

September 18-22, 2023 Edition

Following The Year(s) Of ^Jesus Part 90

The Parable Of The Sower & The Seeds:

Jesus The Good Teacher

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: We are currently in a series looking at the unprecedented impact of Jesus' life on our world. Last week we looked at how His compassion- the way He treated individuals that society didn't value- changed the world as we know it. This week we are going to look at how Jesus' teaching changed the world more profoundly than any other teacher who has ever lived. Let's start here:

Once a religious leader asked Jesus this question: "Good Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke 18:18 (NLT)

What I want to focus on today is this phrase, "Good Teacher". I always thought that the religious leader was being polite sort of like when someone used to say, "now look here my good man..." But it's so much more than that. The word "good" in the Bible doesn't just mean "ok". In the Bible the hierarchy of adjectives doesn't go good, better, best. It goes better, best, good. And there's nothing beyond good. Like English grammar teachers will tell you every chance they get, "there is no such thing as 'gooder'".

The religious leader was right. There is no teacher that has ever surpassed Jesus. Think about this- crowds flocked to Him in such numbers that one time He had to get into a boat just so everybody would be able to hear Him. Short people would climb trees just to get a glimpse of Him. There's story of a sick guy whose friends cut a hole through a roof just so they could get near Jesus. People gave up careers, gave up money, and gave up reputations just to be His students. On the other hand, when He preached His first public sermon it made some people so mad they tried to stone Him. His family thought He was crazy one time so they tried to take charge of Him and take Him home to silence Him. A lot of teachers' only goal is to get bigger crowds... His teaching was so radical that often He would say something that would cause most of the crowd to leave Him. His teaching was so explosively controversial it got Him killed.

Even as a young man of 12 years old His understanding was so deep that He amazed the religious scholars of Jerusalem:

Three days later they finally discovered him in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Luke 2:46-47 (NLT)

After His death (because of His teachings) something strange happened- His followers claimed He wasn't dead at all. That God had raised Him from the grave. These peasants with no formal education banded together and began a community based on His teachings:

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. Acts 2:42 (NLT)

What were the apostles' teaching? Jesus' stuff. What they had learned from Him. And that teaching continued to turn the world upside down! The community of believers in Jerusalem that devoted themselves to Jesus' teachings grew RAPIDLY. The religious leaders of Israel thought they had stamped out Jesus' teachings by killing Him but now there were all these rumors swirling about His resurrection and ascension and His peasant followers were causing an uproar in Jerusalem.

So they arrested Peter & John and hauled them before the Sanhedrin (the ruling council of Israel made up of Pharisees, scribes and the priesthood of the Jews). The Sanhedrin was third most powerful group in all of Israel (after Rome and King Herod) and represented the best and brightest minds that Israel had to offer. They brought Peter & John before them to question them about what they were doing. This would be like if the IRS hauled you in front of them to answer questions about what you were doing to their tax code (unless you're a tax accountant in which case you would identify a bit more with the Sanhedrin- not because being a tax accountant would make you a bad person but because you went to school to be trained just like the guys on the Sanhedrin).

They expected Peter & John to be terrified and just do what they were told. They told Peter & John to stop preaching and go home. Peter & John declined. They argued their point- a couple of fisherman who had no formal training debating the ruling council of Israel. Do you want to know what happened?

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13 (NIV)

The smartest, most educated guys in ancient Israel debated with a couple of fisherman who probably never made it past what we'd consider to be elementary school and Peter & John reduced their accusers to silence. The Sanhedrin never knew what hit them. The only thing they could figure was that Peter & John were able to do what they did because they had been with Jesus- the single greatest teacher Who ever lived. So I guess the question for us to ponder today is, would people say the same thing about us? Do people take note that you have been with Jesus? Not to put too much pressure on you (or me ;o) but Jesus' teaching should not leave us unchanged. Maybe we need to do what the earliest followers of Jesus did and devote ourselves to the teachings of the greatest teacher Who ever lived.

Tuesday Reflection: We talked yesterday about how Jesus' teachings transformed the uneducated into courageous, powerful men and women who changed the world. But it wasn't just the uneducated that Jesus' teachings transformed- it was also the educated. As time went by and Jesus' church grew in Jerusalem even Pharisees and priests started to become believers. The most famous of these was a guy named Saul (who would eventually become Paul after he met Jesus on a dusty road in Syria). Paul is widely believed to be one of the most intelligent people that has ever lived. And he was educated in the best school in Israel- the Gamaliel school for Pharisees. It was like the Harvard or MIT of first century Israel and Paul was the star pupil. Take a look at something that Paul wrote about Jesus years after he became a believer:

In him (Jesus) lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Ephesians 2:3 (NLT)

Paul didn't say that about Gamaliel. Paul didn't say that about himself. Paul believed Jesus was the fountainhead of "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." That's pretty high praise coming from one of the smartest people who has ever lived. Paul recognizes Jesus as the Master of the intellect, above him and everyone he's ever known in every way. That's one of the amazing aspects of Jesus the Teacher. The simplest person in the world

can understand Him, can get Him. But the smartest person in the world can never plumb the depths of everything Jesus said. Early church fathers had a favorite saying that the Gospels are a river in which a gnat can swim and an elephant can drown. And as a matter of historical record, no thinker has ever come anywhere close to the impact of this Man, Jesus. HG Wells (the famous sci-fi writer) said this:

I am an historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as an historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history.

I asked you a few times last week but I'll ask again- Who is this guy? How did He do what He did? The book containing His teaching is the best selling book of all time and of every year/month/week/day in the history of books. It has been translated into 2257 different languages. Next closest? Don Quixote. Any clue how many? 60. The Bible has sold over 5 billion copies to date. The next closest? Again- Don Quixote with 500 million copies sold. This book containing the teachings of Jesus has impacted every continent, every culture, every city in every century for the last 2,000 years. Its impact is impossible to define.

And now you and I have unprecedented access to this book. We can buy hard back or soft cover versions. There are literally dozens of different translations- one for every educational level including comic book level. This book transformed people into courageous, powerful men and women 2,000 years ago and it will still do it today- if you do what Jesus teaches. And who is this Jesus? Just the greatest teacher Who's ever lived who is irrevocably the very center of human history.

Wednesday Reflection:

"Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." His reply completely amazed them. Mark 12:17 (NLT)

It never occurred to Jesus' listeners that the kingdom He spoke of... the kingdom that He said was coming, would not overthrow the Romans as one of its first steps. "The triumphal entry was, for the crowds, a military statement." (Who is This Man? page 102) Finally God was ready to free His people, just as He did in the time of Moses when the Egyptians lost their slave labor force. The words, "now you're gonna get it!" were on everyone's lips.

And yet Jesus refused to "stick it to 'em". His unwillingness to destroy the Roman Empire turned them from words like "hosana" to "crucify him!" What kind of kingdom was this? A kingdom you surrender to rather than fight for? A kingdom like the world had never seen before.

If you were an Israelite, you resented the Romans. They had the power to kill you, the might to demand taxes, the ability to keep you from living the way God had designed you to live. Surely the greatest threat to a life with God was the Romans, but Jesus didn't seem to agree. In an effort to trap Jesus, they asked Him if they should have to pay taxes (show submission) to the Romans. If Jesus said, "Forget the Romans. Don't show allegiance to them. You are God's people," it would get Him killed for treason by the

Empire. And yet no rabbi wanted to be teacher's pet to the Romans. His answer was shockingly profound and nothing like they expected.

Jesus had them pull out a Roman coin, it would have had Caesar's head on it. He looked at the piece of metal made by the Romans and told them that they were welcome to give to Caesar what belonged to him – just as they were to give to God what belonged to Him. In other words, Caesar may have authority over how you spend your money... But there are things that answer only to the highest authority – there are things that belong only to God. Give the Romans back their coins. But give God your hearts and lives. It's as if Jesus was saying that what keeps us from direct access to the life God has designed for us is something much less tangible than politics and rights.

Jesus refused to overthrow Caesar just as enthusiastically as He refused to worship Caesar. After Jesus' death, as Christianity attracted followers by the thousands, Rome didn't know what to make of this new religion. It was like nothing ever seen before. It's practitioners claimed to be of a kingdom that had more authority than all the powers of this world. And yet they submitted themselves to this world's laws almost cheerfully. They moved through the world like foreigners, blessing those who believed like they did AND blessing those who didn't. In Jesus they had found a way to be free in this life regardless of their political standing.

How about you? Are you free? It seems like there are an awful lot of people out there (just take a short trip through your Facebook wall and you'll find them) who are upset about what our government is giving to God without ever giving a second thought to what they are giving God (not that FB posts are wrong... But don't become one of "those" people who complain loudly about the unfair treatment God is getting these days all the while living your life without much thought to how God wants you to live it). Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar... But please... Give to God what belongs to Him. Have you done that?

Prayer: Father, today I want to ask the question, "what do you want to do today?"

Show me how to give You what belongs to You. Teach me to be the kind of person whose words line up with my actions. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday Reflection:

A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance. John 10:10 (NLT)

Jesus told His followers that He came to bring us true life. The purpose of life has always been the question for us humans. Why am I here? What is a good life? To what extent should we try to be good?

The Israelite word for having a good life was "blessed." It was based on the understanding that Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes, that this world cannot deliver on a satisfying or meaningful life. Some lives seem to be better than others, but no one can attain meaning and satisfaction apart from their creator, even someone with all the wealth of Solomon.

The bottom line – a good life is a gift from God. And before Jesus came, few people lived lives of true blessing.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus taught that God is poised to unleash blessings on the most unlikely of people – the sad, the discontent, the lowly. Suddenly a life of meaning and satisfaction isn't just a pursuit for those with power and resources. God through Jesus was seeking to bless everyone, regardless of their circumstances or abilities. This came as quite a shock to those religious leaders who believed that it was up to them who was worthy of God's blessings.

Just like their Roman neighbors, the Pharisees judged a person's worth by their outward behavior and circumstances. Those who had the right answers, who could pass for civilized in their behavior, were the righteous. Unlike the common man who toiled building or fishing or farming, the Pharisees specialized in religion. And what is religion if it isn't the means to show ourselves worthy of God's blessing?

The New Testament would tell us that the purpose of religion is the help bear the load of the heavily burdened – the widow, the orphan, the poor. Those who used religion to merit righteousness and blessings from God, Jesus called performers. He borrowed the Greek word used for those who acted out the tragedies and comedies of the play-writes on the stage. It's almost as if Jesus was saying that outer compliance was more likely to be used for selfish purposes, and was of little value (or downright damaging) without inner devotion to God's perspective.

This is the truth that Jesus brought to give humans freedom: You can forget trying to be good enough, do good enough, or have it good enough to experience real meaning and satisfaction. It's an inside job. One that only God can do. But that bad news is the foundation for the good news that God is eager to move into our hearts and lives to redeem us from the inside out. Only God knows what will truly bless us. Only God knows what is truly good. We want to know who's in and who's out, who deserves blessings and who we can look down our noses at, but God says that only He can see into the human heart.

So stop wasting your time trying to figure out who's part of the in crowd and who's not. Instead live the life God has created you to live. Because until you do the abundant life Jesus dreamed of for you when He dreamed you up will always be just outside of your reach.

Prayer: Father, sometimes I get a little mixed up about what part I'm supposed to be playing in Your plan. Please show me my part and give me the wisdom to stop looking around and judging how others are doing their part. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Friday:

God works through different men in different ways, but it is the same God who achieves his purposes through them all. 1 Corinthians 12:5 (Ph)

Reflection: Have you ever noticed how many different ways human beings view the teachings of Jesus. The same book has spawned untold numbers of different

“denominations” of the Christian church all of whom are vastly different and yet all of whom consider themselves to be devoted followers of Jesus’ teachings. I’ve noticed through my years that honest, sincere, intelligent, devoted followers of Jesus can read the same scripture and come to two (or three, or four, or five, or...) different conclusions about what that means for us today. This used to bother me until it was pointed out to me that almost universally all the denominations agree on the majors- Jesus is God’s Son Who came to this earth to save us. I still don’t quite understand how other people can read the Bible and come to a different conclusion than I do about what it means but I’ve learned to accept it. One thing that really helps illustrate this concept for me is something Max Lucado wrote years ago. I’ve shared it in these devos before but it’s always good to have a refresher.

Life Aboard The Fellow-Ship

God has enlisted us in his navy and placed us on his ship. The boat has one purpose—to carry us safely to the other shore.

This is no cruise ship; it’s a battleship. We aren’t called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer and worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding and training the crew members.

Though different, we are the same. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the captain, for each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport and invited us to follow him. Our faith was born at the sight of his fondness, and so we went. We each followed him across the gangplank of his grace onto the same boat. There is one captain and one destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern.

There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we’ve wandered these decks, we’ve encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms we’ve never seen, sporting styles we’ve never witnessed. “Why do you look the way you do?” we ask them.

“Funny,” they reply. “We were about to ask the same of you.”

The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. There is a group, for example, who clusters every morning for serious study. They promote rigid discipline and somber expressions. “Serving the captain is serious business,” they explain. It’s no coincidence that they tend to congregate around the stern.

There is another regiment deeply devoted to prayer. Not only do they believe in prayer, they believe in prayer by kneeling. For that reason you always know where to locate them; they are at the bow of the ship.

And then there are a few who staunchly believe real wine should be used in the Lord’s Supper. You’ll find them on the port side.

Still another group has positioned themselves near the engine. They spend hours examining the nuts and bolts of the boat. They’ve been known to go below deck and not come up for days. They are occasionally criticized by those who linger on the top deck,

feeling the wind in their hair and the sun on their face. "It's not what you learn," those topside argue. "It's what you feel that matters."

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

Some think once you're on the boat, you can't get off. Others say you'd be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours.

Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.

Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won't hit until we are safely ashore.

There are those who speak to the captain in a personal language. There are those who think such languages are extinct.

There are those who think the officers should wear robes, there are those who think there should be no officers at all, and there are those who think we are all officers and should all wear robes.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

And then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the captain is thanked and his words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who've gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard and neglecting those on board.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.

"What do we do?" we'd like to ask the captain. "How can there be harmony on the ship?"

We don't have to go far to find the answer.

On the last night of his life Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians: I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. (John 17:20)

How precious are these words. Jesus, knowing the end is near, prays one final time for his followers. Striking, isn't it, that he prayed not for their success, their safety, or their happiness. He prayed for their unity. He prayed that they would love each other. As he prayed for them, he also prayed for "those who will believe because of their teaching." That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I be one.

Prayer: Father, forgive me for the times I've clustered with those who are like me while being suspicious of those who aren't. Show me how to live in unity with others who follow You. In Jesus' Name, amen.