

**CREEKSIDE**

# **TWELVE**

**- PART ONE -**



# PART ONE

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# Question 01:

## DO YOU NEED ME?

Two thousand years ago, strange events signaled the arrival of an intriguing figure to the world of Israel. There were stories of prophecies being fulfilled even before this new Rabbi was born, and after a 400 year “famine” of not hearing the Word of Yahweh, a prophet named John the Baptist began proclaiming a message from Yahweh: It’s time to repent and prepare, God is returning to his people to lead them into something new.

As our story begins, we will find John the Baptist, and then Jesus himself, asking Israel if they are ready for what God is about to do. As we will see, God did something amazing through Jesus in the first century. For Israel, everything Jesus did was played out right in front of their eyes. They were either prepared and watching or they weren’t. God was inviting them into what he was doing through Jesus, so he spoke through Jesus and John with a warning and an invitation. John compares Israel to a dead tree that was on the verge of being chopped down. Their need was urgent: either be reborn with new life, or be chopped down.

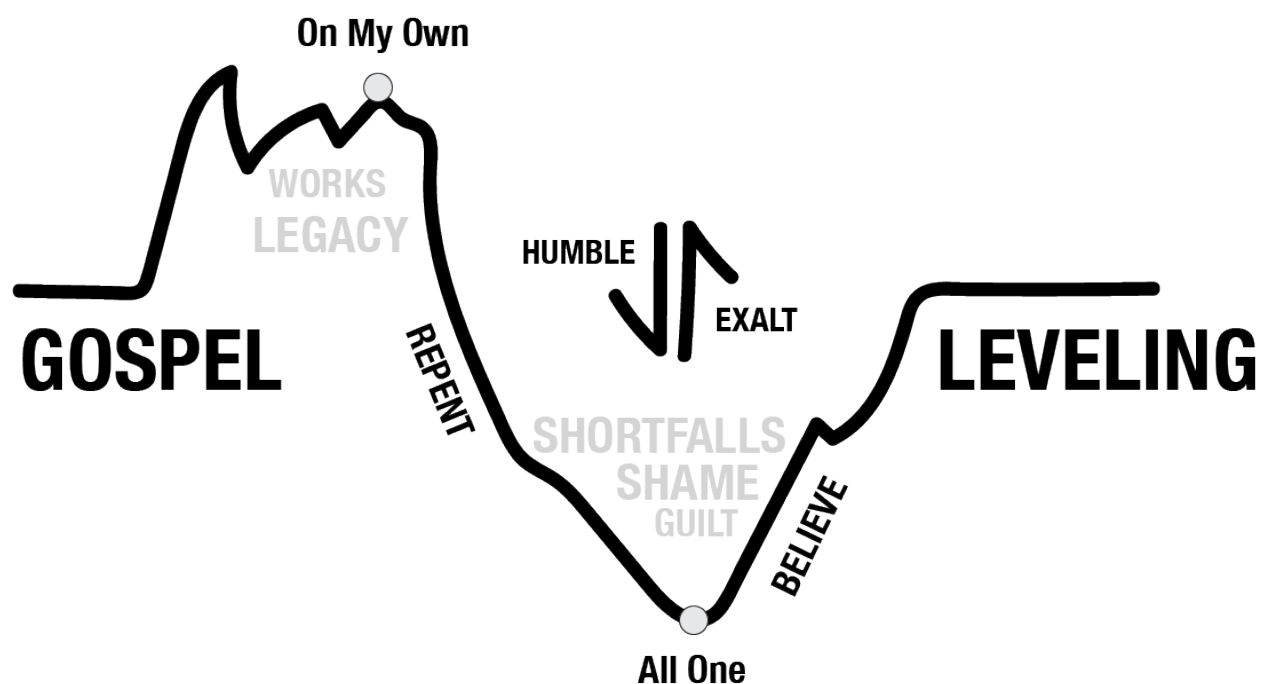
In essence, Jesus arrived on earth with an all-important question: Do you realize your need for me?

Though the specific events we will examine happened millennia ago, that question still stands for us today. Are you ready for what God is about to do? Another way of asking this as we approach this study with Jesus is this: Do you *need* Jesus? You could treat this study as an

academic exercise, evaluating what Jesus said and did without ever asking this first and foundational question: Do I need him? In our first few sessions, this is the question you'll be reflecting on.

## Tool

For each section, we will give you a tool to help you process what is happening in the life of Jesus. Our first tool is called the Leveling. In the second session, you'll follow John the Baptist as he announces a "leveling" that will take place in preparation for the coming of God's Messiah. The hills will be brought low and the valleys lifted up. Anyone who is proud or exalted will be lowered and anyone who is humbled will be raised. We could visualize this principle like this:



The straight line represents the Gospel: the Good News that life can be found in Jesus (alone). This Gospel brings a leveling because it simultaneously declares that a person is not exalted through their own efforts or accomplishments and that a person is forgiven and renewed only through God's grace. Any time we move ourselves above the line (feeling pride in our own

accomplishments) or below the line (feeling the shame of our failures), the Gospel pulls us back to that steady, level path.

As an example of how this dynamic plays out, Jesus tells a story (which we will explore later) about a religious leader and a tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). The religious leader, a Pharisee, stands proudly on the street corner and publically thanks God for his high moral and social standing. The tax collector, by contrast, falls on his knees and begs God to have mercy on him for his moral failings. Both of these men need to participate in the leveling of the Gospel.

The Pharisee has moved above the level path of the Gospel and needs to engage in repentance. He believes that he can stand before God on the basis of his accomplishments, but the Gospel calls him to acknowledge his need for God. In reality, he needs to pray the prayer of the tax collector by pleading for God's mercy. The tax collector sees his need for God, so he confesses his sin and acknowledges his need for God. Through this confession, the tax collector has moved below the level path of the Gospel. He is right to lower himself in this way, but the Gospel then comes to him and raises him up by calling him to believe. He must believe that his failings will not keep him from God. The Gospel proclaims the Good News that God is enough, that receiving God's mercy is all he needs to be brought back onto the level path.

The Leveling tool helps us visualize a process we must constantly embrace. When we find ourselves moving above the level path of the Gospel by trying to stand on our own accomplishments, the Gospel pulls us down. In these moments, we must pause and confess, repenting of our pride and begging God for mercy. As we do, we are brought low, and we need then to believe the Good News that God is enough: that his mercy pulls us back onto the level path of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

As you read these first few stories about what God was doing to prepare—for Jesus and *through* Jesus—be watching for how the Leveling shows up in the stories. Who is engaging in this process? How so? And even as we evaluate the people in the stories, we should watch for

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<sup>1</sup> Another helpful way of exploring this concept is through Mike Breen's concept of the Circle, which he explains in chapter 6 of *Building a Discipling Culture*, Pawleys Island: 3DM, 2011.

ways in which the concept of Leveling can help us to better prepare for and engage with Jesus today.

## **Experience**

For each section, we will also invite you into an experience. If our year with Jesus remains purely intellectual, we are not truly engaging with the Messiah, who calls us to *follow* him, not just *think about* him.

This month, our experience will focus on seeing our need for Jesus by examining the context of the story. This will take two forms: the context of Jesus' story and the context of your story.

### *(1) Read through the Gospel of Mark*

At some point in the next four weeks, read through the Gospel of Mark *in a single day*. This may sound daunting, but it takes most readers only a few hours. It does mean that you'll need to set aside—i.e., sacrifice—a significant chunk of your personal time, but the process is hugely beneficial. Most people have only read the story about Jesus in small chunks, a bit at a time. But reading the story as a whole changes the way you perceive the individual parts. We're choosing the Gospel of Mark because it's the shortest of the four Gospels, and it's also written for a non-Jewish audience, which makes it an easier entry point for most modern readers. As you read through this compelling story (Mark is a fast-paced, enthusiastic storyteller), ask how Mark's presentation of Jesus sets the context for the story.

### *(2) Tell your own story with Jesus*

At some point during the next four weeks, you'll be asked to briefly share your story with your TWELVE group. This doesn't need to be a dramatic, eloquent speech. You'll simply spend five minutes explaining what your experience with Jesus has been thus far. Not only will this help you get to know the other members of your group better, it will also help you account for your own context as you approach the story of Jesus.



# WHAT IS YOUR STORY?

## 01 Context

### Concept

The purpose of this study is to spend time with Jesus. There are many noble activities that could keep you busy. But more than anything, Christianity is about Jesus. Life is about Jesus. Life is found in Jesus. Nothing matters more than being close to him, understanding who he is and how he thinks and acts.

To bring us into a meaningful encounter with Jesus, God has given us four different Gospels. Gospel means “good news,” so each of these four books puts us face to face with the good news of what God has done through Jesus. In spending this year with Jesus, we will be traveling through these Gospels.

Each Gospel writer was writing for a different purpose at a specific moment in time to communicate something unique about Jesus. There is great value in sitting with Jesus in each Gospel, soaking in the specific emphases of that writer and seeing Jesus from that unique perspective. But in this study, we are going to place the four side by side (by side by side) to encounter Jesus from multiple angles. As we do this, however, we need to keep an eye on the purpose and context of each Gospel writer. So this first session will give a brief orientation to each Gospel so that we have a frame of reference for what each writer wants to emphasize.

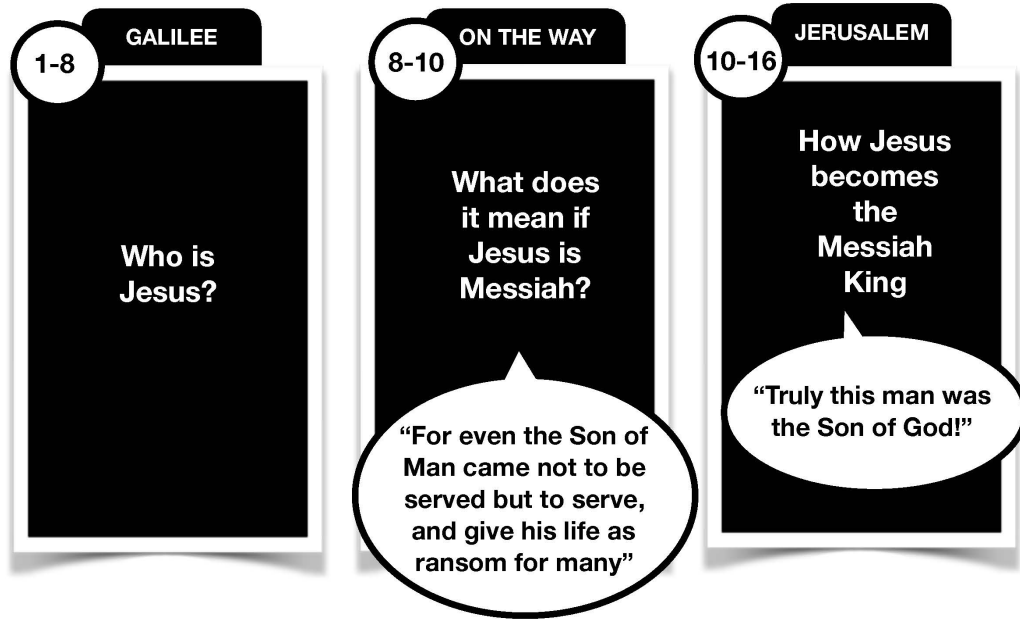
This session will be somewhat different than the sessions that follow. Read through the summaries below, then take some time to work through the questions at the end of the session.

### Key Question

What is your perspective of Jesus? What is your story with Jesus?

# MARK

**“The good news about Jesus Christ, Son of God” - Mark 1:1**

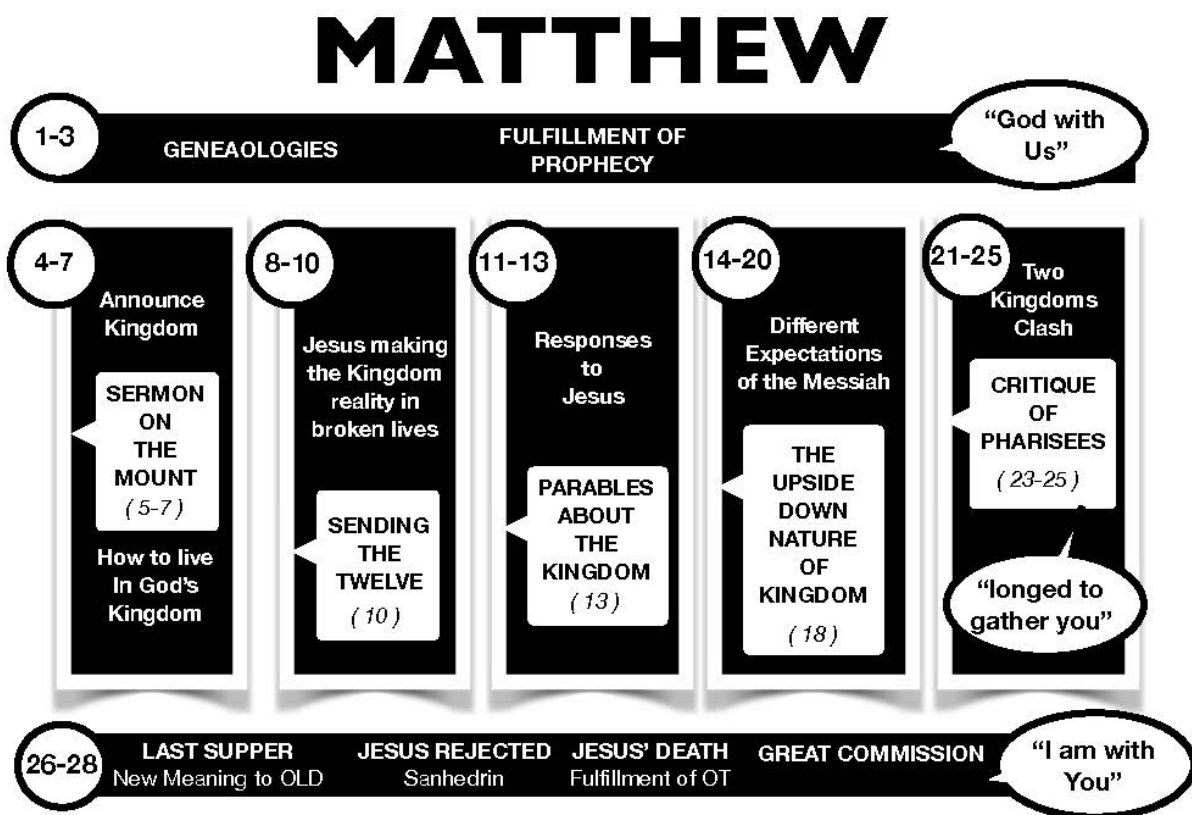


Mark presents us with a big question: Who is Jesus? He explores this question by allowing his readers to follow Jesus on his journey from Galilee, where his ministry begins, to Jerusalem, where he will be tried and executed. As the story unfolds, the disciples learn more and more about who Jesus is, and we share in their realizations. At the end of each stage in the journey, we encounter people who are afraid and confused. They're left wrestling with who Jesus truly is.

The culminating revelation in Mark comes when Jesus says that he came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life (10:45). Mark is showing us that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah (or “Christ”), the true King. And how does he become King? Paradoxically, it's through his crucifixion. Even as the Roman Empire asserts its dominance by publically humiliating Jesus and proving that he has no power by putting him to death, Jesus' self-sacrificing death and his subsequent resurrection reveal him to be the conqueror of death and therefore the true King—of Israel and of the whole world. In Mark, this realization comes from the lips, not of one

Jesus' faithful followers, but of a Roman centurion: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (15:39).

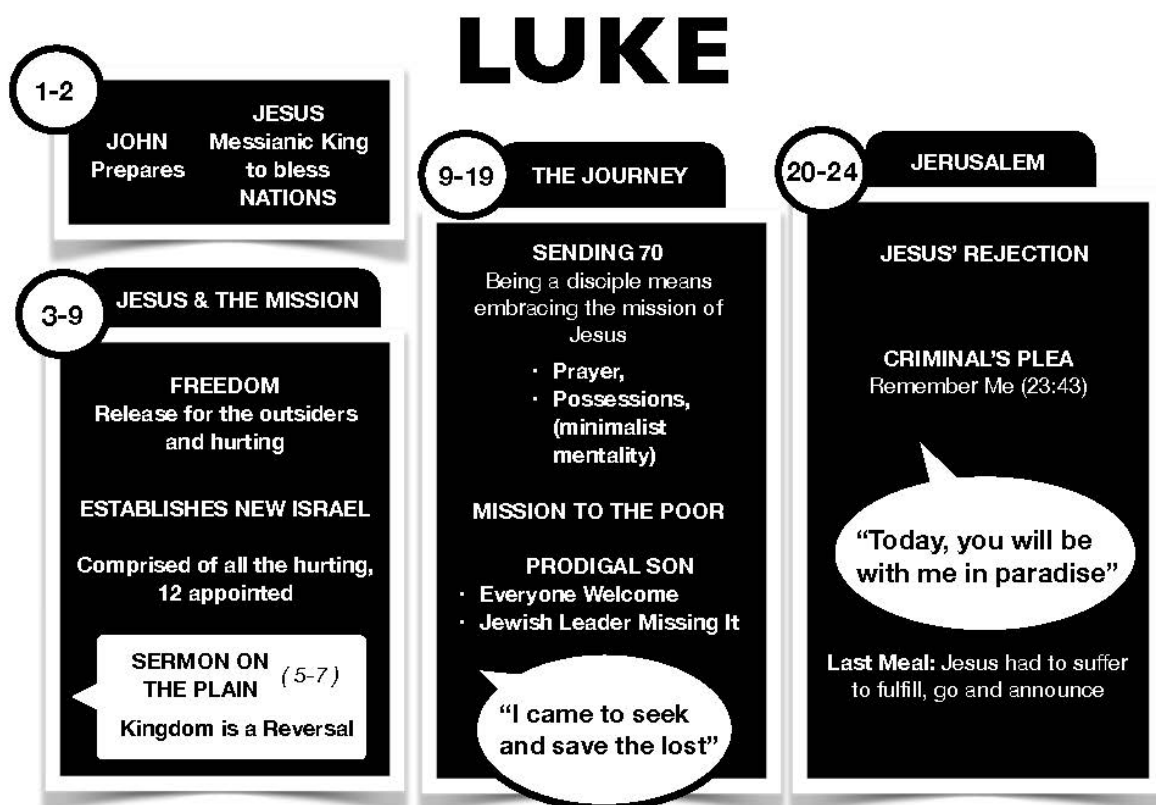
As we read through the book of Mark, he constantly pushes us to wrestle with the question of who Jesus is. Mark makes us face our confusion and fear and to decide for ourselves who Jesus is.



Matthew writes as a devout Jew, explaining to worshipers of Yahweh that in Jesus, Yahweh was acting decisively to fulfill everything he had promised to Israel in the Old Testament. Matthew shows that Jesus was *Immanuel*—not just another teacher or even another prophet, but actually *God with us* (the literal meaning of "Immanuel"). The problem from the beginning has been that through sinful rebellion, people are far from God. But here we see God coming near in the person of Jesus.

Throughout Matthew's gospel, we see two kingdoms colliding. One is the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus teaches about, embodies, and inaugurates as the story unfolds. The other is the kingdom of this world. Surprisingly, the worldly kingdom that stands in opposition to Yahweh consists not just of evil outsiders (such as the Roman Empire) but of Israel's own leaders, specifically the Pharisees and Sadducees. They have co-opted the language and forms of religion to promote themselves and preserve the boundaries of who belongs in the "righteous" crowd. But Jesus turns this on its head and shows that God is not with those who assert their own righteousness.

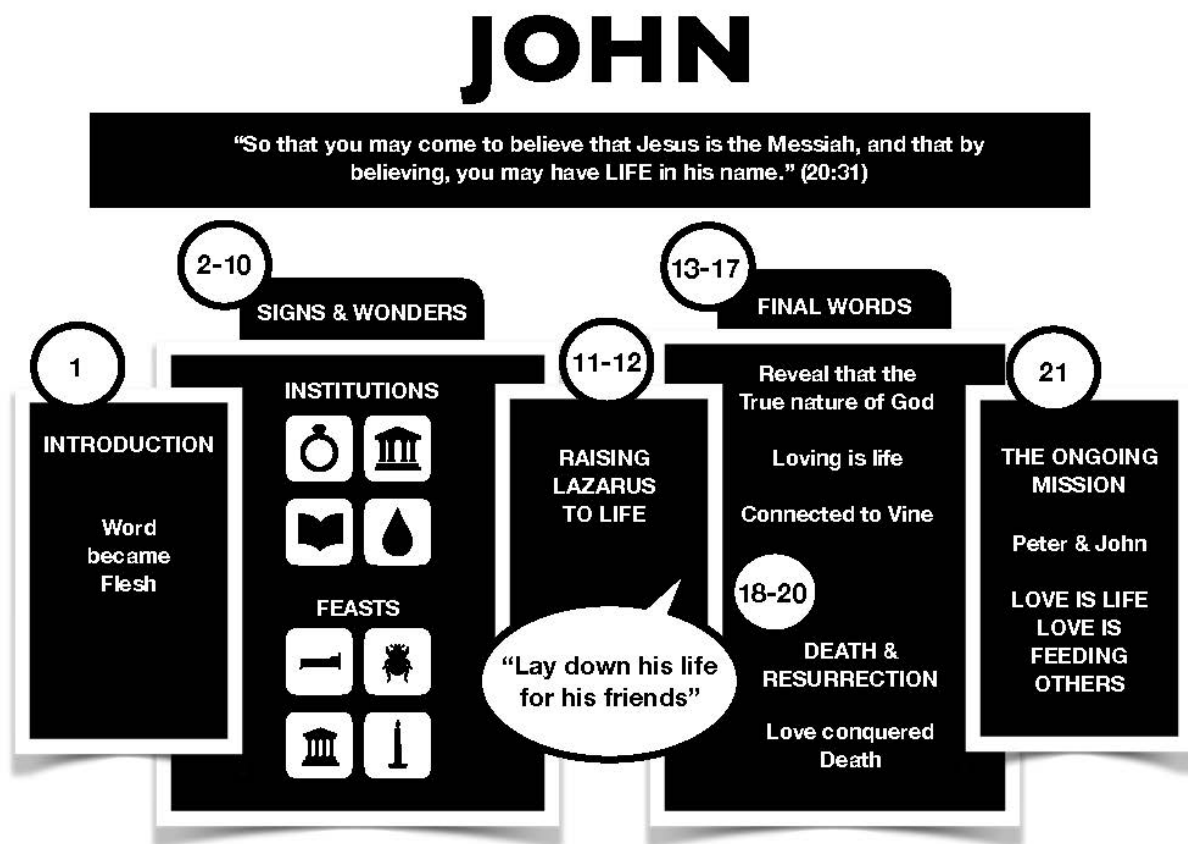
In Matthew, we see that God is with us in Jesus (Immanuel), that he is working to draw his people near to himself (23:27), and that he remains with us as he sends us out to preach and embody his kingdom (28:20).



In his gospel, Luke recounts Jesus' life and teaching with a focus on what it means for all nations. Whereas the Jewish religious leaders were focused on their heritage as God's people,

Luke shows Jesus consistently proclaiming freedom to the outsiders and those who are hurting. The kingdom that Jesus preaches is an upside-down kingdom. In fact, Luke portrays Jesus as establishing a new Israel. Israel had twelve tribes, and now Jesus is at work, preaching a new kingdom with the twelve followers he has chosen.

Luke emphasizes the reality that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (19:10). Everyone is welcome, and Jesus is constantly pursuing those who are not yet “at the table.” The kingdom belongs to them. According to Luke, a disciple is someone who will go anywhere that Jesus goes. Following Jesus means being on a journey. It means joining a mission to all nations.



John is the most unique of the four Gospels because he takes a different approach. The other three Gospels are known as the “Synoptics” because their perspective on Jesus is similar. John presents the same Jesus, but with a different emphasis and many stories not included in the other Gospels. John explains that he writes so that we will experience the life that is

available through Jesus (20:31). He includes several “I am” statements, in which Jesus declares his true identity, even revealing himself to be Yahweh, the great “I AM.”

As we see Jesus with increasing clarity, we are left to respond. Do we believe Jesus is who he says he is? Are we ready to take hold of the life that is offered to us in Jesus? John frequently shows Jesus breathing life into what was dead. To be a follower of Jesus is to experience life.

### **Reflection on the Gospels**

1. *Why do you think God would choose to give us four different perspectives on the life of Jesus? Why not give one full account?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. *How would you briefly summarize the approach of each Gospel writer? In a couple of sentences, what makes each Gospel unique?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. *Acknowledging that we are just beginning this study, which Gospel approach is most intriguing to you at this point? Why do you say that?*

## Reflection on Your Context

Now that we've examined the context of each of the four Gospels, we have to address one other contextual element: You also come to the Bible with a specific context, and that colors the way you understand the text. Because the Word of God is living and active, it always speaks to us in fresh ways. We have to understand not just the context of each book, but our own context so that we can see how this speaks to us where we're at today.

It's important to acknowledge up front what our biases will be and what we'll be prone to twist or overemphasize or underemphasize. We all have a tendency to make Jesus into a personal puppet. We like to have him parrot our own views, to say things in the way we want them said. So as we begin this study, we must pray for some theological humility. Can we acknowledge our potential biases and open ourselves up to encounter Jesus in a fresh way?

4. *Based on your life and context, how might you be prone to misrepresent Jesus? (E.g., are you tempted to see Jesus as a member of the same socio-economic class or ethnicity as yourself? How could that taint your understanding of him?)*

5. *Is there anything you can do as you begin this study to acknowledge your context, let go of your biases, and approach Jesus as he truly is?*

## Key Question

What is your perspective of Jesus? What is your story with Jesus?





# DO YOU NEED A CLEAN START?

## 02 John the Baptist

### Passage

Luke 3:1–18

### Concept

Before we are ready to come face to face with Jesus, we need to prepare. John the Baptist said that every dead tree would be chopped down, so he urged his listeners to repent, to be ready. To rightly hear Jesus' message and choose to follow him, we need to first take stock of what's in our hearts and lives: are we living, fruit-bearing trees? Or are we dead?

### Key Question

As you think back over your life, has there been any point where you could say you had to start over? Explain. Is there any sense or any areas in which Jesus is calling you to start over now?

### The Leveling

Do you see our Leveling tool being played out in Luke 3? With whom? How so?

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

Imagine walking into your doctor's office for a checkup after experiencing some fairly benign yet unsettling symptoms. After a few tests, your doctor delivers some sobering news: your symptoms are the result of an aggressive cancer that is spreading in your body. Your heart sinks before the doctor explains that there is a treatment for this type of cancer, but you'll have to start treatment immediately. If you don't do something right away, you will die.

It's possible that you don't need to use your imagination at all to understand how you'd feel in this situation. But even if this hasn't happened to you, you can imagine the urgency you would feel. It's a fear that many of us share. Situations like this reveal a desperate need that was always real, though you are only now becoming aware of it. It's the kind of need that we know must be addressed immediately.

We begin our journey with Jesus by acknowledging a similar need; the kind of thing we may never have acknowledge, but that has always been real nonetheless.

In the Gospels, Jesus' arrival is preceded by a prophetic messenger: John the Baptist. Start by reading this account in Luke 3:1–18. Read it slowly. If this is a familiar passage to you, refuse to move on from a sentence until the words strike you. Try to place yourself in the setting that Luke describes. After you've spent some time soaking in the passage, continue working through this session.

1. *Read Luke 3:1–18. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

## Getting Ready to See

Before Jesus started his ministry, God first sent John the Baptist as a prophet to prepare the way. We are starting here because if we're going to truly see Jesus this year, we have to prepare ourselves to see. If we're not ready, we're likely to misunderstand what Jesus is doing. If we're not looking, we may miss Jesus completely. We all have a tendency to recast Jesus in our own image, to see Jesus in a way that fits our interests, dreams, and current pursuits. But it's vital that we see Jesus as he truly is. Take a moment to evaluate your heart as we begin:

2. *Can you think of any common misconceptions about Jesus? Are there any ways in which you might be prone to misunderstand Jesus? (E.g., many Westerners tend to see Jesus as a comfortable, middle class, self-help guru.)*

## The Great Leveling

John calls the crowds who come out to see him to make the path of the Lord straight. Quoting Isaiah 40, John describes this in terms of raising the valleys and lowering the hills. Filling the valleys and flattening the hills means that God is bringing a great leveling. Those who are high will be brought low. Those who are low will be lifted up. It doesn't matter what your starting place is, the Kingdom of God is open to everyone, but it first brings us through the leveling process of the Gospel.

If we are truly preparing to be with Jesus, we need to open ourselves up to this leveling. Is there any pride in your heart? If so, you need to humble yourself so that you are ready to be with him, to be shaped by his character and to follow his direction. Alternatively, if you are in a place where you have been brought low, you need to believe that God is all you truly need to be lifted up.

## Baptism

The great sign of preparation for the coming of the Messiah is baptism. Baptism is a symbol of death (going below the surface) and resurrection (emerging in new life). This symbol should

actually be jarring to us, because it's a call for us to lay down our own lives. We don't prepare by doing an inventory of our accomplishments. Preparation means turning our hearts toward God. It means repenting by letting go of everything that has kept us back from God. It's one thing to be part of a church, to consider yourself a Christian. It's another thing to truly repent and come to Jesus without any pride, without any expectation of being honored, but rather to come humbly with a heart that simply longs to be with Jesus.

### **Dead Trees**

John describes this preparatory death in terms of dead trees being chopped down. If we're going to prepare ourselves, we need to ask what is spiritually dead in our lives and what we need to turn from. Through repentance, we align ourselves with the Messiah. We take stock of what we have been pursuing, and we choose to pursue Jesus and his purposes instead. Painful as it is to imagine yourself as a dead tree being cut down to be replaced by a new sapling, this is the kind of transformation the Gospels describe, and it is the path to life. Truly examine your heart:

3. *Do you need a new start in your life in this season? What needs to be cut out as you prepare to be with Jesus? It's hard to be honest and vulnerable with a question like this, but removing what is dead is an essential step in preparing. What needs to go?*

Preparation isn't about getting your life together before you encounter Jesus. It's simply about seeking him. All you need to do is turn to him, prepare your heart, and ask him to transform you. This is what John called the nation of Israel to do through baptism. (Remember that Luke portrays Jesus as reconstituting the nation of Israel—they need to do some business before they are ready to be the New Israel.) And the call remains for us today. Answer the following questions as you wrap up this session:

4. *As you begin this year long encounter with Jesus, is there anything that's off limits? Is there anything you're tempted to hold back? What would it take for you to truly lay everything before the Lord as you walk with him this year?*
  
5. *Have you been baptized? What keeps you from this? What good reasons can you think of for being baptized? (If you have already been baptized, what convinced you to do it?)*
  
6. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to prepare your heart to spend this year with him. Acknowledge any deadness in your life, any apathy that would keep you from truly engaging with Jesus. Pray that he would make himself real to you as you begin this study.*

### **Key Question**

As you think back over your life, has there been any point where you could say you had to start over? Explain. Is there any sense or any areas in which Jesus is calling you to start over now?



# DO YOU NEED GOD'S POWER?

## 03 The Baptism of Jesus

### Passages

Mark 1:9–11

John 1:29–34

### Concept

Jesus began his ministry by being baptized. In this act, Jesus identifies with the people he came to save (Israel and us) by taking part in the symbol of repentance in preparation for what God would do. But Jesus' baptism went beyond this symbol of repentance. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit of God also descended, which underscores the new life we receive through Jesus and the Spirit.

### Key Question

Have you experienced the empowering and guiding of the Holy Spirit in your life? How so?  
What difference does this make?

### The Leveling

Do you see our Leveling tool being played out in Mark 1:9–11 and John 1:29–34? With whom?  
How so?

## The Baptism of Jesus

Every parent has experienced what it's like to be completely powerless. It doesn't matter how high your aspirations are for your child or how flawless your plan for them, you are going to encounter a situation in which you cannot do what needs doing. This could be anything from a toddler who refuses to obey all the way to a grown child who chooses to stray from the path you set as a parent. In these moments, you realize how much of what you deeply long for in life is outside of your control. This is, of course, not limited to parenting. We encounter these situations in many areas of life: in our jobs, relationships, health, and on and on.

These experiences are awful because we feel an intense desire for something we are completely powerless to achieve. Something or someone outside of ourselves must act if anything will happen. As we consider the baptism of Jesus, not only do we see this concept presented, but we also find the true solution to our own powerlessness.

Last week we watched John the Baptist step onto the scene and prepare Israel for the coming Messiah ("Christ") by calling for a baptism that symbolized repentance. This week we will see Jesus walk onto this same set: John is baptizing as Jesus approaches and asks to be baptized as well. As you read Mark 1:9–11 and John 1:29–34, try to watch the scene unfold in your mind's eye. What would it have been like to watch this? How would you have responded? What does it all say about Jesus?

1. *Read Mark 1:9–11 and John 1:29–34. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this event? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*



## **John's Baptism of Repentance**

As we begin reading the Gospels, it makes sense that the people of Israel would be baptized. After all, Israel as a nation had been sent into exile because of their rejection of God. At this point in history, they're still waiting for God to return to them, to send them a Messiah, someone who would lead them in returning to Yahweh and once again experiencing his blessing and presence.

But it may be a bit startling that Jesus began his ministry by approaching John to receive baptism. After all, Jesus is here to set the people of Israel free. He came as a savior, not a sinner. So it's significant that Jesus identified in this way with the people he came to save. Take some time to reflect on this. What are the implications of Jesus being baptized in this setting?

2. *If the Israelites were being baptized as a symbol of repentance to prepare for what God was about to do, why do you think Jesus was baptized before beginning his ministry?*

## **Jesus' Baptism with the Spirit**

Already at this early stage in the Gospels, we come across an instance where all three members of the Trinity are present: Jesus is physically present, the Father speaks, and the Spirit descends as a dove. This underscores the event as significant. And with this appearance of the Holy Spirit, we see that there is a difference between Jesus' baptism and what was happening with John.

As people came out to be baptized by John prior to this point, John had explained the difference to the crowd: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11, Luke 3:16). John's baptism was all about repentance, preparation. Jesus' baptism still carries the connotation of repentance, yes, but the new element was the Spirit of God: not water, but fire. Not simply flesh, but Spirit.

3. *Explain the major difference that comes with being baptized by the Holy Spirit.*

### **A New Source of Life**

Jesus' baptism, then, was not just about the leaving behind of the old person, but the gift of new life. As we will see, the Spirit empowers, brings transformation, brings guidance. He leads and moves and works in all the ways in which we are impotent. If you've ever tried to do the kinds of things God commands in your own strength, you know how impossible it is, how frustrated you feel. This is precisely where Israel found itself. For generations that had been trying to be God's people in the world, yet they were attempting this in their own strength. John's Baptism of repentance led them to acknowledge how far short they had fallen, how powerless they were to enact the change that was needed. They were a dead tree, they needed new life. And so it is with us: withered and dead, we need a breathe of new life. This is the very thing we find with the Spirit of God.

4. *Have you experienced the frustration of trying in your own strength to be either (a) who you want to be, or more significantly, (2) who God wants you to be? What is this like?*
  
5. *Have you experienced the transformation and new life that comes through the Spirit of God? How so? What difference does this make?*

## God's Beloved Son

The visible descent of the Spirit and the voice of the Father alert us to the reality that Jesus will not be acting alone in his ministry. He did not come to earth purely of his own accord. He enters the human scene with the authority and approval of the Father and with the power of the Spirit. As he prepares to lead Israel into everything Yahweh wants for them, Jesus stands in solidarity with his fellow men (the descendants of Adam and of Noah) and fellow Israelites (the descendants of Abraham). By enacting repentance and preparation alongside the rest of Israel, Jesus was leading his people in the pursuit of God in the midst of a broken world. And when he emerged from the water, the Father affirmed his pleasure in the Son, and the Spirit visibly descended to the guiding and empowering relationship he would maintain with Jesus throughout his life.

As you ponder this event in the life of Jesus, once again try to put yourself on the scene. If this Jesus were to emerge from the water and then call you to follow him, how would you interpret it? What difference does it make?

6. *You stand here today with the invitation to follow this Jesus. What do you think it means to follow this Jesus who calls us into baptism, not just of water, but also the Spirit?*

7. *Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for sending the Son in whom he delights. Pray that you would be able to follow Jesus in the steps of preparation he took. Pray for the power of the Holy Spirit. Ask Jesus to continue to reveal himself to you as you sit at his feet.*

## Key Question

Have you experienced the empowering and guiding of the Holy Spirit in your life? How so? What difference does this make?



# DO YOU NEED JESUS' VICTORY?

## 04 The Temptation of Jesus

### Passage

Luke 4:1–13

### Concept

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, he had to demonstrate a commitment to one of two kingdoms: the Kingdom of this World or the Kingdom of God. Like Israel before us, we are all pulled toward building our own kingdoms, which ultimately are a part of the Kingdom of this World. By resisting Satan's temptations, Jesus offers to lead us in pursuing a new kingdom: the Kingdom of God.

### Key Question

Which Kingdom are you actively pursuing: the Kingdom of this World or the Kingdom of God? Explain your answer.

### The Leveling

Do you see our Leveling tool being played out in Luke 4:1–13? With whom? How so?

## The Temptation of Jesus

Think of a time when you've seen someone do a thing you know you could never do. A speaker waxing eloquent, a poet encapsulating beauty, a singer striking a high note, an athlete smashing a record. When we witness victories like these, we usually feel some mixture of inspiration and jealousy. Such triumphs leave us in awe at others' abilities even as we are reminded of our own lack of ability.

We sometimes have these experiences in our spiritual lives as well. Any time we witness the generous giving of a financially-stretched friend, or the continued faithfulness of a husband, or the patience of a parent with a difficult child, we are inspired with the possibility of overcoming our own temptations even as we are reminded of our many failures.

But watching Jesus' victory over temptation is not like this. As we read about Jesus' encounter with the devil in Luke 4:1–13, we may be tempted to throw up our hands: *of course* Jesus overcame temptation: he's *Jesus!* Or we may feel inspired to try harder next time we encounter temptation. But our victory over sin is not something we can achieve through our own efforts, nor is it a one-time accomplishment. Perhaps Jesus' victory over temptation was never meant to give us helpful strategies for overcoming our own sin. What if God recorded this story so that we could see that even though Adam and Eve failed, even though Israel failed, even though we still fail today, *Jesus didn't?* And that changes everything. This story is not necessarily a model to be followed, but a historical fact that we are meant to receive as a gift: Jesus did what we could not. And he did this *on our behalf*.

1. *Read Luke 4:1–13. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

## **Into the Wilderness**

Immediately after Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit came upon him and led him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. It's crucial that we acknowledge that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into this situation. The implication is that Jesus would not have been tempted like this had the Spirit not directly led him to it. This is a good reminder for us that following the Spirit's leading sometimes means walking into a dark, dry season. Just because you're in a difficult situation does not mean you've done something wrong, it doesn't mean that God is not with you. Often, the times when we feel the farthest from God are the very times when God is working in us the most.

2. *Have you gone through any dry, difficult seasons recently? Was it hard to recognize God's presence in those times? How so? Have you been able to see any ways in which God was working then? How so?*

## **The Kingdom of this World**

Even as we acknowledge *the Spirit's* presence in Jesus' wilderness temptations, we also need to recognize that *Satan* was tempting Jesus. Jesus has a real enemy, which means that we have a real enemy. From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, we're seeing that two sides are being set up. These two sides can be described as two kingdoms. These are the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of this World. One helpful way to gauge what is happening as we watch Jesus' ministry unfold is to ask how these kingdoms are coming into conflict.

Satan is obviously working to build the Kingdom of this World, and this is what he is trying to tempt Jesus to embrace. This kingdom focuses on human beings. On our pleasure, power, and prestige. In this kingdom, everything you do is for your own sake or for the sake of other human beings. You can work to make this kingdom anything you want it to be, but its security and stability all depend on your efforts. And it ultimately leads nowhere.

3. *What does the Kingdom of this World look like in your own experience? Where are you most drawn to it? In what ways are you participating in this kingdom?*

### **The Kingdom of God**

Jesus' Kingdom, on the other hand, stands opposed to virtually everything that human beings seek to attain. In this Kingdom, God is King. Everything you do is directed toward his glory. In this kingdom, you are not responsible for its security and stability, but you do need to submit to something outside of your own control.

The Kingdom of God is real, but it's not geographical. At heart, these are kingdoms of allegiance. Your allegiance is pledged, so to speak, to one of two kings, to the building of one of two kingdoms. Jesus is being tested as to which Kingdom he will pursue, and we have the same choice to make today.

4. *In what ways have you experienced the Kingdom of God? If it's not a geographical kingdom, where do you see this kingdom showing up? In what ways are you participating in this kingdom?*

### **The One Who Succeeds**

As we follow Jesus in this spiritual battle, we need to acknowledge that each of these temptations have already been failed by Israel. As a nation, they rejected God's Kingdom and pursued their own. But we are no different. We also fail in all of these temptations. We fail to live by the Word of God, to pursue his Kingdom. We find the pull toward the Kingdom of this World irresistible.



But the point isn't that Israel has failed these tests, nor that we have failed. Luke is telling us this story so that we will understand that Jesus has covered every temptation we've fallen into. The point is that Jesus has fulfilled it. Luke relates this story so that as the story continues, we will recognize that when Jesus offers to take the place of our sin, he does so as one who has faithfully fulfilled everything God calls his people to.

5. *What is the takeaway from all of this? What are we learning about Jesus through this early chapter of his ministry? What difference does it make for you, right now?*

6. *Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for the faithfulness of Jesus. Pray that he would give you the grace to renounce Satan and the Kingdom of this World and to instead pursue Jesus and the Kingdom of God.*

### **Key Question**

Which Kingdom are you actively pursuing: the Kingdom of this World or the Kingdom of God? Explain your answer.



# Question 02:

## DO YOU DESIRE ME?

This dot is you. It's you at this exact moment. You where you currently are. Take a minute to assess: who are you in this exact moment? That doesn't mean your Myers Briggs or Enneagram number. The question is more pointed.

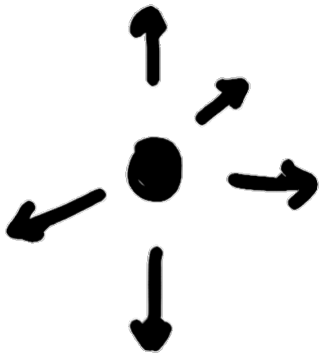
To get to know a person, you could ask where he lives, what he does for work, what his hobbies are, etc. These questions will give you helpful information. But if you really want to know a person, you have to ask about his desires.



What are you spending your life pursuing? What do you desire most? Where are disillusioned? What makes you hopeful? What wrongs do you want to make right?

## Direction

Every vector (think of an arrow) has a direction. In an airplane cockpit, each plane is marked by an arrow. It enables you to not only see the other planes around you, but also what direction they are headed. This is essential information if you want to avoid collision.

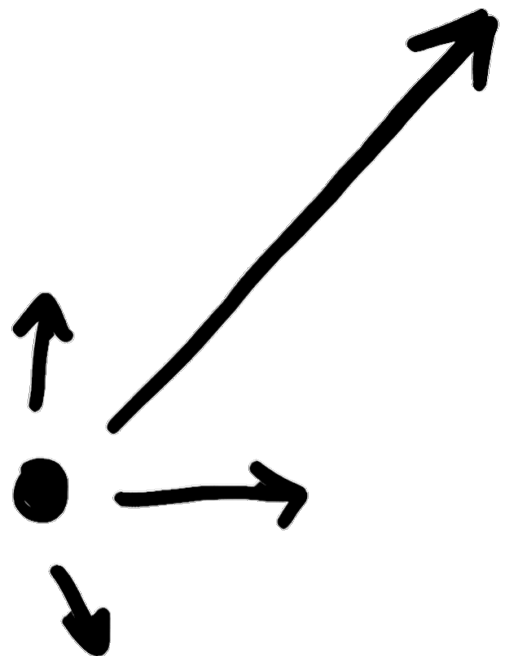


Our lives move in the direction of our passions towards the objects of our desires. We all have many desires, and those desires are aimed at multiple objects. If you love and desire your spouse, you'll want to spend time with and please him or her. If you love your children, you'll watch them play sports, you'll eat meals with them, and you'll play games with them. If you desire to excel in your career, you'll devote time and energy into everything your job requires. This is how desire works. We are always moving in a direction; each desire propels us in a given direction.

## Magnitude

Consider also that each vector also possesses a certain magnitude. In other words, some desires are stronger than others. All of our desires play a role, but our strongest desire at any given moment sets the direction of our motion.

As we continue to watch Jesus interact with people, we will see him uncovering the direction of people's hearts. Jesus was masterful in exposing a person's desires. He could see the sum of their desires, and he would challenge people to make difficult choices to change the direction that were are heading. No one gets through life without



desires. It's simply how we were created to function. But we all suffer from disordered desires. Repentance is all about re-ordering our desires. It's a turning from one direction to another. It's about re-orienting the vectors of our life back to the proper object, which is Jesus.

Think of your desires in terms of their magnitude, where magnitude equals the force of your desires. While there are many objects of our affection, we do not desire all things with the same force and magnitude. The difficulty with this is twofold:

- 1) Resources are finite, so we need to make choices. It would be nice to think that you could be fully passionate about golf, family, Jesus, and career. But the reality is that your time, emotional capacity, and head space are limited. So you need to make choices. Not everything can be equally balanced. Not everything can receive all of your passion. So your life tends to move in the direction of greatest magnitude.
- 2) Generally speaking, we make the most sacrifices for the things we desire most. We tend to shape our lives around our greatest passions without trying. It is the force of our desire that makes this a reality.

When Jesus encountered people in the New Testament, he constantly confronted them in the realm of desire. He wanted to know how much they desired to be with him. The greater the desire, the greater the willingness to drop other things. It's startling to see Jesus call people to leave their possessions and families in order to follow him. But Jesus wants us to begin by assessing our desire for him. Do we really want this? Do we really desire him?

### **The Tool**

Our tool for this section is the vector. It reminds us that a description of our current location and status is not enough to explain who we are.



It's all about our direction. Our desire. And this also reminds us that it's not necessarily about our progress as a given moment. Again, it's about the direction we're heading. What desire in

your life right now carries the greatest magnitude? In which direction are you being pulled? Do you truly desire Jesus? How much? If he called you to leave everything behind and follow him, would you do it? As you'll see in the sessions that follow, this was not a hypothetical situation for Jesus' original followers. So just like these early disciples, we need to evaluate the magnitude of our desire.

# DO YOU DESIRE ME?

## 01 The Calling of the Disciples

### Passage

John 1:35–51

### Concept

As Jesus began his ministry, he invited ordinary people to follow him. They didn't know everything about him or where following him would lead, but they found him compelling enough to leave their former lives in order to be with him. We are in the same situation. We don't know exactly where following Jesus will lead, but we have to ask how much we desire him, and what we are or aren't willing to let go of for his sake.

### Key Question

What do you find compelling about Jesus? Are you intrigued enough to follow?

### The Vector Tool

Do you see our vector tool being played out in John 1:35–51? With whom? How so?

## The Calling of the Disciples

What do you want most in life? If you've ever been part of a Bible study, you know the right answers to that question. But be honest with yourself. Are you seeking happiness for yourself or for your family? Success? Prestige? Significance?

One great way to assess what you want most is to take stock of what you're making sacrifices for. When you're willing to give something up (comfort, immediate happiness, money) and incur some form of pain or struggle (exercise, awkwardness, financial strain), what are you trying to gain in those situations? If you want one thing more than anything else, you'll constantly have to let go of other things in order to attain it. Marrying one person means closing the door on all others. Choosing one career means closing the door on other options. Buying one house means saying no to other houses, and you're often also limiting your ability to buy cars, vacations, etc.

What would you be willing to leave behind in order to gain the thing you want most?

The disciples had to discover their own answer to this when Jesus walked up and called them to follow. They were leaving different things in different situations, but they all had to demonstrate their desire to be with Jesus by letting go of things they loved and valued. As you read John 1:35–41, keep an eye on how this dynamic plays out.

1. *Read John 1:35–51. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*



## The Quest

In verse 38, Jesus turned to two of the disciples who were beginning to follow him and asked “What are you seeking?” This could be simply answered: “We’re just curious what all of this is about,” but Jesus is after more than this. We’re all seeking after something in life. We probably wouldn’t phrase it like this, but we’re all on a life-long quest. We’re searching for something, even if we can’t quite pin down what it is: fulfillment, belonging, significance, success? So asking ourselves the question is an important step in following Jesus. Knowing whether or not we desire him will require us to evaluate what we’re trying to get out of life. Jesus is the true answer to every noble pursuit, so every path of desire, when rightly understood, ought to lead us to him.

2. *Jesus asked, “What are you seeking?” How would you answer that? Based on your pursuits, expenditures, career choices, hobbies, etc., what would you say you’re seeking to get out of life?*

## A Bold Invitation

We’re used to thinking about Jesus walking up to a group of men and saying, “Follow me.” But if you think about it, it’s a pretty bold thing to say. How much self-confidence would it require to walk up to strangers and say, “Hey, it would be good for you to follow me and do the things I’m doing.”

If just about anyone in the world asked you to do this, you’d say no. You may give up your job and friend circles for your spouse. Or *maybe* for a best friend or a parent. But is there anyone else who could invite you into their life and you’d actually consider leaving everything you’ve known behind? Not likely.

Clearly there was something compelling about Jesus. The disciples wouldn’t have known much about Jesus at this point, but they were ready when he called. All of us are in a similar situation. Before we answer Jesus’ call to follow, we all have some level of context for

understanding who Jesus is. Some know very little, some know a lot. But unless we find what we know about Jesus to be compelling, we won't desire him. And if we don't desire him, we'll never follow him.

3. *Try to place yourself in the shoes of these disciples. What do you think they saw in Jesus that was compelling (given what they would have known about him by this point)?*

### **Leave it Behind**

Here's the real test of whether or not you desire Jesus: what would you be willing to give to follow him? If Jesus had asked the disciples "leave your fishing so that you can come live with me in a palace and become kings," the decision would have been easy, regardless of their level of desire for him. But as the story unfolds, we continue to see that Jesus himself is the true draw: they left their jobs and communities and exposed themselves to ridicule and opposition. But they were willing to leave behind careers (for some, like Matthew the tax collector, lucrative careers), loved ones (cf. Luke 18:28ff), and their familiar lives because they wanted to be with Jesus.

How about you? You'd be happy to follow Jesus if it meant social standing, respectability, and a vibrant friend circle (as is often the case in the United States). But what if you had to begin leaving things behind? Would you follow then? What would you be willing to leave, and what would remain off-limits?

4. *For the original disciples, choosing to follow Jesus meant leaving many things behind. What have you left behind or what are you choosing to leave behind in choosing to follow Jesus?*

## **Come and See**

This passage repeats the phrase “come and see.” Jesus doesn’t give them a detailed contract with a list of disclosures. He’s doesn’t explain exactly who he is or what following him will be like. Instead, he invites them to experience it. If you come, you will see. You don’t get answers to all of your questions up front. It has to start with desire. Do you want to be with him? If so, you’ll be willing to take the first steps of following him.

5. *Honestly assess your desire for Jesus right now. Do you actually have a desire to be with him? How is this a struggle for you? Why do you say that?*

6. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to increase your love. Ask him to show you who Jesus is and to help you overcome your desire for lesser things.*

## **Key Question**

What do you find compelling about Jesus? Are you intrigued enough to follow?



# DO YOU DESIRE REBIRTH?

## 02 Born of the Spirit

### Passage

John 3:1–21

### Concept

Jesus meets with Nicodemus, one of the highest ranking religious leaders at the time, and tells him that if he wants to enter the Kingdom of God, he must start over, he must be born again. The new birth comes through the power of the Spirit. This new birth brings us into a mysterious life we don't understand fully, but we commit ourselves to following wherever the Spirit leads. This also means stepping into the light so that everything we have been hiding in the darkness can be exposed and removed.

### Key Question

What has it meant or what would it mean for you to be born (again) of the Spirit? Why is this essential to entering the Kingdom of God?

### The Vector Tool

Do you see our vector tool being played out in John 3:1–21? With whom? How so?

## **Born of the Spirit**

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were completely out of your element? We all have “cultural power” in some areas, meaning that we know the cultural rules for how a space operates. For example, after you’ve had one child, you know your way around the hospital, you know the cultural norms for how to interact, where you’re allowed to go, how to get what you need, etc. Likewise, you know your way around your office building, you know who can get things done, who to avoid angering, etc. All of these things become second nature to us, and we comfortably navigate through these cultural worlds. But someone else stepping in from the outside may not have the same familiarity, which means they are lacking “cultural power” in that sphere.

Consider stepping into a courtroom. It doesn’t matter how much cultural power you have in your own spheres, if you’ve never been around a court of law and you suddenly find yourself thrust into this world (whether for jury duty or some other legal matter), you’ll be lost. There are unspoken rules and norms, there is a new language, there are actors and procedures that are completely foreign to you. You could be the CEO of your own large corporation and thus have immense cultural power in your field, but when you step into a new cultural sphere, the lowest level employee has more cultural power than you do, because he or she is familiar with that arena.

### **What It Means to be Born (Again)**

Something like this is in play when we talk about entering the Kingdom of God. In John 3, Jesus explains to Nicodemus, one of the highest ranking religious leaders at this time, that if he wants to enter the Kingdom of God, he must be born again. We are familiar with the phrase “born again” as a religious term, but imagine how Nicodemus would have heard this term when Jesus first said it. This phrase didn’t come pre-loaded with meaning; Nicodemus heard Jesus telling him that he could no longer be an adult, that he had to become an entirely dependent, completely immature and undeveloped infant.

When we step out to follow Jesus, to enter the Kingdom of God, the Spirit of God gives us new life. But it's not simple addition. It's not simply adding something on top of what we've already achieved and learned. Rather, it's a starting over. It's a new birth. It doesn't matter what you've accomplished in your career, if the Spirit gives you new life it means a hard reset: you've come to the end of yourself, and now you're starting fresh in a new sphere. This is a humbling place to begin, but Jesus says it is essential.

1. *Read John 3:1–21. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*
2. *Doing your best to avoid religiously cliché language, what do you think it means to be “born again”?*
3. *Why do you think that being born again (or born of the Spirit) is a prerequisite for entering the Kingdom of God?*

4. *Looking at your own life, what has it meant or what would it mean for you to be born of the Spirit?*

### **Step Into the Light**

In this context, we are also told that God sent Jesus into the world—not to condemn it, but to bring life. Jesus’ mission was not about judgment, because he says that the darkness has already rejected the light. Jesus came into a world that had already rejected God’s right to rule over it. And when Jesus came, he was constantly being rejected. And yet he came because “God so loved the world.” This is a hugely important statement.

It sounds intimidating to “step into the light” (as the passage calls us to do). But we have to understand that the call to enter the light stems from the love of God. This world is a dark place. But God has sent light into this dark world by sending Jesus to be with us, to bring us light and life. Stepping from darkness to life sounds terrifying, because the light does indeed expose what the darkness hides. But this is only bad news if we love those things that will be exposed. If we can see true life in the light, then we would be fools not to grab hold of it.

So we stand today with this constant offer to recognize God’s love for us, and to accept this love by stepping into the light. We have no need to fear being exposed in the light so long as we trust the source of the light. We all have a decision to make: will we step into the light, or do we prefer what the darkness offers us? This is a decision we make when we first begin following Jesus, and it’s a decision we make moment by moment as we continually seek to keep in step with him.



5. *What do you think it means to “come to the light”? Is this something you have ever done? What was it like? Is there anything holding you back from doing this at this time in your life?*

6. *Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for his gift of new life. Thank him that he “so loved the world” that he gave us Jesus. Pray that we would be flooded with God’s new life. Ask God for the grace to step into the light and be exposed in all the best ways.*

### **Key Question**

What has it meant or what would it mean for you to be born (again) of the Spirit? Why is this essential to entering the Kingdom of God?



# HOW MUCH DO YOU DESIRE HEALING?

## 03 The Paralytic

### Passage

Mark 2:1–12

### Concept

A paralyzed man was carried by his friends to Jesus for healing. Jesus did heal this man physically, but he first healed him spiritually by forgiving his sin. It takes a strong desire for Jesus to overcome whatever obstacles keep us from him. Just as this man's friends exerted significant effort to bring him to Jesus, we must have a strong enough desire for Jesus to work through the obstacles that would hold us back so we can come to Jesus for the healing he offers.

### Key Question

What hurdles must you overcome to find healing in Jesus? How might his healing differ from your expectations?

### The Vector Tool

Do you see our vector tool being played out in Mark 2:1–12? With whom? How so?

## **The Paralytic**

Have you ever experienced symptoms so bad that you finally went to a doctor, only to find that your problem was different than you thought? Maybe it's a cold lasting longer than it should, an ache or pain that won't go away, or some other symptom that's not necessarily terrifying in itself, but that persists long enough to bring you to the doctor. For many people, these are the very situations that reveal something more serious that they could never have diagnosed in themselves.

The symptoms did not create the problem, nor did the visit to the doctor. The real problem was there all along, but the tangible need that drove you to get a checkup revealed that something deeper was wrong.

### **It Starts with Desire**

Jesus' encounter with the paralyzed man in Mark 2:1–12 was like this. This man's friends brought him to Jesus because being paralyzed at that time was a matter of life and death (it's no picnic in any age). These friends were desperate to get their friend healed. Their desire was to see his physically body be healed, and their desire was strong enough to push them to overcome the serious obstacles required to bring him to Jesus so this could happen. These men were convinced that this Rabbi could do something for their friend.

In pursuing physical healing, they found that Jesus wanted to heal their friend spiritually as well. They were right to desire the healing Jesus could offer, but as always happens, they discovered that Jesus had so much more to offer.

Desire is a wonderful, powerful, and potentially destructive thing that resides deep within our souls. It's a sacrifice to do something you don't care about. It's no sacrifice if the desire is already present. We all act on our desires; we don't have to try to do it, that's just what happens.

We all have these deep wounds, and every one of our wounds should be a reason to come to Jesus. But Jesus is often more concerned about our internal wounds—the sin that eats us from the inside out—and he often starts there. Jesus sees our spiritual wounds even when we don't. It's not just that this man *had* spiritual wounds, it's that he *created* them. How do we know? Because Jesus *forgave* him. Forgiveness is only necessary when we have sinned. We don't often see our own hand in destroying our relationship with God.

It shouldn't be a surprise that this man wasn't perfect—no one is. But it highlights an important point: it's easy to get so caught up in the driving needs we experience that we fail to see our need for forgiveness and spiritual healing. Our greatest needs are often unseen.

An example of this comes in this passage when the Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy. They were outraged because Jesus was claiming to forgive sins, and that is something only God can do. They weren't wrong: only God can forgive sins. But in their theological outrage, they were missing their deeper need: their hearts were unbelieving. They were rejecting God, even though he was standing right there in front of them forgiving a man's sins and healing his body.

As you read this story, try to feel how vivid the scene must have been, how passionate everyone was, and how much Jesus' words and actions must have meant.

1. *Read Mark 2:1–12. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

2. *What are the tangible things you're experiencing right now that drive you to prayer? In other words, if Jesus were standing across the street, what things in your life would push you to cross the street and ask him for help?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. *Looking deeper than your externally visible needs, what deeper healing do you believe you need from Jesus at this moment?*

### **What Would You Do for a Friend?**

This man was healed—physically and spiritually—because his friends carried him to the feet of Jesus. To be a friend, to love someone, is to bring them to Jesus. Love is pointing wounding people to Jesus, and carrying them to him when necessary. The more we bring others to Jesus, the more often we'll find ourselves in his presence. True friendship means we're constantly bringing each other back to Jesus.

4. *Is there anyone you feel drawn to "bring to Jesus" in any sense? (This may mean introducing them to him for the first time or simply finding a way to bring someone closer to him in a specific season or moment.)*

### **Taking Stock of Your Desire**

Do you actually desire Jesus? You know you desire him when you're willing to lay something down in order to be with him. When it costs you something and you're willing to pay the price

in order to be with him, that's when you can be sure that you desire him. This isn't necessarily a one time decision that will give you every ounce of desire you'll need for the rest of your life. It's more of a trajectory. It's the direction your heart is aimed. Take some time to consider where your desires are focused. If you don't desire Jesus, take some time to consider how you might increase your desire for him.

5. *Right now, how would you describe your desire for Jesus? Why do you say that? (This is not about judgment over not having the "right" answer, it's about honestly taking stock of your heart.)*
  
6. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to increase your desire for him. Bring any needs or desires you're experiencing to him, and offer your heart to him, asking him to heal anything that's not necessarily at the forefront of your mind. Also pray that God would make you the kind of friend who brings others into the presence of Jesus.*

### **Key Question**

What hurdles must you overcome to find healing in Jesus? How might his healing differ from your expectations?





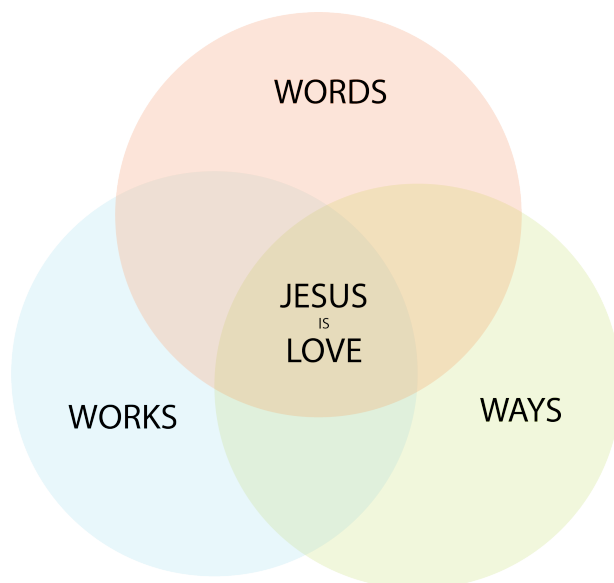
# Question 03:

## WILL YOU LEARN FROM ME?

Jesus is well known as a good teacher. As he talked to the crowds and worked with his disciples, he would take key opportunities to teach them. In essence, Jesus is asking them—and also us—“will you learn from me?” This is a vital question. We all know many of the things that Jesus said. But there is an important difference between hearing the words of Jesus and actually learning from Jesus.

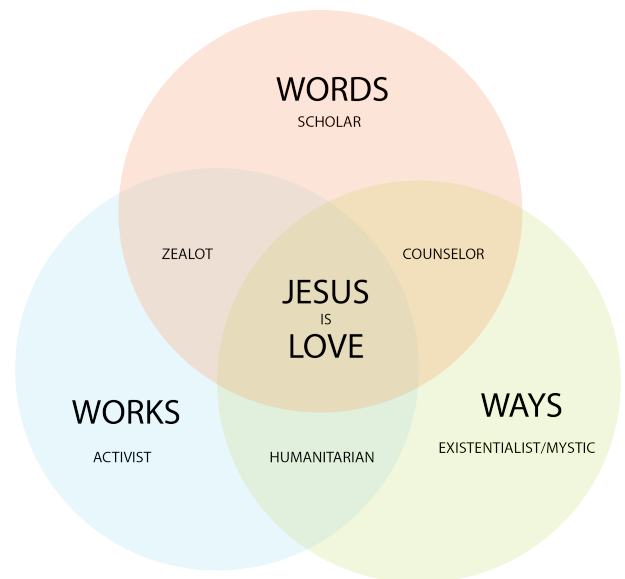
### The Tool: The Three Circles

Our tool for this section provides one helpful way to consider what it means to truly learn from Jesus. This tool is the three circles, which represent the words, works, and ways of Jesus. The goal is to see, embrace, and embody all three elements. When we have all three elements in place, then we are truly living like Jesus, which is another way of saying that we are living in love.



The danger, however, is that we tend to focus on one of three. Some of us (and some churches) are more prone to focus on the words of Jesus. Obviously the words of Jesus are essential—we cannot be with Jesus or be like Jesus if we neglect his words. But focusing on the words of Jesus to the exclusion of the works and ways of Jesus is what we might call the scholar’s approach. It makes us knowledge focused. In these situations, we can all too easily wield the words of Jesus (and by extension the whole Bible) as a weapon that we use against the very people we are called to love. But if we put the words of Jesus in context with the works and ways of Jesus, we have learned to live in love.

Others are prone to emphasize the works of Jesus to the neglect of the words and ways of Jesus. This we could call the activist’s approach. Here, we can get caught up in powerful things that Jesus did and the challenges he laid before the authorities of his day. We should, of course, be doing the works of Jesus, but if this is divorced from Jesus’ words and ways, then we are not truly living in the love of Jesus.

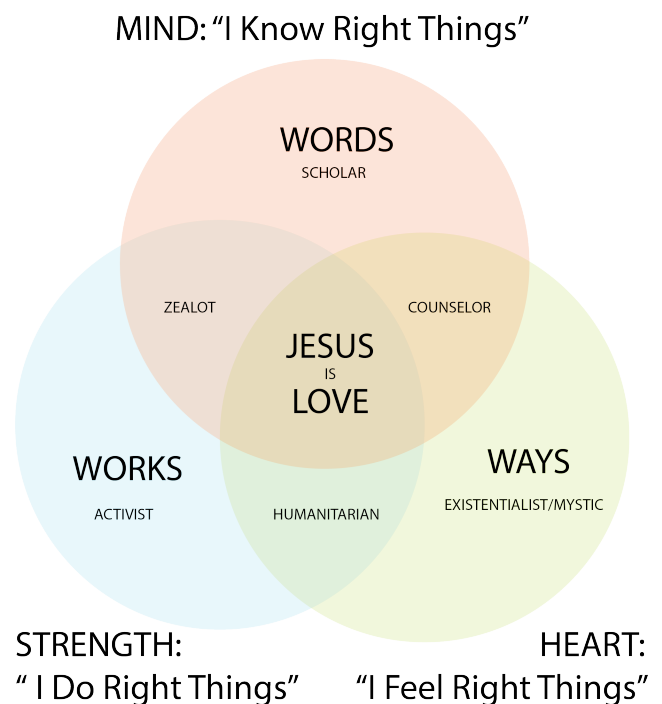


Still others focus on the ways of Jesus to the exclusion of the words and works of Jesus. Again, imitating Jesus’ humility, compassion, and love is incredibly important. But when we neglect the words and works of Jesus, this leaves us in what we might call the existentialist’s or mystic’s territory.

We can also see from the three circles that we get a variation of these distortions when we focus on any two circles while leaving out the third. If we add the works of Jesus to the words of Jesus, for example, we are basically zealots. These two elements are good, but without the ways of Jesus, we are still missing his heart. Similarly, focusing on the works and ways of Jesus without the words of Jesus makes us humanitarians who do good things in good ways, but are left without the truth that Jesus proclaims. And combining the words and ways of Jesus basically makes us counselors who can provide helpful guidance to others but who fail to act as Jesus would have us act.

It's important to see that none of these circles is bad. When we overemphasize one of these circles, we are not introducing some foreign, evil element. But this is precisely what makes religion so deceptive and destructive. The lesson of the three circles is that we can be attempting to follow Jesus—we can be actively imitating him—and yet still miss his heart. For example, we can use Jesus' words in a way that makes us utterly unlike Jesus! That is a terrifying and ugly thought, and yet it is reality for many in the church. So the key is not to get anyone to stop doing the works of Jesus, or to stop learning the words of Jesus (and by extension the whole Bible), or to stop embracing the ways of Jesus. The key is to dive deeper into who Jesus is, and to help each other embrace all three circles in ever more meaningful and all-encompassing ways.

To shift the diagram one more time, this is all another way of considering Jesus' call to love the Lord "with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength." If we take the soul to be an overarching category here, loving the Lord with our minds means thinking right things, loving him with our strength means doing right things, and loving him with our heart means feeling right things. Again, each of these elements is essential, but it's only when we put all three together that we can truly love God and other people as Jesus does.



As we look at a few passages in this section in which Jesus calls us to learn from him, keep the three circles in mind. We all have a tendency toward one or two of the circles, so this too can be a corrective that helps pull us back toward the center.

## The Challenge

Our challenge for this section is to soak in the Sermon on the Mount. This means more than simply reading it through. The challenge is to read the entirety of the sermon from Matthew 5–7 at least once every week and to spend time meditating on what these words mean and how

you should be shaped by them. You could meditate on these words for your entire lifetime and never come close to plumbing their depths, so take this challenge seriously.

A second part of this challenge is to memorize the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:3–12. As you gather with your group, review your progress in memorizing these simple yet profound statements. Memorizing the Beatitudes will go a long way toward facilitating your meditation on the sermon as a whole.

# IS THE GOSPEL GOOD NEWS TO YOU?

## 01 Jesus Proclaims Good News

### Passage

Luke 4:16–30

### Concept

As Jesus spoke in a synagogue in Galilee, he announced that good news had arrived. He himself carries that good news, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor, the captives, and the oppressed. Too often, the gospel becomes old, boring, or irrelevant news to us. We treat it as a religious sentiment. But Jesus is good news, and he is truly good news for us provided we are ready to come to Jesus and learn from him. To understand Jesus fully, we must learn to see him as he truly is and find all of the ways that he truly embodies good news for our lives and our world.

### Key Question

How does the gospel of Jesus strike you as good news? If the gospel feels more like a religious belief than an actual announcement of good news to you, how might you be misunderstanding who Jesus is and what he came to do?

### The Three Circles Tool

Do you see our tool of the three circles being played out in Luke 4:16–30? With whom? How so?

## Jesus Proclaims Good News

Have you ever been in a situation where the word “captive” was appropriate? Some know what it’s like to be in an actual prison, to be literally locked into a place. Others know what it’s like to feel trapped in a relationship, an agreement, or an addiction. Some situations are more intense than others, but being a captive means being held in a position where you’re controlled, where you can’t break free, where you have no way out. The feeling of despair in these situations is overwhelming.

When was the last time—what was the last situation—where you really wanted to change something but felt powerless to do it?

### Good News

We sometimes think of the gospel as a cliché religious sentiment. Too often, we have taken the gospel and reduced it to a simple statement that we either believe or don’t, a prayer that we either pray or don’t. But “gospel” literally means “good news.” And it doesn’t come in a vacuum. It’s not just a short religious mantra.

Vital to our understanding of who Jesus is and what he’s doing in the gospel is the simple acknowledgment that the “good news” is actually good news!

In other words, the gospel is news that gets announced to those who are in a desperate situation. To those who find themselves trapped, enslaved, oppressed, forgotten, and marginalized, Jesus comes and proclaims that there is good news. A change is happening! New life is being offered! Your terrible situation is not the final word, something big is happening!

When it feels like we are completely trapped, the good news truly brings freedom. And it comes out of nowhere. We aren’t expecting it. The good news is that there is freedom even

when we least expect it. Even when we can see no way out. This is precisely when the King comes and offers freedom.

1. *Read Luke 4:16–30. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

### **Good News for Whom?**

Jesus' announcement that the good news was being fulfilled in him came as he read from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. And those words were written for specific people: the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. Before we fill in the word "gospel" with all of our modern Christian connotations, we should first consider what the word would have meant to those marginalized groups Jesus was speaking about.

1. *What do you think it means to "proclaim good news"? What do you think Jesus had in mind when he read this prophecy?*
2. *How do you see this proclamation of good news play out in the ministry of Jesus?*
3. *What do you think proclaiming good news would look like in your setting today? Have you seen any good examples of this in churches you've been part of? Or do you get the*

*sense that the modern church has turned the proclamation of good news into something different than Jesus intended? Explain your answer.*

We have a tendency to translate “poor” into “spiritually poor,” and this is partially right. But we shouldn’t dismiss the reality that Jesus also offered good news to the physically poor. When God sets the world to rights through Jesus’ return, there will be no more poverty, no more suffering of any kind. It’s wrong to say that Jesus doesn’t care about physical needs, as if we were simply spiritual beings. God made our bodies and our physical world, and he cares for our physical needs (see Matt. 6:25–34). So the gospel is good news to those who are physically malnourished and oppressed. God acts—often through his people—to meet the physical needs of those who suffer.

But the gospel is also good news to the spiritually poor. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to pray that their trespasses (sins) may be forgiven (Matt. 6:12–15). Paul tells us that through Jesus the record of debt that stood against us has been cancelled (Col. 2:14) and that Jesus, who was rich, became poor so that we, who were poor, might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

The good news is quite simply good news. Think of it any way you can imagine. If you’re feeling either physically or spiritually malnourished, the gospel is unquestionably good news to you. It’s fulfilled in Jesus. There is a king who is looking out for his children. He is here *for* you. He cares for you, no matter what your need is, no matter how great your need is.

4. *As you consider your life right now, in what sense is the gospel good news to you right now?*



## The Year of Jubilee

Jesus also portrays the good news as a proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is a reference to the Old Testament concept of the Year of Jubilee (see Leviticus 25). Every fiftieth year, Israel would celebrate a Jubilee, in which every debt would be cancelled, every slave would be set free, and every bit of property would be returned to its original owner. It’s a grand resetting of the playing field. Reading about the Jubilee today feels very un-capitalist and un-American. But we need to remember that Jesus is not a capitalist or an American. He is simply the King and Savior of the world.

The good news is that Jesus is proclaiming God’s favor over us, not because of our works, but simply because of his love. How do you think God views you today? Do you think he sees you as a failure? As a success? We inherently respond to questions like these by thinking of the things we’ve done good or bad. We tend to stand so much on our works. But the gospel always levels the playing field.

The gospel is bad news who think they are favorable. But it’s good news for those who know they are unfavorable. God is so liberally free with his love, and that irritates the religiously-minded. But this is the very essence of the gospel: Jesus brings good news, not for those who are already doing great, but for those who are in need.

5. *Try to assess yourself honestly. Is there any sense in which the gospel feels like bad news to you? Or even just irrelevant or boring news? If the gospel feels more like a religious belief than an actual announcement of good news to you, how might you be misunderstanding who Jesus is and what he came to do?*

### Will You Learn from Me?

As Jesus spoke to the people in Galilee, which was his home region, he gave some examples of events that God had done in the past to illustrate that “no prophet is acceptable in his hometown.” The scary point of these stories is that often, those who think they know God best don’t know him at all. Sometimes those who think they understand Jesus are the last people to actually recognize when he is at work.

Could this be our problem? Our question in this section comes down to whether or not we’ll truly *learn* from Jesus. We’re in danger of being a people who hear but don’t learn. We could be those people who don’t respond to Jesus when he’s in our midst. The question is not whether or not we *hear* Jesus’ words, but whether or not we will truly *learn* from him when he speaks to us.

6. *Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for the good news that comes to us through Jesus. Pray for eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts that are eager to truly learn from him as he speaks and directs us.*

### Key Question

How does the gospel of Jesus strike you as good news? If the gospel feels more like a religious belief than an actual announcement of good news to you, how might you be misunderstanding who Jesus is and what he came to do?

# ARE YOU LEARNING TO LIVE IN GOD'S BLESSING?

## 02 The Beatitudes

### Passage

Matthew 5:1–12

### Concept

Jesus began his famous Sermon on the Mount by talking about what true blessing looks like. Jesus' vision of "the good life" looks different than anything we would list out, but this is the entry point to the Kingdom of God.

### Key Question

Through the Beatitudes, Jesus answers the question: What is the good life? How would you answer this question? How does that contrast with Jesus' answer?

### The Three Circles Tool

Do you see our tool of the three circles being played out in Matthew 5:1–12? With whom? How so?

## The Beatitudes

When was the last time you recognized the brokenness of this world? This is a question none of us have to think too hard about. We can all point to major events that prove the broken state of the world: the death of a loved one, a national tragedy, the loss of a job, a strained relationship with a spouse or a child, etc. But we even feel the brokenness in smaller things everyday: aches and pains in our bodies, miscommunications with friends and family, the stress of modern life, and on and on and on. It's all around us.

We spend so much time and energy trying to escape this brokenness and restore comfort and security to our lives. This is right, in a sense. But when Jesus began his famous "Sermon on the Mount," he redefined what blessing looks like. We tend to consider ourselves blessed when our situation is calm, when we are materially prosperous.

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount by inviting us into a life of blessing that looks much different than we'd expect. He does this using a list of blessings that has come to be known as the Beatitudes. "Beatitudes" is a Latin word meaning "blessings." So the question Jesus answers is: What does it look like to be living in the blessing of God?

1. *Read Matthew 5:1–12. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

### Hungering & Thirsting

There is much to glean from this short section of Jesus' sermon. We will focus on a few concepts. Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness."

He promises that those who desire to know and to live in God's ways will be satisfied. If this is your pursuit, you will find what you're looking for.

But there's also an acknowledgement of brokenness in the concept of hungering and thirsting. If we truly long for God's ways, it means that something is missing now—that's what hunger and thirst mean. Something is currently lacking and we yearn for it. We long to see God's righteousness, to see his ways become reality on the earth.

There is also an echo of this in Jesus' statement that the pure in heart will see God. Unless we our hearts are pure, we will not be able to see God clearly. A dirty mirror gives a distorted picture. To the extent that our hearts are impure, we have a distorted picture of God. A pure heart, allows us to see God and pursue him as he is. As we hunger and thirst for God and his righteous ways, we want to be constantly seeking to purify our desire. Are we hungering for him. Truly? Or are we hungering for better circumstances? For blessing as we define it rather than the blessing he offers?

2. *In your own words, what do you think it means to "hunger and thirst for righteousness"? Have you ever seen this evidenced in your own life? How so?*

## **The Good Life**

As Jesus transforms our concept of blessing, he is also giving a unique answer to the ancient question: What is the good life? If you were to list out what "the good life" includes, none of the things Jesus' discusses are likely to be on your list. As we should probably expect by now, Jesus' view of this is vastly different than our own. It differs from what we're taught and what we subconsciously adopt from our culture.

Henri Nouwen says that much of our lives are driven by a few powerful lies. Namely:

- We are what we do.

- We are what we have.
- We are what others think of us.

But there is a powerful truth in seeing ourselves the way God sees us. Namely:

- I am not what I do.
- I am not what I have.
- I am not what others think of me.

Instead, I am the beloved child of a loving Creator. This makes all the difference in the world. We always derail when we adopt a version of the good life that differs from God's. With the Beatitudes, we can begin to see that God is calling us into something greater.

3. *In this passage, Jesus is answering the question, "what is the good life?" If you look at your pursuits, your interests, and the vacations you've planned over the last few years, what picture have you been painting of what "the good life" is? Do you think your version of the good life is typical or atypical? How so?*

4. *How would you say Jesus is answering this question in this passage? What is the good life according to Jesus?*

## **Re-Imagining Blessing**

We actually find several Beatitudes in the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms and Proverbs. The basic idea of these is that if you do what the Lord says, things will go well for you. And that is certainly true in many ways. But Jesus basically flips this concept on its head. He gives us

Beatitudes for a broken world. Beatitudes for the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus shows us that the Kingdom of Heaven is open to everybody, to the poor in spirit, to the mourning, to the oppressed. Blessing is not about everything going your way.

The kinds of people who are blessed represent things that we are not pursuing, but rather situations we find ourselves in. We are blessed when we find ourselves in these places where we feel trapped.

For example, being poor in spirit is about recognizing our inability to rectify our situation. And that's an actual blessing. This is the beginning point of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we are going to see the Kingdom of God in this world, it's going to begin with recognizing that things are broken, that all is not as it should be. If we feel like things are all going pretty good, then we are blind to much of what is actually happening. Think back to John the Baptist and our discussion of the Levelling Tool. Those who are high must be brought low, and those who are low must be lifted up.

Think of it this way: How many blessings in your life have come through difficult circumstances? This is not the easy path, but it's the path to true blessing. The good life is present even in our times of suffering. To enter the Kingdom means becoming low. We can begin to recognize the blessing and the joy of the difficult seasons. God is there, he can be found, even when it seems he is absent or inactive.

5. *What is your typical mindset when you find yourself in a difficult season? Do you recognize God's presence in these times, or is that a struggle? Why do you think that is?*

6. *If we shifted our values away from material blessing and general prosperity to instead valuing the things that Jesus refers to as blessings here, how would we look different than we do right now?*

7. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to allow you to see blessing as he sees it. Pray that you would develop a true hunger and thirst for righteousness.*

### **Key Question**

Through the Beatitudes, Jesus answers the question: What is the good life? How would you answer this question? How does that contrast with Jesus' answer?



# ARE YOU LEARNING TO LIVE IN GOD'S KINGDOM?

## 03 The Sermon on the Mount

### Passage

Matthew 5–7

### Concept

In Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount," he challenges our understanding of what it means to live a life that is pleasing to God. So many of the assumptions that religious people make about obeying commands reveal a lack of true relationship with God. In this sermon, Jesus challenges us to see the kingdom in a completely different light.

### Key Question

Based on Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, how is your understanding of what it means to live in God's kingdom being changed, challenged, or clarified?

### The Tool

Do you see our tool being played out in Matthew 5–7? With whom? How so?

## The Sermon on the Mount

Have you ever completely missed the point with regard to something you thought you understood perfectly? This happens to many of us at some point in our careers as technology improves and best practices shift. It sometimes happens in the sciences as some new knowledge reveals that our previous models were inadequate. It happens to married people on a regular basis—our spouses have a way of revealing the areas in which our (over)confidence is unwarranted.

It's difficult to have that realization that everything you thought you understood suddenly needs to be rethought. Some choose in these moments to continue on as usual, even though their basis for operating this way has been proven inadequate. It's difficult to start over, to relearn.

Jesus is a master at making us rethink what we thought we knew. But it is vitally important that we learn to relearn. We have a real tendency to *hear* Jesus without truly *learning* from him. The difference is everything. As you read through the Sermon on the Mount, keep an eye open for all the ways that Jesus subverts the conventional wisdom and forces his hearers to start over from the beginning.

1. *Read Matthew 5–7. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

### Vehicle vs. Vision

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is overturning much of the conventional wisdom on what it means to please God. But Jesus also makes clear that he is in no way trying to do

away with the Old Testament Law. God himself had delivered this Law to Moses to govern the life of the people of Israel, his representatives on earth. Jesus insisted that he wasn't abolishing this Law. Instead, he says that he came to fulfill it. He came to reveal that which the Law was intended to reveal.

One way to think about Jesus' statements about the Law here is through the lens of "vehicle vs. vision." If you're planning a vacation, the mental picture of you sitting on a beach is the vision. Once you've settled on the vision, you figure out a vehicle to get make the vision a reality. In this case, the vehicle is a car or plane tickets or whatever other arrangements and adjustments need to be made to carry you to the place you want to be.

The vehicle gets you to where you're trying to go, but the vehicle is not the point. Your destination is the point. The vision that led you to choose a means of transportation to get there is the point. But when it comes to the way people relate to God, we have a tendency to grow attached to the vehicle. Often, the vehicle comes to replace the vision. And this is a huge problem.

God's vision is to have us with him. To bring us close to himself. To have a relationship with us. This is why he created the earth, and the Garden of Eden, and why he placed us in that garden and walked with us in the evenings. He wants to be with us.

One of the vehicles he created to facilitate that vision is the Law. The Law was created to facilitate that relationship, but the laws themselves were never the point. Think about what rules are intended to accomplish. They provide a framework. They offer instruction and protection. But they can never provide us with internal motivation. They can protect us from poor choices, but they should never be allowed to replace the original vision. The internal motivation we need is a longing to be with God, and that flows through relationship, not rules.

So as Jesus speaks to a crowd of religious people who had grown fond of the Law itself, he's helping them to distinguish the vehicle from the vision. To be sure, they had distorted the vehicle as well by adding laws and details to the Law that God had handed down. But Jesus undercuts all of this and exposes the ways in which they've missed the point. Jesus uses the phrase, "You've heard it said..., but I say to you..." In doing this, Jesus was not relaxing the

Law, he was actually showing the intent of the Law. There's a way of keeping the Law that actually misses the point, and Jesus is exposing the extent to which religious people, who took great pride in keeping the Law, were totally missing the heart of God. They exchanged a relationship with God for the rules of God. We are constantly in danger of doing the same.

2. *How do you tend to relate to the commands of God? Is it possible that you're guilty of any of the distortions that Jesus addresses? Do any of Jesus' words here challenge the way you've related to his laws and/or commands? How so?*

## **Be Perfect**

One of the most shocking statements that Jesus makes in this sermon is "You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is the exact point where any realistic person would throw up her hands and walk away.

But don't think of this as Jesus waiting at the finish line and saying, "If you can run this race perfectly, you can join me here." Remember that Jesus started this sermon by saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." So as we walk through Jesus' teaching on missing the point of the Law, and as we hear these words that tell us that we must be perfect as God himself is perfect, how do we begin to feel? Poor in spirit. And this is precisely where we need to be. As we find ourselves poor in spirit, we come to the one who is rich in spirit. But if we relax the Law, we are tempted to believe that we are doing okay and then we never realize our great need for the good news that Jesus offers. And that good news is himself!

Another big statement that Jesus makes here is the warning against judging other people. A huge tell as to whether or not we are living according to the kingdom is whether or not we are judging other people. Setting ourselves up as judges has no place in the kingdom of God. Any time you find yourself judging someone else, you can know for sure that you're misunderstanding the purpose of God's commands. This is the exact opposite of being poor in

spirit. It reveals your own self-righteousness, rather than your desperate dependence on Jesus to carry you through. Lack of compassion reveals lack of humility, and Jesus points to this essential to living in God's kingdom.

3. *How do you feel when you hear Jesus say that the standard is perfection? How do you think he wants you to respond to that statement?*

### **The Narrow Road**

Jesus says that entering the kingdom of God is like walking through a narrow gate and along a narrow road. Like walking along a mountain path, you have to watch every step. If you're going to follow Jesus, it's going to require constant attention. It's not the default in a fallen world. We must always be keeping our eyes on him, always being careful to follow, to lay our motivations bare, to seek his help and guidance and empowering.

Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven but only those who do the will of the Father. Those who hear and act accordingly will find life. Learning is not just about hearing. True learning means doing.

4. *In your own words, what do you think it means to follow Jesus on the narrow road? How well are you doing at following along the narrow road?*

5. *As you step back and reflect on the Sermon on the Mount as a whole (include the Beatitudes that you discussed last week), how is your view of what it means to live in the kingdom of heaven being changed, challenged, or clarified?*
  
6. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to continue to reveal the nature of his kingdom to you. Pray that he would guide you moment by moment in following him through the narrow gate and the narrow path.*

### **Key Question**

Based on Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, how is your understanding of what it means to live in God's kingdom being changed, challenged, or clarified?

# Question 04:

## HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED ME?

While Jesus is the constant in the storyline of the Gospels, we continue to find people whose lives come into contact with Jesus. These people are coming from a host of different backgrounds, with a host of different mindsets, and a host of different pursuits. Some are hurting and broken. Others are wealthy and self-righteous. Some are passionate and inspired. Still others are apathetic and wandering. But all of these different types of people have encounters with Jesus in the Gospels. The encounters themselves are significant, but it's also vital to watch how each person responds to that encounter.

We all have these encounters as well. It is essential to acknowledge Jesus. To see him. To learn from him. But every time we have an encounter with Jesus, we have to choose how we will respond.

The nineteenth century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard insisted that each person must have a face to face encounter with Jesus. To the apathetic Christians within the state church of Denmark, Kierkegaard insisted that claiming the name of Jesus was not enough. Until a person has come face to face with Jesus, so to speak, and come to a place where they either turn

away in rejection or embrace him in love, they have not entered the gate into true Christianity. An encounter is required before we can truly relate to Jesus.

If you have an encounter with Jesus that leaves you unchanged, then it's not a true encounter. It's possible to come into proximity with Jesus but miss him completely. But a true encounter will change you. How it changes you depends on your starting point.

### The Tool: The Parabolas

Our tool for this section is a series of four parabolas. Each is essentially a U-turn. Each person approaches Jesus from a different direction, and when they encounter Jesus they find themselves moving in the opposite direction. It is the same Jesus in each case, but the nature of the encounter and the effect on each life depends on what the person needs most in that situation.

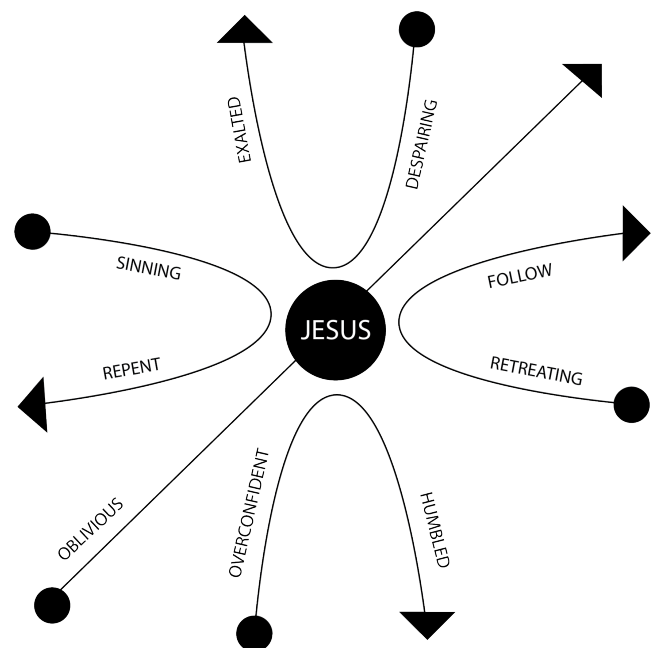
#### *Go Back: The Sinning Repent*

When Jesus encountered people who were in sin, he called them to repent. We have already seen this in the ministry of John the Baptist: In preparing the way for Jesus, he warned that the axe was at the root of the tree and he called the people to repent. We will see this again in the next few sessions as Jesus calls the tax collector

Matthew to follow him: He immediately repents and follows Jesus. When we are actively sinning and in that state have an encounter with Jesus, we turn around and repent.

#### *Go Down: The Overconfident Are Humbled*

When Jesus encountered the proud or overconfident, he called them to humility. We see this over and over again with the Pharisees. They were so confident in their interpretations of Scripture, so confident in their status as the religious leaders of Israel. They consistently approached Jesus with arrogance and superiority, so when they encountered Jesus, he humbled them. The only direction for them to turn was back down, and a true encounter with





Jesus leads in this direction for the overconfident. Another example of this is the would-be followers of Jesus who came to him saying, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus called them to count the cost to be sure they were willing to let go of what they loved most in order to follow. Jesus was checking their overconfidence and calling them to humility. When we encounter Jesus in a state of overconfidence or outright pride, we find ourselves moving downward in humility.

#### *Go Forward: The Retreating Follow*

We also find situations in which Jesus’ followers lost their confidence. They knew who Jesus was and what he was capable of. But there were times when they lost sight of all of this and began to fall back, to retreat. Think here of John the Baptist sending his disciples to Jesus to ask if he was really the Messiah or if they should be looking for someone else. This was a moment of temporary retreat for John, and his encounter with Jesus called him once again to follow Jesus by advancing rather than retreating. We also see Jesus’ disciples in this situation when they find themselves in a storm on the sea. They wake up Jesus in fear, and he rebukes their weak faith. They had forgotten what Jesus could do, and he calls them once again to follow him in faith. When we encounter Jesus in the midst of our timid retreats, Jesus gives us confidence to turn around and push onward.

#### *Go Up: The Despairing Are Exalted*

Finally, we also see examples of people who were weak, hurting, and despairing. When these people encountered Jesus they were exalted, given hope, and made whole. In Luke 4, Jesus read from Isaiah and announced the good news that precisely these broken, captive, poor people were going to be healed and set free. We also find Jesus visiting the sick, spiritually oppressed, and marginalized. As he does, he heals them more fully than they could imagine and in doing so, he exalts them. Their encounter with Jesus raises them to a new height that they could never have reached any other way. When we encounter Jesus in the midst of our despair, we find that Jesus heals us, exalting us to a place of honor and healing.

#### *Don’t Miss It*

There is one final line in our diagram that we have yet to account for. This line fails to have a true encounter with Jesus. It represents the spiritually oblivious. They move in the direction of Jesus, but they continue on unchanged. Though they crossed paths with Jesus, the lack of

course correction shows that even in interacting with Jesus they failed to truly encounter him. No one encounters Jesus and remains the same.

Very often, this path of obliviousness characterizes the Pharisees. But we would be foolish to ignore the possibility that we will find ourselves in this position. For all our talk about Jesus, we may actually miss him, even in the midst of our religious activities. As we've seen, an encounter with Jesus could move us in a number of directions, but if we remain unmoved, then we haven't truly seen Jesus. We haven't encountered him.

The point of all of this is to simply come into contact with Jesus. To collide with him, if you will. If we slide past him, our lives remain unchanged. But if we collide with him, we will be changed. And always for the better.

# HOW WILL YOU RESPOND TO ME?

## 01 Encounters with Jesus

### Passage

Matthew 8:14–9:13

### Concept

In these chapters we see a variety of responses to Jesus. Jesus is going about his Father's business, he is miraculously doing the works of the kingdom. In these stories, nobody questions the power of Jesus, but they respond very differently to him. As we read through these stories, we should be asking why each person responds as they do. We should also ask how we would respond to Jesus in each situation. It's easy to imagine that we would respond perfectly, but the reality is that our motivations are complex and our hearts are often divided. Keep asking yourself honestly how you will respond to Jesus?

### Key Question

Based on your encounters with Jesus—either your experiences with him recently or cumulatively up to this point in your life—how are you responding to him now?

### The Parabola Tool

Do you see our parabola tool being played out in Matthew 8:14–9:13? With whom? How so?

## Encounters with Jesus

In our own minds, we all know how to respond perfectly in each situation. It's easy to hear a story about someone who responded to a situation poorly and to know instinctively, "they should have done *this* instead." But we all know that real life and real relationships don't work this way. Depending on our context, our frame of mind, and even the time of day, we respond in a host of different ways. You probably don't need to think about the distant past to recall a time when you responded poorly to a friend, spouse, or child.

Relationships are never static, they are dynamic. Living. You don't get to choose once and for all that you will be kind to your spouse. That's a great decision to make, but it's a decision that must be made moment by moment. Every married person vows on their wedding day to be loving to their spouse, but that is simply one in an endless stream of moments in which they will have to choose love over anger, bitterness, apathy, or rejection.

The same is true of our relationship with Jesus. Without a face to face encounter of some kind, we can't enter into a living relationship. We have to collide with him, so to speak, and then we must choose how we will respond.

In this session, you will read Matthew 8:14–9:13. In these chapters, we see many different responses to Jesus. For example, we see:

- Ambivalence: Some people want to follow Jesus in theory, but aren't truly committed (8:18–22)
- Worship: The disciples worship Jesus after seeing his power (8:23–27)
- Rejection: Some villagers send Jesus away when he demonstrates his power (8:28–34)
- Allegiance: Matthew leaves everything behind and follows Jesus (9:9)
- Disgust: The Pharisees are disgusted by the people Jesus associates with (9:10–13)

In this section, there's already a buzz about Jesus. He is doing impossible things, and people are talking about him. So when they actually have an encounter with Jesus, how will they respond? As you read, pay attention to their responses and try to evaluate your own response.

1. *Read Matthew 8:14–9:13. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. *Which responses to Jesus do you resonate with? Why do you relate to the way those people responded?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. *Which responses to Jesus do you find baffling? Why is that response difficult for you to relate to?*

### **Challenging Would-Be Followers**

In Matthew 8:18–22, people come up to Jesus and state their desire to follow him. But Jesus pushes them to consider what they're really saying. Following Jesus isn't done in principle, it happens in the real decisions and pursuits of daily life. It's easy for us to be "on board" with Jesus until it actually costs us something. Until there's something we are called to give up. When following Jesus presents us with an obstacle, how will we respond to him?

## **Calming a Storm**

In Matthew 8:23–27, Jesus gives his followers a glimpse of his true power by calming a storm. What had been a moment of true fear turned into a moment of awe. Here they saw irrefutable proof of Jesus' power over the natural world. The disciples were overcome with a sense of Jesus' transcendent power, and their response was to worship him. When we get a glimpse of Jesus' true power, how will we respond to him?

## **Casting Out Demons**

In Matthew 8:28–34, Jesus sets two demonized men free from their spiritual oppression. The men are liberated, but the demons rush into a herd of pigs and destroy them. The villagers who arrive on the scene respond by rejecting Jesus when they see what he is capable of.

This story shows people who do not deny Jesus' power—just as with the calming of the sea, Jesus' true nature is on display. But these villagers don't care about the people Jesus is helping. Rather than seeing men being set free from the power of darkness, they see Jesus wasting time on a couple of menaces and they become angered that Jesus allowed their pigs to be destroyed. They don't love the people, they're grieved over the loss of money. So they reject Jesus on these grounds. They didn't doubt his power, but they didn't want anything to do with the things that Jesus cared about.

This type of response carries a warning for those who closely observe Jesus' activity. Within the Church, could we be those people who see Jesus, who recognize what he can do, and yet want nothing to do with the things that Jesus cares about. What would Jesus do if he were leading our church? And how would we respond to that? Do we really think we would not resist what Jesus would want to do? How he would want to direct our resources? Are we sure we wouldn't ultimately reject him?

## **Eating with Tax Collectors and Sinners**

In Matthew 9:9–13, we see two responses to Jesus. Matthew responds by giving Jesus his allegiance. But when the Pharisees see Jesus eating with Matthew and his outcast friends, they respond in disgust and outrage. The Pharisees are grossed out because they don't care

about the people before them. Sitting back and being disgusted is the luxury of the bystander, the observer. But Jesus loves people, so rather than sitting back in disgust and casting judgment, he lovingly enters into their mess. Relationship leads us into the mess. So as Jesus leads us to cross paths with those the world considers gross or unacceptable, how will we respond?

4. *As people reject Jesus in these stories, what do you think they're actually rejecting?*

5. *As people are drawn to Jesus in these stories, what do you think they're actually drawn to?*

### **Keep Responding**

These categories are not firmly set. We tend to flow in and out of these different responses to Jesus. Jesus has our allegiance until he doesn't. We find ourselves worshiping him until we find ourselves disgusted by someone he loves or something he pursues.

Following Jesus is continual. It's moment by moment. If you find yourself discouraged by your response to Jesus, you have another opportunity now and every moment to embrace him. If you have been resting on your response to him in the past, recognize that you'll need to continue responding.

6. *Based on your encounters with Jesus—either your experiences with him recently or cumulatively up to this point in your life—how are you responding to him now?*

7. *Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for the encounters you've had with Jesus. Pray for the grace to respond in loving devotion as he continues to give you encounters.*

### **Key Question**

Based on your encounters with Jesus—either your experiences with him recently or cumulatively up to this point in your life—how are you responding to him now?



# WHAT DO YOU EXPECT OF ME?

## 02 Galilee Encounters

### Passages

Luke 4:16–44

Luke 5:12–16

Luke 6:6–11

Luke 7:18–35

Luke 8:1–3

*\*You may want to take the time to read all of John 4–7. Though this section includes some passages we've already covered, it will give you a better feel for what's going on at this stage in Jesus' ministry.*

### Concept

As Jesus travels around Galilee, many different people have encounters with him. Once again, it is helpful to evaluate the way people respond. As Jesus heals and performs other miracles, we see him doing the works of the kingdom. We can either love him and find life in him and his ways, or we can do what religious people have always done and work against him.

### Key Question

If you honestly assess your heart and expectations in light of the stories in Luke 4–7, does Jesus actually fit your expectations? Or is there a part of you that would prefer a different type of Messiah? How so?

### The Parabola Tool

Do you see our parabola tool being played out in Luke 4–7? With whom? How so?

## Galilee Encounters

Who do you most want to be? When you close your eyes and dream about your ideal life, what does it look like?

We all have an idea of how we want to live, of what we want to get out of life. Very often, these ideas bleed into our picture of God. Have you ever noticed that your idea of God often matches your idealized version of yourself? It has been said that God created humanity in his image, and then we returned the favor. In other words, we tend to think that God is a lot like us.

So when you think about Jesus, does he care about the same things you care about? Is he involved in the same pursuits? Would his life look very different than your own? In this session, we will be looking at the big picture of a few chapters of Scripture: Luke 4–7. There are many stories here, so as you read, try to get the big picture. In this season of ministry, what is Jesus trying to communicate to people? What you will see is that different groups of people had differing ideas of who the Messiah is and what his purpose ought to be. These expectations should be a warning to us. If our vision of the Messiah looks too much like who we would naturally be, we are probably missing a lot.

1. *Read Luke 4–7. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

## Healing the Sick

Let's examine a few stories from this larger section of Luke's Gospel. In Luke 4:16–30, Jesus reads a prophesy from Isaiah about the coming Messiah and the good news he would proclaim. Basically, Jesus is saying, “the one you're looking for is here, because these things are happening: the sick are healed, the lame walk, the blind see, the captives are set free.” At first everyone is excited about this, but they quickly turn on him when he confronts them with difficult truths.

As we read some of these stories of people being healed, we see some of the ways in which Jesus makes this good news into reality. We need to be careful as we read these healing stories. God does heal. That is one major realization we gain from these passages. But we also have to recognize that these passages are descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, rather than reading these as a manual for how to heal people, we need to ask what these descriptions tell us about what God is doing through Jesus.

Don't take the descriptions as promises that God is going to heal everything that ails you. God can do this, but it doesn't mean that's what he's going to always do in every case. Rather, these stories, as with every story in the Bible, are descriptions of the ways God interacts with human beings. God is alive and interacting with people in various ways according to what he is doing in any given season. We can't turn individual stories into algorithms that predict how God will interact with human beings.

When Jesus heals the leper in Luke 5:12–16, the leper approaches Jesus and says, “If you will, you can make me clean.” He not only believes that Jesus can heal him, but he also submits to Jesus' desire to heal him. Or not. We have these hurts and real sources of pain in our lives and we are right—like this leper—to come to Jesus and acknowledge his power to heal. But at the same time, it's fitting that we submit to Jesus' desire to heal us at any given time or in any given way. We don't demand healing of a certain type on a certain timeline. Jesus is here and he can heal us, but we submit to his timing and his plan. This is difficult to do, but it gets down to the very essence of what it means to have faith in Jesus. It's more than just faith that he can do anything he wants to do, it's also faith that he will know the best time and the best manner to heal.

2. *How does Jesus healing the sick embody the good news? Why is this significant?*

3. *Does this have any implications for the way we think about and announce the good news today?*

### **Creating a New Family of Broken Followers**

As Jesus continues to encounter different people, he heals, restores, and forgives. In doing this, he is creating a new spiritual family. Looking ahead a bit, we read in Luke 8:1–3 about many followers of Jesus who themselves had been healed or set free by Jesus, and who were now following him. It seems clear that not everyone Jesus healed became a follower, but many did. And here we get a glimpse of Jesus healing people and then calling them to join him, to become part of the new family he was creating. These were not perfect people; they were simply people who had been healed and were now acting alongside Jesus.

This is true of us as well. We have been touched by Jesus in some way, healed by Jesus in some way, and now we follow him as part of his new family. It changes who we are and gives us a new purpose and a new calling. We do not have it all together, but we follow Jesus because we know who he is and we believe in what he's called us to.

4. *As we see more people begin to travel with Jesus, how would you describe your own journey with Jesus? Are there any characters that you identify with? How so?*

## **Interfering with the Work of God**

Even in the midst of all of these amazing stories of transformed lives, we find people resisting Jesus. For example, in Luke 6:6–11, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Even as Jesus performs this miraculous act, the Pharisees actively oppose him.

There are always those people who resist Jesus. They are uncomfortable with the boundaries that Jesus pushes; it does not fit in their understanding of what God desires. So they resist Jesus even as he does the works of the kingdom.

It's easy to point fingers at the Pharisees, but this is a warning for us as well. We can get too caught up in trying not to cross certain lines and miss the very things God is doing all around us. We can actually find ourselves opposing God.

Those of us who interfere in the work of God the most today are likely those who care about God's laws the most, who miss church the least, who know these stories about Jesus the best, who have memorized the largest chunks of Scripture, but who have come to love the method more than the Messenger. We all have ways in which we interfere with Jesus. We have lines we don't want him to cross. We have things we don't want him to ask for. We have the idols we're not really willing to set down.

We have to be careful, because the last thing we truly want is to be those people who could encounter Jesus working in our world and wind up resisting him for reasons we believe are justified.

5. *Try for a moment of complete honesty here. As you consider your life right now, are there any ways in which you may be opposing God's work? How so?*

## Jesus' Purpose

In Luke 7:18–35, John's disciples came to Jesus and asked him if he was the one John had prophesied about. In answering their question, Jesus pointed to all of the things he had been doing between Luke 4 and this moment in Luke 7: The blind were receiving sight, the sick were being healed, the captives were being freed. These were the very things that Jesus had announced in Luke 4 as he read from Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus was doing the things he said he would do—not in an abstract spiritualized way, but he was literally doing all of this in the lives of real people. In this season of his ministry, Jesus was demonstrating that he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God.

In this context, Jesus says that the people in this generation are like children who simply bicker back and forth. They are arguing about who the Messiah would be, what he would look like. It's possible that even now we have turned Jesus into someone he is not. We identify Jesus with all of our church activities, but when we look at the life of Jesus, he ate and spent time with tax collectors and sinners. He healed the sick and outcasts. He was compassionate with sinners. Jesus broke down many of the structures. If we are not careful, we create boxes for Jesus to fit in that are significantly different than who Jesus actually is. We must be sure that the Messiah we call other people to follow is in fact Jesus himself, and not some version of him that we have created in our own image.

6. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to reveal the work he is doing around you. Pray that he would expose any areas in which you are opposing his work. Thank God for the work he is doing in you and around you.*

## Key Question

If you honestly assess your heart and expectations in light of the stories in Luke 4–7, does Jesus actually fit your expectations? Or is there a part of you that would prefer a different type of Messiah? How so?

# **WILL YOU BE SUSTAINED BY ME?**

## **03 The Bread of Life**

### **Passage**

John 6

### **Concept**

After Jesus miraculously provides bread for five thousand, he is confronted by crowds who simply want more bread. Jesus explains that he himself is the bread; he is the food. This passage pushes us to trust Jesus even when he asks us to follow him into situations that do not make sense to us. He is the true source of life, sustenance, and purpose.

### **Key Question**

Do you love Jesus because of what he can provide? Or because of who he is? What is the difference? And how can you know you love Jesus for who he is?

### **The Parabola Tool**

Do you see our parabola tool being played out in John 6? With whom? How so?

## The Bread of Life

Have you ever felt purposeless in your work? As you work so hard day in and day out, do you ever wonder what the point of it all is?

We are all constantly working. We work at our jobs. We work to keep our houses clean and maintained. We work to care for our children. We all work hard to provide for ourselves and our families. If we don't work, we won't eat, and we won't be able to provide. This is good and right and natural. But provision is an insufficient goal for all of your work. If you are only working to provide for your physical needs, then something is lacking. You've probably felt this pull. There must be something more to all of this than simply providing the physical food and things that my family needs!

In our passage, Jesus says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you" (John 6:27). Here Jesus is tapping into a greater longing. He's addressing something that we all feel. Sometimes this longing for more becomes a crisis, other times it's a nagging question in the back of our minds.

In this section, Jesus will ask us if we are working for the things that perish or if we are working for something that lasts. We all know what work is, we know what it's like to work hard, but Jesus always gets to the heart and pushes us to look at what we're working *for*.

So how would you answer that question? What are you working so hard *for*? In the end, we all know that it's not about the work itself. It's not about how hard we work. It's about the greater purpose behind it. How often do we find ourselves working and working and working and breaking our backs and wearing ourselves out, and we're not sure why? Every now and then we stop and ask ourselves: What is the point? It's not the size of your bank account, not your possessions or status. There's something more.



As we dive into this section of Scripture, we have to ask ourselves what that “something more” is. Jesus will direct us to it, but we have to have eyes to see and ears to hear.

1. *Read John 6. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

## **The Sign**

After Jesus miraculously fed five thousand, the people caught up to him, expecting more. The crowd was enamored with what Jesus was capable of, and they came to the conclusion that Jesus was a prophet, a man who had come from God. Jesus recognized that they were all going to rush to him and try to make him their king. The irony, of course, is that Jesus was and is, in fact, king. But not in the way that the crowds were expecting.

This is why the call from Jesus is always “follow me.” It’s not about what we want to do, it’s not about what we expect Jesus to do in our agenda, it’s about Jesus being who he is and leading us where he wants us to go.

When the crowds caught up to Jesus again, he explained to them what he was doing. It wasn’t about the bread; Jesus explains that it was a sign. A sign is all about what the thing itself points to. It shows the significance of what the whole thing means. The crowds had come to find more food, but Jesus says that they should be looking for something entirely different. It wasn’t about the food, it was about him.

How often do we come to Jesus because we’ve seen what he provides for us, and we come back again and again because of what he can provide? It’s not wrong to seek Jesus for the things we need, but we have to realize that the stuff itself is not the reason he provides for us. What he really wants to give us is himself. He provides for us as a sign of his ultimate provision, which is giving himself to us. What God gives us as provision will never be enough. What we need is him.

2. *How often do you come to God seeking provision? (This is an appropriate thing to do, and it's actually something we often neglect.) Why do you think you come to him in this way so often or so seldom?*
  
3. *Have you ever found yourself coming to God more for what he provides than for himself? What is the distinction here and why does it matter?*

## **Trust**

The underlying question Jesus is driving at in this section is how much we trust him even when what he says seems impossible to us. Jesus feeds five thousand, and as he does this impossible task, he asks his disciples to trust him.

In this context, Jesus says that doing the will of God is believing in Jesus (v. 29). Sometimes we equate belief with agreeing to propositional truths, but Jesus has something more in mind. It's about trust. Do we really trust Jesus? Are we willing to follow him? To place ourselves in his hands? To go where he goes and to do what he does? This involves more than our minds, it requires our lives. It means that he will set the agenda and we will walk in it because we *believe*—we *trust*—that the place he leads is the place we need to be.

4. *How do you respond when Jesus calls you to do something that makes no sense given your context and experience? Why?*

5. *What have you seen happen in those times when you have trusted God in the midst of these situations?*

### **I Am the Bread**

When the crowds ask Jesus to provide more bread miraculously for them, Jesus tells them, “I am the bread.” He’s explaining clearly that *he is the food*. When you find yourself starving or in need in any possible sense, the whole point is that we need to come directly to Jesus—he is the bread. He is the food. The people demanded a sign from Jesus to prove that he came from God. They pointed to the time when God supernaturally provided manna from heaven to feed Israel. But the irony is that earlier in our passage—literally the previous day—Jesus had miraculously provided bread and fish for them to eat. He had already performed the sign, they seem to just want more food.

They didn’t want Jesus, they just wanted full stomachs. Jesus’ point is that it doesn’t matter what hungers we have, it doesn’t matter why we come seeking Jesus; the real question is whether or not we want Jesus. The question is whether or not we believe that Jesus is the true bread, the true source of life. The battle is not just to see God at work, but also to believe in him. To trust him.

Jesus confidently says that only those who are being drawn by God will see who he truly is. Jesus is clearly claiming to be God, but he has the confidence to know that only those who are ready will see that reality. We have to ask ourselves: Who is Jesus?

Jesus can sense that the people asking these questions are not with him, so he takes it way further and talks about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. He’s not concerned about convincing them, he talks more about the reality to which the sign points. It’s about him. It’s about how we relate to him. So he talks about this deep reality, knowing that it will push his questioners further away. He’s not concerned about that because he knows their hearts are already far from him.

6. *Do you trust Jesus? What evidence can you point to that demonstrates that you trust him? If you do trust him, what do you sense him calling you to trust him in during this season of your life?*
7. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to increase your faith. Pray that you would be able to see Jesus truly and follow him with your full trust.*

### **Key Question**

Do you love Jesus because of what he can provide? Or because of who he is? What is the difference? And how can you know you love Jesus for who he is?

# Question 05:

## Will You Join Me?

There doesn't seem to be any ambiguity in the gospels when it comes to joining Jesus. When Jesus asks Peter to drop his net or Matthew to join him, there is a clear and obvious point of decision. Either they leave their jobs and travel with Jesus to become fishers of men, or they don't.

Throughout the gospels we find that people respond in different ways. Some did. Some didn't. But the call always seemed to be clear.

Today it is a little more difficult to discern. Jesus isn't present in the same way. We have the Holy Spirit, of course, but the Spirit isn't literally walking from city to city by foot. So joining the work of the Holy Spirit, participating in the work of the kingdom, can seem more ambiguous.

Would Jesus want you to leave your job to go into vocational ministry? Does he want you to start a non-profit organization? Does he want you to join him in talking to your neighbor? Does he want you to do devotionals with your children or disciple other adults? Should you serve in youth ministry, prison ministry, or inner city ministry? The reality is that it can be all of these things. But it doesn't have to be any of them.

Maybe it will help to consider a few things that Jesus said and did.

- 1) Making his disciples into "fishers of men."
- 2) Sending the disciples out two by two.

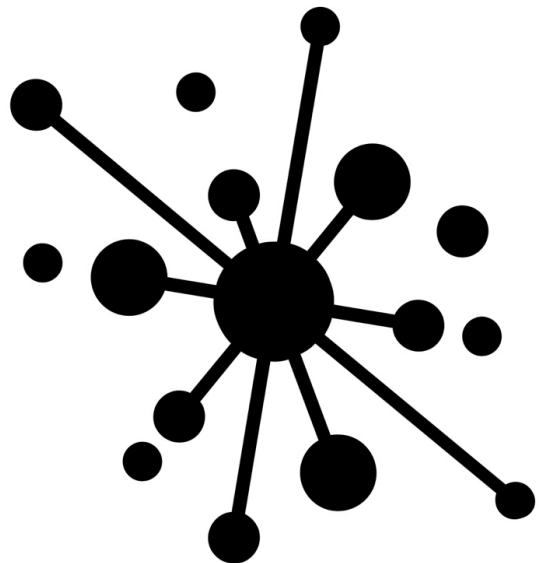
- 3) Teaching his disciples to pray “Your kingdom come.”
- 4) Boiling the Law down to “Love God, Love others.”
- 5) Explaining that the world will know his followers by their love.

In each of these situations, Jesus is centering his kingdom around relationships. As fascinating as it is to watch Jesus walk from city to city performing miracles, this isn't the real focus of his mission. The people are. Jesus always had compassion on the people he encountered; this was the true heart behind his miraculous healings.

To be a follower of Jesus is to join him in what he doing. At the heart of it all, being a follower of Jesus means being a lover of God and a lover of people. This means that it's impossible to follow Jesus and be relationally isolated. Joining Jesus means forming and strengthening relationships with the people God places in our lives.

### **The Tool: The Network**

Our tool for this month is the network. The network diagram actually serves as a great visual for what the kingdom of God looks like. It's not about the church buildings we sit in to listen to sermons. Nor is it about the religious duties we perform. The kingdom of God is really about the people we interact with. It's the people we love and bless and serve and challenge and pray for.

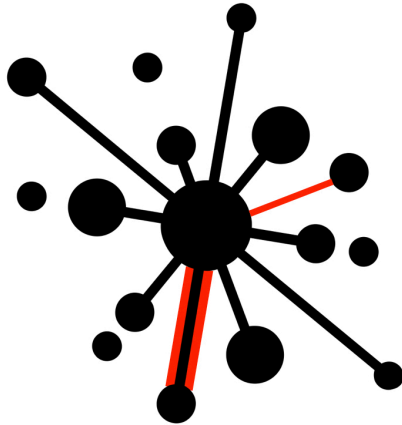


Joining Jesus means making bonds with people.

Every time we make a new connection with someone, we are opening the door to blessing another person. We are giving that person an opportunity to experience the love of God in a tangible way.

We sometimes picture the kingdom of God as a Billy Graham Crusade, where hundreds of people respond by giving their lives as individuals to God. Last month we focused on the question: “Have you encountered me?” With this focus, we saw that true spirituality requires that we encounter Jesus. It doesn't matter how religious we believe ourselves to be, if we are

not encountering Jesus, then we're missing the heart of Christianity. But we don't simply encounter Jesus as isolated individuals. Most often, we encounter Jesus through interpersonal networks. In fact, a careful study of the Billy Graham Crusades found that the overwhelming majority of people who were "converted" at these Crusades came to the Crusade with a person who had invited them. In other words, even these "conversions," which we think of as isolated individuals, are really a testament to the power of the network.



When Jesus sends us out to be fishers of men, he is calling us to join him in loving and blessing the people around us. So we open our eyes and look at the people he has placed in our lives. We form new relationships so we can share the love of Jesus in tangible ways. But we don't stop there. We also strengthen existing bonds, all the while drawing people more and more into the life of Jesus and his kingdom. As we do so, the network simultaneously strengthens and expands. What holds the whole thing together is the relationships, and these relationships are held together with the love of Jesus.

So when you think of the kingdom of God, think of joining. Think of joining Jesus—in prayer, at the table, and in his mission. And as we join Jesus, we should also think of who else we can invite to join us.

### **The Challenge: Your Prayer List**

Your challenge for this month is to develop a list of ten people that you are praying for. These are people who are not currently part of the church. They could be from your family, your neighborhood, your friend group, your workplace—wherever. When you think about those people who need to encounter Jesus and find life in him, who comes to mind?

You may not have a clear idea of exactly how you'll reach out to these people. That doesn't matter. It's amazing how much God does when we simply make it a regular discipline to pray for people. He will provide us with opportunities at the right times, but our call is to pray regularly for the people he places on our hearts and in our lives.

So your challenge for this month is to write down the names of ten people you will commit to pray for, and then to pray for those ten people by name every single day this month. When you gather with your group, spend a portion of your meeting praying for some of these names.

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# WILL YOU JOIN ME IN PRAYER?

## 01 Pray with Jesus

### Passage

Matthew 9:35–38

### Concept

As Jesus interacted with the crowds of people, he had compassion on them. His compassion led him to act in practical, loving ways towards them. In this context, Jesus invited his disciples to join him in prayer that God would send laborers into this harvest of sheep who are in need of a shepherd.

### Key Question

Where are you seeing opportunities to join Jesus in showing compassion to the people he has placed in your life?

### The Tool

Do you see our tool being played out in Matthew 9:35–38? With whom? How so?

## Pray with Jesus

“Harass” is a strong word, but we’ve all experienced being harassed in some way at some point. Harassment is what happens when people abuse their power. It happens when someone’s prestige or authority allows them to push boundaries and do things that others couldn’t get away with. This often happens in the workplace, but you may also have felt harassed at times because of your gender or your race or your occupation or your beliefs. When you’re on the receiving end of harassment, you feel as though you’re being pushed to the point of losing your cool. You feel as though someone else is taking advantage of you, trying to get you to respond in a certain way.

If you’ve ever experienced harassment, you know it’s a helpless feeling. It’s not always clear what the proper response is, and you often feel powerless to do anything about it.

Many in the Church today look at those outside the Church as wicked, sinful, and degenerate. When they look out the Church windows, they do so with suspicion and distaste. But this is not what we see with Jesus.

Jesus had no problem associating with people outside of the faith community. He rubbed shoulders with them, ate with them, and did not try to distance himself from them. In our passage, we see that when Jesus looked at the crowds, he felt compassion for them. Why? Because he saw them as *harassed* and *helpless*. He saw them and thought of sheep that had no shepherd.

Compassion starts with the recognition of another person’s situation. Compassion refuses to be disgusted by another person, but instead looks at others with love and seeks to understand the pain and wounds that another person is experiencing. Jesus knew that the people he encountered were being harassed in a variety of ways, and this led him to respond in compassion.

1. *Read Matthew 9:35–38. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

### **Sheep Without a Shepherd**

Reading the Gospels, we get the impression that most places Jesus went, the people who were sinners and outcasts gathered around him. And we get no indication that Jesus was displeased with this. The people he distanced himself from were the self-righteous and self-important religious leaders. Whenever Jesus encountered the disreputable people of his day, he always seemed to hold them close. This is different than most religious people throughout history have behaved. Why is that?

Jesus sees the things we have a difficult time seeing. He sees beyond the divisions, beyond the status, beyond the markers we typically use to decide who we will interact with and who we will avoid. And because Jesus sees past these superficial things, Jesus responds to people with compassion. It's not a stretch to say that Jesus' mission is driven by compassion.

Compassion is not pity. "Pity" implies that we feel that we are better than someone else. Compassion is not about feeling bad for someone else who is going through something we wouldn't want to be going through. Compassion is about feeling a deep affection for a person who is going through a difficult situation. It's not feeling sorry for someone, it's feeling love for someone.

As Jesus pursued his mission, he looked around and saw people who were harassed, who were going through many different kinds of struggles. And Jesus felt a deep affection for them. Jesus didn't just feel compassion when he looked at individual people. He felt compassion for *the crowds*. That means that it's not just the religious he has compassion for, but also the sick, the sinners, everyone.

It's one thing to feel compassion for someone we like. But when Jesus looked at the crowds, there were many different kinds of people there. And he felt compassion for all of them. Jesus is able to feel compassion for both the victim and the perpetrator. He is able to see the story behind it all that we don't see. He sees the hurt that is behind the veil that we will never be able to see.

In our divisive media culture, it's easy to get worked up about issues, but it's increasingly difficult to see real people. We will know we are developing compassion when we can look at someone walking past us or sitting at the next table and feel compassion for a story we don't even know yet because we understand that whatever this person's story, they are being harassed in some sense. We are all sheep without a shepherd in some sense. Without a shepherd, there are many wrong paths to go down, each of which leads us to some pain, or heartbreak, or error.

*2. Who is it most difficult for you to have compassion on? Whose story is the most difficult for you to understand?*

*3. What are some entry roads into compassion? In other words, what simple steps could you take to begin experiencing more compassion for different types of people?*

### **The Harvest Is Plentiful**

When Jesus looked out over the crowds and saw their harassment and hopelessness, he declared that the harvest was plentiful. These unshepherded sheep were ready to be brought in.

We sometimes think the harvest is scarce. This is true if we are simply going through the motions of religion. But truly, people are thirsty for the truth of the gospel. And if we can open up our eyes and have compassion on the people around us, engaging them in love and grace, then we will begin to understand that the harvest is indeed plentiful.

We often take ourselves out of Jesus' mission because we assume Jesus' plan simply won't work even before we've joined him. We have our own ideas about what righteousness looks like, how we should spend our time, or what people really need. But do we really think that we know better than Jesus? Do we really think we can do better than following in the actual footsteps of Jesus?

Jesus asks us to join him. To believe that there is a harvest ready to be brought in. To reach out in love, simply blessing people without any expectation of being blessed in return.

What we'll find is that God is already out in the world, doing things. We will never show up anywhere and find that God has not been working. We are simply invited to join in the harvest. The work of joining Jesus in mission does not mean convincing people or strong-arming them somehow. We don't need to know how God will produce the harvest, we are merely invited to join him in gathering it.

*4. What do you think "the harvest" actually is? Try to be practical and specific.*

*5. If the harvest is plentiful, why do you think the laborers are few?*

6. *Make this more personal: What do you think is the biggest hindrance you experience to joining Jesus in pursuing the harvest? What obstacles or excuses keep you from this?*

### **Pray to the Lord of the Harvest**

The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. And what we are told to do in response to this situation is pray. As we pray, we are asking God to send us out along with other laborers. We do pray that God will raise people up and send them out, but we do not pray that God will do this without also sending us. Often it seems that we love our Sunday morning services more than we love the people God has placed around us. We have found a comfortable spot for ourselves, but we are willing to ask God to motivate someone else to do the harvesting.

This is a prayer that God would make us more like the men earlier in Matthew 9 who carried their friend to the feet of Jesus so he could be healed (vv. 2–8). It's a prayer that we would be more like the Good Samaritan, who in meeting the needs of a hurt person became the embodiment of compassion (Luke 10:29–37).

We will always find that as we labor with Jesus, our compassion will increase.

7. *In what sphere might God be inviting you to be a laborer for his kingdom? Where are you seeing opportunities to join Jesus in showing compassion to the people he has placed in your life?*

8. *It is vital that we regularly pray with compassion that people would come to know Jesus and experience his love. Write down the names of people you feel led to pray for in this regard.*

9. *Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would give you a heart of compassion. Pray specifically for the people you listed above.*

### **Key Question**

Where are you seeing opportunities to join Jesus in showing compassion to the people he has placed in your life?





# **WILL YOU JOIN ME AT THE TABLE?**

## **02 Eat with Jesus**

### **Passage**

Luke 14:1–24

### **Concept**

In this session, we will observe Jesus at a dinner party thrown by the religious leaders of the day. As Jesus watches the guests at the meal jockey for position and importance, Jesus uses the opportunity to show that a table is for relationship and blessing, not self-promotion.

### **Key Question**

How are you opening your life (and your literal table) to spend time with Jesus and be a blessing to the people around you?

### **The Network Tool**

Do you see our network tool being played out in Luke 14:1–24? With whom? How so?

## Eat with Jesus

What is the thing you structure your life in an attempt to attain? It's not always easy to evaluate ourselves on this. In some ways, it's like asking a fish to describe water. We are thoroughly entrenched in our ways of doing things, so it's difficult to step back and assess what we're doing and why. But every component of our lives is in place because there's something we're reaching for, someone we're trying to please, or some hole we're trying to fill.

Looking back to our vector tool, this is another way of asking: What is the thing you want most in life? You probably would never say that what you want most in life is money. But as you examine the way your life is structured, could a person be forgiven for concluding this about you? You probably would never say that what you want most in life is comfort. But do you ever find yourself choosing something less comfortable for some greater purpose? Or does every decision seem to revolve around comfort?

Every moment, we have an invitation to be with Jesus. That doesn't mean we stop doing our regular activities. We have an opportunity to be with Jesus in the midst of our everyday lives, but it often means reshaping how we do what we do and rethinking what we're hoping to gain. In Luke 14, we find Jesus eating at the same dinner party as the religious leaders. But the way Jesus interacts with these people invites us into a deeper purpose and a different way of pursuing something as foundational as how we choose to use our dinner tables.

1. *Read Luke 14:1–24. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

2. *Take a moment to do a mental inventory of your life. What do your pursuits, your schedule, and the use of your table say about what matters most to you? (The point isn't guilt, just assessment.)*

### **Blessing, Not Legalistic Law-Keeping**

The religious hosts of this dinner party have set Jesus near a man with a skin disease. Because this was on the Sabbath, it seems clear that they were setting a trap for Jesus. Will he heal the man and thereby break the law that requires rest on the Sabbath? Or will he simply ignore the needs of the man before him? Jesus doesn't hesitate at all to choose the needs of the person over the literal requirements of the law. He points out that any of these religious leaders would rescue an animal in need on the Sabbath, so why should they be upset about Jesus having compassion on a human being?

With this swift move, Jesus exposed the bankruptcy of the Pharisees' approach to the law. They had made it about strict and overly literal adherence to commands. But Jesus reminds them that it's about blessing people. This story reminds us that it's possible to pursue God's commands in a way that completely misses the heart of God.

3. *In what ways have you overlooked the hurts and needs of real people in favor of rules (whether spoken or unspoken)?*

### **Humility, Not Self-Promotion**

Next, Jesus calls out the Pharisees on their efforts to exalt themselves around the dinner table. At the time, the closer you sat toward the head of the table—closer to the host, further from the front door or the kitchen where the servants would be—the more honored you were as a guest.

Jesus said that rather than declaring your own importance, you should sit in a humble position and allow the host to exalt you if that was his desire.

This highlights a fundamental aspect of Christlike living. We are all prone to do things in a way that shows our best side, that presents our best self. We want to be perceived in the best possible light so that others will think more highly of us. But Jesus exposes the bankruptcy of this approach. Instead, we should simply humble ourselves, being secure in a low position because we do not find our worth in other people's opinions. If exaltation comes, it will not be because we have called attention to ourselves.

Similarly, Jesus tells the Pharisees to adjust their approach to inviting guests. They invited people who were important or who could provide them with some sort of benefit. This made them look good, and it would often result in receiving invitations to the dinner parties of other important people. Jesus says that a table is better used for blessing those who get looked over. If you fill your table with the outcasts—those whom the world finds disgusting or insignificant—then you will be blessing people who cannot possibly bless you in return (at least not in terms of wealth or social standing). When this happens, your reward will come in God's economy.

How often do we choose friends and guests using the same standard that the world uses? Are we able to look at people the way Jesus did and lovingly bless those the world considers unworthy? Or are we just as obsessed with beauty, wealth, and power as the world?

4. *Are there any ways in which you choose your friends or fill your schedule to highlight your own importance? How so? Are there any practical steps you can take to pursue humility and blessing to others in this area?*

5. *How does our social structure tend toward receiving reward rather than blessing others? Do you ever fall into this trap? How so?*

### **Relationship, Not Status**

This dinner party ends with a parable that Jesus tells. In this parable, the guests who have been initially invited—representing the current religious leaders—refuse to come to a banquet, so the host sends out invitations to the outcasts. We will look at this parable in more detail in a future session, but the point is that the host will fill his table at all costs. The initial guests considered the invitation below them—they had better things to do, and probably they did not want to be associated with this particular host or the banquet he was throwing.

This is another reminder that the kingdom of God is not about status or self-promotion. It's about a relationship. It's about joining Jesus at the table and experiencing the kingdom along with anyone and everyone who will accept the invitation.

So will we join Jesus at the table? And if so, who else can we invite in to that experience?

6. *Have you been ignoring Jesus invitation to be with him? How so? What practical steps can you take to increasingly join Jesus in the things he is doing?*

7. *Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would guide you in opening your life and your table to the people around you. Pray specifically for the people on your list.*

### **Key Question**

How are you opening your life (and your literal table) to spend time with Jesus and be a blessing to the people around you?

# **WILL YOU JOIN ME IN THE MISSION?**

## **03 Follow Jesus**

### **Passage**

Luke 10:1–24

### **Concept**

As Jesus worked amongst the crowds of people, he also continually sent out his followers. First he sent out the twelve, as we saw in a previous session. In this session, we see Jesus sending out 72 of his followers. As he does, we find that there is joy in joining Jesus in his mission. The joy does not come solely from doing awe-inspiring things, but from being with Jesus and experiencing the joy that is to be found in the kingdom itself.

### **Key Question**

Are you finding joy in Jesus and in his kingdom as you join him in his mission? If so, what is that like? If not, what is one step you can take to begin experiencing that joy?

### **The Network Tool**

Do you see our network tool being played out in Luke 10:1–24? With whom? How so?

## Follow Jesus

Have you ever experienced something so good that you frequently look back on that experience and wish you could reproduce it? This is a common human longing. Maybe it's a season of life where your kids were at a fun stage, or you had a group of friends that you miss dearly, or perhaps a season of ministry that has never been matched.

What was it that made those experiences so good? At root, what is it that you are longing for when you long for those times?

There is something inherently good about longing for what we lost when those good times passed us by. But it can be harmful to always be looking back. Sometimes we look back at the things that God did in the past—in our own past or in the Bible—and we long for God to do those same things again. But that's really not the point. Our fascination with seeing God do these familiar miracles can distract us from the reality that God is always working. We can get so focused on wanting God to do a specific thing that we miss the many things he is currently do around us.

The powerful experiences and displays of God's power were never the point, anyway. What we really long for is God himself. We want to be with him. The true joy of following Jesus comes from his presence. It comes from experiencing Jesus as we experience his kingdom. That is where true joy is found. The key for us is to let go of the specificity of our expectations and to instead simply set out to follow him. To join him in his mission.

As Jesus sent out the 72, we find exactly this dynamic shaping their experiences.



1. *Read Luke 10:1–24. Right off the bat, what strikes you about this passage? What do you find interesting or challenging or confusing?*

### **Multiplication Is the Mission**

In Matthew 9, which we looked at in a previous session, Jesus sent out the 12 to minister and heal and proclaim the good news. As he sent them out, he called them pray for more laborers. Now in Luke 10, we find Jesus sending out 72. This increase means that the Lord is answering the disciples prayer! God is indeed sending out more laborers into the harvest. And even as he sends out these 72, we see the same pattern emerging: He once again tells this larger group to be praying for more workers!

The mission involves multiplication. We don't simply answer the call. Answering the call means joining Jesus in his mission, and that means praying that God will continue to raise up more and more laborers. The kingdom was always intended to be a multiplying movement.

2. *What do you tend to pray for the most? While we can and should pray about anything and everything, part of following Jesus in his mission is praying that God will raise up more laborers. Pause right now and pray that God will raise up and send out more people to accomplish his purposes around your area and around the world.*

### **Facing Opposition**

As Jesus describes the difficulty that his followers will face, the biggest hurdle was not paganism or people being hostile to religion. Jesus is describing this hostility even as he sends them mostly to Jewish households. Their biggest hurdle is not pure godlessness, it's actually the existing religiosity. It's people who are going to actively oppose them when they begin to

proclaim Jesus—and everything he said and embodied—as the true Messiah, as the true answer to everything that is wrong in this world.

Religious people have built up everything around their system and their structure. And Jesus is actually unnerving to people like this because he comes and says that everyone is equal in his economy. All of the effort we've put into building up our religious lives does not place us in a higher position than anyone else. We are all the same when we stand at the feet of Jesus.

Some of the greatest opposition you will experience if you set out to follow Jesus is from other religious people who feel threatened because you are pursuing the works and ways of Jesus in a way or to a degree that they aren't. It makes them feel guilty, so they try to slow you down.

3. *In your experience, do you ever find opposition from religious people when you set out to follow Jesus? If so, what does this look like? Why do you think this happens?*

## **Healing the Sick**

Jesus sent these 72 out to heal the sick. As we read the New Testament, we find God performing miraculous healings through regular people. This is something that God does. We may experience this ourselves. But we shouldn't be discouraged if we are not experiencing large-scale, flashy types of healings. Sometimes healing can be as simple as sitting and listening to a person. It's remarkable how few people will sit down with another person and simply ask them about what is going on in their lives. There is a profound sort of healing that God does through us when we sit and listen to another human being expressing their pains and when we simply allow God to bring healing to another person as we pray for them and share the words, works, and ways of Jesus with them.

How different would this world look if we followed him out into the world and simply imitated Jesus? How much would people be impacted if we approached people with the compassion

that Jesus had? If we spoke the healing words of Jesus over them? If we called them to the life and healing that we ourselves have found and are continually finding in him?

In verses 9–16, Jesus actually says that as we go into towns carrying his message and invitation, we are actually carrying the kingdom of God with us. If someone says that they've never experienced the kingdom of God, it could be that we never really offered it or never truly embodied it. But often it just means that they have rejected us, and in doing so, they have chosen to close themselves off from the kingdom.

How amazing would it be if we could follow Jesus to the extent that when a person avoids contact with us, what they are actually avoiding is contact with the kingdom?

4. *Jesus implies that in rejecting us people are actually rejecting the kingdom. What are the implications of this for the way Jesus intends for us to live in the midst of our neighborhoods, schools, hobbies, and workplaces?*

## **Experiencing the Work of God**

As the 72 returned from being sent out, their minds were blown with the incredible things they experienced. It's not about the impressive things they did, the excitement comes from seeing God do things through them that they know they could never have done themselves.

Jesus affirms that what they were doing was actually making a dent in the kingdom of Satan (v. 18: "I saw Satan fall from heaven..."). But even in the midst of this, Jesus tells them that what they should actually be excited about is that they belong to God (v. 20). Doing powerful things can become our idol; the heart of all of this must be the joy we experience in being one of God's children and in joining Jesus in his work. It's about *who we're with* rather than *what we accomplish*. If you start to worship the miracle, you will be disheartened when you can't reproduce it. You will start to believe that God is only working when crazy things are happening. But if you find your joy in God and in his kingdom, then you can continue going to

the next person—not in search of some experience, but out of joy and contentment in the presence of God.

5. *Have you experienced a time when God was working in an undeniable way? What was that like?*

6. *What does it mean to experience joy in God and his kingdom even when nothing flashy is happening? Have you experienced times like this? What is it like?*

7. *Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would continue to raise up more workers for the harvest. Ask him to fill you with joy as you pursue his mission. Pray specifically for the people on your list.*

### **Key Question**

Are you finding joy in Jesus and in his kingdom as you join him in his mission? If so, what is that like? If not, what is one step you can take to begin experiencing that joy?