jesus’ statement was a radical idea that shook Jewish religious leaders,

including Nicodemus, to the core of their being. The entrance to the kingdom Jesus talked about was not based on ethnicity or on how many rules you did not break, but instead on personal repentance and spiritual rebirth. (From a footnote in *New Living Translation Life Application Study Bible*, page 1800.)

The Greek word for “wind” is *pneuma*. But this word can also be translated as “spirit.” Jesus used this wordplay to make an analogy. The wind is not visible. But you can tell where the wind is – you can feel it. And you can tell where the wind has been – you can see the results of it. And so it is with the spirit-based second birth. Its inward manifestations may not be visible, at least with physical eyes. But you can (and should be able to) see its impact.

The word used for “world” in verse 16 is *kosmos* which is comprehensive in scope. Most Bible scholars believe Jesus’ words here are meant for everyone, not just the Jews. The word “believes” in this verse means more than just intellectual agreement. It means the commitment of one’s being.

Nicodemus’ questions were oriented around what man can or cannot do. Jesus’ responses focused on what God – and only God – can do.

Many years ago, I was director of a seventh-grade Sunday School department. One of my responsibilities was leading the opening assembly which introduced the lesson the teachers would expound upon in their classes. One December Sunday, our lesson, appropriately enough, dealt with the second chapter of Luke. In the opening assembly, I posed the question, “What single verse in the Bible do you think best tells the Christmas story?” I was thinking the responses would come from some part of the Christmas events related in the familiar passage in Luke. However, almost before I finished the question, one of the students said, “John 3:16.” Which was the answer I thought I was going to amaze those 13-year-olds with. Even Martin Luther called John 3:16 “the Gospel in miniature.”

Nicodemus did experience a second birth. The impact and one result of his spiritual transformation is evidenced towards the end of John’s Gospel:

With him [Joseph of Arimathea] came Nicodemus,
the man who had come to Jesus at night.

He brought about seventy-five pounds of
perfumed ointment made from myrrh and aloes.

Following Jewish burial custom, they wrapped
Jesus’ body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth.

– John 19:39-40

Questions for Reflection

1. Nicodemus was very well-educated and a highly respected person. Still, he wasn't above admitting he did not understand all he should about God. If you could ask Jesus some questions, what would they be?
2. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus at night?
3. What is unusual about their Q&A session?
4. Has this second birth (that is, being born again) made a difference in your life? If so, how?

Wishing Well

Leaving Your Past Behind You

John 4:7-26,28-30,39-42

Scripture Summary

Upon stopping at a well in Samaria, Jesus encountered a woman who had come out to draw water from a well. Jesus asked her for a drink of water. In a somewhat circuitous dialogue with this woman, Jesus revealed the truth about herself and about himself. As a result, her life was changed. And through her words as well as those of Jesus, the lives of many folks in her village were irrevocably altered for the better.

Points to Ponder

This woman would probably have brought with her both a water pot and a rope with which to let the pot down into the water. Jesus had neither. But note that Jesus does not convey an air of superiority to this Samaritan woman. In fact, he prefaces his request with “Please” (verse 7).

Jesus requested a drink of physical water. In his commentary on John 4, James Burton Coffman observed it is unlikely this woman would have given Jesus a drink without him asking for it. In a similar manner, this woman had to request living water from Jesus. But the request needed to be made not superficially, as in verse 15, but with the spiritual realization of who Jesus really was. (See verse 26.)

Note that Jesus granting this woman's request for living water was also contingent upon confession of her sinfulness. Verse 17 may be part of such a confession. However, it seems possible there was more to what transpired between these two than is recorded in this single sentence. One piece of evidence for this viewpoint is in verse 29 where the woman told the townspeople Jesus knew all she ever did.

It is important to note this woman made her confession without attempting self-justification, denial of wrongdoing, or covering up what she'd done. (Taken from www.studylight.org in the Public Domain.) And the same should be true of our confession of sin to God.

In verse 19, the woman said to Jesus, "Sir, you must be a prophet." Samaritans accepted the books of Moses but discounted the other books of the Old Testament. Due to

this limited perspective, Samaritans were not anticipating a David-like king (as the Jews were) but a Moses-like prophet. (Taken from www.studylight.org in the Public Domain.)

In the watershed verses of 21-24, Jesus revealed worship of God is not going to be dependent on where we are or the rituals associated with a particular place. Instead, going forward, worship will be based upon us aligning our spirit - our core being, our heart and mind - with God's spirit. Former pastor Larry Worley has defined worship as "a conscious awareness of God that brings about praise and adoration." Note that in this definition there is no mention of a temple, sanctuary, worship center, or even walls. And perhaps Jesus was also indicating worship should not be limited to posted times of when to start and when to stop.

In verse 26, Jesus proclaims his Messiahship to this woman who is not just a Samaritan, but also an outcast among her own community. Remarkably, this truth about his identity was often not revealed to Jewish religious leaders of the day. They did not (and would not) see this news as a cause for amazement and joy as this woman did. (Taken from www.studylight.org in the Public Domain.)

One of the evidences of an encounter with Jesus is an adjustment of priorities. This woman had come to the well in midday heat to get a drink of cool and refreshing water. But after meeting Christ and hearing about the hope of his life-giving words, she forgot all about her physical thirst. She jumped up (at least that's how I picture it), left her water pot and rope, and literally ran (the Bible's words, not mine – see verse 28) back to her village. She had to share what she'd just experienced. And not just with one or two people. Verse 28 says she told “everyone.” This outcast among outcasts became one of the greatest recorded pre-resurrection witnesses for Jesus. Another takeaway for me from this passage is to never regard anyone as beyond the reach of God.

We don't know what words this woman used to tell townspeople about her meeting at the well. But they must have been powerful, heartfelt, gut-wrenching expressions of confession, revelation, repentance, and restoration.

And look at how the residents responded. Men and women streamed out from the town to see for themselves. (Reference what Philip told Nathanael in John 1:46b, “Come and see for yourself.”) And it was not just to say, “Hey.” The townspeople begged him to stay. And Jesus

did. For two days! Imagine spending not just a few minutes with the Master, but 48 hours in his presence! How many other towns (Jewish or Gentile) welcomed the Messiah with open arms? None that I know of. The folks in the area of the Gerasenes were even less hospitable: they begged Jesus “to go away and leave them alone” (Luke 8:37).

Because of the unnamed woman’s testimony and Jesus’ teaching, a lot of folks came to believe Jesus was “indeed the Savior of the world” (verses 41–42). I don’t know the topography of the area where this village was. But I’d like to think this town occupied a high point of land in that region and became a “light of the world . . . a city on a hilltop” (Matthew 5:14) that reflected God’s revealing and healing light.

And what about this woman? In his book, *Anxious for Nothing*, Max Lucado pointed out, “There is a reason the windshield is bigger than the rear view mirror. Your future matters more than your past.” I believe this woman’s past became smaller and smaller with each passing day. The same can be true for each of us.

I focus on this one thing:
Forgetting the past and
looking forward to what lies ahead
– Philippians 3:13b

Questions for Reflection

1. What are some of your most meaningful worship experiences? Where did they occur? Why were they meaningful to you?
2. Does the Holy Spirit help you worship? If so, how?
3. What parts of your past do you need to leave behind you?
4. During the months immediately after March 2020, how did COVID-19 change where you worshipped? How you worshipped? Do you think what you've experienced during this time will influence your future worship experiences and in what ways?

Be Ye Glad

Honoring God with What You Have

John 6:5-13

Scripture Summary

A huge crowd of people had followed Jesus to a hillside near Bethsaida, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus asked Philip where they could get enough bread to feed these folks. Philip hadn't a clue. Then Andrew mentioned there was a young boy with five barley loaves and a couple of fish. But even Andrew had his doubts. Jesus instructed the disciples to have everybody sit down on the grassy slope. (There were about 5,000 men present, not counting women and children.) Jesus gave thanks for the loaves and had them distributed to the people. Then he did the same with the fish. Everyone ate until they were satisfied. Jesus had the disciples gather the leftovers, which filled twelve baskets.

Points to Ponder

Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptizer. Shortly after John had baptized Jesus, Andrew heard John

identify Jesus by declaring, “There is the Lamb of God!” At that point, Andrew became one of Jesus’ first disciples (John 1:35-40). Thereafter, Andrew was noted for bringing others to Jesus – beginning with his brother Simon (John 1:42). When we meet Andrew in chapter 5, he is once again assisting another person to meet Jesus. This time, it is a young boy. This lad had some victuals he was willing to give to Jesus.

In his book *He Was One of Us*, Dutch painter Rien Poortvliet depicts a number of events in Jesus’ life. One of these happenings is from this passage of Scripture. In the artist’s vision, the scene is a vast ocean of people, shoulder-to-shoulder, crowded onto a two-page spread in this large, coffee table volume. In this horde of humanity, the viewer’s eyes (speaking for myself) are drawn to a specific young boy. And on this boy’s face is a smile.

The disciples thought whatever resources they had were insufficient to meet the vast need they saw. They felt what they had to offer was not much more than nothing. So that is what they offered. And then the lad came forward. This little boy did not focus on the enormous number of grumbling stomachs that surrounded him. Instead of worrying that what he had wasn’t enough, he brought what he did have to Jesus. This lad would

probably have agreed wholeheartedly with Dallas Jenkins, creator of “The Chosen,” who said, “It is not our job to feed the five thousand but to bring the loaves and fishes.”

In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), I think Jesus was directing attention not to how much the individuals had, but to what they did with what they had. When a beggar pleaded for money from Peter and John, Peter didn't say, “I'll get you next time after I visit the ATM.” Instead, Peter said, “What I do have I'm going to give you.” Between receiving pocket change or being able to walk for the first time in his life, I'm pretty sure that man would have chosen the latter. (See Acts 3:1-6.)

I don't think Jesus expects us to meet 100% of every need we become aware of. But I do think Jesus wants us to be sensitive to the needs of others and to do what we can to meet those needs, in conjunction with the leading of the Holy Spirit and our resources, spiritual gifts, and talents.

Another subtle takeaway for me from Mr. Poortvliet's portrayal of this scene is the joyful expression on the boy's face. This lad gave what he had not reluctantly or grudgingly, but gladly. Jesus had quite a bit to say about our motivation – that is, why we do what we do.

Let me tell you why you are here . . .
You're here to be light,
bringing out the God-colors in the world.
God is not a secret to be kept . . .
be generous with your lives.

– Matthew 5:13,14,16 (MSG)

You have been treated generously,
so live generously.

– Matthew 10:8b (MSG)

I think the generosity Jesus spoke of really doesn't have a whole lot to do with what I'm giving, the amount, or who the recipient is. But I believe it has quite a bit to do with my attitude and motivation. Sharing with other folks because of all God has done for me can put a smile in my heart, as well as on my face. And it helps me remember the example of a small boy who encountered Jesus two thousand years ago.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are your talents? Your spiritual gifts? Your resources?
2. What is the difference between a talent and a spiritual gift? Can a talent be a spiritual gift?
3. Should intangibles such as Faith and Joy be included in those lists? And how about Time?
4. Have you ever refrained from giving because you felt what you had to contribute was inadequate? If so, has taking another look at this passage of Scripture changed how you will evaluate future opportunities?
5. Are there areas of your life in which you need to cultivate a more generous spirit?
6. Why do you think Jesus placed more emphasis on the motives behind our giving rather than on the gift itself?

For the People

Authority and Responsibility

John 19:6-11

Scripture Summary

Jewish religious leaders were vehement in their words to Pilate. They insisted Jesus be crucified. Pilate protested, “I don’t think he’s guilty.” The leaders countered, “According to our law, he should die because he claims to be the Son of God.” This statement may have caused Pilate to start twirling his “worry beads.” The ruler took Jesus back into the Praetorium.

“Where are you from?” Pilate asked Jesus.

No response.

“Why won’t you talk to me?”

Again, no response.

A frustrated Pilate asked, “Don’t you know I have the power to either release you or to crucify you?”

This time, Jesus did reply. “You wouldn’t have any authority unless it had been granted you from above. And the group that handed me over to you is guilty of an even greater wrong.”

Points to Ponder

This rather brief encounter is quite significant because of what it says and implies about the rights and limits of civil government and, by extension, any earthly authority. But these verses also contain a wake-up call concerning individual responsibility. And this is not just an alarm clock going off. It is an ice-cold bucket of water being thrown into the face of every person in authority over others.

If men were angels,
no government would be necessary.
– James Madison, *The Federalist* No. 51

As Mr. Madison’s insight correctly observes, on this side of heaven we are stuck with civil government, the military, businesses, churches, and other organizations in which a few individuals have authority over a lot of other people. Jesus recognized and gave credence to this reality when he said it was appropriate that even he pay his mandated taxes (Matthew 17:24-27). And this

statement was in spite of Roman regulations and activities which I'm sure Jesus did not agree with.

Later in the first century, the apostle Paul validated this behavior in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

Give to everyone what you owe them:

Pay your taxes and government fees

to those who collect them,

and give respect and honor

to those who are in authority.

– Romans 13:7

However, neither Jesus' nor Paul's words or actions should be taken as a blank check for any persons in authority to enact unjust laws or regulations or simply do as they please.

An unjust law is no law at all.

– St. Augustine

An example of an unjust rule is found in the early history of the church in the book of Acts. Under direction from an angel of the Lord, the apostles went to the Temple to proclaim the Good News. The apostles were summarily arrested and quickly brought before the high priest and the Jewish high council. These religious leaders reminded the apostles they had been told to never again

preach about this man. (The Jewish leaders couldn't even bring themselves to say Jesus' name.) Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:19-29).

Peter set a high standard in demonstrating how an individual should respond to unjust edicts or use of authority. A more recent example is found in the life of German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He could have opted to get out of Germany during the 1930s. But he felt led to "live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany." Bonhoeffer participated in the German resistance movement, helping German Jews escape to Switzerland. He was arrested in April 1943 and put in prison. Two years later, Bonhoeffer was hanged just two weeks before Allied soldiers liberated his concentration camp. (From DBonhoeffer.org.)

But there is another aspect of this Scripture passage that should not be overlooked. Pilate thought he could literally "wash his hands" of any culpability in this matter. But in Jesus' response to Pilate in verse 11, he essentially told Pilate he would be held accountable for condemning a man to death, a man he knew was innocent (John 19:4). (From Donald C. Fleming's commentary on John 19.) I think this is a strong word of

warning to any leader who thinks he or she will not be held accountable for any actions (or lack thereof) during their tenure, even if they are just “following orders.”

To those people who hold positions of authority, do so responsibly, and acknowledge God’s ultimate supremacy, I say, “Thank you! I just wish there were more leaders like you.”

Questions for Reflection

1. As an individual, what standards do you use to decide which rules to obey and which rules to not abide by?
2. If you are or have been in a position of authority, have you been in a situation where you had to implement or enforce a rule or regulation you thought was wrong? If so, how did you deal with it? With hindsight, would you have handled it differently?
3. From your personal experience, what lessons have you learned about facing difficult moral or ethical decisions?

Just Do It

Obedience

John 20:11-18

Scripture Summary

Mary Magdalene was standing outside the tomb crying. Inside the sepulcher, two angels asked the reason for her tears. Mary told them her Lord's body had been taken and she didn't know where it was. When Mary turned to go, she saw someone standing near her, outside the tomb. It was Jesus, but Mary didn't recognize him. He also asked Mary why she was crying. In addition, he wanted to know who she was looking for. Believing this man was the gardener, Mary inquired as to where Jesus' body had been moved so Mary could go and get it. Jesus called Mary by name. Immediately she recognized the Teacher. Jesus told Mary not to hang onto him but to go to the disciples and tell them he was ascending to God the Father. Mary did as she was instructed.

Points to Ponder

Mary Magdalene came from the village of Magdala. In his commentary "Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene,"

Samuel L. Mills noted it was fairly common in that time for a person to be identified with his or her birthplace. Familiar examples would be Saul of Tarsus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Jesus of Nazareth. Magdala was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, but has long since ceased to exist. We have no way of knowing for sure if Mary Magdalene was the Mary in Luke 7 who anointed Jesus' feet with the contents of an alabaster jar. We do know Mary of Magdala was healed by Jesus from an unidentified illness and also had seven demons cast out from her. After that, she became a devoted follower of Jesus.

In the early part of the first century, women were regarded as second-class citizens. In his commentary on John 20, David Guzik pointed out the courts of that day would not recognize the testimony of a woman. But Jesus, through his words and actions, elevated their status considerably. As a remarkable exclamation point to this, each of the gospels records women being the first witnesses to the empty tomb. (See Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1-4, Luke 24:1, and John 20:1.) In each of these accounts where visitors to the tomb are identified, not only is Mary Magdalene named, she is, without exception, listed first.

In verse 17, Jesus said to Mary, “Don’t cling to me” because “I haven’t yet ascended to the Father.” The inference here is that Mary, when she recognized Jesus, fell at his feet perhaps with a reverential embrace of his knees, which would have not been uncommon. The Greek word used here for “cling” can also mean “touch,” “fasten on,” or “grasp.” The present tense used in this verb, conveys not a single act but rather an ongoing habit. So, this could be translated as “Don’t continue clinging to me,” with the idea being Jesus is not back to stay with his followers at this point. (From *Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers*.) Jesus must return to heaven so the Holy Spirit can come.

Mary was the first person to see the resurrected Jesus. In verse 17, Jesus directed Mary of Magdala to go find the disciples and tell them she had seen the risen Jesus and he would be ascending to their Father. And, in doing what Jesus told her to do, she became the first person to share the Good News of the resurrection with others. (From L.G. Parkhurst Jr.’s commentary on these verses.) Mary faithfully gave witness to not just who she had seen but also what Jesus had told her. (From *Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers*.)

Jesus held obedience in high regard, as evidenced in his words recorded in Luke 8:21:

“My mother and my brothers are all those who hear God’s word and obey it.”

Examples of obedience include:

- John the Baptizer baptizing Jesus (Matthew 3:13-15)
- Simon’s miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:3-5)
- Jesus’ willingness to die on the cross for our sins (Luke 22:42)

In a television commercial from long ago, venerable character actor Wilford Brimley urged people to eat Quaker Oats with the tag line, “It’s the right thing to do.” In the above examples, these individuals did things that weren’t their first choices. While the things they did were “the right things to do,” their real motivation was that Jesus or God the Father called them to do those things. And following God’s call and commandments is the mark of an obedient disciple. May it be so with each of us.

Questions for Reflection

1. Is every choice or decision a matter of obedience to God?
2. How do you recognize God's call for you to do or not do something?
3. What types of situations cause you the most hesitation or reluctance to act as you believe God is directing you?
4. Do you find it more difficult to be obedient in the "small" decisions and choices or in the "large" ones?
5. How can doing what God asks or commands us to do in mundane choices help us when we face pivotal, "fork-in-the-road" choices?
6. Are there specific areas of your life in which you need to be more obedient to what God calls you to do or not do?

Back to the Present

During the time Jesus was on earth, a number of individuals had the opportunity to have face-to-face conversations with him. Some of these folks struggled to understand and incorporate into their lives a number of the paradoxes Jesus taught and demonstrated about the kingdom of God. A few of these lessons are:

- Less can be more.
- The internal is more important than the external, and the eternal is more important than either.
- What can be felt with our heart is of greater value than what can be grasped with our hands.
- In a short-term world, we are called to be long-term investors.

Unlike first century disciples, we do not have the advantage of talking things over with Jesus face-to-face. So as twenty-first century disciples, it is even more important that we encounter Jesus daily through Bible study and prayer.

In *When God Whispers Your Name*, Max Lucado related the story of a little boy who fell out of bed one night. When his mom asked him what happened, he replied, “I don’t know. I guess I stayed too close to where I got in.”

Our encounters with Jesus should help us grow spiritually beyond “where we got in” and make a difference in our lives so that we, in turn, can make a difference in the lives of other people we encounter.

And remember, the one-and-only Son of God is always ready to spend time with you personally, one-on-one. How about now?

Acknowledgments

While growing up, my family did a fair amount of tent camping. I think I can trace my love of the outdoors back to those experiences. One of my favorite parts of those family times was the campfire at night. The yellow light from the flickering flames . . . the welcome warmth that kept the evening chill at bay until we snuggled into our sleeping bags . . . recollections, stories, and laughter from Dad, Mom, Karen, and Brian, occasionally punctuated by a “pop” from the burning logs . . . and, oh yes, the unforgettable fragrance of wood smoke!

Those memories bring to mind another type of fire – that of creative work. First, I want to acknowledge that any ability I have at putting words together comes from God. Sunday School teacher Andy Clark summarized thoughts from a sermon by Ernie Arnold this way, “Without God’s fire, it was just a bush in the desert.” I find that to be the case with my writing. In a very real sense, God supplies not only the fuel and the matches, but also the “pop.” In addition, family members and friends have fanned the flames with their breath of encouragement. And I would not even come close to being able to do what I do without the guidance, support, and love of Jean, my editor, my best friend, and my wife.

And to you, the reader, I would also like to say “Thank you” for spending a few minutes around this “fire” (hopefully in a more comfortable place than sitting on a log).

Now, if I could just remember what I did with the marshmallows.

*And whatever you do or say,
do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks through him to God the Father.*

- Colossians 3:17



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