

March 6, 2020



Genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew

Level 1c.

After listening to "Matthew's Genealogy: 5 Subtle Clues Modern Reader's Miss" and seeking to learn more about the women included in Matthew's account of Jesus' genealogy, I have most definitely changed my mind about the importance of such lists that I find in Scripture. Whereas I have always skipped over these lists in the past, never again will I neglect to consider why God may have inspired the authors to include them.

As I read through the list of names in Jesus' genealogy found in Matthew 1: 1-17, I found myself inspired to read more about some of the women, whose names I recognized but had forgotten their stories. God led me on an unexpected journey. I say unexpected, because it never occurred to me that I could gain anything by reading through a bunch of names, that I can barely pronounce, any who! It never occurred to me that such lists would hold anything I might consider to be inspirational. From this day forward, I will give pause to consider the significance of any name that the Holy Spirit highlights as I study God's Word. I will hold these verses, and verses like them with higher regard and not ignore, skip or rush through reading such lists. I'll give God a chance to use a name, two names, or more to lead me on a journey through Scripture as He takes me deeper into understanding what it is that I can learn from their lives. I don't dare say that I will hold them in as high regard as I do verses such as Isaiah 40:31 or Zephaniah 3:17, but I won't dismiss the possibility that these lists could hold treasures God wants me to find in the imperfect people...the diamonds in the rough...He has included.

Now that I have started this journey to discover or re-discover the stories of the people listed by Matthew as part of Jesus' genealogy, I find myself excited about continuing the journey. Such a contrast to how I looked upon this list, even as recently as one week ago when this course began. My initial thought was, "Lord, just get me through this first week of reading, so I can get to the passages and stories I love." In a sense, I guess I was eager to get to "the red letters!" In just a few days, God has changed my heart and caused me to love these lists of names, or rather the possibility of learning as much from them, as I have from the Prophets, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Letters to the Churches, etc. I'm excited about this new journey on which God is taking me!

Level 2, Question 1

So, God just took me on a journey! I have never studied the women whose names are included in Jesus' ancestry like I have today. I could have gone even deeper and even longer if I had the time. I long for the day that I have all the time in the world to just study God's Word. But, for today, I learned so much and am so excited about what I learned about these women as I read their stories. Many, many years ago, I took a class in our Institute where we read, "The Miracle of the Scarlet Thread" by Dr. Richard Booker. I had all but forgotten the lessons we learned from reading this book, and could not say if the author talked about any of these women in his book, but all I can say is, "Wow!" I found evidence of the scarlet thread connecting all these women to Jesus even though none of them were Israelites.

The scarlet thread is a metaphor for the blood of Jesus which washes us clean when we acknowledge him as the Lord of our lives. As I read the stories of these women, God highlighted this scarlet thread, revealing that from the very beginning of time, He had a plan to send Jesus, not just to the Israelite people, but to the gentiles and people of all nations. And, that one day, Jesus, by the shedding of his blood would wash away the sins of ALL those who have been promised to him by God and seal us with his blood.

In Tamar's (a Canaanite woman) story, it is Judah's signet ring, his bracelets and his staff that become a sign of her covering and worth to God. When Judah discovered Tamar's deception and gives orders that she be put to death, she presents him with his signet ring, bracelets and staff, to remind him of the promise he made and must now keep. From what I can find, I believe the wax used by kings and the patriarchs to seal edicts and laws was typically red. The signet ring was symbolic of the power to set seals and even "change a command" previously given. In the Hebrew, the word for bracelet means thread and the word for staff "matteh" refers to "a support of life". And, there it is! Together these items represent God's plan to bind us to Himself, sustaining us and protecting us from the condemnation of death through the blood of His son, Jesus, which is set as a seal upon our lives. (Looking a little further into Tamar's story, I found another reference to "the scarlet chord" that I want to research further. When Tamar gave birth to her twins, Perez and Zerah, Zerah reached out his arm from the womb first and the mid-wife tied a scarlet thread around his wrist. Though Perez ended up being born first and it is his name that is listed in Jesus' genealogy, I find myself wanting to know more about what happened to Zerah.)

In the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman, she makes a pledge to her mother-in-law, Naomi, proclaiming, "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." Because of her faithfulness to Naomi and ultimately the God of the Israelites, who is also our God through adoption, she is also "covered and brought into the abundant favor of God."

When Ruth chooses to remain with Naomi there seems to be a shift in how Naomi thinks of her. At the beginning of Ruth's story, she is referred to as Naomi's daughter-in-law. After Ruth chooses to return with Naomi to her homeland of Bethlehem, in Judah, Naomi refers to Ruth as her daughter. When God highlighted this detail, I felt He was already revealing His plan to adopt us as His sons and daughters. This plan came to light again, later in Ruth's story, when Boaz, who is referred to as the "family redeemer" takes Ruth to be his wife, thereby giving her the rights to the inheritance of Elimelech, her first husband an Israelite who was descended from Abraham. As wife to Boaz, Ruth was now under the Covenant that God made with Abraham. Through the person of Ruth, we see God's love, not just for His Chosen People of Israel, but for all of us whom He calls His Sons and Daughters through adoption. It is by the Blood of Our Redeemer, Jesus Christ that we have been brought into the family of God.

The scarlet chord, again, appears in Rahab's story. God uses Rahab, a Canaanite woman who is also a prostitute, to ensure the safety of the men, Joshua sent to spy out the land of Jericho, the land promised to the Israelites by God. Rahab welcomes the spies into her home and harbors them when the king of Jericho sends word that they are to be brought to him so he can put them to death. Before the spies return to the Israelite camp in the cover of night, Rahab expresses her fear of the God

of the Israelites and asks that her life and the lives of her family be spared when the Israelites return to take the land. Because of her sacrificial actions, the spies make a promise to her, that she and her family will be spared. According to Hebrews 11: 31, "It was by faith that Rahab the prostitute was not destroyed." As a symbol of this promise to spare her life, the spies gave Rahab a "scarlet chord" that she was to hang above her window. I couldn't help but see the similarity between the scarlet chord over Rahab's window and the blood of the lamb that was placed over the doors of the Israelite people when God spared them from the last plague he sent over all of Egypt, namely the death of all the first born sons. Rahab's life was indeed spared and later she married an Israelite named Salmon and gave birth to Boaz, who would later marry Ruth. In Rahab we see a picture of the faith that we are to place in God so we can be called the sons and daughters of God. Jesus's blood is the scarlet chord that washes away our sins and makes us righteous in the eyes of God.

Finally, there is Bathsheba. To find the scarlet thread in her story, I had to take a really deep dive. When David first sees Bathsheba, she is purifying herself after menstrual period. By so doing, she was keeping the law of purification established by God in Leviticus. Bathsheba was an Israelite, unlike the other women included in Jesus' genealogy, but she was considered to be a foreigner because she was married to Uriah the Hittite.

Through the inclusion of Bathsheba in Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus, I see God's salvation plan extended to people of all nations. I see the abundance of His love and provision for all of His children. Though God forgave David for all he had done that was wrong in His sight, consequently He did bring about the death of David and Bathsheba's firstborn son. Though this story found in 2 Samuel only speaks of David's response to the death of his first son, there is no mention of Bathsheba's grief. I'd imagine, however, that her grief would be great. But, God does not leave Bathsheba alone in her grief. He gives to David and Bathsheba another son, Solomon, who later becomes king and builds The Temple where the Jewish people can now come to worship. Through this account of Bathsheba and David, God is revealing that He intends to keep the promise He made to Abraham, that He would be the father of many nations and that His bloodline would never end. In this way, God binds Bathsheba and David's son, Solomon to the promise he made with Abraham and therefore binding Solomon to himself with the same scarlet thread.

It is because these women are included in Matthew's account of Jesus' genealogy that we see God's plan to send Jesus, not just to His Chosen people of Israel, but to the Gentiles and foreigners, to people of all nations, to the broken people living sinful lives. . .to us! If God had not inspired Matthew to include, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba in this genealogy, but instead only included His Chosen daughters such as Sarah and Rebekah, we would perhaps miss God's plan to adopt us into His family, as well. We may not have seen how great His love was for the worst of sinners. We may not have understood what was meant by Scripture, when in Hebrews 10:28 Paul writes, "So also Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people." We may not have realized that the covenant promise God made with Abraham, is His promise to us, as well, through adoption into His family. Through the mention of these women, we see that God intended from the beginning to bring us into His family of many people for all of time. "For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." (Hebrews 10:14)

While the men included in Matthew's account of Jesus' lineage are covered by the Covenant God made with Abraham and their inheritance in Heaven is made secure by the keeping of the Law, God made a way for us to come into our inheritance through Jesus. Jesus was the Word made flesh and He came to fulfill the law. He has made a new covenant with us that we may have missed if he did not include these women who were not Israelites and therefore not His Chosen People. Further down in Hebrews 10, it reads, 'The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts, I will remember no more." (Hebrews 10: 15-17) If only women such as Sarah and Rebekah, who are part of God's Chosen people and therefore lived under The Law, were included, we might still be trying to gain an inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven by keeping God's Law, trying to earn our way into God's family by works, rather than accepting God's free gift of Salvation, Jesus. If Tamar or Rahab had not been listed, we may not have been able to see our worth to God, or see how much He loves us, too. Through these women, we see God's promise of eternal life to anyone who turns from sin and follows Him. We see His abounding grace and His abundant desire to forgive us and take us to Himself as His sons and daughters. Like women such as Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheeba, and Ruth, God rewards our faith in Him, by binding us to Himself with His scarlet chord, sealing us with His signet ring, and protecting us with His staff. His seal upon us is His law that has been written upon our hearts in red!



Jesus' Birth & Preparation for Ministry

March 14, 2020

Level 1a.

This week I have learned so much from our class discussion. As I've read what others wrote about the different accounts of Jesus' baptism, I've been inspired to go even deeper with my own study. I've meditated on Jesus' baptism like never before and as a result, discovered mysteries in these verses that I will most certainly explore further in the near future. These discussions have made me slow down when reading Scripture, raise questions and then seek to discover answers. I find myself truly meditating on God's Word and I'm loving this time I'm spending with God. Honestly, I could do this every day, all day! God is using these discussions to "grow" me spiritually for sure. There is something welling up inside of me that is urging me to dive deeper and deeper so that God can help me unravel the beautiful mysteries He has hidden in His Word. It is so hard for me to tare myself away. God is also using these discussions to once again show me how important it is to Him for us to minister to one another in the Body of Christ. Together, we unlock mysteries faster and see things that we might never have discovered on our own.

This week's discussion inspired me to take a very deep dive. Most of what I learned I posted in the discussion, so I've woven those posts into this journal entry from this point on.

One of the greatest mysteries that together we uncovered and I sought to unravel was regarding John's words, "And, I did not know him", referring to Jesus, which he stated twice in his account of Jesus' baptism. It was Sherry Jones who first made mention of John's words, but I found myself needing to explore this further. When I first pondered this question, I wondered if perhaps John was referring to some kind of transformation that took place in the person of Jesus when the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon him, changing His countenance in such a way that John knew that in that moment, Jesus became more than just his cousin. Additionally, I found myself thinking about the time when both babies were still in the womb, and the Word says that John leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb when Mary came near. In my mind, this confirmed that John did indeed know Jesus, and I thought that perhaps the word "know" was being used in a way unfamiliar to us. I thought maybe that it might be John's way of saying that Jesus came down into the water as the Son of Man, but rose up out of the water as the Son of God, the Promised Messiah. After these initial thoughts, I sought to get a better perspective by exploring commentaries, and this is what I found that resonated with my spirit:

Barnes' Notes on the Bible: This was the sign by which he was to know the Messiah. He was to see the Spirit descending like a dove and abiding on him. It does not follow, however, that he had no intimation before this that Jesus was the Christ, but it means that by this he should know it infallibly. From Matthew 3:13-14, it seems that John supposed, before the baptism of Jesus, that he claimed to be the Messiah, and, that he believed it; but the infallible, certain testimony in the case was the descent of the Holy Spirit on him at his baptism.

Meyer's NT Commentary: John's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah (whom he had not before known as such) rested upon a revelation previously made to him with this intent; and this he now states, solemnly repeating, however, the declaration of his own ignorance

Matthew Poole's Commentary: And I knew him not; I was a stranger to him; I knew him in a sense, when I leaped in my mother's womb, upon his mother's coming to see my mother, Luke 1:41; but that (as impressions made upon infants use to do) wore off. I had some impression upon me at that time when he came towards me to be baptized, which made me say to him, {as Matthew 3:14}

The second most valuable treasure I found as I considered the discussion questions this week and read what others were saying about the account of Jesus' baptism, had to do with the ties between Old Testament prophecy about the Promised Messiah and Jesus in the New Testament. I've always wanted to "see" these connections myself. What's that expression Pastor John always says? "In the Old Testament concealed; in the New Testament revealed." Something like that! I have always wanted to explore the Truth that is concealed in the Old Testament in light of the New Testament which I find much more understandable. When asked to consider Jesus' baptism, I took it as an opportunity to explore the Old Testament for references to the Promised Messiah, myself. I'm sure I've only begun to unlock the mysteries hidden in the Prophets, but I was able to uncover a few relevant verses that I believe point to Jesus.

First, Isaiah 11:1 reads, "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him. . ." Second, I discovered, Jeremiah 23: 5-6, which reads, "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness. . . In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord our Righteousness." Finally, there is the prophet Zechariah who during my "deep dive" I found out was considered to be one of the most Messianic prophets of the Old Testament. In Zechariah 13:1, Zechariah prophesied of the coming of Christ when he said, "In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness."

Each of these Old Testament Scriptures point to Jesus as the Promised Messiah. In the Gospel of John, we hear John the Baptist tell the people that he came "baptizing with water so that he [Jesus] could be revealed to Israel. I believe this relates to Zechariah 13:1. Not only does Jesus step down into the waters of baptism, but the heavens are opened up, God declares Jesus to be His Son, and Jesus rises up out of the waters of baptism as the Fountain of Life, the Living Water. Additionally, John calls Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." When Jesus rises up out of the water and is acknowledged by God as His Son, he goes forth with all the power and authority and right to cleanse us from sin and redeem us unto Himself.

Next, in Matthew's account, Jesus says to John the Baptist, "It is right for us to fulfill all righteousness." I believe this mirrors what Jeremiah declared in Jeremiah 23. Jesus is the Branch of Righteousness, who is called, The Lord of Righteousness, that Jeremiah prophesied.

Finally, all four authors tell of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus. As I mentioned previously, Isaiah prophesied that the Promised Messiah would come from the rod of Jesse, and a branch of David, and he proclaimed that when the Spirit of the LORD came to rest upon him, this would be a sign that the Promised Messiah had come. And, of course, the Spirit of the LORD did indeed alight on Jesus when he came up out of the water.

While these are two of the most significant lessons I learned from this weeks discussion, teachings and my own personal deeper dive, there are so many more treasures that others brought to light that I'd like to explore. These discussions and lessons are impacting my walk with Christ exponentially. In the setting of my home, I'm able to meditate and study as long as I want, and these discussions and lessons are inspiring me to do just that. As I have explored the questions others have raised, I now have much more of God's Word hidden in my heart. I am looking forward to continuing the journey orchestrated by God.

Level 2 Question 3

In their accounts concerning the Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness after he was baptized by John, Matthew and Luke agree on many points. From the beginning to end of both accounts the most important truths about Jesus' wilderness experience are present. In both stories, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and remains in the wilderness for 40 days and nights being tempted by the devil. Furthermore, through both Matthew and Luke, we witness the devil employing the same three temptations. Though Luke writes about these temptations in a different order than Matthew, the heart of the message is preserved and speaks volumes about the character of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who resists and ultimately prevails over every single one of the temptations Satan throws at Him. Jesus does so, not only by quoting Old Testament Scripture, but by answering the devil with the same scriptures in both accounts. Therefore, from both accounts, we see Jesus, very much in human form, experiencing very human temptations, but drowning out the voice of the Enemy and stopping his taunts with the Whole Truth found in God's Word. That leads me to one last thing that I believe is revealed in both accounts and is very important for us to see and know; clearly, the devil knows Scripture, as well. He knows enough that he can twist it and use it against us, unless we make sure to have more of The Truth in us, hiding in our hearts. Both writers included the most salient details from this story of Jesus' wilderness experience, and in so doing, we clearly see in their accounts, the traditional beliefs that were preserved by the early Church and are still preserved to this day!

As I compared the two accounts told first from Matthew's perspective and then by Luke's, I learned more from the differences I found, than perhaps from the similarities. Or, at least, the differences caused me to ask more questions and go deeper in order to try to understand why the differences were there. In the end I realized how important it is for us to have both of these perspectives, and how much more meaningful it is to study them side by side. So much would be lost to us if we did not have both accounts.

In Matthew's account he writes that Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness", whereas Luke makes note that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" and He was "led by the Spirit in the wilderness. In Matthew's account there is a clear picture of an entity who is separate from Jesus, a person who is the Holy Spirit. We see the third person of the Trinity as being separate from God and Jesus, and playing a role that was specifically assigned to him – that of a Guide. While Luke still tells of Jesus being led by the Spirit, he reveals an even more important role that the Holy Spirit plays in this part of Jesus' story, and may even be pointing to the role he will play in our lives. In Luke's account, the Holy Spirit is not a person in physical form, but instead he resides IN Jesus and is leading him IN the wilderness. This paints a picture of the Holy Spirit who will remain with us as we go through

wilderness experiences, just as he did in the person of Jesus. We cannot see the Holy Spirit, but we can still hear his voice and feel his presence with us, guiding us by bringing to us the remembrance of God's Word that we've hidden in our hearts.

Another important difference between the two accounts is found in the portion of Scripture that is quoted by the devil, but especially by Jesus. When Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger and end his suffering, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 in both accounts. However, in Matthew's account, Jesus quotes this verse in its entirety. Luke stops with, "It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone.'" In Matthew's account Jesus continues with, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." This difference between these two accounts left me with two poignant impressions. First, from Matthew's account, I see Jesus identifying Himself as The Word made flesh and even as God incarnate. For, it is out of His mouth that He rebukes the devil.

In Matthew 4:5-6 and Luke 4:9-11, we see a second temptation. Again, in Matthew's account the devil quotes Psalm 91:11-12 in full, whereas Luke only in part. In Matthew's account we find a description of the angels that we would otherwise not know about if we only had Luke's account. The devil says, "He will command his angels concerning you, and with their hands they will lift you up. . . ." Luke does not mention the angel's hands in his account, but rather inserts the words, "to protect you". Between the two accounts, we get a sense that angels may look a bit like us, and that their assignment by God is to protect us and keep us from harm.

In Jesus' response to this second attempt by Satan to get him to fall into sin, Matthew and Luke again reveal something a little different about the character of Jesus. In Matthew's account, Jesus said to him, "Once again it is written, 'You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.'" Luke changed "written" to "said". This begged the question, "Why the play on words?" I think that it is because Luke wants us to see that Jesus is The Word made flesh. Jesus is The Word, so naturally he will speak the Word. I also wonder if Luke is revealing the intimate aspect of Jesus' relationship with God. He is God's Son who was with Him from the beginning of time. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) On the other hand, Matthew's reference to the Written Word, reveals to Christians and any who would follow Jesus, the importance of knowing Scripture. God inspired the authors of Scripture to write everything down on scrolls that would later become the Bible we know today. Jesus was the Word, he spoke the Word, and the prophets, psalmists, historians, and disciples recorded the Word to make a way for us to know God, more intimately, through Jesus. Unlike Jesus, who is The Word, we must read the written Word in order to hide it in our hearts, so in that day when we are tempted, we can silence the voice of The Enemy when he comes to tempt us.

The final contrast I'd like to draw attention to has to do with the last of Satan's temptations and Jesus' response in each of the accounts. This time Luke's account of what the devil says is more detailed, and I think reveals more about his character. Luke reads, "To you I will grant this whole realm – and the glory that goes along with it, for it has been relinquished to me, and I can give it to anyone I wish. So then, if you worship me all this will be yours." (Luke 4:6-7) These verses reveal just how arrogant and full of himself, Satan really is. He seems to be indicating that he victoriously won the realms of the Earth, and took them by force out of the hands of God. Like God had no

choice but to relinquish His rule over His Creation. In his words we get the impression of the devil's false sense of confidence in his ability to win Jesus over and get Him to worship him instead of God. Wow, is he ever deceived!

Finally, I found Jesus' response to Satan's last taunt in Matthew to be much more meaningful and powerful than what Luke wrote. In Matthew, Jesus turns to the devil, and says, "Go, away, Satan! For it is written: 'You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'" In Matthew's account, Jesus clearly takes authority over Satan, declares enough is enough, and commands him to leave. In Luke's account, Jesus only quotes Exodus 20:3. He does not command Satan to go away! I think it is important for us to have Matthew's account, so that we see how we are to respond to Satan when he is relentless in his attacks. We, by the power and strength of Jesus Christ, who lives within us have that same authority over Satan. He must leave us alone when we stand on God's Word, take the authority given to us by Jesus, and say, "Go away, Satan!" When we command him to leave in Jesus' name, he must flee from us.

When considering the differences between the two accounts of Jesus' wilderness experience and the temptations he faced, I'm honestly not sure how it is that anyone could doubt the validity or reliability of the New Testament Gospels. But, if need be, I would sit down with those who had their doubts and show them how the Gospels compliment one another. I'd talk to them about the differences in terms of the audiences to whom these men were testifying Christ. I would also help them understand each writer's perspective, Matthew having a more intimate relationship with Jesus as he was one of the original Twelve disciples; whereas, Luke was writing much later and based his writing on eyewitness accounts. Eyewitness accounts will always be slightly different, but the heart of the message is what is important. And, that is what I'd point out to anyone who doubts the reliability of the Gospels.

Taken together these two accounts tell us so much personally about temptation and how we are to overcome it. We must get The Word in our hearts, by studying and meditating upon the written Word. We must stand on the promises of God, and believe He is faithful to perform His Word. We must guard our hearts with The Word so that we can recognize the lies of the Enemy. Only by hiding the Word in our hearts can we distinguish between the voice of God who speaks Truth and the voice of Satan who will twist the Word for his benefit. Finally, since we will face temptations in this world, we must be prepared to fight back with the Sword of the Spirit, God's Word. There is something in God's Word for every situation; every mountain we face. There is no temptation that is bigger than our God and our Lord, Jesus Christ!

March 21, 2020

Level 2 Sermon on the Mount



The Call of the Disciples

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."

The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who humble themselves before the Lord, and recognize their desperate need of Him in their lives. Those who are poor in spirit, humbly admit that they would be nothing if not for Christ. They lay aside their own wills and the desires of their spirit, and rather embrace The Spirit and the desires of God. The poor in spirit recognize they can do nothing apart from Christ. True humility wants no glory for themselves, but in all things and all ways gives Glory to God. The reward for a truly humble heart, is the

Kingdom of God which is planted in their hearts and begins to grow the moment the seed is planted. And, Jesus, is faithful to the poor in spirit, and will continue to nourish & water the Kingdom growing in our hearts until it has come to full-fruit. Being poor in spirit has to do with the condition of the heart, and it is our hearts that God sees! He sees in us the faith that is found in Galatians 5:22.

Redemptive Solution Found In Scripture

". . . be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time. . ." – 1 Peter 5:5-6

"God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." – 1 Corinthians 1:28-29

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." – James 4:10

"Your beauty. . . should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight." – 1 Peter 3:3-4

". . . For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." – 2 Chronicles 7:14

The latter Scripture from Chronicles is so relevant for today. The poor in spirit must recognize their need of God more so than ever. The poor in spirit, humble themselves before God, lay everything out at His feet and pray. When faced with trials, the poor in spirit fall to their knees and sit at Jesus feet, humbling themselves before Him and acknowledge Him as their High Priest and Intercessor. And, when God answers the prayers of His Son, He is glorified. The poor in spirit recognize that all glory belongs to the Lord.

The poor in spirit have need of The Lord!

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

Those who are merciful, show mercy as God has shown us mercy. Mercy in one dictionary is defined as "compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person in one's power; compassion, pity, or benevolence; the disposition to be compassionate or forbearing." There's an element to mercy that requires us to be long-suffering as Jesus was long-suffering. Jesus suffered countless wrongs, and yet He forgave those who wronged Him, even while he hanged from the cross. The merciful are called to see others through Jesus' eyes. His eyes are full of compassion and love. God looks beyond the wrong done and He looks at the heart. He sees a hurting heart that is in need of His love. As God's children we should be radiant with God's love and ready to forgive in a heartbeat. If we do not show mercy, how then will the one who has wronged us come to know the God always forgives? If we do not show them mercy, we rob them of the very mercy and forgiveness that God made incarnate in His Son, Jesus. When we show mercy towards someone who has wronged us our reward is great for we will experience God's abundant pardon that never draws to an end. This is the patience and love found in Galatians 5:22. When we show mercy we are the light that shines in the darkness and produces what is good and right and true (Ephesians 5:9). Mercy plants a seed of love in the hearts of others that can grow into another field in God's Kingdom. Love conquers all!

Redemptive Solution Found In Scripture

". . .let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." – Isaiah 55: 7-9

"Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. . ." – Luke 23:24

"And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors [letting go of both the wrong and the resentment]" – Matthew 6:12 (Amplified)

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. – Lamentations 3:22-23 (ESV)

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."
– 1 Peter 1:3-5

"Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted."

To mourn in the Greek means to literally wail because you are so filled with grief. Such is the sorrow and loss that you are experiencing, you cannot hide your suffering or the pain that wells up in your heart. I am reminded of a song by Michael Card, "God's Own Fool". Those who leave family and home to follow Christ can be seen as fools. We sacrifice our lives to follow Christ. Often that leads to rejection by family and friends. As Michael Card expresses in this song, there is a great price for becoming fools in the eyes of the World. But, the reward for being God's Own Fool, is greater than anything this world has to offer. Our reward is the joy found in Galatians 5:22

Redemptive Solution Found in Scripture

"You have turned my mourning into dancing for me; You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, That my soul may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever." – Psalm 30:11-12

"Praise the Lord, you who are loyal to him! Praise his holy name! His anger lasts for a little while, but then his kindness brings life. The night may be filled with tears, but in the morning we can sing for joy! – Psalm 30:4-6 (ERV)

"Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." – Lamentations 3:22-23 (NKJV)

"And he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall not exist anymore, nor grief, nor cry, nor distress shall exist anymore, for the former things have passed away." – Revelation 21:4 (Darby)

"But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head."
– Psalm 3:3

"You've kept track of all my wandering and my weeping. You've stored my many tears in your bottle—not one will be lost. You care about me every time I've cried. For it is all recorded in your book of remembrance." – Psalm 56:8 (Passion Translation)

Clash With Societal Values Today

These Beatitudes, for certain, clash with societal values today. The World is not always so **merciful**! I see so much hatred, so much bitterness, so many who hold grudges and so many destroyed friendships & relationships because of unforgiveness. I see people being eaten alive by their unforgiveness. But, how are they to forgive, when they know not the One who is Forgiveness? We live in a world that tells us to walk away from marriages and friendships if and when we've been hurt or wronged. Hearts become filled with spite and in the worst case, people may even seek ways in getting back at the person/people what have wronged them. People are mocked and ridiculed, and this is seen as being justified. "You've wronged me once; well that must mean, everything you do is wrong!" Oh, boy do I see that in this current political climate! We assign such great value to some wrongs and tag them as unforgiveable! And, the World sees these things as right. Yet, Jesus forgave the criminal on the cross. We turn our backs on others when they have probably the greatest need of our love. We fail to see other's with Jesus' eyes. And, we definitely forget His command to, "Pray for our enemies!"

Many are the ones in the World today, who are being consumed by grief and hopelessness. Those who **mourn** should not be consumed or overtaken by grief. People who do not know the Lord believe the lie that says, "I just couldn't live if something ever happened to [fill in the name]" or "I just have to have [fill in the item] or I just won't survive." We say things like, "Things will never be the same again", "I have no reason to live", "I just give up!" or "I don't think I'll ever be happy again!" We look to others for answers and fail to recognize The One who can lift us out of our grief and exchange our sackcloth with garments of praise. Some even would rather wallow in the misery, seeking the attention of others. The loss of a loved one is, I believe, perhaps the greatest reason for mourning. But, even so! Our grieving should not last forever. The world needs to know the Lord, the One who is the Lifter of Our Heads, and experience His Joy even in the midst of great sorrow. The World often fails to see the light that can come from the darkness, and we are living in a very dark time right now. But, there is much light coming from the darkness if we have eyes to see.

Finally, I do not think we are living in a time when people realize how much they need to the Lord. The cultural climate is not a humble one. Hearts are filled with a pride that says, "Look at me! Look at all I have accomplished." The World, unlike those who are **poor in spirit**, fails to acknowledge from Whom their talents, giftings and prosperity comes. So, often, even Christians do things in our own strength, and forget to check in with God, to be sure we are doing what it is He would have us do. Hence, why we become so tired and weary. We are living in a World that is very weary, but doesn't see the cause. Our pride keeps us from asking for help, partly because we believe to do so is admitting failure. The Poor in Spirit recognize their need of Christ in all things. And, instead of looking for the applause of others and looking for the glory that the World has to offer, we need to give all the glory to God, who in turn will glorify us.

Level 1a.

During our discussion this week, several responded to a conversation regarding the first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them." It is only this very moment, after having just studied this beatitude in depth, that I realize we actually may have misunderstood the meaning of "poor in spirit." I think, instead, we only considered the word "poor". Even so, our discussion brought to light misconceptions and blind-sightedness that have often caused us to misrepresent the Kingdom of God and not act in love.

The concern that was raised had to do with those individuals in our society who wrongly take advantage of public assistance, and have done nothing to help themselves and have come to expect others to help them. This causes concern and frustration for those of us who are caring for the poor with charitable "giving" hearts. This is a challenging dilemma.

As this discussion played out, I was once again reminded of my own experience with someone in my own family who was one of those we were discussing so I shared my journey and the lessons God has taught me as I've wrestled with this issue. I've shared part of my account here, as it details how I've grown personally and spiritually while walking in love towards a rather challenging individual!

Those of us who have never struggled with poverty have to be careful not to over generalize. Today, as I consider this issue, I hear people like Jordan Carter and John Tumino in my head. Jordan gave a great message about how we treat the homeless. I'll never forget what he said, "When we avoid looking at them on the corner, they see us avoiding making eye contact!" That's what makes them feel unwanted, unloved and invisible. As John Tumino says, "You're not invisible." In recent years God has convicted me and caused me to ask, "I wonder what their story is?" He has also reminded me that not everyone has the resiliency or understanding or even the support from loved ones and friends they need in the natural to encourage them to help themselves.

In my own family, there is one individual who abused assistance for most of her adult life. She was overflowing with self-pity. If you had a medical issue come up and you shared your concern, her response was "You think that's bad. . .well I...." You can finish the statement. She made suffering and pain a competition, always wanting to get all the attention. She did have family support, encouragement, but she had the poverty mindset that Pastor talks about frequently. Right about the time Pastor was talking about that, God used his teachings to show me why it was that my family member acted that way, always making excuses why she couldn't work. He revealed her poverty mindset. He also talked greatly to me about the gifts and character traits that we have to let Him develop in us. He showed me that just because I was mature in my Faith and understood how prayer and asking Him for healing so I could continue to work and press on, didn't mean others had arrived...yet! I was like, still, it's been 20+ years!

Well, just a few weeks ago, I called to check in and make sure she had everything she needed, and she exclaimed, "Guess what? I'm no longer a shut-in! I'm working three days a week at such and such place." Now, the old me would have blasted her for calling herself a shut-in! I wanted to; boy, did I want to. But, God said, "Silence!" And, then He showed me how He was working...moving her out of the poverty mindset! Baby steps! Just because I'm running, doesn't mean everyone is.

I thank the Lord, for people like John & Leigh Ann Tumino, every day. I so want to be more like them! Ultimately, more like Christ! As Christians, we need to keep praying for people who have the poverty mindset, and just trust God is working in their lives, as well. If they don't know Christ, they don't stand a chance of breaking the chains of that poverty mindset. That's when the Body of Christ has to be God's hands and feet. But, even then, we are not all called to hit the streets or start up ministries like "In My Father's Kitchen" or "Hire Ground". We just need to keep looking at others through Christ's eyes, so we see them as He sees them. Sometimes, that is a tall order! It is something I have to be reminded of every day. I still lose my patience with that member of my family, sometimes. But, I cannot deny that I see a change in her. God is at work changing her, just as He is working out something else in me.



Encounters with Jesus

Those Who CAME To Jesus To Be Healed
Level 2_Q1_Character Development

Words	Actions	What others say
<p>The Leper</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Called Jesus, "Lord" - Shows respect for Jesus and His authority over sickness ▪ Asked Jesus to make him clean - acknowledges his "place" in society; knows he is identified as unclean ▪ "If you are willing" - He is still a little unsure, hesitant to ask; maybe not feeling worthy, not sure he should be asking Jesus to "touch" him; humble 	<p>The Leper</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Came out from the multitude and worshipped Jesus - proskuneo- like a dog licking his master's hand; prostrate oneself in homage; prostrate oneself. <p>He would have been considered "a dog", but even a dog has a master, who feeds them.</p>	<p>Jesus' Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ He tells the leper to go and show the priest that he is clean, and offer a sacrifice in accordance with the law of Moses. <p>Jesus acknowledges that this man is a Jew who is under the Law</p>
<p>Woman with the Issue of Blood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Said to herself, "If only I may touch His garment, then I shall be made well" <p>This shows that she has great faith and renewed hope; She knows her place and knows the Law that forbids her to touch a man; this reveals her desperation</p>	<p>Woman with the Issue of Blood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ She came from behind and touch the hem of His garment. <p>Hem "kraspedon" fringe; she is hoping no one will notice her; trying to avoid being seen; low to the ground</p>	<p>Jesus' Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Be of good cheer" - shows that the woman was downcast ▪ "daughter" - A child of the Father; daughter of Abraham and a daughter of God's people, Israel; a Jew bound by the Law ▪ "Your faith has made you well!" - This woman was a person of great faith, who had kept the Law but saw in Jesus something even greater than the Law.

<p>Two Blind Men</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Son of David" – recognized Jesus' kingship ▪ "Have mercy on us!" – perhaps they feel their blindness is a punishment for the evil things they have done? ▪ When asked if they believed in Jesus, they replied, "Yes, Lord." – they see Jesus with their heart and will give their whole heart to see him with their eyes, as well. 	<p>Two Blind Men</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ They were "crying" out – shows their desperation to be heard; shows that they were rarely noticed by others; unseen; "Invisible". ▪ "They spread the news about Jesus in all that country" – could not contain their excitement? ▪ But, was it just that or did they want everyone to know they were healed so they would now be accepted by society? After all, Jesus told them NOT to tell anyone. 	<p>Jesus' Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "According to your faith, let it be to you." – These men wanted their physical eyes opened, but maybe not so much the eyes of their heart? ▪ Jesus "sternly" warned them, "See that no one knows it." – These men could be disobedient; braggarts? ▪ Sternly – <i>embrimaomai</i> – to have indignation on; to snort with anger ▪ Why would Jesus be angry with them? Maybe, unlike the leper, he knew they would not go to the Temple to show themselves as having been made whole and make an offering of thanksgiving?
<p>Deeper Meaning</p> <p>It is by our faith that we are made whole. The extent of our healing is proportional to the amount of faith we exercise and our willingness to do what God tells us to do. God wants to heal us, not just our bodies, but our minds and hearts. There are times we should share our testimony and there are times we must remain silent. Why should we remain silent? Maybe, there is someone else who is going through the same thing, who is waiting for the full manifestation of their healing, who could be made to feel unworthy? We have to be sensitive to other's feelings and recognize they could become discouraged. When we do share our testimony, we must be sure to give all the glory to God.</p>		

Level 2_Q2 Authority & Persecution

In Matthew 10:1 Jesus gives the disciples authority & power over unclean spirits, so they could cast them out, and he gave them that same authority & power over sickness and disease, so that they could heal the sick. In this moment, Jesus is transferring His own authority and power over evil spirits and disease to his disciples so that they may carry on with the Jesus' work after He leaves them. But, first, they must begin to exercise the authority he has transferred to them while he is still with them. They still have much to learn, and he still must mentor them a little while longer. But, ultimately, I believe he is preparing them for a future without him by their side.

I find it interesting that it is authority and power over unclean spirits, that Jesus gives them first. It makes sense! We know that Satan has power to bring disease, pestilence, infirmities, and even death, but he does not have authority. Jesus needs the disciples to realize they have authority over evil spirits so they won't be intimidated by someone who is possessed. I would think that casting out demonic, unclean spirits would be the most unnerving deeds they were charged with. Also, if unclean spirits are the cause of disease and sickness, you would want to cast them out first, before healing the sickness, because the unclean spirits could come back and the sickness return. I think of "Legion"! Jesus had to cast the Legion out of the boy before he could heal his body, mind, and spirit.

How should we view persecutions?	How should we respond to persecutions?
<p>Those who persecute us are like wolves.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wolves – from leukos – white ▪ Hmm? Those who appear to be good? White as snow? <p>"For a testimony"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An opportunity to share our testimony <p>"For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An opportunity for Our Defender to step in and speak for us. 	<p>"Be wise like serpents and harmless as doves."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wise – cautious; discreet, practical; Harmless-unmixed; unmingled; Do not get mixed up with wolves! <p>"Take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ When we stand accused or condemned in the courts for our faith, we are to remain silent and let God speak for us. He will give us the words. <p>Allow the Holy Spirit to defend us!</p>

“. . . brother shall deliver up brother, father the child; children will rise up against parents. . . And, we ye shall be hated

- Persecution may come from our brothers, children, family and others in the spiritual Household of faith.

“Fear them not; for there is nothing covering that shall not be revealed”

- It is for God to decide when their lies will be uncovered and brought to light; He is our Defender. Again, we are not to try to defend ourselves.

“Fear not them which kill the body”

- Those who persecute us cannot harm our spirits or innermost being.

“he that endureth to the end shall be saved.”

- Stay under the covering of God; abide in God’s presence; have fortitude; persevere; bear the trials.

“When they persecute you in this city, flee to another”

- Shun those who persecute you; move on; don’t stick around to try to convince/persuade them to follow Jesus.

“What I tell you in darkness, speak ye in light; and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops.”

- Continue to speak The Truth
- Stand upon The Word
- Continue to Praise the Lord; for the Lord inhabits the praises of His people.

“Fear him which is able to destroy both the soul and body in hell.”

- We are to Fear God not man!
- Continue to give reverence to God.

“Ye are of more value than many sparrows!”

- Remember our worth! We are valued by God!

“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.”

- Pray!
- Ask for God’s help!
- Jesus is our High Priest!

What I Would Say To New Believers

Jesus did not say that we would not suffer; he said most assuredly we would. He even said we are to rejoice in suffering and when others persecute us, because He can use it to grow us in our Faith. In the end, He will turn it for good. Each of us will go through trials, tribulations, and suffer for our faith, but we are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, that Author and Defender of our faith. When we are persecuted or suffer at the hands of another, we are to pray and ask God for help, and Jesus who is our High Priest will intercede on our behalf. It is not our place to defend ourselves, for that title belongs to God. He is our Defender! Don't take the bait! Don't get defensive! Sometimes, you simply need to, "Be still" and walk away. When you must speak, check with the Spirit before you open your mouth. Watch what you say! Let the Holy Spirit lead you and tell you what to say. Keep watch over the Word so you are prepared for these times. Keep the Word hidden in Your heart so that you can pull from it when you need to. Praise and Worship God even when others persecute you. Let them know that you will not be moved, cannot be moved.

I have no doubt that God is using our current suffering to bring people to Himself. No doubt that there are people who are tuning into our broadcasts and live streams, seeking comfort, peace, hope and a way through this ordeal. People are afraid; they have lost their livelihoods, they risk losing their homes, and they even may become sick or know someone who contracted this Corona Virus and is suffering greatly. They may have even experienced the death of a loved one. They need to hear God's message of hope! I believe when this virus has lifted, and people begin to hear of the miracles God performed to save His Children, the World is going to want to know from where our hope comes.

Today, Pastor spoke of this time as being a time for God to raise up Warriors. Warriors stay focused, carry out their mission unswervingly, and they do not display their own suffering. We have to be God's warriors right now. We may become sick, and that will be obvious, but it will be how we speak about that sickness that will encourage the World. We must acknowledge the suffering, but we don't have to walk as if it will last a lifetime. It is not our destiny; it is merely a moment in time.

Personal Encounter with Persecution

Oh, boy! This one is hard for even my fellow Christians to understand. I haven't shared this story in many years. When I have spoken of this experience, to this day I get strange looks and I can tell it makes my fellow Christians very uncomfortable. But, here goes!

Many years ago, a friend (non-believer) came to me with some horrible news. The night before he had been arrested and charged with a horrible crime. It was by far the worst crime that any teacher could possibly commit. This friend had risked much to come to me and tell me about what he had done. His story would hit the news that evening. He revealed just enough that if it had not been for The Holy Spirit speaking to me, I would have made him leave, shut the door on him, and never look back. But, that was not God's plan. His plan involved redeeming this man! And, to do so God would use me. This man needed God's grace and mercy! He needed forgiveness! He needed redemption and a second chance. He needed new life!

When this story hit the news, my phone started to ring off the hook. Colleagues wanted to know if I had heard anything or talked with our friend. But, it wasn't the only reason they called. The majority simply wanted to gossip and be in the loop, and like the game "Telephone", pass the news along with falsities and twists that made the story even more juicy. That was the World's response. It didn't take them long to figure out that I would stay in close contact with my friend and that I would remain by his side throughout whatever would come his way. My colleagues, several who were Believers, relentlessly tried to convince me to distance myself from my friend – not associate with him in any way. When I did not yield, they started talking about me. They started to look at me and wondering about my character. I was not acting as the World would act. I did not reject my friend as they did. I did not run for the hills and hide to protect my character. I just kept focused on my marching orders. This was even hard for my fellow Brothers and Sisters in Christ to stomach. I was most definitely abandoned and judged. They could not understand how God could possibly ask anyone to support someone who had committed what the World considers to be an unpardonable crime with no chance of redemption. But, I did not listen! I kept Jesus before me! Jesus, upon the cross, forgiving the criminal!

This was not a short walk, either. I stood next to my friend, his mother and his father, as he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to jail for 40 days shock-probation. I visited him in jail each week, and endured humiliation. I ministered to his mother and comforted her when she called to check on her son. When my friend was released, he became suicidal. He had lost everything that gave him worth and made him human...he had lost two professional licenses, one which was understandable, but the other I could not even comprehend why it would be taken from him. He was shunned and cast out, as if he was nothing more than a dog. His neighbors turned their back on him and even committed crimes against him, but there was nothing he could do to make them stop. During one such crime, his house could have been set on fire, but he got to the firecrackers that had been set off on his deck in time. His life had been one rich with experiences, travel, activity, sports and interactions with all people from all walks of life...All that was lost. Other than myself, one other friend who had been his best friend since childhood, his mother and his counselor, he had no one. I was the only one who lived close by, however. Every day on my way home from work, I stopped by his house, not knowing if he would be dead or alive. Once, when I had gotten word that he may be attempting suicide at that very moment, I called and got no answer. I threatened that if he did not call me back immediately, I would call the police. Well, he called back and blasted me with anger that I would dare to interfere with his choice to take his life. For two years I endured the waves of his depression, anger, and hopelessness.

In my work place, I spent a lot of time in silence. Colleagues stopped inquiring about this person they once called friend and I was excluded from many events, because they didn't want to be reminded of what had happened. They were "nice" to me, but our friendships, even to this day, have never really been the same. But, that's ok!

In time, I saw my friend's heart begin to turn. The first sign was when he told me about one of his suicide attempts gone wrong. God had hindered his plans to take his life, by causing a malfunction of the instrument that would have been used to take his life. And, there was nothing he could do to fix it! He told me, "Well, there must be a god, and He must have a plan for my life!" Baby steps! I

witnessed my friend express deep, deep sorrow for what he had done and all that he had attempted to do. I listened to him read the heartfelt journal entries that his counselor had him working on as part of his therapy. I listened for hours upon end as he shared what he was learning. I watched God change him. And, I watched God heal his heart and his mind. I watched as God redeemed his life. I walked with him far enough to know that God had him in his hands and would take him the rest of the way. His life has been restored! God has given back to him everything that he held dear. He learned that his life could go on without old friends and old experiences. God has relocated him, given him a new career that has great meaning and purpose, making a difference in the lives of other people; He has new friends who support him as he gives to them. He is back to doing the things that he loved doing outside of his career.

I stayed in touch with my friend for another 3 years, maybe? Then, God said it was time to let go and move on to the next thing He had planned for me. My friend and I slowly fell out of touch, but that was okay. I knew my friend was "running" and God would be there for him the rest of the way. It was time for me to step aside, and let God work.

It may seem odd for me to say, but I would not have traded this experience for anything. I grew so much in my faith. I was stretched so much at times that it hurt and drove me to tears, pleading for release. But, it was in those times, that I leaned into God and I could never trade the closeness I felt to Him for the World. He helped me get back up and press forward to endure another day, another week, another month, and even another year.

Since then God has tasked me to do many other great things for him that seem strange to the World and yes, even my Family in Christ. Each and every experience has been unique and much different from this first time that I did something I considered to be pretty big, even impossible, for God. I could not have done it without Christ. I know that! Through this experience and others like it, I have come to know my utter reliance and dependency upon God. I have come to know my higher calling and I'm always waiting eagerly for the next time God gives me something to do. I made the "mistake" once and expressed in prayer that I wanted to do great things for God. Well, wouldn't you know it...He heard me! And, He reminds me all the time that I can't take it back! LOL

I was not a member of ALCC at the time of this experience, so I did not fully know about the gifts of the Spirit. I now have a greater understanding of who God has called me to be. I am thankful for the gift of Mercy that He has placed in my heart. I know I have a responsibility to develop this gift and use it to build God's Kingdom, so that God will get all the glory, when others see the lives He has transformed. For He is capable of transforming the worst of society, if only His people will show them the love of Christ which is unconditional. And, this is truly where my joy comes from! I rejoice in being, "God's Own Fool!"



April 5, 2020

Parables of the Hidden Kingdom

Scripture Passage	What do you think is the specific need, question, problem, or situation Jesus is addressing?	What do you think is the spiritual meaning of the story?
<p>Parable of the Sower and the types of Soil (13:3-9; 18-23)</p>	<p>Farmers relied on good crops, an abundance of crops so that they would have enough produce to sell so they could pay their taxes to Caesar and have enough to trade and to feed their families. Their economic success depended on the bounty of their crops which meant they had to take measures to ensure the soil of their fields remained fertile. In the natural Jesus was appealing to their need of that which would sustain their very lives and allow them to prosper and grow with the changing economy.</p>	<p>Jesus is speaking to the condition of men's hearts. He is the sower who has come to plant His Kingdom Seed in our hearts. But the Kingdom of God can only grow in hearts that are open to hearing the message of the Kingdom and letting it take root in their hearts so it can grow. The Kingdom of God cannot grow in hearts of stone. That is why Jesus came to change our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. Like prosperous farmers we must watch over the Word that has been planted in our hearts. True prosperity is a condition of the heart. Our very lives depend on making sure the Word is planted deep in our hearts where it cannot be devoured by the Enemy (the birds). We must continue to water it and nourish it with The Word so it will take root and become a faith so deeply rooted that it cannot be swayed or moved by the cares and troubles of this world. Living our lives for the Kingdom involves hard work and requires that we keep constant watch over the seed God has planted in our hearts. We cannot become complacent, but must act on the Word.</p>

<p>Parable of the Tares (13:24-30; 36 – 43)</p>	<p>What should our response be to those who come against us and try to steal from us? Those who do not want to see us prosper? Those who deliberately try to interfere with our success? Those who have set themselves against us as an enemy?</p>	<p>I think Jesus is now addressing the people who have the Kingdom of God planted deeply in their hearts; who have heard the Word and believed what it said; who have accepted the Lord as their Savior.</p> <p>After we have accepted Jesus as Lord of our lives, others will come against us. Because they do not understand our faith, they will mock us. Because they do not understand our joy, they will do things that will cause us pain and grief. While we try to do what we know is good and right, there will be others who do what is wrong.</p> <p>Just as the tares “look” like wheat, there will be people who appear to be Believers, but who the Enemy has planted to deceive us. We must be the wiser than he and allow God to guide us and show us the best strategy to defeat the Enemy.</p> <p>In this life, we must co-exist with those who do not believe in Jesus. Until Jesus comes again, we will always be engaged in some kind of spiritual warfare. But, we are called to endure and be patient; steadfast in our pursuit of righteousness, standing strong in our faith.</p>
<p>Parable of the Mustard Seed, (13:31-32)</p>	<p>A feeling of inadequacy and insignificance; doubt that people of humble means could possibly do or obtain great things, or ever be seen as someone of greater stature or worth. Oppression by religious leaders and the wealthy who judge the farmers as less than they and boast of their greatness and great understanding of God and His ways. Poverty-mindset? Not seeing their potential.</p>	<p>God loves the farmer and fisherman, the woodsman, and the shepherds just as much as anyone else. In His eyes, everyone is significant and accepted as long as they’ve put their faith in Jesus. He can use someone who is humble in their faith, “poor in spirit”, more so than He can someone who boasts in their own greatness. If we place our faith and trust in Jesus, no matter how insignificant others think we are, we can do great things for the Kingdom.</p>

		Those who think highly of themselves and are religious will not be found in the Kingdom of God. Instead, those who are humble and "poor in spirit" will inherit the Kingdom of God.
Parable of the Leaven (13:33)	<p>Generosity; Sharing in our abundance; love of others, not just of ourselves; earnestly care about others. (NOT a poverty mindset)</p> <p>Leaven, from "zeo" – boil over; be fervid; earnest</p> <p>Earnest – a sign or promise of what is to come</p>	<p>The Kingdom of God is meant to be shared with others. Our faith should give rise to a love for others that is overflowing; that which desires others might come to know Jesus as Lord, as well.</p> <p>The Kingdom of God is greater than anything we could ever expect or hope for. It is promised to all those who earnestly seek to know the Lord and come to Him with expectant hope that what God has promised them is true.</p>
Parable of the Hidden Treasure (13:44)	<p>What do we find most valuable? What is our most prized possession? What is its worth?</p> <p>The value of earthly treasures and earthly wealth.</p> <p>Desire for wealth and riches.</p>	<p>The Kingdom of Heaven is far more valuable than gold and silver.</p> <p>Our desire to follow Jesus must far exceed our desire for earthly treasures. We must be willing to give up all that we have to follow him.</p> <p>Jesus is the treasure from Heaven. Treasure in a field is hard to find, but once you find it, you won't have need of anything else. Those who find Jesus, will have need of nothing else.</p>
Parable of the Merchant Seeking Pearls (13: 45-46)	<p>The desire for quick gain and reward; instant wealth, as if wealth was the answer to all their problems.</p> <p>The great lengths we will go to obtain riches and wealth.</p>	<p>Jesus is the Answer! He is the pearl of great price. We must be willing to give everything to follow Him.</p> <p>We must seek after the things of the Kingdom and dedicate our lives to following Jesus. Pearls take years to form, and we must be earnestly committed to allowing Jesus to establish and grow His Kingdom in our hearts until that day when we enter the Kingdom of God which is in Heaven.</p> <p>We must be faithful to the end!</p>

<p>Parable of the Large Fishing Net/Dragnet (13:47-50)</p>	<p>Need for discernment between what is right and wrong; Good versus evil.</p> <p>Condition of the Heart.</p> <p>Intentions and Motivations</p> <p>Who will we listen to?</p> <p>What is it that is feeding our souls?</p> <p>What is bringing nourishment to our bodies?</p>	<p>There will be some who look like they are following Jesus, but there is no room in Heaven for those who are religious and whose ears have been closed to the Truth. There is certainly no room for evil.</p> <p>God sees the heart of man and knows who has truly loved His Son.</p> <p>Jesus is the source of our spiritual nourishment.</p> <p>Jesus knows the difference between those God has placed in His hands and those who belong to The Enemy.</p> <p>Only those God has chosen will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.</p>
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Development of the Disciples

Scripture	How do the disciples act as examples of what behaviors and attitudes we should follow or avoid? How do they address Jesus? What do I learn about being a follower of Jesus?
<p>Call of the 1st Disciples (Matthew 4:18-22)</p>	<p>Following Jesus requires sacrifice; we must be willing to leave everything behind if that is what is required. When we are young in our faith, we may have parents who guide us, but at some point we have to start walking out our faith without them. We need to mature to a point where we can discern the voice of the Holy Spirit and act on what He says without hesitation. Jesus is our Shepherd, and we should know His voice, just as the first four disciples he called didn't even question who He was and seemed to just know it was the right thing to follow him. Following Jesus requires that we go, "All in!" Additionally, we may not know exactly why Jesus asks us to do something or even where he is taking us, but we just have to trust Him to reveal His plan in His timing. Following Jesus requires that we exercise our faith!</p>
<p>Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7)</p>	<p>Just as the Disciples came to Jesus and sat listening to His teachings, we must spend time in God's presence and read the Word or listen to the Word being taught. Sometimes we simply need to, "Be Still!" and let the Holy Spirit talk to us. We must have those times when we focus solely on God, free from distraction. The Disciples recognized the value in Jesus' teachings. Though he chose them, they also chose Him to be their teacher when they accepted that invitation. As Pastor says, like the disciples we must find the shepherd that makes us go, "Baa!"</p> <p>As followers of Christ we need still to obey the Laws of the Old Testament, but also practice the grace and mercy of God. We should be humble in word, deed and prayer so that God will receive all the glory. There will be times when we should fast, but our fasting should be done in secret. We should love those who have wronged us and even pray for them. We should pray without ceasing. We must continually study and meditate on the Word, so that it is hidden in our hearts. Only when we remain "salted" with the Word so we can continue to grow and be better used of God. We are the light of the World and we should do good works in such a way that shines the light on God and His goodness, so He gets all the glory.</p>
<p>Would be Disciples (Matthew 8:18-22)</p>	<p>Like the Scribe we have to be careful not to make empty promises we can't keep or won't keep when the going gets tough. Jesus' response to the disciple who wanted to go bury his father, was one I've always thought rather harsh. But, I think I may have just understood this very moment why Jesus responded the way he did. I always thought, "Wow! His father just died and Jesus won't let him go be with his family to bury him?" Now I am thinking that this disciple's father had</p>

	<p>not yet died, but perhaps he didn't want to follow Jesus until that time when his father did pass and he would inherit his father's rights? Or, maybe Jesus was referring to a condition of his father's heart. . . that his father chose not to follow Jesus, so the disciple needed to make a choice between his father & worldly ways or Jesus & His Ways. This causes me to stop and think about my own family members who are not walking in the ways of Christ. I sometimes spend so much time guiding them, teaching them, correcting them, making sure they get to church, and are listening to the right music, reading their Bibles...that I neglect my own time with God.</p>
<p>Stilling the Storm (Matthew 8: 23-27)</p>	<p>First of all, we need to keep things in perspective. When we face any "storm" in life, we need to remember all the times and ways in the past that God has brought us through difficult things. He is always faithful! We should first and foremost pray and see if we can find an answer in the Scripture. We need to claim the promises of God. We have an advantage over the Disciples at this point in the story. Jesus doesn't give them authority until Chapter 10; we have been given the authority to speak to the "storms" and command there to be peace. When we face storms in life, we must not let the Enemy still our peace. We must speak peace over our circumstances and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. I've always looked at it this way – Jesus is in the boat with me, and I know God ain't gonna let anything happen to him! LOL</p>
<p>Call of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13)</p>	<p>Either the disciples didn't have much to say OR Jesus answered the Pharisees before they could. Either way there is something to be learned. There will be times that we should remain silent and recognize when we are being baited. We shouldn't get caught up in gossip and hear say. . . when someone asks us something about someone else, we should point them to that person who can speak for himself. On the other hand, this may be a picture of how we should be ready to give an answer? Let the Word and our actions speak for themselves? At the least, this simply speaks to the fact that all are welcomed who make a decision to follow Christ, no matter where they started in life. God considers only the heart of the man!</p>
<p>Commissioning of the Twelve (Matthew 10)</p>	<p>To be a Disciple of Jesus comes with a great price. We will be persecuted, mocked, rejected and hated. Being a Disciple does not mean we will not suffer or struggle in life. We will still go through hard things, challenging things. . . everyone does! We cannot know what all these things will be, but we can rest in knowing that God does. We must trust that God will provide for all our needs and see us through all things. Despite our circumstances or the people that may come against us, we must stand firm in our faith. We must press into God and endure the trials with patience. Our desire to please the Lord should far outweigh our desire to please man.</p>

<p>Family of God (Matthew 12: 46-50)</p>	<p>Those who follow Jesus have been called to a Household of Faith. Together we are Sisters and Brothers in Christ. As such, we should love each other with the same love that we have for our mother, father, sister and brother. Just as we would help our mother, father or siblings in a time of need, we should be there for each other. . .lifting each other up in prayer, providing for each other in time of need, encouraging one another, listening to one another, building our friendships by spending time with one another, etc.</p>
<p>Reason for Parables (Matthew 13:10-11; 13:36)</p>	<p>God has hidden truths in His Word that only the True Believer can understand. Understanding comes as the Holy Spirit guides us into Truth as we read the Word and meditate upon it. It is a good thing to pray for the Holy Spirit to show us what it is that God wants us to see before we begin to read. The Parables could only be understood by those whose hearts had already begun to change and grow more like Jesus than like the World.</p>
<p>Feeding of the 5.000 (Matthew 14: 12 – 21)</p>	<p>God sometimes will lead us into desert places, so He can have our full attention. In the desert places, we have no choice but to seek God and rely on Him to “feed” us, in whatever way we most need. It is in the desert places that we need to draw strength from The Word, and stand on the Promises of God. It is in the desert places that we need to pray for those things that are not as if they are so. When all else is stripped away and there is nothing to distract us (like right now) we need to take advantage of the time we’ve been given to build up our faith by drawing close to God and His Word. We need to water the “dry places” with the Word and let the Holy Spirit refresh us and strengthen us.</p>
<p>Jesus Walks on Water (Matthew 14: 22-33)</p>	<p>Why would Jesus lead the disciples into a storm that He obviously knew would come upon them? What I learned from this story is that sometimes God will allow us to go through storms in order that we might have an opportunity to exercise our faith. When we exercise our faith, our faith grows stronger, and are ready to stand against other storms that are sure to arise further on our journey. When we are in a “storm” we must keep our eyes on Jesus. We must trust in God, the One who “trod on the back of the sea”; “passed through surging waters but left no footprints”; and even Whose “steeds tread the sea.” I will never read this story the same way again!</p>