

THE LIFE OF
JESUS



BOOK 5



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JESUS





BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

In the Bible, God reveals His truth about how to have eternal life by becoming a believer in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The believer is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a true child of God, and one who has been saved by God according to God's grace (undeserved favor). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

How does one become a Christian?

- The Bible, God's word, says that eternal life (salvation) is a free gift of God which cannot be earned or deserved (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- However, we also find in God's word that all people are born sinners and cannot save themselves from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God. God's requirement is perfection and no one is perfect (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:3-23; Ephesians 2:1-4).
- God tells us in His word that He is holy, meaning that He is perfect and that He is also just, meaning that He gives to sinners what is deserved, and because of His holiness and justice He must punish sinners. But thankfully, the Bible also says that God is loving and merciful and does not take pleasure in punishing sinners (Exodus 34:6-7; Ephesians 2:4-5).
- God has mercy on sinners by not giving them what they deserve. This is only possible because He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to be the substitute for sinners bearing the penalty for their sin and satisfying God's justice (John 1:1,14; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:8).
- Jesus said that in order for anyone to have eternal life there must be repentance of sins and faith placed in His substitutionary death on the cross to pay for the penalty of one's sins. This faith must be in Jesus Christ alone, not depending on anything else including "good works" (Mark 1:15b; Acts 20:21; Ephesians 2:8-9).

What then is the response to these things if one desires to have eternal life and become a Christian?

1. Pray and ask God to forgive you. The Bible says that you must repent of your sins, being ashamed of them, genuinely regretting and grieving over them, and firmly deciding to make an about-face and turn away from sin and your old lifestyle (Acts 3:19-20).
2. Pray and tell God that you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone to save you. The Bible says that for you to become a Christian, you must place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to become your substitute and who took the penalty for your sin upon Himself once and for all (John 3:36).

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■ LIFE OF JESUS

September 12, 2021 | *Jesus Predicts His Death; the Request of James and John*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- List the top 3–5 ways in which Jesus exemplified how we as His followers are to live.
- Read Mark 10:32–45.
- Pray that this passage would convict you of any pride gripping your life and convince you to become a servant to everyone.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus expects His disciples to follow His example by serving others.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Adopt a servant-to-all mindset.

■ MEDITATE

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to begin considering how you can adopt a servant-to-all mindset.

Q: *What is a servant?*

Q: *What are some of the best displays of service you have witnessed?*

A few years ago, I co-taught a week-long course on discipleship in Mumbai, India. One of the lessons examined the relationship between discipleship and Jesus's command for His disciples to love one another as He had loved them from John 13:34. At the end of the lesson, the headmaster of the school addressed the students. From the way he was speaking, I could tell he was leading up to something. At the conclusion of his address, the headmaster asked the students, "Who is the least important person in the room?" In unison, about forty Indian men stood up and said aloud "I am!" It was one of the most moving and unexpected moments of my life. I was completely caught off-guard, by both the question and the response. Later, I asked the headmaster what was behind the question and the full-bodied response. He told me a few months prior he had recognized a problem within many of the churches he visited. In various ways, many of the pastors were setting a poor example of servanthood within their churches. He recognized that this attitude was certain to filter down through the rest of the church, and he was determined to do something about it. He decided to teach a series of lessons on servanthood among believers and used John 13:34 as one of his key texts. He began and ended each session by asking the students "Who is the least important person in the room?" At first, the students did not understand, but as the series continued, they caught on and responded, "I am," with more boldness each time.

In this week's lesson, Jesus presents servanthood as the greatest role in His kingdom. The way up in His kingdom is actually down. If Jesus's disciples want to be the greatest in His kingdom, they must learn to serve the most. They had to learn to think of themselves as the least important person in every room they entered. The same is true for us today.

Q: *How is servanthood countercultural in our context?*

Q: *In what ways is God calling you to adopt a servant's heart?*

APPLICATION POINT – Are you willing to answer the question, “Who is the least important person in the room” in the same way as the Indian brothers? If you are like me and most other people I know, the first thing you do on entering a room is size everybody else up. Who is the smartest? Who is the most athletic? Who is the best looking? Who is the best dressed? Who could juggle the best? What a terribly judgmental attitude to have! The worst part about this mindset is that it views others as competitors rather than as people made in God’s image. This is even worse when it occurs within the context of the body of Christ. How different would your life become if upon entering a room you viewed everyone else as a person to serve? Start asking yourself, “who is the least important person in here” and immediately respond to yourself, “I am.” Doing so will change your church culture. By God’s grace, it may even begin to change your home, your workplace, and every other place you find yourself.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In this week’s passage, Jesus urged His disciples to be eager to serve others rather than seek their own prestige or position. In doing so, they would be following Jesus’s own example.

1. JESUS PREDICTED HIS SUFFERING, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION.

2. JAMES AND JOHN LOOKED AFTER THEIR OWN INTERESTS.

3. JESUS CALLS FOR SERVANTHOOD.

GOING DEEPER

+In Mark 10:32–45, Jesus was journeying toward Jerusalem and preparing His disciples for His suffering. The magnitude of what was about to happen continued to allude them. James and John used this occasion to attempt to secure their own interests in His kingdom. Their efforts drew the ire of the others, not because they understood the nature of Jesus’s kingdom but because they did not want to be outmaneuvered. They had all misunderstood what makes someone great in Jesus’s kingdom.

1. JESUS PREDICTED HIS SUFFERING, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION.

■ MARK 10:32–34

Q: *How did Jesus's followers react to His journey toward Jerusalem?*

Q: *Why did they react this way?*

With the celebration of Passover approaching, Jesus started out for Jerusalem, joining thousands of other travelers making their way to the feast. By this point in His ministry, He had become quite an irritation for the Jewish elites, so much so that they were intent on killing Him. Evidently, their intentions were well known because Jesus's journey to Jerusalem drew reactions of awe and fear from those traveling with Him. Although His life would be in danger upon arrival, Jesus continued toward Jerusalem. He even walked ahead of the group He was traveling with. Despite the certain agony that lay ahead, Jesus remained resolute. Despite what others said or thought, nothing deterred Him from His mission.

Q: *Do you amaze others in the way you live for Jesus Christ?*

Q: *How can you live audaciously for Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus amazed those around Him with His resolve to carry out God's mission in His life. If we seek to be biblically faithful, mission-minded followers of Jesus, our lives will also draw the amazement of those around us. The Christian life is inherently countercultural. It entails exchanging the priorities of this world for God's priorities. Such a commitment will be evident to those around you, and they will find it strange. It will show up in the kind of car you buy, the kind of conversations you have, and the kind of activities you seek. If you appear completely normal to the non-believers around you, you should wonder how well you are living out your faith. It may be time for you to do something others would consider strange.

Q: *What title did Jesus use to refer to Himself?*

Q: *How would Jesus's prediction have challenged the disciples' conception of the Messiah?*

Jesus referred to Himself as “the Son of Man,” a messianic title stemming from Daniel 7:13. At the time of Jesus, the Jews were anticipating a coming king who would end the foreign occupation in Israel and inaugurate a new kingdom among God’s people. This kingdom would be the perfect expression of God’s rule on earth. By referring to Himself as “the Son of Man,” Jesus was claiming to be the Jewish Messiah, a claim that would have aroused certain expectations among His followers. They envisioned a king who would remove the foreign oppressors. But Jesus offered a radically different portrayal of the Messiah than they expected. Rather than leading the Jews to overthrow their foreign oppressors, Jesus said He, the Messiah, would be handed over to those foreign rulers by His own people. Then He would be beaten and abused before finally being executed. If this were not enough to shatter their expectations, He concluded with this strange bit about rising from the dead after three days. Nothing in Jesus’s portrayal of the Messiah lined up with His followers’ expectations. But this is the story of Israel’s Messiah told by the Old Testament (Isaiah 52:13–53:12).

Q: *How has Jesus challenged your expectations of what He would be like?*

Q: *Why was Jesus’s vision of the Messiah so different from His followers’ vision?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus did not meet their expectations because they had bought into a different vision of what the Messiah would be like and what He would do. They thought their biggest need was relief from foreign oppression. If this were the case, they had no use for a slain Messiah. But their greatest need was not relief from foreign oppression. Their greatest need was the same as all humanity’s. They needed to be forgiven of sin and welcomed into God’s family. When the diagnosis is wrong, the wrong treatment inevitably follows. Has Jesus failed to meet your expectations? The most likely explanation is that you have misunderstood your greatest need. If you think your greatest need is more self-confidence, a better financial portfolio, or more friends, you too will have little use for a slain Messiah. Rather than adopting the world’s understanding of your greatest needs, ask God to reshape how you see yourself and your needs with the gospel. If you are willing to do this, you will find Jesus is precisely the Messiah you need.

2. JAMES AND JOHN LOOKED AFTER THEIR OWN INTERESTS.

■ **MARK 10:35–40**

Q: *How would you describe James and John's request?*

Q: *What were James and John envisioning?*

After Jesus revealed He would suffer and die in Jerusalem, two of His disciples, James and John, decided it was an opportune time to secure their positions within His kingdom. They asked to sit at Jesus's right and left hands, the positions closest to Jesus and of the greatest influence and honor. Their request was both misinformed and egotistical. It was misinformed because they were obviously still holding to a view of the Messiah shaped by their culture. Although Jesus had just announced His suffering and death, they still would not jettison such firmly entrenched beliefs. It was egotistical because they intended to set themselves over the rest of the disciples and everyone else in Jesus's kingdom.

Q: *How are you like James and John?*

Q: *How can you refuse to become involved in this type of behavior at your work?*

APPLICATION POINT – James and John's audacity is hard for us to imagine. How could two of Jesus's disciples be so ill-informed, both of His mission and the nature of His followers? The only explanation is that they were just caught up in the daily grind around them. When we are caught up in our daily grind, it is difficult to see the really important things. We also become callous toward our peers as we jockey for position with them. Although you are not asking Jesus for the first seat at the table in His kingdom, you very well may be caught up in the same type of behavior at work or school without ever noticing. We can see the same sinful intentions when children cut in front of one another trying to be first in line. This mindset is all around us, and if we do not consciously refuse to participate, we will also be caught up in it. Identify the rat-races consuming your life and determine how you can put the glory of Christ on display in their midst. You may not be able to completely remove yourself, but you can show everyone involved that you serve a different master.

Q: *What are the cup and the baptism that Jesus referred to here?*

Q: *How would James and John be linked to Jesus?*

Part of Jesus's response to James and John is easy to understand. He could not guarantee them a prominent position in His kingdom because He does not make those decisions. He did not say so, but we may infer that this honor is reserved for the Father. The Son walks in complete obedience to the Father and would not dare usurp the role reserved for Him. The second element of Jesus's response is more challenging. He asked if James and John were able to drink the cup He would drink and be baptized with the same baptism. They answered affirmatively, but, since they were misinformed about the kingdom, they were also misinformed about what they were agreeing to. But Jesus did affirm that they would follow His lead in this. James and John answered better than they knew.

But what are the cup and the baptism He was referring to? They are metaphorical ways of referring to God's wrath and Jesus's approaching death. The cup was widely recognized as a sign of God's judgment. The Old Testament prophets frequently depicted God's wrath as a cup to be drunk (Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15), and Revelation picks up on this same imagery (Revelation 14:10). To understand what Jesus meant by baptism, we have to consider the nature of baptism itself. At this time, baptism involved fully immersing someone in water, surrounded and completely overwhelmed by water. Thus, baptism may be a way of referring to being completely overwhelmed. Seen in conjunction with the cup, baptism in this sense connects most clearly to Jesus's death.

One final question from these verses needs to be answered. Jesus vicariously endured the wrath of God and died for the sins of others. Although Jesus affirmed that James and John would drink the cup He drank and be baptized with the baptism He endured, the Bible gives no indication their participation in these would be vicarious like Jesus's was. Instead, the cup and baptism should be taken to mean they would suffer for the sake of Jesus.

Q: *Are Christians in modernized societies protected from suffering because of their faith?*

Q: *Have you suffered because of your faith in Jesus Christ?*

APPLICATION POINT – This point serves as a counter to the previous point. Not only should we refuse to see our faith in Christ as a means of obtaining wealth and honor in this world, we should expect our faith to lead to our suffering, especially as communities become more hostile to the gospel. James and John seem to unknowingly invite suffering into their lives by agreeing to drink the cup of Jesus and follow in His “baptism.” We will not have the benefit of naivety. If we are committed to Christ, there will be times our faith will cause us to suffer. It will vary in form and degree, but suffering will come for the followers of Jesus. The only question that remains is whether we will be ready to endure the suffering caused by our faith. To prepare ourselves for suffering, we need to strengthen our resolve to follow Jesus now. This will take sacrifice on our part. What sacrifices do you need to make in order to strengthen your faith in Jesus? What spiritual projects, perhaps ones stemming from this study of Jesus’s life, have you put off? Or what projects have you started but given up on? If you are unwilling to make sacrifices for your faith when the imposition stems from yourself, you will be unlikely to be willing when the impetus comes from someone else. This week, revisit the commitments and convictions you have let fall by the wayside and ask whether God is leading you to pick them up again to strengthen your faith.

3. JESUS CALLS FOR SERVANTHOOD.

■ MARK 10:41–45

Q: *What example did Jesus use as a contrast to how His disciples should view authority and service?*

Q: *How is Jesus’s command counterintuitive?*

James and John’s attempt to secure their positions in Jesus’s kingdom did not stay hidden from the other disciples. They were predictably ticked-off these two tried to gain the upper hand on them. This kind of action would have been considered a betrayal of trust. The disciples’ reaction, however, revealed that their hearts

were not in the right place either. Their indignation shows that they held the same view of Jesus's kingdom. They believed His kingdom would look like the kingdoms of the world. Had they the correct understanding of Jesus's kingdom, they would have responded to James and John with pity.

Jesus, perhaps sensing the tensions among His disciples might boil over at any moment, intervened by revealing the right way to become great in His kingdom. He began by dispelling any notion that His kingdom would be modeled after the kingdoms of the world. He invited His disciples to consider how the gentiles misused authority as an excuse to exploit those beneath them. There were plenty of examples for them to consider. We are aware of several just from reading the Gospels. Such abuses of authority would not be found within Jesus's kingdom. In Jesus's kingdom, authority is not a license to put others down but a responsibility to serve them. This is one of the great reversals commonly found in God's kingdom. Greatness is measured by how well you serve others. The person at Jesus's right hand will seem like the lowest servant in His kingdom to the outside world.

Q: *How can you adopt this view of authority within your workplace?*

Q: *How could this perspective of authority revolutionize your home?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus's counterexample to His kingdom creates a missional mandate for His followers. The world views authority as a means to dominate others, but a follower of Jesus views authority as an opportunity to help others flourish. For Christians, the way you exercise the authority you have is a witness to the watching world. Your use of authority either confirms their misconceptions of what makes someone great or indicts their abuse of authority. Make a list of the relationships in which you have some authority, such as a parent-child relationship. For each one, write down one way you can use your authority to serve those under you. Servant-leadership does not, of course, demand you bend to the will of those over whom you have authority. That would be an abandonment of authority and a misunderstanding of what Jesus was saying. But you can use your God-given authority to seek the welfare of those you are responsible for. When you allow the gospel to dictate how you exercise authority, your authority will demonstrate the goodness of God's kingdom to everyone watching.

Q: *Who did Jesus put forth as an example of serving others?*

Q: *How far did Jesus go to serve others?*

The best example for the kind of service Jesus described is Jesus Himself. Jesus, again using the messianic title “Son of Man,” proclaimed that He came into the world to serve others. This is the second time in this passage that He turned upside down His followers’ expectations of the coming messianic king. Kings have servants who tend to their needs. The king who was to inaugurate a new age in world history and reestablish David’s throne among God’s people would certainly need others to serve Him, right? Jesus’s followers had the wrong idea about the Messiah and the nature of His kingdom, and nothing made that clearer than Jesus proclaiming the Messiah would be a servant to others. He shattered expectations even further by proclaiming that the Messiah would give His life for the sake of others. Jesus was alluding to His sacrificial death on behalf of others to provide forgiveness of sin, but His disciples could have only marveled at the idea that a king would die for His people. Jesus was changing all their expectations, from the nature of a servant to the nature of the Messiah.

Q: *How can you emulate Jesus’s willingness to serve others?*

Q: *What limits are there in how you can follow Jesus’s example?*

APPLICATION – Jesus offered Himself as an example for us to follow in serving others. We will never be able to serve others by dying for their sins like Jesus did, but we can and must follow His example in serving others, perhaps even to the point of dying for them. Just as Jesus’s demands upended His followers’ expectations of their coming messianic king, His demands diverge from the world’s expectations. Seek to serve someone who would never expect it this week. Doing so may be the only way to provide a window for them to peer into the gospel of Jesus Christ.

NEXT STEPS

This lesson focused on what kept the Jewish leaders from repenting. The Pharisees were consumed with external signs. The lawyers were caught in hypocrisy. These are not mutually exclusive categories. Which one creates the biggest struggle for you? Take some time to write down some resolutions to help you flee from these two corrupting influences.



PRAY

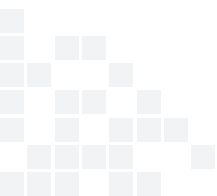
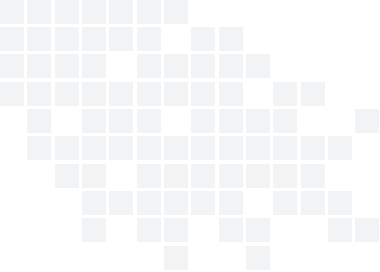
+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-Lord Jesus, you came to serve me and paid the ultimate price to do it. Thank you for the hope your service has given me.

-God, help me to challenge the expectations of a fallen world that refuses to serve.

-Father, strengthen my resolve in preparation for suffering for your kingdom.

-Jesus, help me to serve others like you did.



■ LIFE OF JESUS

September 19, 2021 | Parable of the Shrewd Manager

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- How is your attention divided at work, at home, and at church?
- Read Luke 16:1–13.
- Pray that God will help you to be aware of divided loyalties in your life.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus warns His followers against living a divided life.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Leverage your possessions to prepare yourself for eternity.

■ MEDITATE

“One who is faithful in very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much” (Luke 13:10).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to encourage yourself to struggle with the meaning of difficult parables.

Q: *What books or movies can you think of that contain a hidden plot twist?*

Q: *Why is this an effective storytelling device?*

I love books and movies containing scenes that force you to completely reevaluate the story once you become aware of some key fact reserved for the end. Pulling off this feat requires tremendous talent and creativity. Sometimes the audience knows something is amiss and must keep guessing what key piece of information is missing. Other times, the audience is completely unaware they have just witnessed an allusion to the unexpected twist waiting at the end. The true significance of what they have just encountered is only revealed at the end. These scenes are often forgotten until a second reading or viewing. Then the reader can delight in recognizing the meaning hidden right in front of their eyes. In some ways, the parable Jesus told in Luke 16:1–8 operates like this. When we initially read the parable of the shrewd manager, it seems that Jesus was saying something impossible! How could He promote this kind of dishonesty and shrewdness among His followers? But reading the parable in light of what follows, we can see that Jesus was not promoting dishonesty but cautioning His disciples against living a divided life. His warning still speaks loudly to us today.

Q: *What is your approach to understanding difficult parables?*

Q: *What resources does your church recommend to help you when reading the Bible?*

APPLICATION POINT – Luke 16:1–8 is not the only parable Jesus told that can disturb us when we read it for the first time. Jesus often included cruel and shady characters in His stories. Sometimes they are the ones we are supposed to emulate! How have you handled these difficult passages as you have read through the record of Jesus’s life contained within the Gospels? When we read the Bible, especially as part of some prescribed plan, we don’t often take the time to understand what challenges us. We just have to keep going. We move on to something simpler to understand and apply to our lives. But challenging portions of Scripture nonetheless have a tremendous message for us if we take the time to reflect on them. As you read God’s Word, come up with a system to help you revisit the challenging parts you encounter when you have time. Investigate the resources your church

recommends that would help you make sense of Scripture for yourself. Pastors love to help others understand and apply the Bible, but they are also encouraged when they see members seeking to grow on their own.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The parable in Luke 16:1–8 teaches us to avoid living a double life. The parable, when read in isolation from Luke 16:9–13, is nearly impossible to interpret. But when we allow our understanding of it to be shaped by what follows, we can easily see the challenge Jesus placed before us.

1. THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER
2. FAITHFULNESS
3. DODGING A DIVIDED LIFE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will look at this passage in three parts. The first part explains the difficult parable in Luke 16:1–8. The final two parts consider the teachings Jesus drew from His parable.

1. THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER

■ LUKE 16:1–8

Q: *What statements in this parable make it difficult for us to understand?*

Q: *What principle can help us make sense of what is being said?*

The facts of this parable are easy enough. A wealthy business owner hired a manager to oversee his business but fired him because of his mismanagement. We do not know if the wealthy man's discontent was due to the manager's incompetence or dishonesty. The manager knew he would soon be relieved of his duties and acted quickly to make

friends from the pool of his master's debtors by discounting their debts. Whatever the rift between the business owner and the manager might have been, the manager's actions were clearly dishonest and would possibly impoverish the business owner.

What makes this parable difficult to understand is Jesus's endorsement of the manager's behavior. In fact, Jesus chastised His followers for not behaving more like this manager (Luke 16:8). What are we to make of His parable and His endorsement of the manager? Luckily, the verses that follow are rife with clues if we can put them together and connect them to the parable. Here we will focus on several clues found in Luke 16:9. The others will become apparent as they come up in later sections.

Jesus told us to “make friends . . . by means of unrighteous wealth.” At first, we may think “friends” corresponds to the earthy relationships we make with other people, but Jesus went on to say “they [referring to the friends] may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” This statement accomplishes two things. First, it reveals our “friends” are not our earthly acquaintances but figures associated with heaven. Second, the payoff shifts from something we will receive in this life to something we will receive in the next. The connection with the parable is easy enough to see. Just as the manager made friends for the future with the resources at his disposal, we should also make friends who are in a position to help us for eternity.

Notice also that Jesus described the means for making these connections as “unrighteous wealth.” Jesus's audience would have immediately made a connection to the parable when He said this. In the Old Testament, God's people were forbidden from profiting by charging interest on the money they lent to others (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–36; and Deuteronomy 23:19–20). The rich man in this parable, however, was likely profiting from the goods he lent to his debtors. This was how he became rich. Therefore, the “unrighteous wealth” can be connected to the resources at the shrewd manager's disposal. Jesus also said this unrighteous wealth would fail to secure eternal dwellings. This “unrighteous wealth” refers to resources we have on earth that cannot secure us a place in heaven.

How can we put all of this together to understand the parable? Jesus's point was not that His followers should be dishonest and shrewd for personal gain, as a first reading of this parable might insinuate. Instead, Jesus was telling His followers to use the resources at their disposal while on earth to have an impact on eternity. Just as the manager used the resources at his disposal to secure hope for the future, we should also leverage our resources for eternity. We are not securing our hope for eternity. Only Jesus can do that. But we are seeking to leverage our resources to make the greatest difference we can for eternity.

Q: *Can you create a list of five resources you have that you could leverage for eternity? Ten? Fifteen?*

Q: *How are you leveraging your resources for eternity?*

APPLICATION POINT – When considering the resources we have at our disposal, we must think broadly. We often equate resources with money, but money may be the most pitiful resource any of us have. In addition to your money, consider how you can leverage your time, gifts, intellect, and personality to influence eternity. Begin keeping a list of the assets God has given you. Review your list regularly and ask yourself how well you are leveraging those things for eternity.

Q: *What was the rich man's response to his manager's scheme?*

Q: *Why do you think the rich man allowed the manager to continue in his role for any length of time?*

Since the rich man knew the manager was bungling the business, we may be tempted to think the rich man was foolish to allow him to remain in his position long enough to carry out his scheme. He was inviting disaster upon himself. This is another instance where we must provide some leeway for the telling of the parable. The rich man was unlikely to have conducted his affairs in this manner in real life, but that should not factor into our understanding of the parable. Our role in interpreting Jesus's parable is to follow Jesus's lead. In the parable, the rich man congratulated the manager for his shrewdness. It is unlikely that anyone in the rich man's position would have reacted this way. Jesus likely intended this departure from reality to teach His audience something. The way the parable is explained above, the rich man has no clear correspondent to Jesus's audience, but his reaction is too out of the ordinary to write off as just part of the story. The rich man's admiration may coincide with the admiration the world will have for the followers of Jesus Christ if they live out their convictions fully. They may not agree with our convictions, but they may respect us for living them out consistently.

Q: *How may authenticity in the Christian life be a potent gospel witness?*

Q: *Has anyone ever noticed the way you live differently because of your faith in Christ?*

APPLICATION POINT – When I was a teenager, there was a growing emphasis on sharing the gospel with your lifestyle. The idea was that you did not have to use words to share the gospel. I am thankful this trend does not seem to be in vogue anymore, at least not to the extent it was. I always found it difficult to believe someone would

conclude that Jesus died on the cross for their sins just from watching me treat others with kindness. They could just as likely have concluded that I treated others kindly so I could earn my way to heaven. Nevertheless, there is certainly some relationship between our lifestyle and our witness. If we share the gospel with someone who knows we seldom, if ever, live out our Christian convictions, we are unlikely to be very persuasive. But if we allow the gospel to make its full impact on our lives, it is certainly possible that we will draw the attention of those who also need the gospel message. We will need to be ready to put the gospel into words, though, when an opportunity arises.

2. FAITHFULNESS

■ LUKE 16:9-12

Q: *Why did Jesus begin discussing faithfulness and dishonesty after His parable?*

Q: *What was Jesus referring to when He said “very little” and “much”?*

The parable of the shrewd manager challenges Christians to leverage our resources for the sake of eternity. It should not surprise us to see Jesus discussing faithfulness immediately afterward. Faithfulness is one element the parable promotes. We must be faithful with the resources God has entrusted to us. Notice that the extent of our resources is not important in how Jesus describes faithfulness. God has given some people many resources and others very few. If someone is faithful with little, that person would also be faithful with much. The same is true of someone who is faithful with much. That same person would also be faithful with very little. The key is not the extent of your resources but the extent of your faithfulness with whatever resources God has entrusted to you. Many of us are tempted to think that if we had greater financial resources, we would be more comfortable being generous with our money and investing it in eternity. Jesus does not allow us to go down that road. The extent of our resources, small or large, can never be put forward as an excuse for unfaithfulness or even delayed faithfulness, which is the same thing as unfaithfulness.

Q: *How is Jesus’s call to mere faithfulness liberating?*

Q: *How is God calling you to be faithful with your resources?*

APPLICATION POINT – In one sense, Jesus’s call to faithfulness is liberating. You never have to worry or feel embarrassed if the life you lead for Jesus Christ does not produce for eternity much that will be noticed, as long as you have been faithful with what God has given you. God has not called everyone to lead a small group, write a book, pastor a church, lead worship, or go on the mission field. But even if your faithfulness does not lead down these roads, you are still not excused from seeking to be faithful with what God has given you. This week, preform an audit on yourself to gauge your faithfulness in leveraging the resources God has given you for eternity. Whatever the result, pray for God’s help in being more faithful tomorrow than you were today.

Q: *What is unrighteous wealth?*

Q: *What are true riches?*

Jesus extended the metaphor of His parable in His teaching afterward. In the parable, the manager’s resources consisted of unrighteous wealth because it was gained by taking interest on loans, a practiced forbidden by Old Testament law. (It is debated among theologians whether the same principle is active today.) The manager’s use of this unrighteous wealth to prepare for the future corresponds to how we use the resources God has put at our disposal on earth to prepare for eternity. When Jesus discussed “unrighteous wealth” in His teaching after the parable, He was referring to the resources God has given us on earth. There is nothing intrinsically “unrighteous” about our possessions. Jesus was just extending the metaphor to refer to our possessions. Once we understand what is meant by “unrighteous wealth,” we can easily see what Jesus meant by “true riches.” These are riches that will last throughout eternity. Jesus said if we are unfaithful to leverage our resources for the sake of eternity, we should not expect to receive true riches in heaven. Why would we be entrusted with heavenly riches if we were unfaithful with something of far less value? What are these “true riches”? Does this refer to some sort heavenly currency we will need? Will true riches establish some sort of hierarchy among believers in heaven? Neither of these explanations is very plausible. Instead, “true riches” will be the means by which we magnify God’s glory throughout eternity. True riches are an extension of the resources God has given us on earth. They will be leveraged in heaven the same way we should leverage our resources on earth. True riches will be the means by which we give God glory throughout all eternity. We want as many true riches as we can get!

Q: *Have you ever been tempted to disregard the value your earthly possessions can have for God’s kingdom?*

Q: *Are you encouraged by the idea that the use of your resources will impact how you view eternity?*

APPLICATION POINT – The way Jesus extended the metaphor of the parable could potentially lead us to conclude that our possessions on earth have no significance for God’s kingdom. What good would “unrighteous wealth” be before the throne of a righteous God? But once we realize that “unrighteous” is merely an extension of Jesus’s metaphor, we can easily see that our possessions, and the way we will leverage them for heaven, have a great deal of significance for heaven. Never fall into the trap of thinking it does not matter what you do with what God has given you on earth. The way you use your resources will matter for eternity. Leverage them for the sake of the gospel.

3. DODGING A DIVIDED LIFE

■ LUKE 16:13

Q: *How does the parable of the shrewd manager relate to leading a divided life?*

Q: *What would have been the manager’s outcome if he had decided to be honest with his master’s money?*

The shrewd manager shows us the importance of investing our assets for heaven. He also shows us the importance of avoiding a divided life. Once he realized he was losing his role as a manager, his only concern was to prepare himself for the reality he knew he would face. He was even willing to steal from his master to do it. He could not afford to continue serving his old master and secure the friendships he would need after his role as a manager ended. When we come to faith in Christ, we know we will spend eternity worshipping God in heaven, but many of us continue to live as if our earthly lives are all that matter. We are living a divided life. Our confession says we should seek the joys of heaven, but the way we use our time, money, and talents suggests we are more concerned with our lives here. The parable of the shrewd manager offers us a warning. Live now for eternity! Do not think you can prepare yourself for heaven while seeking all this life has to offer.

Q: *Are unbelievers ever caught off guard by the way you utilize your resources?*

Q: *In what ways are you holding back from investing for eternity?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the best gauges to see if you are leveraging your resources for the sake of eternity is to compare your lifestyle to your peers, especially unbelievers who are in a similar financial situation. Are you able to afford the same car, the same house, and the same vacations? Do you have time for the same activities? If there is no distinction between how you use your resources and how an unbeliever in a similar situation does, there is a good chance you are not leveraging your resources for eternity.

Q: *How did Jesus conclude His teaching from this parable?*

Q: *Why is monetary wealth so seductive?*

Throughout this lesson, an effort has been made to broaden the idea of “resources” beyond money. This is an important point. Living the Christian life will require a sacrifice of your time and talents. Jesus does, however, conclude by drawing attention specifically to our monetary resources. There is something about money that is seductive and destructive in a way nothing else is. Money divides families, businesses, and churches. The desire for money makes people do things they would not have thought themselves capable of. There is little reason to wonder why Jesus warned His followers of the dangers of serving God and money.

Q: *What protections do you have in place to keep yourself from succumbing to the love of money?*

Q: *Do you find managing your money to be the hardest part of living for Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – The parable of the shrewd manager invites you to turn the tables on how you view money. We typically think in terms of how much we can afford to give. This parable challenges you to think in terms of how much you can afford to keep. Every dollar you cling to is one that cannot be invested for eternity. This is a much more challenging way of thinking about monetary wealth. Ask yourself, “How much money can I afford to keep from God?” The way you frame the question can make a difference in how you leverage your money for the kingdom.

NEXT STEPS

Create a chart to help you track how you are leveraging your resources for eternity. Start with three categories: money, time, and talents. You may wish to broaden these categories more. Determine how to best quantify these things and come up with a total number for each resource you have at your disposal. Below your totals, write down how much you are currently leveraging for eternity. Below that, make some goals for the weeks and months ahead. For example, let's say you have two hours of free time on week nights once you get home from work and put your children to bed. Let's say you have five hours of free time for each day on the weekend. Your total time resource number would be twenty. Determine how many of these hours you spend each week on something that will make a difference for eternity. Do you prepare for your small group lesson? Do you participate in a ministry at Oakwood? Serve in an Oakwood ministry that benefits the community? After determining this, set some goals to do more in the future. Legalism in these things is not the point of this exercise. The exercise should help you understand how you are using your resources and encourage you to consider making more sacrifices that will show up in heaven.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-Jesus, help me to do the tough work needed to understand your teachings.

-Father, help me leverage my resources for eternity.

-Father, keep me from living a divided life.

-God, help me to always rely on the grace you have shown to me in Jesus Christ, whether I am walking well or stumbling.

■ ■ LIFE OF JESUS

September 26, 2021 | *The Rich Man and Lazarus*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- What relationship is there between our lives now and the lives we will experience in eternity?
- Read Luke 16:19–31.
- Pray that God will use this passage to convince you to live for eternity.

THIS WEEK

■ ■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The decisions we make in life determine how we spend eternity.

■ ■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Prioritize eternal life over the life you have now.

■ ■ MEDITATE

“But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish’” (Luke 16:25).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to introduce yourself to the main point of this week’s lesson.

Q: *Have you ever experienced regret?*

Q: *How can we address feelings of regret?*

Regret is perhaps the most painful emotion anyone can endure. It can be unbearable to believe the sorrow you now endure could have been avoided if you had charted a different course in the past. We wish we could be given an opportunity to do things over, but this simply is not how God has orchestrated His creation. We are given one life. Apart from the grace of God shown through Jesus Christ, we must face the consequences of our actions, both now and for eternity.

In Luke 16:19–31, we encounter a man facing regret. This man lived a life of ease and luxury, but after death, he realized he would endure an eternity of torment and sorrow. During his life, he chose to indulge himself and live as if this life were all that mattered. Now, after death, he regretted the decisions he made that led him to this point. He regretted that he failed recognize the connection between his life before and after death. There was nothing he could do after death to change his circumstances or the decisions he had made.

Q: *How can you keep from becoming the rich man we encounter in this passage?*

Q: *How do you deny yourself now for the sake of eternity?*

APPLICATION POINT – There will be several applications drawn from this passage, but you must not miss the main point. What you do in this life matters for eternity. Every Christian recognizes that there is more to reality than the things we can see and touch, but it is easy to live like a materialist. It is easy to live for what brings us joy now at the expense of what will secure our joy for eternity. The only way out of this trap is to consider Jesus Christ, your Savior. Jesus gave up the glory He knew in heaven to secure the eternity of those who would confess Him as Lord. The best hope you have for the greatest joy for all eternity is to follow His example.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+This passage shows us the dangers of living only for ourselves. It also shows us that the decisions we make in life carry through eternity. It is easy to go through day-to-day life without considering how the decisions we make reflect the eternity we are headed for.

1. PAVING THE ROAD TO HELL

2. HEAVEN AND HELL

3. RECEIVING REVELATION

GOING DEEPER

+This parable is filled with lessons and implications for our lives. It peers into the greatest depths of reality. We will examine this parable in three sections.

1. PAVING THE ROAD TO HELL

■ LUKE 16:19-21

Q: *What principles did the rich man live by?*

Q: *How would you describe the rich man's attitude toward Lazarus?*

Jesus created a sharp contrast between the characters in this parable. The rich man is identified by his wealth and its luxuries. Purple clothing was expensive in the ancient world and a symbol of great wealth. A feast was something typically reserved for special occasions, but this man indulged his appetite by feasting on a daily basis. Everything we are told about him shows that he lived for the moment. He was not concerned with what the future held.

Lazarus, on the other hand is identified by his poverty and sorrow. Since he was laid at the rich man's gate, we can assume Lazarus had little recourse other than begging for his daily needs. He was covered with sores rather than purple cloth. Even the dogs added to his sorrows by licking his wounds. Lazarus is portrayed as almost sub-human.

Jesus did not tell us specifically why the rich man was destined for an eternity of sorrow or why Lazarus found favor in eternity. The rich man's wealth, by itself, would not condemn him, nor would Lazarus's poverty have proved his righteousness. We certainly may infer that the rich man sinned by ignoring Lazarus at his gate. Rather than using his wealth as a means to help others in need, the rich man instead sought a life of ease and luxury. We know the life this man secured for himself only provided a better time on his way to finding eternal sorrows. Essentially, he lived to pave the road to hell for himself.

Q: *Who do you identify with more in this parable, the rich man or Lazarus?*

Q: *What is the connection between the rich man's wealth and his eternal fate?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the most perplexing issues in this parable is the relationship between the rich man's wealth and his eternal destiny. We cannot affirm that the rich man was destined for an eternity of sorrows because of his wealth, but it is impossible to completely disregard the connection between his wealth and his fate. At multiple points within the Gospels, we can see that wealth is, almost by nature, deceptive. Great wealth can deceive those who have it into disregarding God and the rest of humanity. At the very least, this parable encourages us to guard ourselves against the deceptiveness of money. Wealth provides an opportunity to meet the needs of others. Whatever amount of money you have in your accounts, you need to always be aware of the needs surrounding you. If you begin to view wealth as a tool to help others, you will likely begin to notice needs right in front of you, unlike the rich man who overlooked Lazarus.

2. HEAVEN AND HELL

■ LUKE 16:22-26

Q: *What factors should limit the conclusions we draw from this passage concerning heaven and hell?*

Q: *Why is it difficult to speak with certainty concerning what heaven will be like?*

Christians are rightly curious to know what heaven will be like. We know heaven is where we will see God clearly and glorify Him forever. It is the place where our greatest hopes and joys will come true. I think there is a nearly equal curiosity concerning the nature of hell. We must be cautious, however, of drawing firm conclusions concerning the nature of heaven and hell from Luke 16:19–31. We have to accept the limitations of the genre Jesus chose to employ. As we have seen, Jesus used parables to illustrate His teaching, but in doing so He created a storied world that does not always align with the way things are. We should assume the same principle is at work in this parable. There is no reason to think, based on this parable, that those in heaven and hell will be able to see one another or converse back and forth in the manner we see here.

We also have to accept the limitations inherent within the concept of “progressive revelation,” which acknowledges that God did not fully reveal everything about Himself at a single point in human history. God revealed some of Himself and His plan to our earliest ancestors. He expected them to live faithfully according to the revelation He gave them. At various points throughout human history, God revealed more of Himself and His plan to us. One of the key areas of progressive revelation is what we know about heaven, hell, and the afterlife. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people had an incomplete understanding of the afterlife. They clearly believed in the continuation of the human soul after death, but they did not necessarily think of “heaven” and “hell” as separate realities dividing those who were saved and those who were not. God had not revealed this to them in the way He has to us in the New Testament. When Jesus addressed His audience with this parable, He presented heaven and hell in categories they would have clearly understood, given what God had revealed to them. For example, today, when we read the word “Hades” in Luke 16:23, we usually associate this word with hell, but notice that the rich man, Lazarus, and Abraham were all apparently in Hades in this parable. “Hades” was just a way of referring to the afterlife. In Hades, the eternal fate of these characters is distinguished by the great chasm separating them. Those on the side of the rich man would suffer for eternity while those on the side of Abraham and Lazarus enjoyed a paradisiacal experience. This portrayal of heaven and hell is consistent with what has been revealed to us in the rest of the New Testament but not completely congruent. Before drawing conclusions about heaven and hell from this passage, we have to allow for the medium by which Jesus was teaching and for His accommodation to what had been revealed to those He was teaching.

Q: *What are the implications of progressive revelation for us?*

Q: *Why should we be thankful there is still more to know about God?*

APPLICATION POINT – Progressive revelation has multiple implications for us. We still live with the reality of progressive revelation today. God has revealed everything we need to know concerning salvation in Jesus Christ, but beyond this, there is an unlimited extent to which we do not yet understand God, His creation, or His plan for

us. This should make us both cautious of thinking we know more than we do and eager for the day we will know God even more fully than we do now. We must also be content with what God has revealed of Himself. We may speculate on matters God has not revealed, but we must do so with humility, ready to acknowledge our limitations in these matters. We must also not use progressive revelation as an excuse to disregard what God has clearly revealed in Scripture. The idea behind progressive revelation is not that God behaves one way in one era only to turn the tables at a later time. God's character always remains consistent. What He has revealed to us builds on the foundation laid in previous eras.

❓: *What can we infer from this parable about heaven and hell?*

❓: *How are Lazarus and the rich man contrasted in these verses?*

The contrast between Lazarus and the rich man continues in the afterlife, but the tables are turned. In life, the rich man lived in ease and luxury. Now the rich man was in agony, his life of ease and luxury a distant memory. In life, Lazarus suffered. Now, he was comforted. In life, Lazarus longed for only a small portion of what the rich man had. Now, the rich man yearned for only a drop of the water available to Lazarus. Notice, however, that things are not completely inversed. Their lives on earth came to an end, but their eternal state will not. The rich man could not find solace in knowing he experienced good during his earthly life. The rich man would spend eternity in agony, and Lazarus would spend eternity finding comfort.

❓: *Why should you seek joy in the life to come, even at the expense of luxury and ease?*

❓: *How are you seeking eternal life over life on earth?*

APPLICATION POINT – Sixteenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal devised what became known as Pascal's Wager, which is an argument for why people should believe in God. The basic premise of Pascal's Wager is that if we live as though God exists, and He does indeed exist, we have gained heaven. If He does not exist, we have lost nothing. If, on the other hand, we live as though God does not exist and He really does exist, we have gained

hell and punishment and have lost heaven and bliss. Pascal reasoned that a person would be foolish to forego the possibility of eternal happiness when there was no greater alternative to be gained. Pascal's Wager faces some difficulties philosophically and theologically, but his thinking does help draw the application of Jesus's parable into focus. A person would be foolish to prioritize what could be gained in this life at the expense of losing what is offered in eternal life. Organize your worldview to prioritize eternal life. Doing so may mean giving up some long-held dreams. You may have to give up things you feel entitled to. But what you give up cannot compare with what you have to gain.

Q: *How did the rich man view Abraham?*

Q: *How did the rich man view Lazarus?*

Although the rich man was suffering, his new situation did not create any humility or even a resignation that he had received what he deserved. He still referred to Abraham as his father even though Abraham was far off and separated by an immense chasm. The rich man was not a spiritual son of Abraham. Furthermore, the rich man behaved as though Lazarus's only role was to serve others. He adjured Abraham to send Lazarus to relieve his anguish, as if Lazarus were Abraham's servant and had no greater obligation than to serve him by relieving his anguish. He still prioritized himself over Lazarus. He believed he deserved mercy even though he showed none to Lazarus in life. The rich man would not see past his own gate in life, but now failed to notice the great chasm separating him from Lazarus.

Q: *Why do people who are caught in sin struggle to see a way out?*

Q: *How can you protect yourself from the delusion caused by sin?*

APPLICATION – The rich man's behavior after death shows the distorting effect sin has on us. Living in sin makes us delusional. We cannot see God's world for what it really is. Furthermore, we cannot cure sin's delusion on our own. The nature of delusion means that even when we think we are outside of the influence of sin, we may only be

deceiving ourselves. We need a standard or rule to help us see when and where our lives have become unaligned with God's righteousness. God gave us this rule in the form of His Word. Unfortunately, when we see something in God's Word we do not like, many of us seek a reason to ignore it. Instead, seek to mold your life to the rule provided for us in Scripture. When you encounter something in the Bible that challenges how you want to live or think, do not immediately assume the Bible cannot mean what you do not want it to mean. It is always okay to seek a clearer understanding of Scripture, but we need to be wary of trying to mold Scripture to fit our expectations.

3. RECEIVING REVELATION

■ LUKE 16:27-31

Q: *Who did the rich man show concern for?*

Q: *What does "Moses and the Prophets" refer to?*

After realizing nothing can be done for him, the rich man finally showed some concern for others. He begged Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them of the coming sorrow. The rich man's attitude of superiority still remained. He still viewed Lazarus as a servant. Furthermore, rather than interceding for the poor and needy, he interceded for his brothers, who were apparently just as callous as he was. Abraham countered his requests by saying his brothers had Moses and the Prophets. This is a shortened way of referring to the Old Testament. Abraham's reply shows that the brothers had all they needed to repent in faith. The rich man, however, did not believe the Scriptures were enough to induce faith in his brothers. A messenger from the dead who testified to the realities of life after death might just do the trick.

Q: *Have you ever wanted to view a miracle to validate your faith?*

Q: *How can you verify the teachings of Scripture?*

APPLICATION – The rich man’s assumption about his brothers continues to resonate with us. There have certainly been times in my life when I have thought I would believe more if only I had some type of validation of my faith, but God has provided me, and everyone else, with everything we need to put our faith fully in Him and to live out our faith consistently before others. We even have more of God’s revelation than Abraham referred to in this parable. We have the New Testament as well as the Old. We do not need a further sign from God to believe in Him more. What we need to do is dive into the witness He has given us and pay attention to how it testifies to the truth of our faith. When we allow the Bible to transform the way we think and the way we live, the validity of our faith becomes clearer and clearer. Don’t look for miracles to validate your belief. Look at the transforming power of God’s Word.

Q: *Why would the rich man’s brothers refuse to repent?*

Q: *How do these verses echo Jesus’s own ministry?*

The rich man knew his brothers were in need, but he misdiagnosed their problem. He thought their problem was a lack of evidence. The real problem was that their hearts were too hard. Abraham responded to the rich man’s request for more evidence by stating that even if someone were to come back from the dead and warn them, they still would not believe. No amount of evidence will ever mend a hardened heart. It is difficult not to see the connection between this parable and Jesus’s own ministry. Jesus would soon be crucified and raised from the dead, but many from His own people still refused to believe in Him. The words of Abraham in Jesus’s parable portend what would be the case among the Jewish people soon after the resurrection and many others since.

Q: *How can you protect yourself from a hardened heart?*

Q: *How can you help others with a hard heart see the beauty of Jesus Christ?*

APPLICATION – The most effective way to ward off a hardened heart is prayer. If you are consistently praying for the truths of the gospel to be made evident in your life, God will make your heart receptive to Him. If you know someone whose heart has been hardened to the gospel, consistent intercessory prayer is the best antidote you have

for them. You certainly want to be ready to share the gospel and respond to their objections, but a hard heart can ultimately only be cured by the work of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit works with our prayers to bring others to faith in Jesus Christ. Choose one person you know who is hardened to the gospel, and pray for God to change his heart.

NEXT STEPS

The decisions we make in life will echo for eternity. The most important decision anyone can ever make is to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. If you are a Christian, the next most important decision you can make is to leverage your life for the gospel. Select one practice you know would help you spiritually and commit to making it a habit over the next two months. Find a way to keep a record of your commitment and how you are doing. Perhaps you need to ward off the devastating effects of materialism in your life. Commit to tithing or giving to missions on a weekly basis. Perhaps you know your prayer life is not where it should be. Find a five-minute period during the day to pray. What you do now matters. You do not want to reach eternity and wish you had done more to love and serve Christ on earth.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-God, help me not to live for today but for eternity.

-Lord Jesus, affirm in my heart that heaven and hell are real.

-Holy Spirit, keep my heart from being hardened to God and His calling on my life.

-God, thank you for the life-giving power of your Word.

■ ■ LIFE OF JESUS

October 3, 2021 | The Seven “I Am” Statements of Jesus

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- What is the most important thing in Christianity?
- Pray that this lesson will help you come face-to-face with Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.
- Read John 11:17–27; 14:1–14; 15:1–17.

THIS WEEK

■ ■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus is the life-giving, hope-filled center of the Christian faith.

■ ■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

There is nothing more important than understanding who Jesus is.

■ ■ MEDITATE

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to begin thinking of why Jesus’s identity is so important.

Q: *What are some common explanations for the identity of Jesus of Nazareth?*

Q: *Why do people feel the need to explain Jesus's identity?*

Who is Jesus? Our answer to this question is the most important decision of our lives. In Colossians 1:17, Paul said, "In [Christ] all things hold together." Paul placed Jesus at the very center of everything and attributed to Him the power to hold the very fabric of the universe together. Such a testimony is evidence of the radical difference Jesus had made in the life of the apostle Paul. According to John, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Revelation 1:8; 22:13). Again, John understood that Jesus is the key individual in all of human history. He is the first and the last. Everything in between can be explained in terms of Him.

Most people today do not share the apostles' magnificent vision of Jesus. Many are willing to admit He was a good moral teacher. They think of Him in the same way they do Buddha or Gandhi. New Testament scholars have provided a plethora of ways to identify Jesus. Some believe He was part of a separatist movement, such as the Essenes. Others have thought He was a Jewish revolutionary. Some have suggested He was simply a rabbi who suddenly found Himself out of step with the norms of society. Ironically, the need of so many to explain Him illustrates the significance of who Jesus is.

When considering the identity of Jesus Christ, the most important place to start is with His own testimony. In his Gospel, John recorded seven of Jesus's statements in which He identified Himself, each beginning with the words "I am." If you want to understand who He is, there is no better place to begin than with the man Himself.

Q: *What do you think most non-believers would change about Jesus if they could?*

Q: *What is the most reliable witness concerning the nature and identity of Jesus Christ?*

APPLICATION POINT – In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a movement among New Testament scholars known as the quest for the historical Jesus. They believed the portrayal of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels had become skewed by the theological commitments of the early church and, that by examining Jesus's culture and subjecting His words to the analysis of modern psychology, they would be able to describe

for the world what He was really like. They denied His miracles. They denied He ever claimed to be the Jewish Messiah or the Son of God. They claimed His only concern was teaching the love of God and the brotherhood of all human beings. The participants in this quest were quite proud of themselves until others began pointing out that their description of Jesus looked a lot like them! The quest of the historical Jesus turned out to be an attempt to remake Jesus into their own image.

When seeking to understand who Jesus is, it is crucial to begin in the right place. Despite the skepticism of the scholars participating in the quest for the historical Jesus, there is no better place to begin than with God's Word. Through the Bible, we become familiar with ideas like creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. We can begin to define concepts like sin and atonement. At the outset of this lesson, and any time you explore the identity of Christ, you must commit to starting with the truths provided in God's Word. This is the only way Jesus will ever make sense.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The first four "I am" statements were studied earlier in this series. This lesson will consider the final three "I am" statements.

1. I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.
2. I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE.
3. I AM THE VINE.

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate the "I am" statements in John 11:25, 14:6, and 15:1. These statements will be set within their surrounding context. We will also draw implications from them for us to apply today.

1. I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.

■ JOHN 11:17-27

Q: *Was Jesus speaking of physical death or spiritual death in this passage?*

Q: *Why did Jesus say everyone who believes in Him will never die?*

In John 11:17–27, Martha was mourning the death of her brother, Lazarus. She and her family were close friends with Jesus, and they believed He was the Messiah. Martha also believed if Jesus had been present, He could have saved her brother. His reputation as a miracle worker was well known. But Lazarus was dead, and she believed it was too late to do anything about it. But Jesus told her Lazarus would rise again. And Martha acknowledged that he would rise again on the last day. With remarkable clarity for her time, she spoke of a day in the future when God will intervene in human history and raise the dead to life. Jesus responded to her by both affirming her and alluding to the fact that resurrection on the last day was not all He meant. In so doing, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Q: *Why is the resurrection from the dead a great hope among Christians?*

Q: *How is the resurrection a symbol of the victory of Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT –Resurrection from the dead to eternal life is a remarkable gift for us in God’s plan for His creation. God’s glory is at the center of the Christian faith. He would deserve all the praise we can muster during our lives even if the resurrection of the dead were not part of His plan. But God has determined His people will be raised from the dead. The resurrection is a demonstration of His love for His people. It is a demonstration of His power over His creation. It demonstrates Christ’s ultimate victory over sin and death. Even believers can become completely wrapped up in our lives on earth. This is understandable. Throughout the course of this series on the life of Jesus, you have been challenged to make your life count for the gospel to the greatest extent possible, but in doing so to not completely take your eyes away from the great hope God has provided us for eternity. Take time to reflect on the day Jesus shall return, the dead shall rise, tears will be no more, and you will behold the wonderful face of your Savior in resurrection glory.

Q: *Was Jesus thinking about the resurrection on the last day or something else when He spoke to Martha?*

Q: *Why was Martha unable to see what Jesus meant when He said Lazarus would rise from the dead?*

When Jesus told Martha her brother would rise from the dead, she assumed He was referring to his resurrection on the last day, but Jesus meant Lazarus would be raised to a new life right then. In responding to Martha, He said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Martha had an incomplete understanding of what He meant. She did not fully understand who Jesus was because she had limited the extent of His ministry to resurrection after death, but Jesus came so that His followers might truly live now. There is new life available in Jesus for those who will believe in Him now. In Ephesians 2:1–10 Paul affirmed Jesus’s words, saying we were once dead in our trespasses and sins, but Jesus has made us alive. Since Christ has “made us alive,” we are now able to accomplish the good works for which God created us. The blessings of the resurrection are not completely reserved for the eternal state. There is new life in Christ available now.

Q: *What does Lazarus’s resurrection teach us about our lives now?*

Q: *How are you limiting the benefits of new life in Christ?*

APPLICATION POINT – Limiting the joys of new life in Christ to the eternal state will severely inhibit the church’s witness to the lost. If we cannot show the benefits of living for Jesus now, the best we can say to non-believers is, “Take my word for it.” Jesus had far more in mind when He said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” This week, spend some time reflecting on passages that cover attributes associated with the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23; Colossians 3:12–17). Ask God to make the new life you have in Christ evident through the emergence of these attributes in your life.

2. I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE.

❏ JOHN 14:1–14

Q: *What was the occasion for Jesus's address in John 14?*

Q: *What prompted Him to say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life"?*

John 14:1–14 is part of Jesus's address to the disciples on the evening before His arrest. It is known as the "Farewell Discourse." He was preparing the disciples for the events that would shortly transpire. The thought of being without Him weighed heavily on the disciples. But Jesus affirmed that He would return in the future to receive His followers. One day, they would find themselves again in His presence and in the presence of the Father. In this passage, as in others in John's Gospel, Jesus's message to them blends two realities. In one sense, it seems as if He was just shuttling off to some other location in Israel, but readers on this side of the resurrection generally recognize that He was departing this earthly reality to join God in heaven. His going would somehow prepare His followers for a place in heaven with the Father. Perhaps sensing their confusion, Jesus also told them they knew the way to where He was going. But the disciples were not tracking with Him. Thomas questioned whether they could know the way to the Father since they did not know where Jesus was going. Thomas could not unhinge himself from thinking only in terms of physical time and space. He was asking for a roadmap. Jesus replied to him in the clearest way possible. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Forget roadmaps and compasses. If you want to find God, focus on Jesus. He is the way. If you want to know the truth that is needed to go before God's presence for eternity, forget your traditions, pop psychology, and horoscopes. Study Jesus. He is the only truth you need. If you want to live your life to the fullest, do not seek adventures, drugs, money, or sex. Search for the life Jesus offers. Jesus's response shows there is one way to know and enjoy God forever, and that one way is through Him.

Q: *How do modern secularists respond to claims of absolute religious truth?*

Q: *Why are claims of absolute truth vital for Christianity?*

APPLICATION – Many non-religious people shudder at claims of absolute truth, especially within the realm of religious truth. Religious inclusivism is the dominating paradigm. They have stories they like to tell. Religions are like people taking different paths up the same mountain or like blind men unable to identify an elephant because they think the part they are touching is all there is. Unfortunately, they fail to recognize the pretentious superiority underlying such tales. In their minds, every religious person is deceiving themselves. They are the only ones enlightened enough to see the truth, but doesn't this make them just like the people they are chastising? If you confront them with this inconsistency, some will sheepishly admit they had not thought through the implications of their position. Others will be offended at your refusal to get with the picture. The real problem, of course, is that in the minds of secular people religion does not matter all that much. Most will not begrudge you holding to some private religious principles, but they view as bigotry any suggestions that those claims are absolute. But John 14:6 leaves Christians with no other option. We cannot abandon the absolute exclusivity of Jesus Christ. To do so is to deny the gospel and endanger souls. As you read through this lesson, reaffirm your commitment to Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father.

Q: *What additional "I am" statements did Jesus make in John 14:1-14?*

Q: *What instigated these "I am" statements?*

The seven "I am" statements in John's Gospel refer to seven metaphors that begin with "I am." These statements create unique images by which we gain additional insight into the identity and ministry of Jesus. There are other significant occurrences of "I am" within John's Gospel that are not included with the seven "I am" statements because they are non-metaphorical. For example, in John 8:58, Jesus responded to those claiming He could not have seen Abraham by saying, "Before Abraham was, I am." This is an allusion to "Yahweh," the proper name used for God in the Old Testament. The allusion was not missed by the Jews. They picked up rocks in order to stone Him. Another "I am" occurs within John 14:1-14. In John 14:10-11, Jesus twice said, "I am in the Father." While not metaphorical, this "I am" statement has enormous implications for understanding Jesus's identity. In saying "I am in the Father," Jesus affirmed both His unity with the Father and their uniqueness. This is one of the verses underlying the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. There is one God. He has existed for eternity in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God. There is real unity between all three members of the Godhead and also real distinction. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father.

Q: *Why would you refuse to worship another person?*

Q: *How does the Trinity model mutual love and harmony between people?*

APPLICATION POINT – The doctrine of the Trinity is not just something fussy theologians argued about hundreds of years ago or something stiff-necked academics use to feed their superiority. The doctrine of the Trinity has significant implications for our lives. Sometimes, we are so used to the implications we simply fail to trace them back to the Trinity. For example, do you pray to Jesus? Worship Him? Confess Him as Lord? Would you do this for any other person in the history of humankind? Of course not! The reason you worship the man Jesus of Nazareth is because you recognize that He is also fully God. This is part of the doctrine of the Trinity. Other times, we should perhaps be chastised for failing to recognize the implications of the Trinity. If God has existed forever as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then He obviously values unity and harmony. We should expect nothing less from our families and our churches, but dysfunction has become so common in these spheres it is almost surprising when they are absent. This week, praise God for the doctrine of the Trinity. Think deeply about the doctrine of the Trinity and its implications for your life.

3. I AM THE VINE.

■ JOHN 15:1–17

Q: *What is the role of the Father in this metaphor?*

Q: *What do the branches represent in this metaphor?*

This passage is a continuation of the Farewell Discourse. In John 15:1, Jesus compared Himself to a vine from which many branches grow. The branches in this metaphor are His disciples. When attached to the vine, the branches are able to bear fruit and thrive. Apart from the vine, they are worthless. They cannot bear fruit on

their own or even sustain themselves. They dry up and are thrown away. In comparing Himself with a vine, Jesus shows Himself to be the source of life for all believers. There is no life apart from Him. Furthermore, He shows Himself to be the true source of good fruit within our lives. The branches receive life from the vine and then naturally produce fruit. The branches do not produce fruit on their own. In order for His disciples to bear fruit, they must abide in Christ.

Q: *In what ways do you depend on Jesus?*

Q: *What are some ways even Christians attempt to live apart from Him?*

APPLICATION – Most Christians want to grow in their faith. They want to adopt habits that will lead to righteousness and glorify God and jettison the sinful practices that characterized their lives before Christ. A common misconception of the Christian faith is that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but somehow, we grow through our own efforts. When Jesus says, “I am the vine,” He reveals that nothing could be further from the truth. We do not grow through trying really hard to be good and avoid sin. We grow by drawing nourishment from the vine. We dwell on who Jesus is and what He came to do. In your Christian walk, be wary of seeking growth from your own efforts apart from the live-giving power of Jesus.

Q: *How do we abide in Jesus?*

Q: *What are the signs that Jesus loves us?*

Jesus calls His disciples to abide in His love. This is the only way for them to bear fruit. They can be assured of His love because of His willingness to die for them and because He considers them friends. By abiding in His love, Jesus’s disciples will keep His commandments. The dynamic of the gospel is clearly seen in this. They do not keep Jesus’s commandments to gain His love. They keep Jesus’s commandments because of His love.

Q: *How does Jesus's love motivate you to obey His commandments?*

Q: *How can you extend "gospel love" to those around you?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our world lives by the principle “you do for me and I’ll do for you.” This is an exhausting way to live. There is no grace or love in this lifestyle. Seek to serve others this week. You may be ridiculed or taken advantage of. If that happens, use it as an opportunity to consider the scorn of Jesus on the cross. Sometimes, however, you may draw the attention of someone in need of the gospel.

NEXT STEPS

What other metaphors can you think of to illustrate Jesus's identity and mission? Spend some time reflecting on the gospel and the world around you this week. How can we see the love of Christ in the ordinary things in life? Write your reflections down and share them with your group. Encourage one another in the gospel.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-Lord Jesus, help me to come to a greater understanding of who you are day by day.

-Father, thank you for the life you have given me now and the life you have promised me in the resurrection.

-Jesus, give me the courage to proclaim that you are the only way, the only truth, and the only life.

-Jesus, help me to abide in your love.

■ LIFE OF JESUS

October 10, 2021 | Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Can you describe a time someone forgave you?
- Read Matthew 18:21–35.
- Pray that God would instill a heart of grace and forgiveness in you.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

If you are unable to show grace to others, you have never experienced grace yourself.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Be willing to forgive others.

■ MEDITATE

“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to begin thinking about forgiveness.

Q: *What assumption would you draw if someone could not explain a concept to you?*

Q: *What would make you question whether an instructor was qualified to teach his material?*

In college, I was invited to visit a friend while he was house-sitting for a couple in his church. They had a large property with ponds and woodlands, and they told my friend he was welcome to invite a guest to hunt or fish with him while he stayed there. Their home was quite far from campus, and it took a long time and multiple turns to get there. My friend gave me directions, but I couldn't find the house. At the time, I did not own a GPS or a cell phone, so I had little choice but to backtrack from where I was until I found a gas station with a pay phone. I called my friend, got another set of directions, and set off. After some time, I realized I was no closer to finding the house than the first time, so I backtracked to the gas station again. I called my friend, got directions, and set off again. The same thing happened. This time I was quite frustrated with my friend, and he admitted he had misplaced the directions they had given him. He was trying to tell me how to get there from memory. I should have realized this a lot sooner. If you do not know the way to a place, you cannot tell others how to get there.

We see a similar principle at work in Matthew 18:21–35. Jesus had just described how to handle situations in which one of His followers has sinned against another (Matthew 18:15–20). The offended person should confront the offender, and if the offending believer accepted his fault, the dispute could be reconciled between the two of them. Peter, however, questioned how many times this pattern could play out. In response, Jesus told a parable to illustrate that if you are unable to show grace to others, you have never really experienced grace yourself.

Q: *Why should Christians be the first to extend grace to others?*

Q: *What would keep a Christian from showing grace?*

APPLICATION POINT – If you are unable to show grace to others, you have never really experienced grace yourself. A Christian unable to show grace to others is not as trivial as my friend misdirecting me. Christianity teaches that you are saved by grace through faith. If you have never experienced grace, you have not been saved.

This is the main point to be gleaned from Matthew 18:21–35. Certainly, precautions must be put into place. A wife may forgive an abusive husband, but forgiveness does not mean she must reenter the home immediately, if ever. A serial adulterer may find forgiveness from the church but should hardly expect to be given a leadership role within the body. But the point remains. Christians, above everyone else, know what it is like to need forgiveness. Therefore, we should be the ones most ready to forgive others. We should be the most forgiving people in any community. Our willingness to forgive testifies to the grace of God in our own lives.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates that the inability to show grace to others stems from a failure to understand our own need for grace. This principle is derived from at least six truths evident from this parable and the surrounding context.

1. WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND GENEROSITY.
2. WE NEED FORGIVENESS.
3. SIN BLINDS US.
4. GOD HAS FORGIVEN US.
5. FAILING TO SHOW GRACE SIGNALS A FAILURE TO RECEIVE GRACE.
6. COMMUNITY GENERATES ACCOUNTABILITY.

GOING DEEPER

+This section will expand upon the six observations from Matthew 18:21–25 noted above, all related to our need for forgiveness and our need to show forgiveness to others.

1. WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND GENEROSITY.

▣ MATTHEW 18:21–22

Q: Do you think Peter thought his proposal was generous?

Q: *What did Jesus mean by “seventy-seven times”?*

In His discussion of handling disagreements among His followers, Jesus maintained the ideal of the offending party seeking forgiveness and the offended party being willing to forgive (Matthew 18:15). When this is the case, matters can be resolved without involving others. Peter recognized the ideal but wondered what limits Jesus’s followers should place on forgiveness. Surely forgiveness cannot be as open ended as Jesus implied. In posing his question to Jesus, he suggested that forgiving someone seven times might be a suitable limit. Perhaps he figured forgiving someone seven times would be extremely generous. Jesus, however, countered his “generosity” by saying His followers must be ready to forgive seventy-seven times. It is unlikely that Jesus meant seventy-seven was the magic number of times His followers should be willing to forgive. In multiplying Peter’s suggestion elevenfold, Jesus showed that Peter’s idea of generosity was far from the standard needed among His followers. It is safe to say that Jesus believed Peter’s line of inquiry was fallacious from the start. There are no limits to the forgiveness shown among Jesus’s followers. Even when Peter believed he was more than gracious, he was merely showing how far human standards of forgiveness fall from what Jesus demands.

Q: *Do people around you think of you as a forgiving or gracious person?*

Q: *How should our standard of forgiveness differ from the world’s?*

APPLICATION POINT – Peter likely thought his proposal was generous, but Jesus’s response showed he was completely off-track. The world offers us a poor standard for forgiveness. We need a much higher standard than anything this world has to offer. This is, in fact, what this passage is all about. Yet, I have seen many people who claim to be Christians adopt a standard of forgiveness that makes even worldly standards seem generous. A few years ago, I had a new co-worker I learned was a Christian. I typically saw him only in passing, but it was rare for me to have a Christian co-worker so I tried to get to know him in hopes we could encourage one another in displaying God’s glory in our workplace. Before long, I noticed this man was not well-regarded among our co-workers. I soon found out why. In one of our conversations, I said something I thought to be rather trivial, but it offended him. He completely shut me out of any conversation with him. I apologized profusely, but there was simply no room for forgiveness in this man’s heart. With him, you had one shot, and if you blew it, you could expect nothing more than curt responses and hostile interactions. It was embarrassing to know my other co-workers considered him to be a

Christian like me. Given the principle of this lesson, I have serious doubts as to whether he really was. If this story remotely describes you, I beg you to pray right now for God to begin working His standard of forgiveness into your heart. I am scared for you.

2. WE NEED FORGIVENESS.

■ ■ MATTHEW 18:23–25

Q: *Why was the servant in danger in this passage?*

Q: *What is a “talent” in this passage?*

To illustrate why His followers must be characterized by forgiveness, Jesus told the parable of the unforgiving servant. In this parable, a king decided to settle the accounts of his servants. One servant owed him 10,000 talents. According to the note in the ESV, a “talent” was equivalent to 20 years’ worth of wages for a typical laborer. The average salary in the United States is a little more than \$30,000. This amount multiplied by twenty equals \$600,000, approximately one talent in the ancient world. This servant owed the king 10,000 talents. If the math is accurate, the servant owed approximately 6 trillion dollars. The picture Jesus painted could not be clearer. This servant had a debt he could never repay.

Matthew 18:35 is the key to understanding this parable. This verse equates the king with God and the servant with us. We owe God a debt we could never pay. Our debt is not monetary but moral. The currency is not “talents” but our own sin. We have a “sin debt” we can never repay. We have no hope of atoning for our sins. Our only hope for avoiding God’s judgment is His forgiveness. This is the glory of the gospel! Through faith in Christ, we are forgiven a debt we could never pay and given a righteousness we could never earn. The grace of Jesus is free in that we contribute nothing to earn it, but it does come with implications for the entirety of our lives, as is made clear in this parable.

Q: *Why is works-based salvation a common assumption among non-Christians, even those coming from a Christian background?*

Q: *How does the gospel provide you with the freedom to love and enjoy God?*

APPLICATION POINT – Growing up in the Bible Belt of the American south, the default religion I most often encountered was works-based salvation, the idea that if your good deeds outweigh your bad, God will be pleased with you and allow you into heaven. The fact that so many people find this appealing and assume it is true exposes a failure to understand the extent of our debt and our need for forgiveness. It also shows that most people employ this same system in their own interactions. They assume God uses this system for us because it is the system they use with others. There is little reason to wonder why we are so hesitant to forgive or seek forgiveness. Even after hearing the gospel and accepting Jesus as their Savior, many people continue employing this works-based system as the lens by which they view others. The goal of this lesson is to help you see the inconsistency of this behavior. You have been forgiven a debt you could never repay. Now that you are saved, explore how the gospel can transform the way you view and interact with others. Instead of making others earn your goodwill, give it to them freely. Our ability to let the gospel guide our interactions with others is a wonderful testimony to the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

3. SIN BLINDS US.

■ MATTHEW 18:24–28

Q: *What was the servant's response when the king demanded repayment of his debt?*

Q: *Should the forgiven servant have been so concerned with the debt the other servant owed him?*

The king's servant had incurred a debt he would never be able to repay, even if he had several lifetimes to do it. Matthew 18:35 shows this debt corresponds to our sins. Despite the enormity of his debt, the servant begged the king for patience and committed to repaying it. He thought he was capable of repaying it. His response was foolish, almost laughable. He was delusional. The servant had not come to grips with the reality of his debt.

This alludes to the devastating delusion sin causes in our minds. The further we go into sin, the more convinced we become that our situation is not that bad. The more deluded we become over our sinful state, the more open we become to the idea we could atone for our sin, given the time. Our understanding of God's holiness diminishes. Our delusion causes us to normalize sin, and sin transforms how we view life. It is no longer something to avoid, it is the key to having a good time. But the more we look to sin to provide us with joy, the more misery we invite into

our lives. To combat that misery, we continue to turn to sin. With every cycle, it grows harder to see the reality of what sin is and what it does to us. Our only hope is the Master's grace.

Q: *How does sin's delusion continue even after we have been saved?*

Q: *Have you ever been tempted to reminisce fondly about your life before Jesus?*

APPLICATION – Sometimes believers are tempted to reminisce about their lives before they accepted the gospel, looking back almost fondly on when they indulged their sin and had no regard for the consequences. This is a lingering effect of the delusion sin causes. If you ever find yourself doing this, stop kidding yourself. You have a far greater foundation for joy and fulfillment in Christ than you ever had in sin. Furthermore, appearing to reflect fondly upon your life before Jesus can reinforce the delusion of sin in which others are still living. You do not want to contribute to sin's delusion.

4. GOD HAS FORGIVEN US.

■ MATTHEW 18:27

Q: *How did the servant resolve his debt with the king?*

Q: *Why did the king forgive his debt?*

The king recognized that the servant would never be able to pay his debt. Rather than condemning him and his family to a debtor's prison or enslaving them, the king had pity on him and forgave the debt he owed. This is what God does for His people. Each of us is guilty of sin and in need of forgiveness. Apart from God's grace, each of us would be condemned.

At the outset of this parable, Jesus framed it as a comparison to the kingdom of heaven. This may seem like a mischaracterization because the parable obviously pertains to our lives on earth before the final judgment or the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven. What did Jesus mean when He said this parable is what the kingdom of heaven is like? By comparing this parable to the kingdom of heaven, Jesus showed that the forgiveness of our sin is an end-time, heavenly reality that has been made known in the present. We do not have to wait until the last day to be forgiven of our sins. We are forgiven now, and that forgiveness is infused with the blessings we will know fully in the kingdom of heaven. This is also part of God's grace. We are not resigned to live out the rest of our days under the condemnation of sin until God decides to intercede in world history and begin His kingdom rule. We are fully forgiven of sin right now.

❓: *Why should we rejoice that we can know some of heaven's blessings now?*

❓: *What evidence of the kingdom of heaven do you see in your life right now?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our new life in Christ does not await us in the future. It has been made known to us right now. We are no longer bound to sin and its delusions. We do not have to wait to worship God in His presence. We will surely know each of these things in a greater measure in the kingdom, but the blessings of God overflow into the present. Take a moment to praise God for the new life you have in Jesus.

5. FAILING TO SHOW GRACE SIGNALS A FAILURE TO RECEIVE GRACE.

▣ MATTHEW 18:28–33

❓: *What did the servant do immediately after being forgiven by the king?*

❓: *Why did the king react the way he did?*

After being forgiven the equivalent of six trillion dollars, the servant encountered another servant who owed him 100 denarii. According to the ESV's footnote, a denarius was worth a day's wage. Using the same estimates and math above, the second servant owed him about \$8000. This is no small sum, but it pales in comparison to what he had just been forgiven. This was an opportunity to show someone else a small portion of the forgiveness he had just been shown. Instead, the forgiven servant treated his debtor more harshly than he had been treated. He condemned his fellow servant to prison.

The king's reaction is the key to understanding this parable. After hearing of the servant's actions, he summoned him again and condemned him for his original debt. Why did the king react in this way? He could have decided it was up to the servant to determine how to manage his own financial affairs. If he did not want to extend grace to others, that was his decision. Instead, the king recognized that the servant did not understand the grace the king had shown him. This is problematic, because if the servant did not understand the grace shown to him, it meant he had not really received it. The servant's actions cheapened the king's grace and made it as if he were obligated to it.

The parallel between us and the first servant could not be clearer. If we cannot show grace to others, it is a sign we have never really received grace ourselves. Thus, we are liable to the full condemnation of God.

Q: *How can you show the grace of God to others?*

Q: *Why should you show the grace of God to others?*

APPLICATION POINT – If you are unable to forgive others, it is a sign that you do not understand forgiveness. If you do not understand forgiveness, you cannot understand even the most basic aspects of the gospel. Be ready to forgive others when they offend you. Be ready to even take forgiveness a step further by being willing to give someone else the benefit of the doubt. Do not assume someone meant to offend you, even if you feel offended. This is part of leading with the forgiveness you need God to show you. Often, given time or a chance to further interact with the person, you will learn your offense was unwarranted anyway.

6. COMMUNITY GENERATES ACCOUNTABILITY.

■ **MATTHEW 18:31–35**

Q: *How is this parable connected Matthew 18:15–20?*

Q: *What role do the other servants play in the parable?*

Jesus told this parable immediately after discussing how disputes should be handled among His followers (Matthew 18:15–20). One principle in this passage is that the other members of our community help hold us accountable to righteousness. When one member falls out of line, he is first confronted by one, then two or three others, and then the entire church. The power of community helps members address sin in their own lives. We see this same principle at work in the parable of the unforgiving servant. When the king's other servants witnessed what the unforgiving servant has done, they were greatly distressed and reported the matter to their master, who addressed the issue. The servant's community held him accountable for his wicked action.

Q: *How does your church community hold you accountable to the gospel?*

Q: *Why do you need your church to hold you accountable to the gospel?*

APPLICATION POINT – The more you are involved in your church community, the better it is able to help you live out the implications of the gospel in your life. This is a good thing. We may even say it is a necessary thing for true believers. Correction is not something to be avoided, especially in matters as important as living consistently in your Christian faith. Be deeply rooted in your church community. If an occasion arises where other brothers and sisters in Christ help you reconsider the rightness of your actions, do not recoil in anger. Your church community is a gift God has given you to hold you accountable to your faith. If your heart is hardened by sin, there are few other avenues for this.

NEXT STEPS

Have you failed in showing forgiveness to others? Are you holding on to hostility against someone? Use this lesson as an occasion to repent of your unwillingness to forgive and seek reconciliation with the other person. This is an opportunity for you to seek real growth in your Christian life.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-Father, thank you for the forgiveness I have in Jesus Christ.

-God, help me to use the forgiveness I have in you as a model for how to forgive others.

-God, keep me from the blindness caused by sin.

-Jesus, help me adopt a new vision for what it means to be generous and forgiving of others.



■ LIFE OF JESUS

October 17, 2021 | Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Why did Jesus come into the world?
- Read Luke 19:1–10.
- Pray for God to help you understand and join Jesus's mission.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus's mission is to seek and save the lost.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

If you are not a sinner, you cannot participate in Jesus's mission.

■ MEDITATE

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.

Q: *Why do many people not appreciate Jesus as Savior?*

Q: *What is one thing you must recognize before you can confess Jesus as Savior?*

Imagine you were shopping at your local grocery store. It is a typical shopping trip until an employee runs up to you shouting, “Follow me! I know the way out!” Odd behavior, for sure. You’ve been to this store a thousand times. The way out is through the front store, the same way you came in. Furthermore, you are not done with your shopping yet. Why would you want to leave? Then the employee shares a key piece of information. The front of the store is on fire. You cannot get out that way, but you must get out. You are, in fact, in grave danger even though you were unaware of it. The employee is trying to save your life, but you did not think you needed to be saved. If you do not think you need to be saved, you will not appreciate it when someone tries to save you.

Such is also the case concerning our response to Jesus and His mission on earth. As we will see in this passage, many people are interested in Jesus but not in being saved by Him. They may espouse him as a good moral teacher, an example of counter-cultural living, or someone willing to stand against authority, but they do not see Him as their Savior because, in their minds, they have no need for a Savior. They are trapped in a burning building with no idea they need someone to show them the way out.

Q: *In what ways can Christians inadvertently undermine the faith they proclaim by obscuring the gospel?*

Q: *Do you ever move beyond your need for Jesus to save you?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the hardest things to recognize is inconsistency within ourselves. We go through life, doing what we’ve always done, often without realizing we are a walking heap of self-contradiction, and we are good at making excuses for ourselves. For many aspects of life, it hardly matters. Who cares if you say you do not enjoy social media but cannot stop uploading your entire life onto the web? Who cares if you say you eat healthy but pig out on chocolate cake three times a week? But when it concerns our faith in Jesus Christ, this kind of inconsistency can bring our growth in Him to a halt. This lesson will identify some ways we can avoid

contradicting our faith in Christ with our actions and/or attitudes. As you begin, consider how you might be contradicting your faith.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Luke 19:1–10 is the story of Zacchaeus. For many of us, this may be one of the earliest Bible stories we encountered. As is often the case with stories we are familiar with, there is much more to the story than what we remember.

1. SEEKING JESUS

2. KEEPING OTHERS FROM SEEING JESUS

3. IGNORING OBSTACLES

4. TWO VIEWS OF GRACE

5. AUTHENTIC REPENTANCE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine Luke 19:1–10 in further detail by exploring the five points listed above.

1. SEEKING JESUS

■ LUKE 19:1–3

Q: *What was Zacchaeus's occupation?*

Q: *What was the implication of Zacchaeus's wealth?*

Luke tells us two things about Zacchaeus. He was a tax collector and he was rich. They were essentially agents of a foreign oppressor, so they were seen as traitors among their own countrymen. To make matters worse, tax-collectors supported themselves by collecting extra taxes from the people. They passed on the amount required to the governors and kept the excess for themselves. This frequently led to abuse, as in the case of Zacchaeus. But

such behavior is accompanied by guilt. So, tax collectors are often viewed sympathetically within the Gospels and by Jesus. When we see tax-collectors in the Gospels, we see individuals who knew they were sinners and were ready to repent.

We also know Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus. Jesus was well-known within Israel by this time and drew enormous crowds wherever He went. He was quite the spectacle. Zacchaeus, however, was not interested in Jesus because of the spectacle surrounding Him. Somehow, Zacchaeus knew he must change, and he recognized Jesus as the key he needed to transform his heart.

Q: *Why are you interested in Jesus?*

Q: *Why should you be interested in Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – There are a lot of reasons you could be seeking Jesus. Many people feign interest in Jesus because those around them do. They just happened to fall into a group of Christian friends at work or buy a house between to neighboring believers. Some people are interested in Jesus's ability to heal. Others merely recognize that He draws a crowd and are curious about the spectacle. No matter the reason you are seeking Jesus, this parable shows that Jesus is also seeking you. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, including you! The only question is whether you understand your need of Him as Savior. If you are seeking Jesus for any other reason, reflect on why you need a Savior and be prepared to embrace Him as your Lord and Savior.

2. KEEPING OTHERS FROM SEEING JESUS

■ LUKE 19:3

Q: *Why couldn't Zacchaeus see Jesus?*

Q: *Why wouldn't other people in the crowd help him see Jesus?*

Zacchaeus could not see Jesus because he was short. The crowds surrounding Jesus were simply too big for him to catch a glimpse of Jesus. His peers were too busy clamoring for their own view of Jesus to worry about Zacchaeus. They kept him from seeing the Savior he needed.

Unfortunately, Zacchaeus was not alone in being prohibited from seeing Jesus by the world around him. But for others, it was not because of their short stature but because they were exploited by those around them. One example that comes to mind occurs in Acts 16. Paul was proclaiming the gospel in Philippi, but he was being accosted by a slave girl who was possessed by a spirit that allowed her to see the future. Her owners profited by exploiting her “talent.” They were unconcerned with her spiritual welfare, and when Paul ordered the spirit to leave her, they had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison. She was kept from Jesus by her masters.

Q: *In what ways could you be preventing someone from encountering Jesus?*

Q: *How can you help someone who has been prevented from encountering Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – Although not every situation is as extraordinary as the one Paul encountered, people are still kept from encountering Jesus because of those around them or because of their place within society. Single mothers, for example, often feel trapped in an endless cycle of work and managing their homes. They do not have time to stop and reflect on their relationship with Jesus. If they stop, they will find themselves falling behind on another payment. And there is always a child waiting for them. The few minutes they have away from work and children are typically spent recuperating, only to begin the cycle again the next day. Life’s demands can keep single mothers from seeking Jesus.

There may be other examples within your church. Every week, there are countless people who give up attending church because they do not feel welcomed among the people of God. You may argue that is not the point of attending church or that they should try to become more involved. You may be right, but this is a rather empty victory. There was still someone within the walls of your church building who failed to encounter Christ, and it is possible that you could have done something about it. How might you be hindering someone from encountering Jesus? Consider how you can help someone who has found themselves at a place where it feels impossible to seek Jesus.

3. IGNORING OBSTACLES

❏ LUKE 19:4

Q: *What was Zacchaeus's solution to seeing over the crowds?*

Q: *How does this show his commitment to seeking Jesus?*

Zacchaeus refused to allow his short stature to keep him from seeing Jesus. If he could not see through the crowd, he would climb a tree to look over them. Nothing would keep Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus. If the tree failed, he would have looked for the next way.

Q: *How do you see this Zacchaeus mentality within your church?*

Q: *What excuses do you frequently encounter for why someone cannot attend church?*

APPLICATION POINT – There are families in my church who give our pastor a bulletin from the church they attended if they had to be out of town on a Sunday. They do not want him or anyone else to question their faithfulness to attend church. I find their thinking a bit rigid, but I must admit I admire their commitment to be among God's people on Sunday morning. It is much more common for me to encounter the opposite mindset. I know many people who think any excuse to stay home on Sunday morning is good enough. They were out too late the night before, they have company coming, they have other plans, or they were just very tired. If you find yourself constantly making excuses to not attend worship, you need to realize that this shows the lack of value you place on worship. You might not like this conclusion, but it is difficult to avoid. If you were truly interested in encountering Jesus, you would follow Zacchaeus's example. You would fight your way through every obstacle in order to catch a glimpse of Him. Fight to protect your worship times.

4. TWO VIEWS ON GRACE

LUKE 19:5-7

Q: *What did Jesus demand of Zacchaeus?*

Q: *What was Zacchaeus's response?*

Zacchaeus was a sinner. He used his position as a tax collector to exploit others and become rich. He cared more about gaining wealth than he did about his integrity or the well-being of others. His sin was visible for all the world to see, even himself. There was no use in denying his sinfulness, yet Zacchaeus could not fix himself. He could only watch as his guilt grew. And of all the people in the crowd that day, Jesus chose to invest in Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus responded with joy. When sinners acknowledge the reality of their sin, grace becomes more precious to them than anything else.

Q: *When was the last time you were broken over your sin?*

Q: *What keeps you from understanding the joy of Jesus's forgiveness?*

APPLICATION POINT – The more deeply you are aware of your sin, the more you recognize your own need for grace. Our problem is that we hate acknowledging our sin. It is counterintuitive. Instead of acknowledging our sinfulness, we prefer to justify our sins or deny the sinfulness of our actions. We will not succeed in deceiving God, however. Let Zacchaeus show you a better way. Instead of refusing to acknowledge your sin, embrace the joy that comes from the forgiveness Jesus offers.

Q: *What was the crowd's reaction to the grace Jesus showed Zacchaeus?*

Q: *Why did they react this way?*

Zacchaeus was not a popular person. You can almost see the astonishment on the faces of crowd as they watched Jesus engage with such an egregious sinner. Their astonishment turned to discontent once they recognized that He would be gracious to a sinner of Zacchaeus's caliber. In their minds, it was best to avoid sinners, but Jesus attempted to befriend them. Their problem, of course, was their willingness to see Zacchaeus's sin but not their own. If they saw their own sin, they would see their need for forgiveness from Jesus and rejoice when they saw grace.

Luke created a clear contrast between how Zacchaeus and the crowd responded to grace. Zacchaeus responded with joy. He was forgiven. He did not have to persist in sin anymore. The crowd grumbled. When you do not understand your own need for forgiveness, you resent when forgiveness is offered to others.

Q: *In what ways do you resent God's grace?*

Q: *Why is it dangerous to resent God's grace?*

APPLICATION – God's grace is an act of His will, and He freely gives it to us. No one has earned God's grace. This truth is central to the gospel, but when we resent His grace when it is shown to others, we treat it as if it were something that could be earned. We essentially are saying, "I know I'm not perfect, but I've earned the right to receive God's grace anyway." The resentment of grace is a misunderstanding of the gospel at every point. No one needs to clean themselves up before seeking the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ. If you find yourself falling into this line of thought, again, let Zacchaeus show you a better way. Zacchaeus knew he had to seek Jesus as he was. If he waited for his sin to subside, grace would never have come.

5. AUTHENTIC REPENTANCE

❑ LUKE 19:8–10

Q: *How did Zacchaeus demonstrate his repentance?*

Q: *What is a son of Abraham?*

In response to his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus repented of his life of swindling and exploitation. He pledged to repay anyone from whom he inappropriately gained, and he gave away half his goods to those in need. This is authentic repentance. Zacchaeus did not just try really hard to not do wrong again. His heart was changed. He sought reconciliation with others. Where he once exploited others, he now sought to exploit himself. Zacchaeus clearly had a new master. Before, he was a servant of money and possessions. Now he was a servant of Jesus and was free to give away money and possessions.

Q: *Do you still struggle with the same sins you did before accepting Jesus as your Savior?*

Q: *What does repentance cost you?*

APPLICATION – Some new Christians are disappointed to learn that sin has a tighter grip on them than they thought. Although they have confessed their sins and repented of them, they frequently find themselves prey to the same temptations and sins they did before they accepted Jesus. The problem is often cheap repentance. Again, consider Zacchaeus's example. He was not content just to try really hard to no longer exploit others through his position. Instead, he took action to assure himself and everyone else that he had a new master. If you continue to struggle with sin, perhaps you have not taken the steps needed to assure yourself and others that you have a new master now. When we exchange one master for another, we can find the transformation that leads to authentic repentance.

NEXT STEPS

Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Once we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, we join Him in seeking the lost and confronting them with the realities of the gospel. Share the story of Zacchaeus with someone you know who is not a believer. Be ready to lead them through the main points of Zacchaeus's story. Pray that God would help you share your faith through the power of His Word.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Jesus, thank you for seeking me when I needed you most.

Father, help me never to keep others from seeking you.

Lord Jesus, help me to face the reality of my sin and my need for you.

God, keep me committed to worshipping you in the presence of other believers.

■ LIFE OF JESUS

October 24, 2021 | *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- What do you do to persevere in your faith even in the midst of doubt?
- Read Matthew 20:1–16.
- Ask God to help you see the connection between service and the gospel.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

In the kingdom of heaven, we will see a great reversal of what takes place on earth.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Follow the example of Jesus in becoming low among others on earth to be delighted over in heaven.

■ MEDITATE

“So the last will be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to learn the key for understanding Matthew 20:1–16.

❓: *Why is it important to look for cues to understand any written material?*

❓: *What does it mean for the first to be last and the last to be first?*

Publishers carefully plan every detail of a book's cover to signal the content of a book by. The front cover contains the title and author's name, but beyond these two givens, everything else is intended to showcase the book's content. The front cover may portray an image of the main character or a consequential scene. It could illustrate an item of key significance for the plot, or the publisher may intend to hint at the tone or mood of the book. The back cover often tells you a little more about the author. You can have a better idea of what to expect if you are familiar with the author's work. The back cover also often has a brief blurb introducing the plot or a character. The outside contains the keys for understanding what is inside.

A similar concept is at work in Matthew 20:1–16. The last verse of Matthew 19 says, “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.” Almost verbatim, Matthew 20:16 states, “So the last will be first, and the first last.” These two lines function like a book cover around the parable Jesus told in Matthew 20:1–15, highlighting the main point of what Jesus had to say.

Whoever is first will be last and the last first. This statement alludes to the great reversal God will orchestrate at the resolution of this age. There are hints of it all throughout Scripture. Joseph was sold by his brothers as a slave, but he became the prime minister of Egypt during a time when the country consolidated its power over the surround lands (Genesis 37–50). Nebuchadnezzar was known as “king of kings and lord of lords,” but he became like an animal in a pasture because of his self-exaltation (Daniel 4). Those who weep on earth will receive their joy in heaven (Revelation 21). This great reversal is perhaps most simply expressed in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:2–12).

❓: *What reversals do you see today that hint at the great reversal coming at the end of history?*

❓: *How can you live to be “last”?*

APPLICATION POINT – The hardest temptation for a Christian is the temptation to live both for right now and for eternity. We believe God will one day intervene in the course of human history and reverse the fortunes of the wicked and the righteous, but it is hard to forgo the joy we think we can have today to hope for the joy we are promised for tomorrow. Although there are signs of this reversal throughout Scripture and even in the world today, sometimes it can be hard to see how God will make right everything that has gone wrong in this creation. In the back of our minds, we always worry the sacrifices we make because of our faith in Jesus Christ will be for nothing. If this all seems familiar to you, allow this lesson to help you dig deeper into the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are waiting for God to act. May He find us faithful when He does.

❏ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In Matthew 20:1–16, Jesus offered us a new principle we can use to view our place in the world. Whoever is first on earth will be last, and whoever is last on earth will be first in heaven. This principle helps us see everything God does in a different light.

1. WHY WE SHOULD SACRIFICE

2. WHY GRACE IS BETTER

3. WHY REWARDS ARE GOOD

GOING DEEPER

+This section will draw principles from the concept of “the first will be last and the last first” and from Jesus’s parable of the workers.

1. WHY WE SHOULD SACRIFICE

❏ MATTHEW 19:16–30

Q: Why didn’t the rich young man go with Jesus?

Q: How did Jesus’s rejection of the rich young man point to the great reversal?

The parable of the workers in the vineyard comes on the heels of the story of the rich young man, and this context is critical for understanding why Jesus told the parable of the vineyard workers. The rich young man seemingly had everything in his favor, but Jesus did not accept him because he would not relinquish his material wealth. The young man loved his worldly goods more than he loved Jesus. Jesus's rejection of him was the opposite of what His disciples expected. In Jesus's day, as in our own, people wanted to rub shoulders with people like this rich young man. It improved your social capital and your lifestyle, but Jesus was signaling to everyone willing to see it that things are different within the kingdom of heaven than in the kingdom of this world.

Peter recognized what Jesus was signaling and correlated it to himself and the other disciples. Unlike the rich young man, the disciples had left everything to follow Him. When the kingdom came, they would be rewarded. Jesus affirmed what Peter said and announced that their sacrifices would not go unnoticed when the kingdom of heaven came. Furthermore, Jesus used the disciples as a model to show that anyone who sacrificed the joys of this world to follow Him would be rewarded when the kingdom of heaven arrived. Those who make sacrifices to follow Jesus now make themselves last in the kingdom of man, but God will make them first in the kingdom of heaven. This is the great reversal that all of Scripture anticipates.

Q: *In what ways are you making yourself last in the kingdom of man?*

Q: *Why is the story of the rich young man a warning to our modern world?*

APPLICATION POINT – Being last in the kingdom of man is not necessarily tied to obscurity or a renunciation of wealth and material goods. Being last in the kingdom of man simply means prioritizing the kingdom of heaven over everything this world has to offer. Being last in the kingdom of man means you seek God's will rather than following the course the world sets before you. These are general depictions of what it looks like to be last in the kingdom of man, but you can fill in the specifics of your own life. Take some time to figure out the specifics. On a sheet of paper, write "personal goals," "financial goals," and "career goals." Under each of these headings, list an example of a worldly goal. Try to be as specific as possible, given your situation. Under each worldly goal, edit the worldly goals to prioritize the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdom of man.

2. WHY GRACE IS BETTER

■ MATTHEW 20:1-16

Q: *What principle did Jesus reverse in this parable?*

Q: *How did Jesus's life and ministry subvert the principle He was reversing?*

When Jesus turned the rich young man away, the disciples were astonished. They thought earthly stature coincided with heavenly stature. The rich young man was wealthy and important on earth. The disciples believed he would be wealthy and important in heaven, but Jesus refused to accept him as a disciple. He was reversing the disciples' expectations by operating under a different principle. The first will be last and the last will be first. To illustrate this reversal, Jesus told the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

The first workers in this parable agreed to work for a denarius, the typical daily wage. When the first workers noticed that the workers who arrived late in the day also received a denarius, they expected the owner to pay them proportionally more. Their principle was that they should be fairly compensated for their labor. Although they originally agreed to work for a denarius, their expectation of fair compensation changed when they noticed the later workers receiving the same amount. They hoped to receive more, perhaps even twelve times more than those who worked only a single hour. The owner's payment, however, operated on a different principle, the principle of grace. He gave the workers who worked less than a full day more than they deserved. His principle reversed the expectations of the first workers. In the same way, the kingdom of heaven will reverse our expectations. Those who are first on earth will be last in the kingdom of heaven, and those who are last on earth will be first in the kingdom of heaven.

Unlike the disciples' expectation, this principle wonderfully matches the arc we see in Jesus's life and ministry. Jesus gave up the glories of heaven in order to become a servant on earth. In the minds of those around Him, this would have been crazy! Giving up a prestigious position in order to take a lower one is crazy. But Jesus eventually showed the folly of this thinking. After becoming a servant of others on earth, He was highly exalted in heaven. The last on earth became first in heaven.

Q: *How does Jesus's parable encourage you to become a servant on earth?*

Q: *Why are we often hesitant to assume the role of a servant in the church?*

APPLICATION POINT – Every church has needs no one wants to meet. When I attended a mega-church in seminary, that job was the parking team. Rain or shine, the parking team was in the lots assisting people in finding a parking space. Even after the service started, the parking team had to stay behind to help the late arrivals. Then they had to pick up traffic cones and signs. When everyone else was done serving, the parking team was only half finished. No one wanted to be on the parking team. In my current church, that job is the nursery. No one wants to miss Sunday school or service to watch someone else's kids. Furthermore, if you agree to be on this team, you can count on serving two, if not three Sundays a month because volunteers are scarce. It is the job no one wants to do. The problem in both these churches, and I suspect almost every other church, is that Christians do not believe what Jesus said. If they did, these roles within the church would not be the ones no one wanted but the ones everyone would want. If you believe what Jesus said, consider getting ahead of the others in your church by volunteering for the roles no one else wants. The last on earth will be first in the kingdom of heaven.

Q: *How does the vineyard owner's response to the workers' question go against the principle the disciples held concerning the rich young man?*

Q: *Who is the source of every blessing on earth and in heaven?*

The workers who arrived at the vineyard first were offended when the owner paid them the same amount as those who showed up an hour before quitting time. But the owner declared that he was free to do whatever he chose with what was his. His statement is clearly meant to convey God's freedom to be gracious to whomever He wills. Every blessing, in heaven and on earth, belongs to God. God is free to be gracious with what is His. Notice, however, that the principle the disciples believed concerning the rich man did not allow for this. In their minds, the rich young man would be blessed in heaven because he was blessed on earth. This principle denies God's free grace. God is not obligated to bless someone in heaven just because they were made much of on earth. Instead, God uses a different principle. Those who made much of themselves on earth can expect little from Him in heaven, where those who sacrificed what they had for the sake of the gospel can expect to be made much of.

Q: *Do your possessions belong to you or to God?*

Q: *Is the purpose of your wealth to make much of yourself or of God?*

APPLICATION – If the principles in this lesson are true, most of us have the wrong idea about wealth. We think the primary purpose of our wealth is to serve us. God says the primary purpose of our wealth should be to serve Him. It is ultimately His anyway. The rich young man could not accept this demand. That is why he left Jesus and continued putting himself first on earth by how he spent his wealth. This lesson challenges you to do the opposite. Using your wealth to make much of God will make you last on earth, but in the kingdom of heaven the first will be last and the last first. Use whatever means you have to make much of God.

Q: *What hope is there for those who are last in the disciple's way of viewing earth and heaven?*

Q: *What hope is there for those who are last in Jesus's way of viewing earth and heaven?*

The disciples believed wealth and importance on earth were evidence of wealth and importance in heaven. This principle never demands sacrifice from those who have much on earth. It would be crazy to sacrifice anything for the sake of the gospel if it meant diminishing our earthly importance. Furthermore, this principle offers no hope to those who have nothing. There is no joy on earth and no promise of joy in heaven. But Jesus's principle changed everything. Sacrifice is the key to becoming great in the kingdom of heaven. It is those who are able to put others first on earth who will find themselves first in heaven. Jesus offered hope in heaven to those who have none on earth.

Q: *Why is it hard to make yourself last on earth?*

Q: *Why does heaven provide a better hope than earth?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians are not hoping to locate their joy in the things of this world. If you are having difficulty believing the principle at the heart this lesson, it is because you are still hoping to find joy in the things of the world. You must recognize the futility of this way of thinking. Whatever joy you find on earth will

not last. Place your hope for joy in heaven. When you look to heaven for your joy, becoming last on earth will not seem like a big deal.

3. WHY REWARDS ARE GOOD

Q: *How is this parable related to how we experience salvation?*

Q: *Can someone be extra-saved?*

The main point of this parable is the great reversal. The first will be last, and the last will be first. Matthew assures that his readers recognize this by bookending the parable with this phrase. Many people have also noticed how this parable relates to the verdict God will pronounce upon each one of us on the last day. In the parable, each of the workers received equal pay regardless of how long they worked in the vineyard. The Christian who is saved early in life will be declared “not guilty” when God judges us on the last day. In the same way, a person who lives 100 years and only confesses Christ as Savior in the last moments of life will also be declared “not guilty.” The one who was saved early in life is not “extra not guilty” nor is the person saved late in life “just a little not guilty.” Jesus’s blood covers them the same. Everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as Savior is on equal footing in this regard.

Q: *Why should we be thankful that our justification is based completely on God’s grace rather than even partly on our own merits?*

Q: *Do you think you would take your faith more seriously if you had to earn your salvation?*

APPLICATION POINT – The parable of the workers affirms that we can never earn our way into heaven. If we are in Christ, our future does not hang in the balance. Our justification has been secured. We never need to worry whether we have done enough to earn our justification or done something to cancel it. Our justification rests upon

our faith in the resurrected Christ. We are free to pursue God out of love, not to increase our standing before God. Any other way would diminish God's glory and our joy.

Q: *If we all receive the same verdict, what advantage is there to confessing Jesus Christ as Savior early in life?*

Q: *How should we think about rewards in heaven?*

Every believer in Jesus will be declared not guilty when God judges humanity during the final judgment. Some people have seen fit to extend this equal standing into eternity, claiming that everyone's experience in heaven will be exactly the same. The frequent discussions of rewards in heaven in the New Testament should be enough to challenge this sentiment. In some cases, it is easy enough to equate rewards with our justification, but in other instances, the New Testament does seem to imply that some Christians will receive rewards related to their faithfulness on earth (Matthew 6:19–21; 1 Corinthians 3:12–15).

The exact nature of these rewards is never fully explained. I doubt God will be sharing His glory with others in heaven. Perhaps a reward in heaven is something by which we will be able to take in a greater appreciation of God's glory. For example, I can press keys on a piano just as well as anyone, but I cannot make music with one. My capacity for joy in playing the piano is very limited compared to someone who has done the hard work of learning to play. Perhaps that gets at the nature of rewards in heaven. Rewards increase your capacity to take in God's glory. Whatever the case, it seems unlikely we should extend any point concerning our equal standing before God in judgment to correlate to our experience in heaven. The New Testament confirms that some people will attain a greater reward than others.

Q: *How should the hope of great rewards in heaven influence our lives here?*

Q: *Can you be a Christian and not seek great rewards in heaven?*

APPLICATION – All Christians are called to remain faithful to their confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior and grow in their faith by submitting every part of their lives to His lordship. If someone claims to be a Christian but has no desire for these things, there is good reason to question the authenticity of their faith. This growth in the Christian life is also what leads us to rewards in heaven. If you are a Christian, pursuing rewards in heaven really demands nothing beyond what you committed to doing when you confessed Jesus Christ as your Savior. Every true Christian seeks rewards in heaven. This is not an extra step in the Christian faith. Therefore, continue to seek growth in your faith. Break down the limits on how much you will allow your faith to control your life. Seek rewards in heaven by seeking to grow in your faith.

NEXT STEPS

The first will be last and the last first. How are you making yourself last in the kingdom of man? How are you sacrificing your worldly goods for the glory of God and the spread of the gospel? You can do this in an endless number of ways. You can become last in the kingdom of man by becoming a servant to all. You can become last in the kingdom of man by giving sacrificially from your wealth. You can become last in the kingdom of man by seeking to honor others rather than yourself. See how you can put Jesus's principle into action this week.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-Father, thank you for turning the wisdom of the world upside down.

-God, forgive me for not trusting in the joy to be found in your kingdom.

-Jesus, thank you for the hope I have in heaven's great reversal.

-God, thank you for the free gift of salvation in your Son, Jesus Christ.





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